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# **The Development of Socialist Magic: Reflections on the Place of Power and Ideology in Magic Performance.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The author seeks to establish a historical context for his own performance practice, which combines radical left politics with magic tricks and ventriloquism. A survey of the iconography of magic performance from the time of Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin onwards reveals an ideological underpinning which reflects hierarchies of class, gender and race in society. However, the magician's role is complex, as he (or less commonly she) practises an art which is part of 'low' culture, despite its association with the rich and powerful. Moreover, the modern magician is associated with rationalism and scepticism, which sometimes puts the conjurer on the side of a progressive view of society. The author examines his own attempts to overcome this disjunction in his practice and explains why, for him, the combination of agitprop and magic performance can only be effective through the use of humour.

## **KEYWORDS**

Magic; Politics; Power; Socialism; Ideology; Robert-Houdin; Cabaret; Comedy.

‘Good evening. My name is Ian Saville, and I am about to show you some magic tricks. Some socialist magic tricks. I realise that some members of the audience may not be entirely familiar with the genre of *Socialist Conjuring*, so in order to lead you gently into it, I’m going to start by showing a trick that I saw a *bourgeois* magician do many years ago. But in true socialist manner, I’m not only going to show you the trick, I am also going to show you how it’s done, and a dialectically opposite method of performing it.’ (Saville, 2006)

This is how, for many years, I have begun my magic act, in my persona as ‘The Socialist Conjurer’ (or, more often these days ‘Socialist Magician’). Like most comic performers, I developed my script primarily from pragmatic considerations. I didn’t begin from a theoretical structure, and earnestly compose patter to fit within an epistemological framework, but adapted to the reactions of live audiences. I followed the laughs, and responded intuitively in a way that I thought would bring more laughs. However, notwithstanding the ad hoc basis of my act’s development, and the absence of a predetermined rigorous analytical outline, I believe that I developed something which casts some light on the ideological underpinning of magic as a performance art, and the place of political ideas in this popular cultural phenomenon. In this essay I will try to marry together the strands of these ideas, beginning with a reflective description of my act, and then broadening the discussion to look at the place that I contend it has in the development of magic as a performing art, and the challenge that it represents to the dominant ideology.

It is apparent from the above quote that there is a fair degree of irony in my approach. The humour arises from the fact that I am subverting some received ideas. On the one hand, I upset audience expectations about how a magician/variety artist should behave; on the other, the very idea of a serious-minded political activist delivering propaganda through the medium of magic tricks seems incongruous and somewhat absurd.

The absurdity builds as the act develops. The trick with which I ‘lead people gently’ into the genre of socialist magic is one in which I purport to explain the workings of the trick, but in fact further mystify the audience by repeatedly and unexpectedly making silk handkerchiefs appear and disappear.

Over the years I have performed this trick thousands of times. The trick, both in its technical working and its dramatic structure is not original to me. It is known as *Sucker Silks* and was popularised by a magician called Jack Le Dair, a popular variety act in the 1940s. I came across the trick (through somebody else's presentation, though I can't remember whose) some time in the 1960s. As the title implies, *Sucker Silks* takes the audience along a detour of misunderstanding, leading them to think they know exactly what the magician is doing, when actually the magician is way ahead of them. Such 'sucker' tricks are a discrete category of magical performance, providing a useful weapon in the magician's arsenal. As the title also implies, in its rather derogatory characterisation of the magician's audience, the magician here plays a teasing game with the spectator involving a drastically unequal power relationship. The spectator is led to believe that the magician has mistakenly revealed the trick's method, but soon it becomes clear that the apparently obvious method revealed is not the one used. The spectator has been taken for a sucker. A bad presentation might cause resentment in the audience, and for this reason, some magicians avoid the use of such tricks, or at least, use them with a degree of caution.

In order to develop my argument, I need to explain how I came to appropriate this trick, and others, to present and celebrate a socialist view of the world. I will reflect on the nature of 'socialist magic' and its relation to the rest of the magical world.

