

Tales From The Magic Tech Road: Backdrops

By David Reed-Brown

Welcome to “Tales From the Magic Tech Road” a new column for *The Secret Art Journal*. Our purpose for *Magic Tech* is to focus on the practical aspects of producing a one or two person stand-up show for a one-night-only engagement. We will discuss backdrops, lighting, sound, staging, prop management and vehicles. We will also question the assumption that large magical effects require large props. Many of us perform at one time or another in community, non-profit and business locations where traditional theater resources are sparse, and we often need to fit our show into a sedan, wagon or van; perhaps it must even fit in one case.

I produce my own solo, stand-up show, “Illusion, Wonder & You.” This is usually a single club or cabaret performance for an audience of less than 300 people. My one-hour show includes classic effects from manipulation, mental magic, simple prop magic and an illusion or two for special occasions. I am prepared to create an indoor theatrical space wherever I go. I bill myself as “completely self-contained” with wireless sound, lighting and staging. At one time it all needed to fit in my Honda Civic hatchback. This journey required some creative experimenting, which I will share from time to time.

Last year my “Sound Advice” column began this type of discussion in the Secret Art Journal. Our next stop along The Magic Tech Road is the issue of backdrops.

FIRST QUESTION: DO YOU REALLY NEED A BACKDROP?

Please take this question seriously. If you work neatly out of one case and can easily focus the attention on your magic, then why have a backdrop? Toting one around adds heft and bulk, not to mention the time it takes to set up and strike. A quality backdrop can easily cost hundreds, even thousands of dollars, and if you are performing **OUTDOORS**, forget it! Wind can very easily knock down seemingly stable setups. If you are performing outside, study entertainers like Jeff Sheridan, Gazzo, Harry Anderson and Jeff McBride’s Commando Act.

PURPOSE

To me the purpose of a backdrop is to **FOCUS** people on my magic. It does this by removing visual distractions like props, road cases, mirrors, unsightly wires, doorways, inescapable backlighting like windows, busy wall decorations like shiny trophies and pictures, or just plain clutter - like the set and costumes from that wonderful 1983 holiday play that no-one wants to let go of. (Get a life people!) Also, on a very large stage, a simple backdrop and focused lighting can bring the attention down to you.

A slightly curved backdrop **LIMITS ANGLES**, so people on the sides cannot see the load behind the chair, the shell of the billiard ball or the support for the suspension.

A good backdrop creates **PRIVATE PREPARATION SPACE** – no more prying eyes or loading up in the bathroom down the hall! In their Haunted Mansion lecture notes “Have You Ever Thought About School Tours?” Tim Ellis and Sue Ann Webster describe their rectangular

PVC black-art backdrop. It has sides that extend backward to create a completely private dressing room. These lecture notes can be found at www.magicunlimited.com under “merchandise.”

Then there is the **WOW FACTOR**. When my audience and employer enter our theatrical space, I want them to say, “Woowooooow...” This is about hoping and expecting something wonderful. I want them to know they are about to experience an extremely special show that will touch their hearts and fry their brains. A quality backdrop can be part of setting the stage for wonder. It can say, “I really care about your experience here tonight. Get ready to be amazed...”

FABRIC: Remember, It’s About You, Not Your Backdrop

In Eugene Burger’s video *Eugene Goes Bizarre* he interviews Tony Andruzzi who says, “A magician’s impact is in inverse ratio to the number of sequins on the magicians costume.” The same can be said of the magician’s backdrop. While there times you need a busy pattern like Mylar streamers to hide threads for levitating an object, generally it is better for the material to have a small, simple **PATTERN** or no pattern at all. The **COLOR** should be relatively neutral, fairly dark and should contrast your costume well. You do not want to vanish in front of it. If you go with a very dark solid color (like black velvet) use 50-100% more material to add an interesting pleated texture. Some fabrics are not completely **OPAQUE**. Sewing inexpensive black poly material along the top edge of the front curtain, will keep backlight or tell-tale shadows from coming through. Make sure the backing is slightly smaller than the front curtain so it will stay hidden.

