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Review of Legends of Magic in November 2001

By David Reed-Brown

INTRODUCTION

“I have waited over twenty years for a magic event like this... Now, I’m all about hope, but with all the commercialism in magic and then the Masked Magician, I stopped calling myself a magician. This conference restored my faith, and I am very proud to call myself a magician once again.” When Jim Snack, a professional speaker, shared those words with me, I knew Legends of Magic had been an extremely important and - dare I say - a life-changing event.

“Legends” was a magicians’ retreat into the Nevada Mountains, away from the hustle and bustle of the Las Vegas strip, so that those who love our art might spend quality time with one another and with some of the great legends of magic history. It was a Mystery School production created by the insightful team of Jeff McBride, Eugene Burger, manager/director Tobias Beckwith and company. So many conventions are filled to the brim with lectures, shows and product pitches, that there is hardly time to connect with one another. This conference was designed to foster dialogue – real communication and as we each develop our own legends. It was definitely not Mystery School – that ended two years ago. Legends of Magic was fresh, creative, meaningful and truly legendary, truly a retreat.

THE FACILITY

The Mount Charleston Hotel, a few thousand feet above and forty-five minutes beyond The Strip, was an ideal location. Out most every window I could see pristine desert mountain vistas. While there are certainly more luxurious amenities to be found in Las Vegas, this event was not about pretense or ego. A more ostentatious setting would not enable us to connect with one another. The Mount Charleston Hotel is small compared to other offerings down in the valley, with only three floors of rooms in one wing. However, registration was limited to less than seventy, so it was great to take over most of the hotel – no need to worry about giving away secrets to the general public. The staff was very kind and extremely attentive. The rooms were clean with pleasant, up-to-date facilities. The catered buffet food was very good, even better than last year’s Mysterium conference (also produced by the Mystery School on Mount Charleston). And as we ate in the main gathering area, everyone had the chance to connect, to talk honestly and openly with one another. Lance Burton sat with a rookie in magic, and Jeff McBride honored many an amateur by learning card tricks and other moves from them! This was about building community, fostering friendships and, most importantly, sharing our stories to learn from one another as we journey through magic together. The hotel’s charming atmosphere wonderfully fostered this goal.

THE NIGHT BEFORE

When I arrived the Thursday night before the conference, McBride and company treated everyone to a party held in all of our honor as people developing our own magical legends. I had the chance to ask the very gracious Channing Pollock why he advised Doug Henning to add meaning to his magic (the message of wonder and mystery became fundamental to his performance and a key to his success.) This informal gathering was a great way to begin.

THE LABYRINTH

The next morning, we registered with Jeff's manager and magic director, Tobias Beckwith, assisted by magical computer guru Bryce Khulman and the very talented Dr. Jenny Pauls (did you know she is a professor of Physics?). We were given customized binders that contained the schedule, loose leaf paper for notes, and biographies of the legends. (Yes, Scott Hitchcock, I discovered the cartoon version of yourself that you snuck into many of our folders, clever...) Then we were led in small groups down the corridor of the first floor to a special room. We were given information about the nature of real magical journeys. In particular, we were guided through an ancient spiritual tradition of the Labyrinth, a maze walked meditatively for spiritual reflection. An attendant who set me at ease greeted me warmly at the door. On one wall were inspirational quotes and further information about labyrinths. While I was somewhat concerned that some people might not connect to this process, all participation was optional. No one was made to feel uncomfortable. This room was darkened; soft music played in the background, and drapes were hung around the room. A silent Tarot card reader was present if you had a question to ponder; no direct counsel was given, other than a hand-written description the card you cut to. Then I walked the ten foot square labyrinth pattern laid out on the floor. As I slowly went, I could not help think of the many choices I had made in my life - particularly those associated with magic. I was in the room with about a dozen people, and I realized many of us had faced similar questions along the way. Then, just as I exited, there was Ormond McGill. Hmm... Could my journey have something in common with his? Suddenly I knew this was a different kind of conference. After the labyrinth, we could page through other magical writings, photographs and add our words of wisdom to a smaller labyrinth poster. I also liked the Hershey's Kisses, nice touch.

THE LEGENDS

At our first gathering in the large banquet hall, Jeff McBride and Eugene Burger encouraged us to take as many notes as we could in our binders – we would be grateful come Monday morning. Following this first introductory session, we broke up into small groups to share what each of us brought to the conference and what we were seeking from it. This was very helpful in making connections with others.

