

Derek DelGaudio on the meaning of magic



June 6, 2017 - It's easy to refer to Derek DelGaudio as an illusionist or a magician, but his work is more inscrutable than that. Combining performance art, monologue, and (yes) magic, DelGaudio's current show, In & Of Itself is his most challenging and creatively ambitious to date. It might also be the most perplexing. "This is the show where I'm going to let the world start to decide exactly what it is that I am," he says. "If people see the show and want to refer to me as a magician after this, I have to be OK with that."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2377 words.

Tags: Magic, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Anxiety, Multi-tasking.

There doesn't seem to be a clear path for people to follow in order to become a successful magician or illusionist. When you realize it's something you have an aptitude for, does your life become a long self-education of chasing this information wherever it can take you?

Yes, it's chasing information and, at some point, it became about chasing ghosts and myths, because you hear about people that can do these impossible things and you want to go find them. I spent a lot of my youth chasing after those people. If I heard that someone could do something remarkable, I wanted to see it for myself.

I kept the idea of "amazement" alive in my head even if things I saw weren't necessarily as amazing as I wanted them to be. Sometimes it was like ordering a pair of those X-ray glasses from the back of a magazine. As a kid you'd think, "Oh my god, I'm going to be able to do amazing things with these!" Then you get them and it's really disappointing. They turn out to be these cheap pieces of paper with red plastic lenses. I found that was the case with a lot of magic, but that there are also people who are even *more* extraordinary than what I had heard. I looked to those people for inspiration. They were like the guiding lights of what's possible. That kept me going, the idea of how amazing things *could* be. I relied on that, of my imagined version of how amazing things could be and then strived for that.

Is there such a thing as mentorship in the magic world?

There is. It's very informal. It's usually some older magician who takes a liking to a younger magician because of the talent or there's a real camaraderie there. It's actually a very, very warm community. It's really nice people. There are intense magic nerds obviously, but there are nerds in any field. The magic community is a warm group of guys who are curious and willing to share, so there's a lot of mentoring in the community. The danger with that is there is no critical class. There's no academic discourse. There's no scholarly class on the history. There's no academia around magic. There's just a bunch of people out there doing stuff and showing other people stuff. It's a double edged sword. Yes, there's a lot of mentoring, and unfortunately, there's a lot of bad mentoring.

Your show unspools like a personal monologue in which all of your points are illustrated by illusions. I'm curious about how you put the show together. Once you've mastered these certain illusions, how do you conceive the narrative that you'll wrap around them?

Where to begin, you know? I've done other shows in the past, but this current show, In & Of Itself, is the first one where I feel like I'm being the most honest. I'm being me. I'm telling honest stories from my real life. I thought of it as the first sentence of the paragraph that will be my career. This is the show where I'm going to let the world start to decide exactly what it is that I am.

I can only be who I am, but I know that this show is going to start to solidify who I am out in the world. When you've based your practice on not being pinned down and not allowing people to define your work, that is a bit of an existential crisis that you're going to face. If people see the show and want to refer to me as a magician after this, I have to be OK with that.

Is "magician" a derisive term?

There are stigmas that go with it. I think there are certain social stigmas that go with being a magician, which are natural but also limiting. I think the word "magician" immediately implies that I'm here to deceive you, which is literally the opposite of what I'm doing. I'm using illusions or sleight of hand magic concepts to deliver truths and communicate the way I see the world. The title magician gets in the way of that immediately. As soon as people hear the word magician, the question becomes "What's the trick? What is he doing to try to do to fool me?"

Your show upends expectations in that way. You're a monologist that crystallizes the points of your stories with illusions. To do that, it also means that the content of the monologues—the stories you're telling—need to be as compelling as the illusions they employ. It's a tricky balance. It's understandable that people don't know what to make of it, particularly people who might have shown up expecting to see an old-fashioned "magic" show.

I think that's right. It's funny, there are lots of valid critiques of what I do that I totally understand. I get it if you wish the show had more of *this* or more of *that*—more magic or less talking or whatever. I think a lot of that has less to do with the content of the show and more to do with expectations. People might say, "It's weird, he does these things where he talks for 30 minutes and then something really magical happens to illustrate the point of the thing he talked about." I get why people might be confused by what I do, mostly because there's no real name for it. There's no real name for that type of performance. It doesn't exist in the world. Right now, it's either a guy who tries to do monologues and then occasionally does a trick or it's a guy who does tricks and inserts these monologues between them. They don't necessarily naturally co-exist together yet, and it's partially because I'm at the very beginning of discovering what it is and how to do it. And it's also because there are expectations of what it should be. They've heard it's a magic show, so they go and it's like, "It's been 15 minutes, he hasn't done a fucking trick!"

I actually find that aspect of what I'm doing to be very cool, but it's also sometimes frustrating because the show itself addresses the issues that people bring up. Sometimes people are like, "Well, it doesn't feel like he knows what he wants to be. Is it a magic show? Is it monologues? Is it an art show? Is it theater? Is it a one man show?" I'm literally addressing that stuff in the show. It's complicated.

At this point, do you have a team of people that you work closely with in order to help you realize all of these ideas? People have this idea of an illusionist being the sole keeper of all the secrets, but that obviously can't be the case. This is a complicated theatrical production.

