TODD ROBBINS

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years old, and I was fascinated by it. I got my mom to take me there, and I walked in and there were these dusty shelves filled with apparatus specifically designed to deceive the senses and create the illusion of the extraordinary. I took magic lessons there and bought magic tricks and got really bitten by the bug, as many young people are, especially boys around that time in their life. And just continued on. I never fell from grace with it. I moved to New York about 31 years ago, and I found the quality of what was being done here was not the best. There were certainly the big shows, but a young person moving to the city was not going to be able to break into those ranks right off the bat. But the smaller, second- and third-tier ones often had the quality of a bad community theatre with pretensions of high art. I found I was auditioning for shows I didn't like for people I really didn't have admiration for, or respect. So I decided to take things into my own hands, brushed off the magic act and started doing that. MTV had started up and they were looking for something unusual for one of their shows. So I worked up the feat of sticking my hand into an animal trap. And once I did that for the TV show I put it into my magic act. I'd do a magic trick and say, "That was a trick, but this isn't." And I'd set up the trap and stick my hand into it. And people were amazed by it, came up afterwards and that was the thing they were talking about. Because there's no trickery to it. There's a technique to do it, but there's no trickery. It's just a little extraordinary piece of reality that's based upon a principle of physics and anatomy that people aren't familiar with. So it looks impossible, but it can be done. Little by little I pushed out all of the magic and just started adding all the sideshow things like sword swallowing, fire eating, walking over broken glass with my bare feet, hammering a nail into my nose and things like that. So that's worked very well, also ragtime piano and early jazz piano is what I play. Musically, I've done two albums with Woody Allen. That is also a very rich culture that has been sort of cast off and discarded. But it still is a very rich area to be recycled and rejuvenated. There's a nice little scene of young people who are discovering the older forms of jazz and ragtime. And there's a ragtime competition—an old-time, piano-playing competition in the spirit of Richard K. Fox—every year in Peoria, Illinois. Also, having known a number of the old-time piano players like Eubie Blake, a great old black ragtime piano player who died in the early '80s, there are a lot of younger people coming up in their 20s that didn't have that experience of knowing these people. So they ask all about them. And I love doing the research and looking into things and finding out not only what it was all about but why it happened and where it happened and who was doing it and the whole social dynamic of it.

One basic reason why it happened is because it was interesting. It seems some performers and writers today have a hard time connecting with that.

It's kind of sad that the mainstream popular entertainment has atrophied down to basically music and comedy. There's been a little bit of an uptick in terms of variety entertainment with things like *America's Got Talent*, but unfortunately it's not like the old *Ed Sullivan Show* or *Hollywood Palace* or any of the shows that had true variety on them. They have to make it a competition. So you've got a juggler versus a dog act versus a kid singing, and it's such an apples-and-oranges kind of thing it really makes no sense whatsoever. But people have been sold the idea that these competition shows are a good thing, so it has gotten exposure for a number of people. But I just don't like the idea. There's enough competition in show business without making it *into* a competition. It's worked well for a number of good people, so that's fine. But I have no interest in that. And the other side of it is there's a whole neo-burlesque movement going on.

But it's variety? Striptease as well as other acts?

Yes. It's becoming a good place to see various jugglers and sideshow performers and magicians and things like that.

Where does that take place?

It's all over the place. There's at least one burlesque show per night in New York here. Often there's two. There's a permanent venue, a wonderful place called The Slipper Room that's on the Lower East Side. There's also another place on Chrystie Street that was opened by a man named Simon Hammerstein who is of the Hammerstein family; Oscar Hammerstein was his grandfather. And he opened this place called The Box. He really wanted to capture the spirit of the old concert saloons, the kind of places that Richard K. Fox would go to every night. So he really kind of played up the outlaw quality of it. The acts there also are of a nature that if it involves a body part and an opening and is of a unique nature it's on the stage of The Box. And captured, again, that spirit that is very much evident in the *National Police Gazette*.

What are some of your best routines that really wow people every time?

