

The Magic Tech Road

A Practical Magicians Case-Table

At this stop along The Magic Tech Road I would like to consider practical road cases that have a dual purpose: to transport props and to help manage them on stage as a table. Remember this is about a one or two person cabaret show for that one-night-only one-hour performance. The subject of cases is huge, so let's focus. I am not talking about all stage tables, illusion cases or the smaller cases for what Penn Gillette calls a "commando show," where the magician performs with minimal props under surrounded, street-like conditions. While I once heard that Max Maven performed for an hour with props that fit in a manila envelope just to prove that it could be done, this article is about a practical, flexible combination case-table for managing more props than would fit in a breadbox.

It seems as though I am always looking for the perfect case. Apparently I am not alone because there are dozens of products available on the market. Magicians keep trying to "build a better mousetrap." I think this because we are each unique, with particular performing needs that change over time. That said, here are some ideas and qualities of cases that are helpful to me.

LIGHTWEIGHT: Keep the case as light as you can because you will be lifting it a lot. If you think you might need to check it as airline luggage from time to time, remember that domestic flights in the USA now limit checked bags to 50 lbs. each. Cases made of quality plywood do not need to be thicker than 3/8", and custom cases made of "fibre" or more durable "abs plastic" will probably be fine. Generally, you do not need to lug heavy 3/4" plywood or ATA flight cases to each show – leave those to the large traveling illusion shows.

STABLE: While you want the case light, make sure it is stable enough to endure being accidentally knocked around on stage or in the wings. If it tips, try adding some weight to the bottom – perhaps thick plywood painted black. Try screwing some metal to the bottom.

ROLLING, ROLLING, ROLLING: Casters at least 2" in diameter can be very helpful on and off stage. Larger casters make it easier to roll but increase weight, and one or two locking wheels can be very helpful.

FORGETTABLE: When I am on stage, my case should not upstage me. I avoid snazzy designs and want the audience to forget about it. While using quality equipment says a lot about me, my show is about the magic of my life not my props or my case. The purpose of my table is to hold my props out of sight until I need them and store them out of sight when I'm done. That's all, so I prefer it to be rectangular and either black or charcoal grey. People think, "O, it's just a road case," and forget about it.

CUSTOMIZABLE INTERIOR: Another reason I want the audience to forget the outside of the case is because I gaff the heck out of the inside. I have special shelves, boxes, tubes, tape, cardboard, Velcro™ and wire on the inside holding my props in just the right places every time. "Everything has its place and every place has its order." When performing becomes more consistent, it gets easier. When it gets easier, it becomes more beautiful and thereby more magical. (Thank you, Doug Henning.) Customizing the interior also saves me time and reduces the stress of setting up and tearing down. As Martha Stewart would say, "It's a good thing."

CUSTOMIZABLE EXTERIOR: Forget-ability aside, there *are* times when it is helpful to customize the outside of a case for a themed act. Maybe there are colors, designs or messages I want for a particular show. The suitcase tables by Joe Leffler and Viking Magic are covered in Velcro™ friendly charcoal grey carpeting. They are perfect for customizing with specialty signs you can make at home with most desktop publishing software, then mount on foam core board.

CUSTOM FABRIC COVERS: Over time, your case will probably acquire scrapes, dings and marks. There comes a point where these can be distracting to the audience. It is a good idea to have dark covers made from a quality fabric – some poly-content will ensure that it is wrinkle-resistant.

HEIGHT: I find it helpful for my magic table to be high enough to hide my hands while they hang naturally at my sides. Why? Let's say I need to palm a gimmick that I have no choice but to store in the table. If it's high enough, I do not need to bend down obviously to get the prop. A taller table hides my hands as I retrieve the gaff and palm it.

WHERE'S THE OPENING? Some performers like a case to be open in back, while others, like manipulators, prefer an open top. An open top can make working with long objects, like canes, easier. This is a personal preference and is entirely up to you.

ADD POCKETS: Jeff McBride taught me that when using an open-top case, we can hang holders with pockets off the back side. A drummer's stick bag holds wands, fans, Chinese sticks and ... drum sticks quite nicely. You can also get inexpensive pocket organizers made of netting that are designed to hang from a shower-curtain rod (check your local discount department store).