The first legend of magic, Ormond McGill, now well into his 80s, WOWed us with his depth of knowledge and performance skill. Jeff presented him with a large, ornate silver

Grail - after all, each of us seeks some kind of Holy Grail in magic. He and Eugene then interviewed Mr. McGill. It was astonishing to hear him ask, "Has anyone else seen Thurston perform?" Then he made strong point that very large, magical and entertaining effects do not require large props. Then he proceeded to prove it with only a deck of cards and a number of volunteers. We should all be so lucky as to hold an audiences attention and thrill them with magic at that age!

The next legend was Channing Pollock. This was a very rare appearance for him. Jeff, Eugene, Lance and Channing gathered on the floor, and he too received a special silver Grail as a living legend. The other three then interviewed Pollock with some prepared and some impromptu questions. Soon the floor was opened to the rest of us. While we learned about his own professional journey, it became very clear that Channing Pollock is a very gracious, humble and wise human being. He has become a mentor to hundreds, if not thousands, of people. Today, he is concerned with the deeper questions of magic like "Why do we perform?" "What are our dreams?" "What are the blocks that keep us from living them?" As Lance, Jeff and Eugene continued to facilitate the interview process, I became keenly aware that we were all on similar journeys through magic; it's just that we are all at different places and different skill levels. At this point, celebrity did not seem to matter very much. Everyone was taking down their walls, and this was about the many stories of peoples lives in magic.

Lance Burton also proved to be a very humble and gracious person. McBride presented Lance with an extra special deck of cards. Burton confessed his total amazement at the success he has achieved. He recounted many steps in his journey, and the struggles and phases he encountered along the way. He gave valuable advice to aspiring stand-up manipulation performers: get a consistent gig where the variables do not change much. That way you can more easily receive input from both the audience and staff to make improvements. Burton and Thompson shared how their relationship developed over the years, and how Thompson encouraged him simply to be the best version of himself on stage. It was good to see how Lance and Jeff's relationship had grown from cocky but friendly competitors to humble friends who embraced before us. (It was an "I love you man!" kind of moment.) Recently, the Monte Carlo vastly extended Burton's backstage area, so now he and company are able to develop new illusions and routines. Currently the early and late shows have over 20 minutes of divergent material, but Burton hopes to develop two completely different shows in the coming years.

As Johnny Thompson was awarded his silver Grail as a Legend of Magic, Eugene Burger awesomely reminded us that Johnny is one of the few people in magic who has mastered it all: close-up, cabaret, illusions and cruise ships. Eugene reverently shared how in recent years he saw Johnny do several half-hour sets on a cruise ship without repeating a single routine. In fact he flew thousands of miles from a Caribbean cruise engagement just to be with us. John humbly shared his own stories often recollecting other great magicians and his family. His advice was that of a sage and seasoned mentor. Then he taught a practical pass for stand-up work, and expertly performed the Balls in Net, which adapted from his dear friend, Dai Vernon. Finally, John Thompson presented the greatest Malini Egg Bag routine I have ever seen, and I have watched him do it several times

before. His shiny maroon egg bag is most stunning. (Am I drooling?) He held us on baited breath through his gracious volunteer management and warm but modern-vaudevillian character. By the way, all three pieces are on his 1999 tapes by L&L publishing. The egg bag routine is also on The Greater Magic Video Library from Stevens' Magic Emporium.

After all the Legends had been honored, we closed with a photo opportunity. Simply put, the photo you see here [*****] captured a grand moment in magic history. You could feel it deeply.