Let me begin this explanation with a short autobiographical summary. My route into magic performance was similar to that of many other magicians. I remember a magician coming to my primary school (probably around 1960) and being truly 'suckered' by the die box trick<sup>1</sup>. Later, I bought a couple of books on magic that were on sale at Woolworths (they were *Famous Magic Secrets* by Will Dexter, and *The Complete Book of Magic* by Peter Warlock). I have no idea why these two books, so different from the normal stock of the general store, were offered for sale in 1963 or so, but the combination of

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<sup>1</sup> The die box (and many variations) is still a standard of children's magic, but it can also be successfully performed for adults, particularly when presented by a strong comic performer such as Tommy Cooper. The magician places a large solid die in a cabinet that has two compartments, and, after saying the magic words, claims that it has disappeared. The audience is convinced that the magician is simply sliding the die back and forth between the two compartments, aided by the fact that they see the magician tip the cabinet, and hear the sound of the die sliding across. Eventually the magician gives in to the vociferous demands of the children (or adults) and opens all the doors of the cabinet, revealing that the die has indeed disappeared, and is recovered from a hat or other receptacle elsewhere on the stage.

Dexter's advice about aspects of performance, and Warlock's compendium of tricks started me off on an interest that has persisted for nearly fifty years.

By learning some magic tricks, I was able to perform short pieces of theatre without the need for a set, other actors or a script. Of course, I could have learned a few jokes, and passed myself off as a comedian, but that was too daunting. Magic tricks gave me a theatrical structure into which I could insert my personality, my humour and my ideas. Each trick was a short sketch, with its own exposition, action and denouement. In some cases, the plot was simple – a cut rope becomes whole, a bottle disappears – in others it was complex, and played with the audience's expectations. Here was a framework in which I could practise all the theatrical and dramaturgical methods that I would later associate with playwrights and directors: narrative elements, visual surprises, comic inversions and fantastical images.

But the world of magic, I quickly realised, was in a different compartment from the world of 'legitimate' theatre. Drama and Theatre were, largely, 'high' culture, whereas magic was part of show business, popular entertainment and light distraction, and therefore firmly in the 'low' culture bracket. My participation in the Butlin's national talent contest, alongside Bobby Crush and Mike Reid, might have been a step on the road towards fame and fortune (although in practice, it was not), but it was not a 'serious' undertaking. Serious theatre was Shakespeare and Chekhov and Ibsen and Beckett, not David Nixon or Channing Pollock.

Although I later came to a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between high and low culture, and came to realise that there was more interchange between them than the conventional narrative allowed for, it seemed, in the late 1960s and early 1970s that my interest in theatre was something quite removed from my facility with magic tricks.

If, as seemed the case, I had to choose between theatre and magic, then I would have to choose theatre. And so I did. I performed in an amateur production of *The Good Person of Szechuan*, and learned the conventional chronology of theatre, as filtered through A-level English Literature and my enthusiastic teachers in Hackney. At least one of them had taught Harold Pinter years before, so there was an educated and enthusiastic understanding of contemporary theatre, along with an eagerness to embrace the vibrant fringe theatre that was emerging at that time. So for a while I put away my childish things, my ropes and silk handkerchiefs, but every now and then I

would go back to them and find a way to use them in my conventional theatre work.

Having mentioned Brecht, I should also explain that around this time, I became aware of politics. In fact, my reading of Brecht, while not being the whole of my political education, was certainly a significant part of it. I shared Brecht's socialist view of the world, though hindsight gave me a different perspective on the role of the Soviet Union. Not only Brecht, but other writers and cultural theorists would help me to develop an understanding of political ideas. It was possible, I realised, to pursue the study of politics, and particularly left wing politics, at the same time as one studied theatre and cultural theory. Indeed, it sometimes seemed that the most sophisticated and developed ideas about politics had been put forward by people whose primary interest was in culture, and particularly that area of culture concerned with performance.