The **QUALITY** of the fabric should be relatively high. Magician and entertainment agent Joe Leffler says, “While I no longer need a backdrop for my performance, I learned that you only look as good as the material you’re performing in front of.” Do not be afraid of spending some money here. Next, your backdrop will be packed and unpacked many times, so search for **WRINKLE RESISTANT** fabrics with poly-fiber content – why would a successful magician hang something shoddy? Crushed velvet is very nice for draping all sorts of furnishings – wrinkles, what wrinkles?

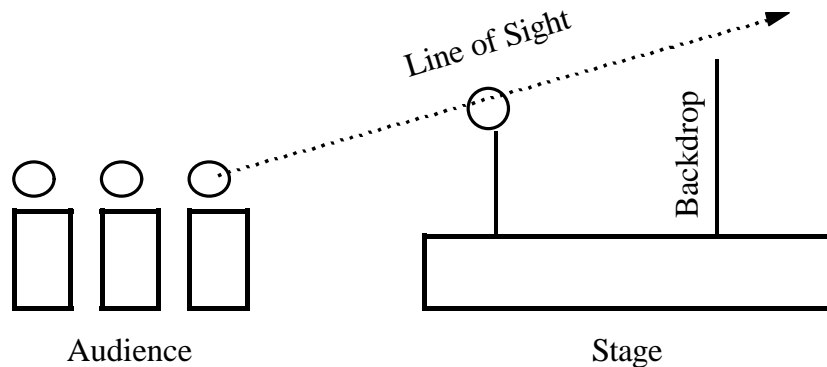
EXTREMELY IMPORTANT: If you use any fire at all, intend to position the backdrop near lights or have even the slightest desire to perform in a professional theater, it is absolutely essential that your system be **FIRE RESISTANT**. While there are a number of theatrical products available to treat staging materials, it can be expensive to have this done professionally after the fact - better to search for fire-resistant fabric in the first place from theatrical supply companies. Tobias Beckwith says,

“Rose Brand is probably the largest supplier of theatrical draperies. They’ll fabricate to order. They are on line at www.rosebrand.com. I don’t know these folks, but they claim to be the biggest: www.theatricaldrapery.com“

Rose Brand also stocks fire retardant systems for doing it yourself.

What **SIZE** should a backdrop be? Some of the products on the market, like Abbott’s Jet Set, create a 6’ x 6’ backdrop. This might work for a birthday party in someone’s home, but if you move from side to side, it will not cover you. The product has been around for a while, but because of improved public health, performers are generally taller today than they were 30 years

ago. Also, if you are raised on a platform or stage above the audience even a foot, then when you move the least bit forward, the backdrop will not cover your head from their perspective. Fortunately, Abbott's Jet Set can be enlarged easily. (More on this later...)



A backdrop can be taller than you but still not be sufficient to cover your frame from the audience's point of view.

In this case, a backdrop could actually be distracting. Consider at least an 8' x 8' backdrop, but 8' high by 12' wide is preferable.

More questions: What is the **PACKED SIZE AND WEIGHT** of your backdrop system? Will it easily fit in your vehicle? Can one person hang it easily? Do you really want to lug around those hundred-pound, thick maroon velvet curtains from the old theater – classy as they are – not to mention the brass bases and support rods? Oy!

REMEMBER: It's about you, not your backdrop. Do you really need one? If so, use quality opaque fabric with a darker color to contrast your costume, with little or no pattern, and make sure it is both wrinkle and fire resistant; carefully check its size and weight too.

