

THERE ARE NOT MANY GENUINELY FUNNY PERFORMERS IN THE MAGIC INDUSTRY, BUT THE BRILLIANT MARK JAMES IS ONE OF THEM. A FAVOURITE IN THE MAGICSEEN OFFICE, MARK HAS THE KNACK OF MAKING STANDARD MAGIC TRICKS INTO HILARIOUS FEATURE ROUTINES DUE TO HIS GREAT COMEDY TIMING AND SKILFUL MANAGEMENT OF THE AUDIENCE.

GRAHAM HEY TRIES TO FIND OUT HIS SECRET.

I meet Mark after another successful gig, and after a cold drink he soon settles back to discuss his career so far. He begins by telling me that he thought his upbringing was pretty normal but now looking back things were actually little different to the norm. "I grew up mainly in pubs. I wasn't alcoholic or anything, not until I went to college anyway," he laughs. "My parents ran a few pubs until I was a teenager so I grew up around a lot of weirdos and people much older than I was. It was a lot like being a magician, although I wasn't interested in magic at all at the time. Saying that, I did seem to like going on stage. The pubs actually started when I was about 5 but before that my dad ran bingo. Apparently I used to get up and sing to the cleaners in the mornings and I loved hearing my own voice on the microphone. That part certainly hasn't changed!"

While attending what Mark describes as a "sort of kid's drama school" on weekends, he was shown a magic trick by a friend who could do a diable-lift. "He showed me a trick and I freaked out. He then showed me how to do it and I practised it a lot but that was it for years. It was the basic thing where you false shuffle their card into the deck and give them the apparently wrong card then they turn it over and it's the right

one. I think Simon Lovell calls it 'fingered'. I guess you could say I fingered a lot of people in those first few years..."

"At 18 I auditioned as a singer for a holiday park and off I went for a season in Blackpool. I loved that job and it's something I often recommend to young magicians. It's great life experience because you live away from home and get to be on stage for about 6 hours every night. I mean, you have to dress like a tiger and do the Cha Cha Slide every week but it was still great!"

Eventually, Mark ended up in JB Magic. "And like everyone who visited that shop, Mark Mason made sure I left with everything but my wages! The physical shop was really at its best then and was constantly full of magicians. A few years later I actually ended up working there myself but as with all magic shops these days it was slowly moving over to an internet business, so eventually it closed and we only worked in there to manufacture tricks."

So what did you buy and how did the job come about? "I bought The Missing Spade, a No Tear Newspaper and Mark's own Real World Magic DVD. I couldn't do anything on the DVD for what felt like forever. It sort of became a reference for getting better. You know when your mum puts a pencil mark on the wall to check you're getting taller? Well the DVD

MARK JAMES HAVING THE LAST LAUGH

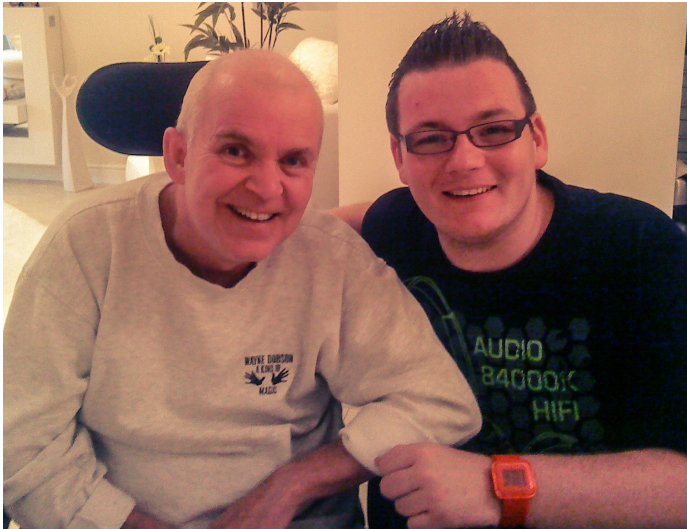




“MY TYPICAL SET-LIST WOULD INVOLVE A STRAIGHT-JACKET ESCAPE, MOUSETRAP JUGGLING, CIGAR BOXES, SOME AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION STUFF, UKULELE SONG PARODIES AND A SLIGHTLY INDESCRIBABLE TRICK INVOLVING A PADDLING POOL, SHARKS ON STICKS AND SOME WATER PISTOLS.”



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was like that. Every few months I would watch it again and realised I could do more and more of the stuff. Oh I also bought this thing called 'Newspaper Seance'. It was basically a third hand gimmick but fixed sideways to an open newspaper with this bar that kept it open. That was my first real magic disappointment. I got it home and I just couldn't make it work. I couldn't fix it to the newspaper or really work out what to do with it anyway. I wish I still had it though, it was great", he laughs.

So how did the job at JB Magic come about? "I'm not sure really," says Mark, straining to remember the details. "It came at a great time though. By then I was on my second season on the holiday

parks and I'd seen loads of acts that came to perform there. I knew I wanted to do gigs instead but as I was already working every night, I couldn't. I was spending every minute I could in the magic shop and one day I was sitting in the back talking to Mark when a couple came in. He was busy with something and asked me to see if they were ok. I took that to mean go try and serve them and so when I called for Mark's help they had to pay for. Once they left, Mark asked me if I wanted to come back tomorrow. I ending up coming back tomorrow for 3 years..."