But whereas one could study politics through theatre, it seemed far less possible to study politics through an understanding of magic tricks. And as I struggled to interpret the politics of the 1970s, and to involve myself in leftist action, I became aware of another schism running along the lines of cultural interpretation. This manifested itself in a certain puritanism on the left. It was by no means a universal attitude, but was often discernible in underlying assumptions about the role of art in relation to the struggle. Later, I was to learn that this had deep roots in socialist history, and had played a significant role in the development of oppositional culture, at least in England. When, for instance, I studied the development of the Workers' Theatre Movement in the 1920s and 30s, I found that an attitude of distaste for popular theatre forms, such as the Music Hall, permeated the revolutionary left. An account by a participant in that movement, Philip Poole, illustrates a common attitude at the time:

You were supposed to be politically active every day of the week. I remember once seeing a Party member coming out of what was then called the Hackney Empire . . . music hall in Hackney, and I was absolutely horrified that this comrade should take an evening off and go to the music hall . . . terrible crime! (Saville, 1990, p. 120).

This was really a reflection of the attitudes of the ideologues of the left in Britain. In my doctoral thesis I quoted the British Communist Party theorist Maurice Dobb, who wrote of the role of the Music Hall as a form of 'dope' to distract the working class from their historic mission to overthrow capitalism.

While attitudes in the 1960s and 70s had changed somewhat, and the Music Hall had been replaced by television as the mass medium which was diverting the proletariat from its revolutionary task, there remained something of this attitude on the left. Perhaps a distinction needs to be made between the purely activist left, or the bureaucratic left, and the left in the field of cultural production. For certainly in theatre groups there was more openness to the idea of expropriating low cultural forms for propagandist purposes. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the vibrant alternative theatre culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and the eagerness of leftist theatre groups to experiment with popular forms, there remained something suspect about 'variety'. This attitude was really only overturned at the end of the 1970s, with the growth of alternative cabaret, and what Roland Muldoon dubbed 'New Variety'.

To further complicate things, there is another narrative I need to introduce. In addition to the divides between high and low art, and the suspicion on the left about the triviality of popular culture, the world of magic and magicians had its own social and cultural perspective. This was bound up with an image of magicians that derives largely from 19th-century practice, and is further complicated by the difference between the images that magicians have of themselves, and those perceived by members of the public. These images and cultural icons have undoubtedly informed my own practice, both in positive and negative terms (and sometimes both positive and negative overlaying one another) so some examination of their historical development is appropriate.

Clearly, there are manifold images of magicians. But undoubtedly the stereotyped image that would have been recognised in the 20th century is a sort of throwback to the well-dressed gentleman of the 19th century. Top hat (or Opera Hat) and tails became so much associated with the magician, that probably for many mid-20th century children, it was considered a sort of uniform for the conjurer, quite divorced from any sort of everyday clothing. Even a top hat on its own might be considered something to do with magic, and when paired with a rabbit, it became an unmistakable emblem.

It would seem that this uniform dated back, at least in part, to the manner of dress adopted by the great Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, who was paradoxically using it not in order to create a special style for the magician, but in order to blend in better with his bourgeois audience. Robert-Houdin was not the first or only magician to adopt this approach. As far back as the early eighteenth century, Isaac Fawkes presented himself as an aspiring

member of the bourgeoisie, and successfully presented his shows at exclusive and fashionable venues, as well as to the general populace at Bartholomew Fair (During, 2002, p.81). And Robert-Houdin's contemporary, Angelo Lewis (under the pen-name "Professor Hoffmann") popularised the notion of the magician as a member of the gentlemanly class, in his profusely illustrated series of books for the well-to-do amateur, beginning with *Modern Magic*. But it was Robert-Houdin's stage persona that had a persistent influence, lasting into the present day. This, of course, was in contrast to earlier magicians who set themselves apart from their audiences, portraying themselves as special beings, in contact with realms of spirituality. Robert-Houdin eschewed the wizard's robes and sought to portray himself as an enlightened member of the ruling classes. He was more in touch with scientific developments than with spiritual enlightenment, and although his demonstrations included unexplained phenomena such as the sudden increase in weight of an empty box, or the gravity defying suspension of a child, these were presented within a framework of scientific advance and discovery, and were interspersed with demonstrations of clockwork mechanisms and automata, the advanced technologies of the day.