BLACK ART IN BRIEF

If you want a black art backdrop to do grand illusion effects, **BE CAREFUL**. For one-night-only engagements, the lighting and staging for these routines can be quite tricky. The cost is considerable if you just want to produce or vanish a person. However, if you are going to explore this area, you might want to consider a purchase from Don Drake in Las Vegas (members.aol.com/dondrake/home.htm). His book *Black Art Breakthroughs* and Gary Darwin's *Inexpensive Illusions* are worth a look. Don Drake strongly recommends and supplies triple velvet. While pricey, it reflects the least amount of light. On the other hand, adding flame retardant reduces the black art effect. Flame-resistant double velvet is available from theatrical supply warehouses. Because the velvet is so dark, use much fabric to create a pleated texture. Don Drake can create an entire setup for you with various gaffs. Keep in mind that certain illusions need a black art floor cover too. The material will get dirty, so prepare to keep it clean. For black art effects, you may want to consider something smaller, like Don's Wizard's Window or Wizard's Table. Lighting for a black art curtain must face the audience and possibly crisscross the stage to create shadow. **WARNING:** The lighting can be quite difficult to set up. If you want to produce or vanish an assistant in a one-night-only show, black art is a long and

rather expensive way to go for such brief effects. There are other methods described in classic and contemporary books on simple illusions: *The Mark Wilson Complete Course in Magic*, U.F. Grant's classic *Mystery Carton Illusions*, books like *Illusion F/X* by Andrew Mayne, and Paul Osborne's *Easy Build Illusions*.

SETUP TIME

Ask yourself, "How much time will different backdrop systems add to setting up and striking my show?" While it might seem natural to thread a curtain on a rod, it can be time consuming when the fabric is heavy, the rods long, and the hem narrow. What are some options? Curtains with backing stitched along the top can just be **THROWN** over a rod. Some curtains are permanently kept on rods and then simply **HOOKED** on to a framework. **VELCRO** is a magician's best friend, and one of the finer professional backdrops attaches to its support system with powerful strip **MAGNETS**.

TRIPOD SYSTEMS

The most common method for hanging curtain-type backdrops is on a rod suspended by one or two medium duty tripods available at photography supply stores, like B&H Photo Video in New York City. There are many different kinds of tripods such as photo, video, speaker and lighting. You are looking for a **PHOTOGRAPHER'S BACKDROP SETUP**. Get the whole thing in a kit if you can. Lighting tripod legs tend to be set lower. You want them lower not extending out so far that you trip on them. Popular brands include Bogen, Star-D and Lowell. Black tripods draw less attention, and make sure they can hold the weight of your curtains. A more stable setup will use two **MEDIUM OR HEAVY-DUTY** tripods, cross-bar adapters, and a telescoping cross bar. Certain features increase the cost of tripods: compactness, lightness, air cushioning and easy releases. School photographers purchase the better ones for those reasons. Consider investing in a hard plastic lighting **CASE** with configurable dividers to keep everything safe and neat. If you want wings (at least three feet wide), additional tripods, bars and adapters can add one to each side. Don't forget to inquire about lighting clamps if you need to attach lights to your setup for effects like black art (use cool burning lights for safety).

PVC PIPING

You can create a lightweight and economical backdrop frame out of strong 2" **PVC** piping and connectors. Its shape would be a rectangular "C" such that the long flat edge of the frame faces the audience and the shorter ends go to the back as stabilizers. Hanging fabric with Velcro on all three sides creates a convenient changing room in back. While not particular to them, Ellis & Webster use this framing for their traveling haunted school show; their unique black art set-up is worth serious study. See their lecture notes "Have You Ever Thought About School Tours?" at <http://www4.tpgi.com.au/users/katzkin/2002WorldLectureTour.htm#merchandise>

Private Dressing Area

SPECIFIC BRANDS & MODELS

ABBOTT'S JET SET is perhaps the most famous and inexpensive tripod system for magicians (\$70). They have it manufactured specifically for magicians. This hardware only package is chrome-plated, has no loose parts, collapses down to 3' x 5" in diameter, and weighs less than 7 lbs. As I mentioned, 6' x 6' is rather small, but you can safely extend it to 8' x 8' with simple piping available from your local hardware store. Abbott's Jet Set comes with directions for making your own curtain. The curtain in the photo below looks like dark crushed velveteen. This system is very light, fast and easy to work with. If you use two they will fit together forming one 6' x 12' backdrop. (www.abbottmagic.com)



For just a little bit more money, you can **DESIGN YOUR OWN** tripod system. I would suggest searching through the online catalog at B&H Photo Video in New York City (www.bhphotovideo.com). You are looking for photo & video backdrop systems. Try to construct a setup where the tripods are not on the very ends, but hidden behind the curtain. Closely examine the Abbott and Klamm photos in this article.