Yeah, I have resources in different areas. I have fabricators that I work with. I can't physically make anything myself. I might make it with duct tape and super glue and safety pins, but it would be a mess. I have an artist, Glenn Kaino, that I work with. Any idea I have that feels particularly challenging to pull off, I will immediately put it through his filter. It's like a cultural filter, not just an idea filter. I have magicians that are friends I trust that understand what I'm trying to do.

They also understand how important it is to me to not sacrifice real magical moments for the sake of an idea. It would be easy to go, "I'm a conceptual magician. Technique doesn't matter. It's about the idea." Well, no. The idea lives in the moment and those moments need to be carefully crafted. Those moments need to be perfect, or as close to perfect as possible.

Then, I have Frank Oz, who directed my show, and other writer friends that help make the show legible so that it's not just magically fulfilling. It's not just an abstract idea, but it's also clear and people can receive it even if it's not totally explicit and spelled out for them. I have a really good circle of friends and collaborators that I'm able to bounce ideas off of. It's so incredibly important for me. I use them as my guard

rails.

If an illusion fails on stage, how do you recover?

You deal with it. Sometimes there's no recovering. It is really painful. It's painful because I let them down. It's not like you broke the strings on a guitar and we've got to start the song over. It's over, man. You can't even hear the song anymore. It's over. That's really shitty. That really sucks, because the goal is to create a shared hallucination that we can all participate in and it's not just one illusion but the grand illusion of the entire event, you know? The moment the curtain starts to go up and you see the man behind the curtain, the wizard disappears. The whole thing suffers.

In those moments the audience is reminded of the thing I work so hard to have them forget, which is that you're being deceived on some level. I work so hard at getting them to not only forget they're being deceived, but not care because what they're getting out of it is so much grander than this notion of whatever they would get if they weren't being deceived. As soon as that happens and something goes south, the whole thing cracks and crumbles. It's not just that one piece. Everything else is just reduced to "This is not real. Magic doesn't exist."

When you're doing a long run of a show like *In & Of Itself*, how do you keep it interesting? So much of it involves doing complicated things and making it look effortless.

Everything is very meticulously worked out, planned, and perfected before a show opens, so you really have to fight to constantly see it in new eyes again. The more you know, the more you have to train yourself to forget and imagine how this would feel or look to someone who doesn't know things, or doesn't know the craft. That is the challenge. It goes back to that moment where I think most magicians actually decide to become a magician, when they see someone do something amazing and they feel this moment of wonder immediately followed by, "I want to learn that." Then they start to learn, and from that second their ability to transfer that feeling of amazement starts to diminish, because they forget what that feeling is.

Doing magic then becomes about knowledge and about secrets and less about the thing that got them there in the first place, which is that moment of wonder. The more you know, the more you forget, because then it becomes about craft and technique and less about just the feeling of awe. You have to figure out a way to come full circle. The best magicians I've ever met in my life are somehow able to hold onto that wonder. At the end of the day *that's* the real gift. It's not that you learn this thing and you're going to show it to people, it's more like you have the opportunity to transfer this moment of astonishment to others. It's very difficult to hold onto that.

I think of it this way. Imagine that you've seen the best movie you've ever seen and you want to share that experience with someone else. Here, let me show you. You sit the other person down to watch it. You put it in in the DVD player and you press play for them. That's what a magician should be, a proxy for a moment or thing that's astonishing. It shouldn't be, "I'm amazing. You sit there and watch me do this." You should simply be the proxy for the amazing thing.

That's the right attitude. You should be appreciative and grateful that you were able to help someone access those parts of themselves. I think a magician should be, in the best case scenario, grateful that they're able to share wonder with others, because that is a rare commodity, you know? There's not a lot of wonder in the world anymore. As a magician it shouldn't be about your ability to do magic. Those words shouldn't even go together. It should be that you're able to share a glimpse of wonder because you've seen it. You can help navigate people to that space of imagination. It's not about you.

That's why your show is so interesting, because it does both of those things. It's about illusions, but it's still very much about you.

That's the problem—me as a proxy. If you do a show about identity, you have to actually have an identity in order to talk about those ideas. I chose myself reluctantly. Also, there are things I'm doing in the show that require

that I talk about myself, and I accept that. I'm still figuring it all out. If magic is a synonym for hope, what can you generate by using it? Maybe this is a good thing to consider for any kind of art or entertainment. What good can come of it? There has to be more you can do with it than just the illusion itself. It's such a powerful medium, but it's generally used in such trivial ways. How can you use an inherently powerful medium to do something even more powerful? I don't know, I'm not totally there yet, but I believe it's possible. Believing that is the first step.

Derek DelGaudio recommends:

"On Exactitude in Science" - A one-paragraph short story by Jorge Luis Borges

Looking up - Francis Alys

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows

Clock of The Long Now

On the Decay of the Art of Lying - A short essay written by Mark Twain in 1880 for a meeting of the Historical and Antiquarian Club of Hartford, Connecticut.

Name

Derek DelGaudio

Vocation

Magician, Writer, Performance Artist

Fact

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