SHOULD YOU GET A CUSTOM DESIGNED CASE?: While there are many magician's cases on the market, consider the possibility of designing your own. We each have our way of working, so why not make your life as easy as possible with just the right case for you? Elliot at Fibre Case Corp. in New York City does a wonderful job with ABS cases. (212-566-2720 or www.fibrebase.com). I recommend playing around with your own cardboard and duck tape mock-up to make sure you get exactly what you want. When you give specific **written** instructions for how the case is to be built, it is best to start with the **interior dimensions** you require. Some magicians find a rectangular "telescoping sample case" with 2" wood-mounted casters on the narrow end to be just about right. **HANDLES:** When designing your case, make sure you do not put a bulging handle where your flat tabletop is supposed to be.

CHECKING BAGGAGE & SHIPPING FREIGHT: Let's assume you have Joe Leffler's wonderful Pro Suitcase Table. While durable enough for your van, you might not want to check it as luggage or ship it by freight as is. If you only need to do this once in a blue moon, just pack it in cardboard. Shipping centers can pack it for you or sell you one or two boxes to be cut to the perfect size. They also sell cardboard corner padding. Chances are you will be able to use this custom box a few times. **SOME SHIPPING SECRETS:** The Post Office, UPS and FEDEX are not your only options. You and I have access to competitively priced commercial freight companies that constantly send trucks and trains across the country. I've had very good experience with BAX Global (www.baxglobal.com). Also, most every airline has a freight division, which is required to pick up and drop off shipments door to door. Give them a call and see what they can do for you – be sure to give your precious equipment plenty of time to travel ahead of you and do NOT forget to purchase insurance. Also, know precisely who will receive it and keep it safe until you arrive.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

TABLE POSITION: Several years ago John Tudor reminded me that the table should never be front and center on stage. That's my place. Generally the table should be off to the side. If it needs to be in the middle, it should be upstage-center (towards the back). I try not to perform behind my table because it blocks the audience's view of me.

BEWARE THE CLUTTER: Some props distract too much attention at the wrong time either because they are suspect or attractively designed. "Out of sight out of mind" is a good rule to live by. When I am done with a prop, I put it away. **CLUTTER KILLS!** It confuses the audience and me. It can derail the routine or worse: cause a serious accident (unstable bubble juice + sharp paring knife + slippery floor + sneezing volunteer = YIKES!). Also, when performing, I do not have anything in the case that I do not need. I carry a folding tote

bag to store those extra things off stage. Why tempt fate? I entertain so much more magically when I keep things simple. That is the purpose of a good case.

TALK TO THE AUDIENCE, NOT YOUR TABLE: Unless your table becomes an actual character in your show, in general make sure that when you address the audience, you **look at them** - especially when retrieving and ditching props. I once had a bad habit of breaking eye contact with the audience and talking to the table at those moments. I thought I was keeping the conversation flowing and the show moving. Later I realized how rudely I was shutting them out. Now I look at them and talk; pause to get things from the table; look up at them to say something, etc. I find it better to ditch props in silence than to lose the focus of my dialogue.

AFRORDABLE OPTONS

\$50

A number of years ago on AllMagic.com Richard Robinson wrote some interesting articles on affordable stage tables. In one article he suggested getting a cube-like fibre musician's case for about \$50. I think it could be an 18-24" cube. You will want all the corners to be reinforced with metal for durability. This case is like a sample case. It consists of two boxes, which are essentially the same in shape. The top is a slightly larger five-sided box that slides completely over the outside of the inner box. For travel, the two are nested together and secured with straps. On stage the idea is to stack one cube on top of the other to your liking. The bottom box should be mouth down or mouth up for stability. The top box could be open-end facing up or open-end facing back. As you can see, a good functional case does not need to be expensive.

OTHER AFFORDABLE OPEN TOP OPTIONS

John Cassidy is a wonderful magician you may have seen opening for the Amazing Jonathan, at the Magic Castle or at one of our national magic conventions. He's also the hilarious Guinness World Record Animal Balloon Twister. John has done thousands of shows, and he swears by – get this – **conga drum cases**. These tall (forgettable) tubular containers are light, durable and affordable at \$50-200 each. They come in fiberboard or very durable hard plastic, and the plastic ones come with wheels on the bottom. Rivet and glue some "industrial strength" loop Velcro™ to the top edge; add a pleated skirt of fabric and you're ready to go! Companies that make them include Nomad (fibre only), Latin Percussion (hard plastic) and Humes & Berg (fibre and plastic).