If you want a quick link to a specific product, check out **THE PORTABLE BACKGROUND SUPPORT SYSTEM** (\$170) at www.tallyns.com/PortBckdrhtm.htm. While the tripods are silver colored, they extend to over 8' high, and the 3-section telescoping crossbar has a maximum width over 12 feet. They sell a cheaper, narrower product and large shade-like backdrops that photographers pull off a roll; their "seamless paper" for backdrops looks intriguing as well. While I have never tested these shade-type backdrops, I always thought it would make for a rather artistic, avant-garde look. I would beware of the paper being too lightweight because (as in any theatre) you do not want the backdrop moving when making an entrance or exit. There is a transport issue too since the roll of material is so long.



Klamm Magic (www.klamm-magic.com) sells a dual tripod setup for \$249 (the 4 drapes are \$230 more). The price seems steep considering the options above. I would advise against Klamm's cheaper wooden frame system. Upon examination, it seemed a bit flimsy to me. Steer clear of Mylar curtains unless you definitely need to hide threads and wires. "It's about you, not your backdrop."



PIPE AND DRAPE

Theatrical Drapery (www.stagedrapery.com) sells **PIPE AND DRAPE SYSTEMS** in various configurations. While heavier and less compact, this option may suit your needs. Their 8'H x 10W booth is \$665.



SPIDER BACKDROPS of Germany (www.spiderbackdrop.com) has wonderful, complete systems for a fair but considerable price. I purchased the "Spider Flex," which contains two 5x8 frames, two stabilizer bars, 4 fastener bars to join the two frames, two larger curtains in a color of my choice, back padding and a doorway curtain of matching material or Mylar streamers... This creates a slightly concave backdrop eight feet high by twelve and a half feet wide. I LOVE IT. Currently the Spider Flex system retails for around \$1,350. The best part is that it all fits in my Honda Civic thanks to a convenient 12"x18"x30" soft case that rolls. A smaller single-frame "Spider-Jet" package is available too for \$630 at Arjan's (see below). Frame and curtain sizes include 5x8, 8x8 and 10x8. The colors include black, midnight blue, red wine or royal blue, and Richard Robinson tells me the fabric is one of the best he has ever seen on the market. You may purchase individual parts to design your own setup, but this can be the more costly way to go. To save some cash, you might want to purchase curtains, backing and curtain rods from Spider Backdrop and hang them on a cheaper support system. (The rods have little hooks on them.)

Snazzy spider leg side-tables are available in 55, 65, 78 & 88 cm heights and in two clear acrylic tabletop sizes (30x30 cm & 40x40 cm). Spider Backdrop systems and parts are also sold by Arjan's Show-Biz Centre (www.show-bizcentre.com 1-888-994-6287 in the USA). They will send you a very nice information packet that includes brochures, a detailed price list and fabric samples.



NON-CURTAIN OPTIONS

A couple of years ago Richard Robinson recommended to me one method that does not use curtains at all, but rather a system of three or four foot square **MODULAR PANELS** as outlined in Frances Marshall's book, *The Super Show*. Contact Magic Inc. in Chicago (773-334-2855). While somewhat dated, it still contains much valuable information. These panels can be configured in many different ways, and you can easily customize them for corporate events.

While simple and affordable, hinged theater **FLATS** are bulky but perfectly usable if you have help and the right vehicle to transport them in. Their construction is basic, using 1" x 2" pine stiffeners and stretched canvas. Consult most any book on basic theater set design. They set up quickly and are also customizable – consider Velcro tabs to hold custom signs, frames and fabrics. If you're doing this on the quick and cheap, **FOAM CORE BOARD** comes in various colors and can be hinged easily with cloth tape.