Well, these are all things that go back generations; some of them go back centuries. Some had been forgotten; and some audiences wish they had been forgotten. But the traditional ones are fire eating, sword swallowing. There was an act called the human blockhead, which has its origins in the fakirs of India, the torture stunts that they would do. These are the people who would lie on a bed of nails, supposedly with a higher sense of spirituality and enlightenment—it's all just physics. And while doing this would have their little basket out for donations. The king of them all was P.T. Barnum, who took the Scudder Museum down at Ann Street and Broadway and turned it into this internationally well-known landmark. I mean, you couldn't go to New York without seeing Barnum's Museum, because he was always promoting. He created modern marketing as we know it, almost single-handedly. He used the press as no one had before and few have since. The end result was that he really established these things as part of popular culture. So everything I do are the old traditional working acts of the sideshow and the dime museums. And these, as opposed to the freak acts—who are people that were born different—these are things that can be learned. They're all based upon techniques. Such as the human blockhead. It's the ability of taking a nail and hammering it into your nose. It seems impossible. Often, people think the nail collapses. But you have enough area in your nose. It goes straight back to the top of the throat. It's the air passage, how you breathe. And unlike magic tricks, I feel no reservation talking about the technique behind it because, if anything, it makes it more amazing. It's not just a cheap trick. It's actually based upon something remarkable. And it also shows there are some extraordinary things we don't know about. Eating glass is another one that I do that I'm very well known for. I take a regular light bulb, not the compact florescent lights—CFLs—that are so prevalent, but the traditional incandescent bulbs and bite into it and chow down on the broken glass. Again, this is something that goes back generations before there were light bulbs. The fakirs of India were taking panes of glass from windows and biting into it. And there's a way of chewing it up and swallowing it so it doesn't cut the mouth and throat. There's a diet regimen I go through every day that keeps it moving through my system so it does no harm. We did this Off-Broadway show also and it was about spiritualism and the fascination we have with death, and how profitable that kind of thing can be for the people who provide answers to the big mysteries.

Like what John Edward does.

John Edward is carrying on a tradition that dates back to the 1840s. There were two young girls in upstate New York, in Hydesville, New York. They pretended that they were communicating with someone dead, a "Mr. Splitfoot." They did it to frighten their mother. But people took it seriously. And when their older sister, who was 16 years older, got wind of it she came down and said to her young sisters "What's going on here?" They confessed to what it was all about, and she said, "You're not going to let anyone know about this. You're not going to confess this. Because the fact is we have power now. People are coming to us." For a woman in the 1840s/1850s in America there were very few choices. You basically became a wife, housewife; a handful of them became teachers, some nurses. Some worked in factories or professionally as secretaries. Or prostitution. And that was it. And now all of a sudden you had another kind of phenomenon created, which was goddess, which was basically religious leader. And so it empowered women in a very interesting way. And all of a sudden this starts to spring up all over the place. They used to say that the prospectors in California came in '49, and in '50 the hookers and the spiritualists came. All started by these two little girls that later on recanted everything. It has so much character, and it also says something about us as a people and as a culture and society.

What does it say about our culture and society?

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, humanity abhors a mystery. We really don't like mysteries; we want answers. And there's a great deal of profit in providing answers, as any religious leader—if they're honest—will tell you. We're looking for answers, and the greatest mystery of all mysteries is what happens when we die? Is there an afterlife? Is there a supreme being? Is there something more than what we have here? And this tied into that. It was a whole expansion of what is possible in life, which is what America has been all about. Many of these things are kindred to magic tricks. Often magic tricks use the techniques that the spiritualists use and vice versa. The difference is we're just a little more honest in our deceptions saying it's for entertainment purposes: "Don't take this seriously. We're not here to change your worldview. We're just here to provide amusement for the time we're going to spend together with me up on the stage and you sitting in that seat there." Anyone who's involved in magic for any period of time is sooner or later going to become fascinated by spiritualism. So I decided I was going to do a little show about mediums and things like that. It was good, but it needed more. A producer became involved and wanted a director. So I called Teller of Penn & Teller who's an old friend of mine and said "Would you be interested in being the director of this?" And he said, "Yes." So we got together and started ripping the show apart. And we ended up with an evening of true ghost stories about real people, some good and some not so good. We used magic and special effects, and it was all very darkly humorous. During the course of the show, within the first 15 minutes, I bring someone up from the audience and kill them. It's not a plant; it's a real person from the audience. Because if you're going to have a séance, you've got to contact the dead. And a freshly dead person is the best kind to contact. So I kill someone; then we have a séance and try to make contact with them. And it goes horribly, horribly wrong. We used a lot of the old techniques of the spook shows, which were a wonderful 20th century phenomenon: spooky magic shows that were done in theatres, in which ghosts would come out and walk among you and fly overhead, and all kinds of things. It really was all about young people getting together late at night in a movie theatre with the lights out and pinching each other and grabbing each other and

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