Magicians who followed on from Robert-Houdin tended to emulate his approach, and sought to associate themselves with the highest echelons of society in order to demonstrate the value of their art. A poster presently in the Devant Room of the Magic Circle HQ in London shows Professor Anderson ('The Great Wizard of the North' – a contemporary of Robert-Houdin) performing to an array of royal patrons, and asserts that Anderson had performed to 'the whole of the monarchy of Europe'.

Autobiographies of magicians from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as those of Carl Hertz and Horace Goldin are, like that of Robert-Houdin himself, replete with stories of their shows for the rich and the royal. And at the turn of the century, magic was becoming not only a branch of performance, but also a popular hobby for the amateur. The magical hobbyist, as discerned through the writings of the prolific Professor Hoffmann (Angelo Lewis) was clearly a well-to-do, respectable gentleman, happy to spend substantial sums on elaborate chrome plated props and adaptations to clothing.

The relationship between magic performance and theatre was by no means straightforward. Notwithstanding Robert-Houdin's much quoted dictum that



the conjuror 'is an actor playing the part of a magician'<sup>2</sup> (Robert-Houdin, 2006, p. 39), magical performance was not a part of the canon that might be considered great, or even worthy, art. As far as aesthetes and critics were concerned, the magician was still practising a less elevated form of art than his (or her) brothers and sisters in the 'legitimate' theatre. The conjurer's appearance in Music Hall or Vaudeville signalled that, whatever its pretensions and appeal to the upper classes, magic was still, at base, a low, rather than an elevated form of cultural discourse. While Simon During has demonstrated that 'secular' magic has had a broad-reaching influence on the culture of the 20th century, (During, 2002, pp. 1-42), it remains the case that as an entertainment form it has almost exclusively been associated with low cultural forms: 'Art may be serious and profound while magic is trivial and light. Art may generate immense cultural capital. While magic generates almost none.' (During, 2009, p. 26). In the beginnings of the era of mass media, magic continued to occupy this ground, and a practitioner such as Houdini was one of the first to exploit the potential of mass communications and publicity in furtherance of his art. Indeed, as During shows, the connections between magic and the new mass media, particularly film, were extensive, and magicians or former magicians, such as Méliès were important to the development of the new media.

So while performers such as Houdini and Hertz flaunted and exploited their connections to the social upper classes, the work they were doing was inescapably 'popular' rather than 'refined'. But, as if in reaction to their lowly cultural status, or perhaps as a consequence of the magic performance being associated with a large hinterland of well-to-do amateurs, magicians have clung, even up to the present day, to the idea that their art is refined, highly wrought, and scholarly. Magazines and books devoted to the art of magic pride themselves on their attention to academic detail, and the instructions for a magic effect will carefully trace the origins and variants, with what sometimes seems an obsessive compulsion to give full and proper credit to the provenance of every move, variation and flourish.

So, it would seem that magic is in an anomalous and contradictory position. A low cultural form that nevertheless aspires to the garb of the ruling class. A performance art that is both a sort of swindle, and the epitome of respectability. One might wonder what would be the attitude of the practitioners of such an art to progressive, or even revolutionary ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert-Houdin's statement, found in a chapter on 'escamotage, prestidigitation', is as much concerned with distinguishing the conjuror from the juggler, as identifying him with the thespian. The less quoted beginning of the sentence is 'A conjuror is not a juggler'.