THE SHOWS

Friday evening's eight-o'clock show, emceed by Jeff McBride, started off with a wonderful wizard routine by Jayson Morrison and his costumed Mom. Jayson has won many a national magic competition, and this routine with multiple productions, a zombie routine, and a delightful hand-made dancing cane. Even more, the routine of a struggling young wizard's apprentice coming of age hooked us emotionally, and suited the music extremely well. It ended with a surprising transformation of wizard into Mom. We will be seeing more of this talented young man. Jeff McBride told a tale of the Buddhist Prayer Sticks, complete with a very respectful accent. David Loch Crane performed his opening number with cards. Yours truly performed a flaming cane entrance with color change and a transformation, an audience participation bit with the hands, and then a one to eight billiard ball routine. I capped it off with brief torn and transformed tissue effect that directly addressed our healing after September 11. Joan DuKore followed with a very strong and expertly choreographed cut and restored rope routine. Her stage presence, well-defined character, skill and interaction with the audience were top notch. Her act stood out as one of the most professional and commercial of the evening; Joan DuKore is a magician to contend with – she's obviously here to play with the big kids in the sandbox. Eugene Burger then debuted his hilarious version of Mexican Poker; it's an offbeat routine including a doll – cleverly named Patsy - and two spectators, one of whom cannot lose no matter what his opponent chooses to do. It was hard to believe this was the first time Eugene performed it. He is a Legendary Master of our age who continues to grow as a consummate professional by embracing the stage as a stand-up performer. [Should you care to see Eugene Burger, Master Illusionist, be sure not to miss him with Jeff McBride and company at the Claridge in Atlantic City.] Finally, rounding out the show, the father and daughter team from Singapore, Lawrence and Priscilla Khong, presented the feature Linking Ring Routine from their touring illusion show, *The Magic of Love*. Their character interaction, charm, technical moves, choreography and technical ability make this beautiful Asian linking ring routine one of the most progressive I have ever seen. Part of its beauty is the simplicity of four rings and the focus on their link as father and daughter.

The shows only got better. MC, Eugene Burger, doing his famous burnt and restored thread with the Vishnu patter, kicked off the eight o'clock show on Saturday night. The opening feature act was the amazing and award winning teenage magician, Danny Hill. His hilarious character as a snake oil salesman had us cheering "Hoop dee doo!!!" every

time he said the words “Magic Elixir.” Danny proved himself as a growing young professional when a problem developed with the table containing all his props. Those of us who knew the routine from Master Class, marveled as he adapted without blinking or stopping the audio track and continued the routine to a wonderful conclusion with the giant production of a confetti spouting bottle of Magic Elixir – Whoop Dee Doo! Someone once said, “Character is who you are in the dark.” Danny proved himself a very strong performer. Las Vegas card expert, Alan Ackerman, wowed the crowd with the 10 Card Trick and a poker effect. Should I be able to perform as Ormond McGill did that evening with billiard balls, up-to-date ad-libbing, an astounding mental-magic card rise and supreme audience management, I would die a very happy man. What an incredible lesson for all of us. One of the most memorable moments for me, was watching Jeff McBride’s eyes bug out of his head and then burst out laughing, seeing Ormond convincingly fake “becoming imbalanced” as he poked fun at himself. Eugene Burger then shared “Thirteen for Dinner” with his delightfully edgy humor. Corporate magician and protégé of Channing Pollock, Patrick Martin, made a rare magician’s conference appearance. His kind, suave and supremely honed character graciously thanked and involved the hotel staff. He performed a unique and very entertaining card stab as his delightful character knocked us off balance with a Freddie Kreuger glove – the blades on the fingers must have been over 11” long. We held our breath as he poetically performed Barrie Richard’s water suspension with a drumstick and glass of water that were just lying around. Patrick also performed a comedy rope tie with much poise, timing and precision. Our closer, Jeff McBride, wowed the crowd with a new routine manipulating lights. This is not a DeLight routine, but sophisticated cutting edge technology, expert skill and great driving music. Jeff capped off the night with his card manipulation finale –this cabaret manipulation routine dwarfs many Grand Illusions in its mystery, energy and size.

The late night show was performed by MC Scott Hitchcock. He began with his Magician’s National Anthem. Jayson Morrison provided a brief “death to confetti” moment – a running gag throughout the three shows as Hitchcock and McBride swapped barbs while they swept . Father Daniel then performed poetic and spiritual versions of a bubble which becomes solid (can you say “incarnation?”) and a spiritual/mental effect. Interestingly, a spectator chose to identify herself with a particular saint from a deck of cards. As she held the complete deck in her hand, closed her eyes and focused on the qualities of that saint, her chosen saint card rose out of the deck. [Incidentally, at informal moments there was much discussion of meaningful magic and spirituality among many of the conference participants. Yet, everyone was made to feel welcome no matter what their beliefs. All this was mixed in with the latest card moves.] The Rev. Mont Dutson performed a nicely routined silk blendo in the framework of a Native American spiritual ritual. Chuck Minyosa performed as “Baba,” a finely-honed and very lovable Asian Indian guru character who bumbled his way through some impressive comedy magic. (There were a few moments, though, when I felt uncomfortable because I wondered how an Indian person might feel watching this performance, loveable and skillful as it was.) Dave Cooley performed a delightful version of the linking rings. Sarena, a breast-cancer survivor, performed a meaningful straight-jacket escape with a powerfully triumphant costume change at the end – wow! Consummate comedy