Something worth considering is a portable **TRADESHOW DISPLAY** used by traveling corporate folk. These come in handy transport cases and pack up quickly and neatly. Jeff McBride uses a tradeshow backdrop by Nomadic Display (www.nomadicdisplay.com). His sold for \$3,000. It is flame resistant and looks fantastic every time you set it up. It comes with great flight cases, and is guaranteed for life. If you ever have a problem with it, the company will send a replacement overnight. WOW! It makes sense, though, if their clients include companies like IBM. Here is one example of many:



Keep in mind that their purpose is to bring attention to themselves and the materials posted on them. I believe simple and subtle is best for magic. They come in many shapes and sizes, but I repeat: “It’s about you, not your backdrop!” In the early 1990s used tradeshow exhibits were sold in the Boston area. That might be worth checking out in any metropolitan area – especially in a slow economy where business people are traveling less...

Finally, a friend I met at Master Class a couple years ago mentioned a similar setup called a “portable funeral.” I have no information on them but the idea is strangely intriguing. If you know anything about them or other backdrop systems, please contact me at David@Reed-Brown.com. I will be most grateful.

A STORY FROM THE ROAD: CREATING A THEATER IN 24 HOURS

In summer 2001 I was on sabbatical at a Camp Wightman, a great place for kids and adults in Eastern Connecticut. Every Sunday evening we had an all-camp welcome in a simple outdoor program shelter - the open-sided kind you see in parks across the USA. For the start of the program I had our staff produce the camp program director with a basic grand illusion, but to make it truly spectacular, we needed a makeshift theater with sound, lights, backdrop and wings. Did I mention we had no budget? One college student brought in a CD player and 100 watt computer speakers. Another bought some clip-on shop lights with colored PAR38 floods. The camp had some band risers. I went to a local fabric store, which was having its seasonal clearance sale. Many fabrics were a dollar a yard – YES! The backdrop was navy blue; the wings green and pink. A hem here... A stitch there... We hung three pipes from the rafters with spare chains from the shop and weighted the fabric with more pipe. Everything could be hung or removed by two people in five minutes. We crafted a simple but effective theater for under \$125 in one day. **NOTE TO SELF:** Sometimes the measure of art is how much can be done with very little...

Our next stop will be the issue of tables and cases. I wish you all the best on your journey down The Magic Tech Road!

REFERENCES

Abbott's Magic Jet Set \$70

www.abbottmagic.com

B & H Photo Video – search for photo & video backdrops

www.bhphotovideo.com

Don Drake: Black Art Wizard's Window, Wizard's Table & Wizard's Curtain

<http://members.aol.com/dondrake/home.htm>

Black Art Breakthroughs by Don Drake

Inexpensive Illusions by Gary Darwin

Dual Tripod System by Bob Klamm \$250, Curtains \$230

www.klamm-magic.com

Tim Ellis & Sue Ann Webster see “Have You Ever Thought About School Tours?” PVC Frame
& Black Art at www.magicunlimited.com

<http://www4.tpgi.com.au/users/katzkin/2002WorldLectureTour.htm#merchandise>

Nomadic Display (tradeshow systems) \$3,000

www.nomadicdisplay.com

Portable Background Support System \$170

www.tallyns.com/PortBckdrhtm.htm

Spider Backdrop Systems, Spider Flex 8' x 12 ½ \$1,350 (more or less depending on size)

www.spiderbackdrop.com & www.show-bizcentre.com

The Super Show compiled by Frances Marshall, Magic Inc.

Telephone: 773-334-2855

Theatrical Supply Companies Which Sell Draperies:

Rose Brand www.rosebrand.com

www.theatricaldrapery.com

www.stagedrapery.com 8'H x 10'W heavier pipe & drape \$665

To develop simple illusions without black art reference the following:

The Mark Wilson Complete Course in Magic

Mystery Carton Illusions by U.F. Grant

Illusion F/X by Andrew Mayne

Easy Build Illusions by Paul Osborne