Of course, among individual magicians there has been a range of opinions and political positions. And on the whole, direct reference to political ideas in the literature of magic is scarce.

What there is though, is instructive and interesting. Thus we can find in Professor Hoffmann's *Later Magic* a trick which is described in its title as 'An Illustration of Free Trade Principles' (Hoffmann, 1904, p. 418). The trick is elaborate, and in the patter which Hoffmann recreates, we are told that, using eggs, a candle, silk handkerchiefs and a tumbler, the magician will address the 'much disputed question' of Protection versus Free Trade in international relations. While this is far from being a propagandist piece, it is clearly an illustration of the wonders of capitalism, and the productive forces of modern industry. It assumes an audience that is at least somewhat familiar with the economic controversies of the day, and casts the magician in the role of lecturer, approaching issues from a 'scientific' point of view.

The founding of The Magic Circle in 1905, an institution devoted to the furtherance of the craft or art of magic, but organised along the lines of a Gentlemen's private club, confirmed the magicians' elitist view of the world. While there seems little reference in magical literature to the turbulent politics of the time, there is at least a taste of the magical fraternity's attitude to current events. In an item in the Magic Circle's journal, *The Magic Circular*, in 1907, under the heading 'Magic and Socialism' the writer, *The Magic Circular's* editor Nevil Maskelyne, draws the readers' attention to a letter in the *London Daily Express*. The correspondent, alluding, no doubt, to recent events in Russia, asks somewhat whimsically:

What will be the status of the conjurer under the Socialist régime?  
Will he be allowed to follow his calling of catching money in the air undisturbed, or will he be retained by the 'state' to replenish its coffers after it has distributed the proceeds of its gigantic theft?  
Money will have to be forthcoming from somewhere, I presume, so possibly we may witness the removal of the Mint from Tower Hill to St. Georges Hall [*Home of Maskelyne and Devant's magic shows - IS*].

The correspondent was a Mr Leslie Lambert, a Member of the Inner Magic Circle<sup>3</sup>. Nevil Maskelyne responded that such a scenario was unlikely in practice, and certainly undesirable:

If and when this country falls under the rule of socialism there will be no wealth catchable. Riches take unto themselves wings and fly. When socialism arrives they will have already flown. That, however, will not concern us personally. We shall have ceased to move and vote, ages before. Query – Will socialism ever be able to square the Magic Circle? (Maskelyne, 1907, p. 170)

The Magic Circle had taken as its avowed object: 'to form the nucleus of a vast congress of magicians of all creeds and nationalities, striving to elevate and purify the art, and raise it to one of the first professions' (Whipp, 1950, p. 7) as well as to prevent the exposure of the working of tricks. But it also wished to frame itself as a highly respectable organisation, a pillar of the establishment with links to the highest echelons of society. An early report in the Daily Mail, jokingly referring to the organisation as a conjurors' 'Trade Union' drew opprobrium from established magicians, and reports of at least one magician refusing to join the Circle because of the use of that term (Whipp, 1950, p. 113).

In keeping with its elevated aims, The Magic Circle has sought to associate itself with the 'top drawer' of society. Early Presidents of the Magic Circle included Lord Ampthill (Oliver Russell) and His Grace the Duke of Somerset (Evelyn Seymour). In 1975, His Royal Highness, Charles, The Prince of Wales was elected to membership of The Inner Magic Circle and he remains a member to this day.

