

# Secrets of Improvisational Magic

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# *Foreword*

Most of us take it for granted that the effects we perform for lay people will work exactly as intended, garnering a more or less predictable response from most audiences. Much of the time this is proved correct due to what we might call the push-button effect (or conditioning), which operates in many areas of life, where a planned action results in a predictable reaction. But if our 'antennae' are switched on, we may almost as often be faced with the uncomfortable feeling that we are performing the wrong trick for the wrong people at the wrong moment. Anyone aware of the juxtaposition between the planned effect on the one hand and the unfamiliar and unique newness of the here-and-now on the other, will have felt the grinding of gears that can stem from this juxtaposition. This may be particularly so in the informal arena where the parameters of a performance are broader and looser, but it can apply to the formal one too.

As society becomes more diverse and more complex for a multitude of reasons, the unexpected response is becoming more and more commonplace. More and more often we encounter people who have never seen magic before, who are unfamiliar with playing-cards, or who's views or beliefs impede the suitability of certain effects – or even magic itself. Thus our assumptions and habitual thinking patterns are becoming less reliable. The push-button effect is developing loose wires. The need to improvise has always existed, but nowadays it seems less of an option and more a necessity, at least potentially. This shift, both in what is 'out there' and the way we perceive it, lies behind the present examination of improvisation, the 'art of contextual performing'.

For many performers improvisation is a vague concept which means whatever they want it to. Nonetheless it can be shown that there are different types and applications of improvisation. Is it done openly or covertly? Is it deliberate or based on lucky breaks? Is it risky or sure-fire? Is it occasional or sustained? Is it internally or externally determined? Does it require an active imagination? Does it involve brainstorming? What is brainstorming? What is jazz magic? In the following pages, these and many more questions about what improvisation is and, more importantly, how we can employ it to create more effective – and contextual – performances will be addressed.

## *Secrets of Improvisational Magic*

One of my associates was concerned that younger readers may flinch at some of the examples quoted from older texts, as they may appear outdated or even old-fashioned. After all, by definition improvisation is always something now, contemporary, modern. What use is there in providing samples decades or even centuries old? On a practical level, examples of improvisation in print are relatively rare, and so we have to use whatever relevant quotes are available. But the issue of age is actually irrelevant, because the motivation and creative processes behind improvisation are always the same, and are timeless. In a hundred years this information will be as valid as it is today (by which time today's examples will appear, to the casual observer, to be long out of date). If anything, there is a danger that too many contemporary examples may confine the reader to thinking only in certain ways. The unfamiliarity of the older illustrations may be the key which aids in developing the required skills (based on an understanding of underlying dynamics) without creating bias towards one form of improvisation or another.

Improvisation is not anarchic, in the sense of doing away with pre-rehearsed, choreographed routines. As we shall see, there are degrees of improvisation according to the performing context, and there are many contexts where fully choreographed routines are required (such as in a fixed show) or inspired by the context (as in an improvisational one).

Improvisation is particularly suited to card magic, and most of the examples given will be card-based. However, the reader need not be a card magician to make use of these principles. A friend of mine is an expert at improvising with a handful of English pennies, a knowledge of several coin moves and effects, and the capacity to lap and retrieve effortlessly. Mentalism, in particular, is an area where improvisation can work miracles.

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