The Latin Percussion "Road Ready Conga Case" shown below is 33" high, 22.5" deep and 22.5" wide.
<http://www.samash.com/catalog/showitem.asp?ItemID=36061>



Consider the "Humes & Berg" Fiber, Round and Enduro models with casters. All H&B conga cases are 31" high. If you're on an extremely tight budget for an open-top case, look at the affordable "Humes & Berg Vulcanized Fibre Conga Case w/Casters," which I found online for \$84 at <http://www.explorersdrums.com/product3093.html>



SPECIFIC MODELS MADE FOR MAGICIANS

SUITCASE TABLES: If you don't have **anything**, get one. You'll be happy you did. They solve so many problems at once, and you can use them in multiple venues. My children's birthday party show is always set up in one. It makes life easy.

Joe Leffler's "Pro Suitcase Tables" come in two sizes. The smaller measures 18" wide by 22" tall by 12" deep when closed and 18" wide by 36" tall by 14" deep when open. It retails for around \$300 and has served me faithfully for ten years and hundreds of shows. The larger \$350 case measures 24" wide by 24" tall by 12" deep when closed and 24" wide by 38" tall by 14" deep when open. Each one has two shelves and the lower compartment is good for ditching props. The grey fabric is Velcro™ friendly and resists marking. They weigh a moderate 30 lbs. or so. The smaller case fit quite nicely on the front floor of my Honda Civic hatchback. See the "magic catalog" at www.wearefun.com or your favorite dealer.



Viking Manufacturing Company makes a most elegant Pro Table Case. It is made of ½" plywood and includes two drawers, a large lower compartment with double doors for large props. Add-on accessories include a prop holder, shelf and ditch bag. The exterior has dark grey Velcro™ friendly carpeting and the edges are covered with metal, so it is quite durable. Because of all this, it weighs a hefty 41 lbs. empty. (\$425 at www.vikingmagiccompany.com sometimes out of stock, so call.)



Mak Magic has a neat “mini” suitcase table for \$200. It is a dark solid color (unlike their very cheesy-looking larger suitcase table). This nice mini weighs only 17 lbs. and is narrow but quite tall: closed it measures 12" deep x 12" wide x 28" tall, opened it is 12" deep x 12" wide x 39" tall. The back lower flap with the lock hinges down for better access to the larger compartment. The image below is from www.hocus-pocus.com



Consummate stage and cabaret performer, David Charvet, sells the unique and very compelling “Ten Second Table” designed by Mark Evans. It is a lightweight but very durable ATA case and not too big. It’s not as forgettable as the other cases mentioned here, but still, people just see a road case on a stand. The lid becomes the base with smooth rolling inset casters while a two-piece center post holds up the main container at a good height. When you order, you need to specify whether you want the opening at the top or the back. Custom sizes can be made for a small fee. I know people who use and swear by this case; it has been tested around the world for years. (\$249 <http://members.aol.com/dcstudios/tables.html>)



BONUS: THE ADVANTUS MULTICART #500 METAL HAND TRUCK

One tool I would never do without is my 8 way multi-cart. When I perform my large show, I may bring as much as my case-table, another case of props, a portable sound system, compact lights, backdrop and an illusion. It is much easier to make one trip from the van. It’s also looks very professional. The pneumatic wheels make curbs and stairs much easier. The whole thing collapses down to a very small size, but also opens up into a five-foot long dolly that can carry 24 cubic feet and 500 lbs. It forms eight different configurations

and the company makes 3 or 4 different models including the R2, R6 and R8 starting at around \$90. I keep my show stacked on it and just roll it out the back of my van – very nice. The larger one can be found online for \$160. Staples sells them for \$216.99. (Hmmm... Max Maven's show in a manila envelope is sounding tearfully beautiful.)



“MAKING MY CASE”

Thank you for stopping by to consider practical road cases. I prefer to keep it lightweight, stable, rolling, forgettable, customizable inside and out, with optional covers, at just the right height and with an appropriate opening for my show. Cases can be custom designed or prefabricated. Carefully consider the weight; ponder its stage position and be sure to cut the clutter. Options range from fiber music cases to professional magicians cases costing hundreds of dollars. Finally, try not to over-think these things. Experiment with different options and see what works best for you! Next time I would like to break from my usual “tech” and share some thoughts on performing for free or for charity. I’ll see you then... Now get out and perform on the Magic Tech Road!