The purpose of recounting this history is to demonstrate that in the mid-20th century, when I entered into the world of magic and prestidigitation, the figure of the magician stood in a liminal place with regard to ideology and power. Magicians practised an art that was in some senses trivial, but which gathered to itself the trappings of power and privilege. It is no coincidence that the gender roles inhabited by magicians have also reflected and amplified the inequalities of gender relations in society as a whole. With notable exceptions, magicians have been men, and for most of the 20th century, women were not allowed to join The Magic Circle. Women, as

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie Lambert was later to become a successful radio broadcaster under the pseudonym A. J. Alan.

assistants to the men, have been sawn in half, vanished, transposed or otherwise mutilated – the irony being that it is generally the woman in these situations who has to work hardest in order to bring about the magical effect. As if to add insult to injury, the originator of the effect of ‘Sawing a Woman Through’, P.T. Selbit, garnered publicity by offering ‘paying work’ at a rate of £20 a week to the suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, if she would consent to be sawn in half (Goldston, 1921, p. 17).

Similar points could be made with regard to race and ethnicity. Robert-Houdin's prototype modern magician was part of the ‘superior’ tribe of white Europeans, and eschewed images of witch doctors or native shamans. Robert-Houdin himself recounts how he used magic to impress and pacify a tribe in Algeria that showed a rebellious attitude to its French colonial rulers. Robert-Houdin's demonstrations of French legerdemain were enough, by his account (which, of course, may not be entirely reliable), to persuade the Marabout leaders of the tribes that he had access to hidden powers of which they knew not. Of course, Robert-Houdin is at pains to point out that he made it clear to the Marabouts that, impressive as his bullet catching and other tricks were, they had been achieved by skill and scientific understanding, rather than supernatural intervention (Robert-Houdin, 2006, pp. 622-633). In this, like many magicians in the modern era, Robert-Houdin was both having his cake and eating it. The modern magician both asserts that his magic is achieved without the intervention of supernatural or other-worldly means, while apparently contradicting such an interpretation by methodically ruling out all the possible logical explanations for the phenomena witnessed. It is a common trope for magic tricks to purport to illustrate a scientific principle, and then, at the end of the demonstration, for the magician to do something which entirely contradicts the previous explanation. A recent example is Alan Shaxon's presentation of ‘The Hydrostatic Glass’. He framed the trick in precisely this way, presenting it from the beginning, in the manner of a scientific experiment illustrating the effect of air pressure on a body of liquid, but finishing with the words ‘That's science.... That's MAGIC!.... and THAT'S ALL!’ as he confounded audiences' expectations and made the water in his glass defy gravity in an unexplained way (Shaxon, 1970, p. 59).

The relationship of magic to race and ethnicity is, perhaps, more complex than the simple show of power described above. From the late 19th century, the Orientalism described by Edward Said in his book of that title also played a part. The European fascination with the mysterious East opened up possibilities for the magician whereby unexplained phenomena could be attributed to the strange and foreign philosophies of lands where European

science was unknown. So it was that the American William Robinson took on the role of a Chinese illusionist, Chung Ling Soo, and in this guise (which he maintained offstage as well as on) became one of the most popular and successful turn-of-the-century magicians. Robinson took advantage of the 'otherness' of Oriental philosophy in order to step outside of the proto-scientific discourse, and provide an audience with engaging mysteries which could be attributed to something other than scientific rationalism. But even in this, Robinson was careful not to cause offence to the ideology of imperialism. His famous, and ultimately fatal, presentation of the bullet catching trick played out a scenario which made clear his support for the power of the British Empire against the Boxer rebellion (Steinmeyer, 2005, p. 217).

There is much which could be explored in this area of magic, ethnicity and power. But what I wish to establish here is the complex image of the magician, into which I had to step in the process of creating my 'socialist magic' act. The magician practises an art form that has low cultural capital, but whose devotees wish to claim for it the status of high art. It is a popular form that displays itself in the garb of the ruling class. Its best-known practitioners have sometimes boasted of their connections with the ruling establishment, and members of that establishment have often dabbled in magic as amateurs, and have even taken high office in the clubs and societies of magic. As a demonstration of the close association of magic with the establishment, there could be a little that was more emblematic than Paul Daniels' vanishing of a million pounds in 1984, under the scrutiny of later disgraced newspaper proprietor Robert Maxwell. The million pounds was actually the property of Barclays bank (Fisher, 1987, p. 220).