magician, Daryl (who was present at Legends as a participant) performed a delightful rope routine that entertained and inspired us as performers from beginning to end. (Friends, it's not the trick... it's the magic of the person revealed through the routine!) Scott and Joan Hitchcock then debuted their new sub trunk routine with witty male-female interaction that any couple can identify with and laugh over. Their choreography is excellent, the music well chosen, audience interaction is very good, characters vivid, and to top it all off, they are both excellent magicians. The sub-trunk ends with Joan escaping out of the trunk, wearing Scott's blue blazer, complete with the yellow tagged key dangling from the breast pocket. Scott emerges from the trunk surprised, bound and gagged by the rope. Joan grabs and end of the rope and leads him off stage with a wink and a smile, triumphant. Together their act is "Magic Feets;" I would be proud to see them on many a Las Vegas stage, on TV or performing for IBM. They are an up and coming powerhouse of modern magic with a big-band feel. Finally, John Cassidy stole the show with his comedy balloon act. His frenetic character blows up animal balloons by mouth, literally at Guinness World Record pace. As an audience we were laughing so hard that breathing became difficult. Cassidy's comedy and banter is sheer genius – he's almost an animal balloon himself. His climax of jumping into a giant six foot diameter balloon (blown up by a leaf blower) to find a spectator's chosen card is one of the funniest things I have ever seen. His character changes as he enters the balloon, and his many antics are hilarious. John says he nearly scared some trick-or-treaters to death this year by staying inside the balloon and pressing his face against it as they came to the door. He brought the house down with a standing ovation. John Cassidy needs to be seen on national television. Comedy Central, PAX and NBC are you listening? (Late on Sunday, Cassidy turned Hitchcock into Eugene, a 9 foot high balloon version of Eugene Burger. Can you say Burger meets *Ghostbusters*' Staypuff Marshmallow Man? He was walking around the hotel complete with "yellow cotton thread" - truly a sight to behold with Scott's voice booming through the halls.)

LECTURES

To top it all off there were workshops by Jeff McBride, Eugene Burger, Bob Neale, Tobias Beckwith and a late-night lecture by Las Vegas card expert, Alan Ackerman. Alan's lecture contained gift after gift after gift. One cull-like force immediately found its way into my work. The sleights and routines were wonderful – his Brother John Hammond tapes are definitely on my must have list. Jeff McBride encouraged us to develop our work by trying daring new combinations of favorite our routines, people, places, and hobbies – he says we often read and think ourselves to death by canceling great ideas before we even give them a chance. We could not leave the workshop until we generated at least one new idea. Eugene Burger encouraged us to ask hard questions like, "Which room in the house of magic will I choose?" He also challenged us to develop magical disciplines by practicing and rehearsing intentionally and regularly. He made a very valuable suggestion: to be extremely careful not to perform beyond our ability. While we may want to appear adept and skillful to our peers in magic, perhaps what might be even more important is appearing to be an expert to our clients, even if that means using methods that are more simple. He demonstrated some of his principles with Max Maven's B'Wave and Positive Negative with an alternative ending by Bryce

Khulman, and finally Burger's own Mexican Poker routine. Bob Neale encouraged us to bring meaning into our magic by asking ourselves how we had experienced magical moments in life and weaving those things into our performance. He also challenged us to include one non-magic routine in our shows, and at the end he gave each of us a little wire puzzle from India that we could use to tell stories as we formed different shapes. Tobias Beckwith taught large groups of people theatrical warm-ups and skills each morning. The schedule was a great help to attending these sessions because the first day started at 10 am and the second at 11 a.m. Tobias gets brief mention here because that is the way he is: humble and unassuming, always wanting to bring about the best in others. However, make no mistake, his professional expertise with every level of logistical detail enabled Legend's of Magic to happen. He and the Mystery School Team collaborated decisions together to create the framework in which all the individuals could come and share of themselves.

