PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE HISTORY is a series devoted to the best of theatre/performance scholarship currently available, accessible and free of jargon. It strives to include a wide range of topics, from the more traditional to those performance forms that in recent years have helped broaden the understanding of what theatre as a category might include (from variety forms as diverse as the circus and burlesque to street buskers, stage magic, and musical theatre, among many others). Although historical, critical, or analytical studies are of special interest, more theoretical projects, if not the dominant thrust of a study, but utilized as important underpinning or as a historiographical or analytical method of exploration, are also of interest. Textual studies of drama or other types of less traditional performance texts are also germane to the series if placed in their cultural, historical, social, or political and economic context. There is no geographical focus for this series, works of excellence of a diverse and international nature, including comparative studies, are sought.

The editor of the series is Don B. Wilmeth (Emeritus, Brown University), Ph.D., University of Illinois, who brings to the series over a dozen years as editor of a book series on American theatre and drama, in addition to his own extensive experience as an editor of books and journals. He is the author of several award-winning books and has received numerous career achievement awards, including one for sustained excellence in editing from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

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From the Eighteenth Century to the Present

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Foreword by Eugene Burger
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Eugene Burger is one of the most revered magicians in the world. A celebrated performer, Burger is also a prolific author of books on the art and theory of magic performance. He is a leading figure in the recent movement to approach magic as a meaningful, expressive art form.

Throughout most of its history, beginning around the sixth century BCE when the Magi came to Greece from Persia, the idea of “magic” has had a checkered reputation. On the one hand, the idea resonates positively with us: we are drawn to the idea of magic. It is an idea filled with possibilities that suggests the fulfillment of our deepest dreams. We find the idea of magic fascinating and alluring. Perhaps it appeals to us at a primal level. Perhaps the human heart cries out for magic.

On the other hand, magic has also always been seen as something suspect. Magic has never fully been trusted and never been felt to be fully trustworthy. There are negative connotations to the idea of magic. Many people see magic as ungodly, demonic, from the Underworld. Magic frequently suggests danger, something we need to fear. In the words of Antonin Artaud: “But no matter how loudly we clamor for magic in our life, we are really afraid of pursuing an existence entirely under its influence and sign” (9).

It was one of the accomplishments of the twentieth century that the negative perception of magic has changed. With the exception of a few fundamentalist Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the notion of magic has been virtually redeemed. This has happened in large measure because of the efforts of advertisers and marketers. I would say that a good deal of the credit for the redemption of magic surely must go to the Disney company. (If the funds are available, what parent could be so cruel not to take their children to visit Disney’s Magic Kingdom?) Disney and other advertisers including Mercedes Benz, Buick, and AT&T—the list is long and growing—have
used the idea and even the word “magic” to sell their products and enhance their services.

Is there much difference, after all, between consulting the forest-dwelling old witch in the Middle Ages to obtain a love potion and going to Bloomingdale’s cosmetic department today for much the same purpose? At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in advertising, the word magic has become an exciting and positive adjective that opens our minds to new possibilities for our lives. To say that something is “magical” is to say something highly positive about it. The old negative connotations seem to be drifting from our consciousness.

As our view of the value of magic changed, there were changes in the way we viewed theatrical or performance magic as well. The price for the rehabilitation of the idea of magic has been high: as the twentieth century progressed, performance magic became, more and more, something “merely for the children.” Exactly why this happened is too long a story to attempt to tell here. Nonetheless, I would observe that while magic began the century not simply as an entertainment for the family but also sometimes as an adult entertainment without the presence of children, by mid-century most performance magicians seemed to be primarily aiming their work at children and families with children. In the process, in the larger world of cultural perceptions, performance magic became more and more dismissed as trivial and unimportant for the adult world.

Even so, as the twentieth century was drawing to a close, something rather surprising happened: academics began taking performance magic seriously. They began writing about it. (Many of these books and articles are referenced in the pages that follow.) Not only books that taught magic tricks, but also books that intelligently discussed the history of magic began to appear in popular bookstores. (Oddly enough, they are placed not with the performance and theater books, but with books about games and puzzles). The last decade of the twentieth century also marked the beginning and flowering of Lawrence Hass’s “Theory and Art of Magic” program at Muhlenberg College. Magicians and academics from all over the world were invited to discuss performance magic from a variety of standpoints. It is from this groundbreaking academic program, in fact, that this present book has grown and developed.

Frankly, I must confess that I am personally surprised (and a bit distressed) that this process of rehabilitation and recognition took so long and came so late. For me, performance magic has always been a deep and profound art that raises fascinating questions, and some of these are questions that we ignore at our own peril. Consider this one: why are we all so
easily deceived? Why is deception so common? Why are we deceived by politicians, the so-called religious, and even those who reside in the inner circles of those we love and who love us? Would our lives benefit if we could reduce the amount of deception in which we are involved on a daily basis? And how shall we deal with self-deception? Indeed, is self-deception always a “bad” thing? I submit these are important questions.

Looked at from another perspective, performance magic is worthy of our attention if only because it appears to be the only art form that is always and forever concerned with transcendence. I find this fascinating. This is not to say that other art forms do not also deal with transcendence. They surely do. Sometimes. Theatrical or performance magic, on the other hand, always deals with reaching beyond the ordinary and everyday; it always deals with transcending the human condition.

In everyday life, I cannot fly, fire will consume me, spikes will penetrate my heart, and I will die. In the world of the magic show, on the contrary, people can fly, they do survive burning fire and deadly spikes. In everyday life, the empty hat remains just that: empty. It does not suddenly fill with life—with the small white rabbit that brings “ohs” and “ahs” not only from the children but also from many adults.

As a professional magician I find it genuinely exciting that performance magic is becoming the subject for academic scrutiny, analysis, and interpretation. The essays that follow take us down many paths. They look at performance magic in different ways. And so they open doors for us behind which we will find many new and different questions—and many new surprises.

I suspect, for example, that many magicians will be surprised at some of the interpretations that follow because they have never quite looked at their art in the ways suggested. At the same time, I think that many academics will be surprised by the way these scholars openly celebrate magic—their willingness to treat magic as a profound art form worthy of our deepest attention.

Part of the fun and excitement of performance magic, of course, is that it brings us surprises. It reminds us that life is filled with surprises. And surprise sometimes brings wonder; and wonder can bring transformations in the ways we see our world and ourselves.

But how could it be otherwise? Ultimately, performance magic reminds us that the Universe is a capital “M,” Mystery. And Mystery, I think, is both irreducible and eternal. As the well-known theologian and anthropologist Lawrence E. Sullivan puts it: “The horizon of the unknown moves outward with the horizon of knowledge” (viii).
WORKS CITED


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