In spite of this association with establishment ideas and people, magic and magicians, in their capacity as sceptical rationalists, have often found themselves in the frontline of debunking common myths and superstition. Thus, Houdini for much of his career set about exposing fraudulent mediums and psychics. Even today, magician James Randi and his foundation play an educational role in challenging the wild claims of the paranormalists. In their early work, magical duo Penn and Teller set about describing to audiences the way in which they could be duped by advertising and corporate presentations in order to sell products:

They have devised the perfect entertainment for a nation overrun with cover-ups, covert operations, and deceptive advertising campaigns (Jenkins, 1988, p.175).

The most successful contemporary British magical performer (though he might eschew the title 'magician') is Derren Brown, who has brilliantly cultivated an image as a rationalist, using his access to the mass media to expose the fakery of mediums, faith healers and charismatic cult leaders, while managing to present himself as an adept practical psychologist. His audiences are left divided as to whether his mystifying experiments are accomplished by a profound understanding of the human mind, or by the more conventional trickery of the magician's arsenal. But even as he mystifies his audience, he urges them to a critical approach to those who would manipulate our understanding.

Thus, my idea of combining socialist propaganda with magic tricks was not absolutely without precedent. In fact there was another precedent, of which I was only tangentially aware, that of so-called 'Gospel Magic', by which Christian magicians sought to illustrate and propagate the teachings of Christianity through the use of magic tricks. Here was magic as propaganda (in the literal Catholic meaning of the term), which supported the dominant Christian ideology.

But to return to the argument with which I began this reflection, when I set out to do 'Socialist Magic' I had little idea of what I was actually attempting, and the process of development was largely pragmatic. Although I had performed magic since I was a teenager, the idea of combining magic tricks with socialist theatre really only occurred to me when I was working with an agitprop group, Broadside Mobile Workers' Theatre, in 1978 – 1979. We had incorporated some magic tricks into the structure of our plays, but while I still sometimes presented my stand-up magic as a curtain raiser to our agitprop pieces, I had not really thought about incorporating socialist ideology into the magic. In fact I maintained that such a course was impossible, as it would imply simultaneously mystifying and demystifying the audience. It was after I left Broadside, and some people who had seen me perform with that group asked me to come and perform at the newly established comedy/alternative cabaret clubs, or Rock Against Racism concerts, that I abandoned my 'demystification' objection and started to think about what it would mean to be a socialist conjurer. What became clear, as I adapted my rope trick (a standard trick known generally as 'The Professor's Nightmare'), with its three different sized pieces of rope, to illustrate the configuration of different classes in society, was that this could only work through humour. I was right that there was a contradiction between mystification and demystification, but rather than being a weakness, this inherent contradiction was a source of humour. And by using humour, I was setting myself clearly apart from the

Gospel magic brigade, whose uncritical and reverential view of their source material ruled out such a comic approach.

And so I developed my act. As the introduction quoted earlier illustrates, I begin the act by combining disparate modes of discourse in a way that is both logical and upsetting to an audience's expectations, and therefore funny (or at least, that is what I hope). The declaration that I have seen this trick done by a *bourgeois* magician tells the audience that even if they are about to see a series of physical effects with which they may be familiar from the work of other magicians, my way of describing these effects will be novel.

It might be thought that this approach could only work with audiences that are familiar with left-wing ideas and language. However, my experience has been that most audiences, whether they are clearly partisan (for example, people attending a meeting of a political campaign) or more generalist (as in a comedy club) will respond positively to this approach. Even if the language of left wing debate and argument is not a language which they habitually use, they will generally recognise it, and see the apparent absurdity of placing it in this new context. Of course, there are occasions where an audience is so familiar with the language, and finds it so refreshing to encounter it being used in a new way, that its delight becomes almost tangible. In this I think that in some ways the still perceived puritanism in some sections of the left plays a role. People whose habitual activity in political campaigns or parties is often approached with serious determination feel invigorated by this chance to poke fun at some of the jargon which in normal circumstances they need to take seriously. There is something liberating about being able to laugh oneself.