QUOTES

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Looking back, it is hard to believe all of this happened in three days. On Sunday I realized that events like this one are changing who I am as a performer and a person. I give Legends of Magic an "A." The most valuable insights, though, came through my informal discussions with the legends and other magicians, like myself. I look forward to more Mystery School Productions and encourage you not to miss the next one. Truly this was legendary magic.

RICHARD, THESE ARE QUOTES FROM OTHER PARTICIPANTS – DON'T KNOW IF YOU WANT TO PICK SOME FO THE BEST

Ken Edwards - I was cautious of coming, but no sooner had I arrived when Jeff McBride had us sitting down, and I was teaching him a trick. He made me feel welcome and comfortable. This event wasn't about ego - it REALLY caught my attention.

Ormond McGill - "These people love magic so much. They want to create magic every day... and they do!"

Chuck Mignosa - "Where else do you get to sit with Johnny Thompson, Lance Burton, Channing Pollack, and Ormand McGill? This kind of magic allows your inner child to come out and play. Jeff and his team created a wonderful occasion.

Steve Kellogg - It's hard to find the words. This is the most intense magical experience I've ever seen. It's so nice to feel comraderie among your peers that you've looked up to all these years and be treated like a friend. [Read that sentence again - it uplifts the humble nature of the event.]

Serena Lumiere - This is the most spiritual group of people I've ever been with. They are so open and giving - probably because Jeff & Eugene are such open and giving human beings. Also, the hotel staff were fantastic; the food was GOOD, and we had Really Great Magic.

Lawrence Khong (Singapore) - On a superficial level, the magic was good to Brilliant with great variety: from mental magic, to mentalism, to manipulation, to illusions.

John LeBlanc - "It's been free exchange of ideas on a very honest level. The principles of the "Elder" masters in our artform are the same ones that are still being taught and learned. We're all grasping for the same golden ring of knowledge.

Trey Cromwell - "I think this weekend we've done something very unique. All of us to some degree or another are on our search for the Holy Grail. The good news is that it can be anything you want it to be. Before this conference, I wasn't sure of my direction in magic. Now I am more clear as to what my path in magic will be.

Bob Neale - At first the title "Legends of Magic" sounded a little hokey, but it seemed interesting to me. Then upon arrival, I discovered that meeting legends was GREAT, an absolutely TERRIFIC idea.

Allan Ackerman - "It's been great - very different than anything I've experienced before. What's so cool is that you get to hang with everybody."

Father Daniel Rolland - I cannot compare Legends of Magic to anything else. This definitely a "magic retreat" because it deals with the magician as a whole person - that the magic comes from who the person is. Meeting the legends, you get to see them as whole people, and that makes the magic all the more possible for each of us. I really enjoyed the freedom of sharing magic - not threatening at all. They're all people who love the art.

Miles Sonkin (Osaka Japan) - Late night magic sessions with Allan Ackerman lasting until 4:30 in the morning, learning the real work on tricks, sleights and moves. Allan just gave and gave and gave and gave - Thank You. Eugene, Jeff, Channing and all the others - just having time to share. The weekend was all about sharing. This weekend was priceless for me. Great value. I would recommend this experience to all who want something more than lectures and tricks. Very profound. Very moving.

Steven Dellaporta - This has been a communal event, not a lecture series, not about how to do tricks. It's community together to learn from one another and to give to one another. It's a circle, a continuum. Our wise legend sages can also teach us to be tricksters, sorcerers and oracles at any moment. But here we see the humility of people who are at the top of what they wanted to do well. If you're always focused on the future rather than the present, then you'll never get there. The diversity of all of us made this convention work. How many other magical events do you get that mentoring experience - not having people ahead of or behind you, but walking the path with you. We asked serious questions: What do you bring? What do you want to take away? What room in magic do I want to be in? Heck, Daryl dropped in and stayed to share and go through this experience with us! We had access to the biggest legends and what a bargain!

Jayson Morrison (young magic competitor) - This was all about friendships. Everybody I've ever met down the road is here. Meeting them all again in one place was wonderful. Seeing John Cassidy fit into a giant balloon and the way his character changed was hilarious

Gerry Morrison - It's been a magical journey where I've watched everybody learn magical things about themselves and become better and go further down their magical path. It's great to see how everybody has changed.