And I go further, in my act, than simply illustrating socialist ideas with the use of conventional magicians' props. Part of the act consists of ventriloquism – what magicians describe as an 'allied art' of magic – with a talking portrait of Karl Marx. My dialogue with Marx is comical, and doesn't attempt to offer any but the most rudimentary explanations of Marxist theory. Marx does tell me that 'all previous magicians have only interpreted the world; the point however is to change it' but that is really the nearest we get to an agitational statement<sup>4</sup>. And even with that, I undercut what could otherwise be a stirring injunction by remarking that, of course, many audiences have, in the past,

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<sup>4</sup> However, in my latest show, the *Free Money Magic Show*, I have attempted to deal with somewhat more complex ideas, which are explained by my ventriloquial Marx, and developed in what I hope is a new, novel way. For a clip from the show see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSIXaRSHYBM>.

taken this as a cue to actually set about changing the world, and have therefore left the theatre.

My presentation of such a venerated and iconic figure as Karl Marx in the context of a ventriloquial dialogue might be thought of in some quarters as disrespectful or perhaps even offensive. But it has not been my experience that audiences have taken offence. By overlapping the structures of ventriloquial crosstalk and Marxist jargon, I hope that I bring a humanising humour to the presentation of socialist ideas.

In fact there is a point in my act, where I depart from my customary comedy-led approach, and move into something nearer to a clear propagandist presentation. This is my presentation of a fairly long poem which I wrote, and which presents a brief panorama of labour and socialist history. This poem, *The Vision*<sup>5</sup>, was written as part of a longer show, in which I debated the nature of utopia with a ventriloquist's dummy of William Morris. Actually, I don't always perform this as part of my act, but judge the conditions and the mood of the audience, as the piece demands a certain sort of attention, which is not always present in a more knockabout environment.

From the short cabaret act, I started to develop longer one-man shows. The first of these was, in a way, a reflection on the nature of the performance I was undertaking. In that show, *Brecht on Magic*, I introduced a new ventriloquist dummy in the shape of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht commented on what I was doing, and suggested new innovations for my act. As I moved from stand-up conjuring to the incorporation of conjuring and ventriloquism into a full-length show, I began to understand some of the dramaturgical possibilities inherent in ventriloquism. Watching the classic masters of the art such as Arthur Worsley, also alerted me to the Pirandellian games that could be played with this fundamentally self reflexive form of puppetry.

I continue to try to find ways to develop this sub-genre which I have called socialist magic. It is still open to question whether this is merely a comical conceit built on a parody of conventional performance, or whether it has the potential to embody complex ideas in a stimulating way. Some more examination and analysis of the ideological basis of magical presentation is needed, putting the presentation of such ideas in the context of serious discourse. As I hope my observations above have shown, this is difficult to achieve given the various filters through which magical performance is

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://redmagic.co.uk/content/vision-poem-shows>



perceived. My latest show, dealing with the nature and development of money, has attempted to offer real and meaningful explanations of phenomena with which many people are familiar, but which few of us actually understand. To this extent it goes further than the approach of the cabaret act, which is primarily an exercise in celebrating an oppositional perspective. How successful this approach will prove remains to be seen.

In Mikhail Bulgakov's great tragicomic satire on Stalinism, *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov has Satan arriving in Moscow and demonstrating to the Soviet public the inadequacy of their own lives, and the corruption of their officials. He does this by means of a public display of conjuring tricks in a grand variety theatre. Satan takes on all the accoutrements of the stage magician, with the advantage that his possession of real demonic powers obviate the need for sleight of hand or misdirection. Bulgakov's satire points to the possibility of magic being used to reveal something profound about our own lives. My hope is that the devil doesn't always have the best tricks.

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