Mark then left the holiday parks and committed fully to magic – performing in many hotels around

Blackpool with reasonably low standards when it comes to acts that are willing to work cheap. "So I basically worked in the shop all day then did gigs anywhere that would have me at night to work my act up," says Mark who says that his magic has always been comedy-based. "I couldn't imagine it any other way. Lately, I've been getting obsessed with new ideas that aren't comedy based and sometimes spend up to a year on them before realising they won't fit - and then ditch them before ever trying them out. I don't mind that though. I don't even see it as wasting time. Steve Martin has this quote I love. 'There is no harm in charging oneself up with delusions between valid moments of inspiration'. I think it sums up the idea of giving yourself room to think and create stuff. It doesn't matter if 9/10 of your ideas are rubbish, as long as one of them is good. Then you have to work on making it great!"

I ask Mark what he believes are the most important things you need to produce a good stand up act? "You need to find somewhere to be bad!" he says, as a man of experience. "An open mic night or a magic club that you can try routines out at. It seems most magic clubs these days only have meetings when they have a lecturer on, which is a real shame. If every other meeting was just for members to perform it would be great. They should have a draw

where each member takes out a slip of paper with a different type of trick on it and they have to perform something in that genre at the next meeting. You know like a rope trick, mind reading, kids trick etc. Then they could discuss it. There aren't as many gigs as there used to be so we need to create opportunities ourselves where we can try things in a low pressure environment.

"I'd say original ideas are important too. You can certainly have a stand up act without them, maybe even a good one, but not a great one. Commitment is important too. You have to commit time to working on it, commit to going and trying it and commit to the material in front of the audience. Otherwise they'll eat you alive..."

Mark bills himself as a Comedy Magician & Juggler but says he tries not to be held back by it. "I've already mentioned him, but I'm a huge fan of Steve Martin. I like that he did a bit of everything in his stand up days and I'm also a big fan of the vaudeville era. My typical set-list would involve a straight-jacket escape, mousetrap juggling, cigar boxes, some audience participation stuff, ukulele song parodies and a slightly indescribable trick involving a paddling pool, sharks on sticks and some water pistols." Sounds pretty run-of-the-mill, I say, laughing.

Do you do mainly stand-up these days then? "I'll do anything I can

get my hands on," he continues, smiling. "The holiday season is April until November so it's a big chunk of the year doing adult and family holiday centre shows. At Christmas I'm in pantomime so that only leaves January, February and March. I try to fill that with lectures and other stuff. I used to do cruise ships then but my wife & I have a little boy now so I try not to do things that involve staying away from home too much for those months. I'd say a good 98% of those gigs are stage stuff. I used to do a lot of close up too but I never really enjoyed it. Now I probably only do about five or six a year..."

What is it about close-up that you didn't like?

"I didn't like that you have to start again ten times every night or that half way through your best trick the food would come.

"I always felt guilty standing around too. You know that moment when every table has their main course and you can't perform but you catch the booker looking at you wondering why you aren't doing anything? The great thing about stand up is that they say you're on at 9 and until that moment you can just stand backstage in your own world. In close up you have to be 'on' as soon as you get there. I guess creatively I started feeling frustrated with only having 7 minutes to perform. I still love actual close up magic when I get to do a parlour show, it's just working tables I didn't like. Especially at corporates. Eugh!!!" he laughs.

Which performers have influenced you? Living or dead?

I already mentioned Steve Martin twice but he's right up there for me. His book 'Born Standing Up' is

incredible. I also love the comedian Bill Burr but I guess magic-wise it would have to be Derren Brown. I know it's a bit obvious but the guy is just unbelievable. I remember seeing Enigma at the Opera House in Blackpool and then again at the Venue Cymru in Llandudno. That show was perfect. Probably the greatest two hour magic show in history. I've also been hugely influenced by my dear friend Wayne Dobson. His influence on magic itself is incredible and being part of his DVD set was an amazing honour...

"If I was trying to pick a perfect moment of magic though it goes to Paul Zerdin. I know he isn't a magician, although I think I heard he used to be. Anyway, my wife and I were watching him in panto at the Birmingham Hippodrome. He did that thing where he leaves

the puppet on stage by itself and the audience is laughing because they 'know' that it's just going to sit there. Almost a full minute went by with nothing happening, which in panto is almost unheard of. Then suddenly the puppet looks up and talks on its own. The audience gasp hit me like a tidal wave and I started crying. I guess I learned that you can do magic without doing tricks."

At this point, Mark has now packed away all his props and the likeable 'comedy magician and juggler' is ready to journey into the night...



QUICKIES WITH MARK

What was the last effect you bought?

I don't know about tricks but I just bought the new Gaetan Bloom book set which looks great.

Lecture next year on February 14th. I'm doing close up, stand up, old, new, tried and untried. It's going to be fun!

Do you have plans for any new DVD or effects to be released?

I'm not planning any releases but I'm doing a Penguin Live



What's your favourite gag or one liner?

I said to the butcher 'have you got a sheep's head?' He said 'no it's just the way I do my hair'.

MARK JAMES' TRAVEL TIPS FOR THE PERFORMER!



1 Wetwipes can be used to clean nearly everything! From dirty shoes to removing props, plus you never know if some toilet paper will be available when you need it...

2 Keep a mic stand in your car. There are only four gigs where I've arrived to find they didn't have one already. Having one in my car was the difference between a good gig and a total nightmare.

3 If you forget your towel, the bed sheet is your only friend.

4 Keep your car ruthlessly clean. Inside and out. People will see you arrive at shows in it, whatever it is, it always looks better clean. It will make you feel better and happier while driving. Especially if you're going to be in it for 6 hours non-stop like I often am.

5 If you stay in a hotel room with a constant airflow system, hang a wet towel on it. It'll stop you waking up with a sore throat.

6 Find a cheap to mid-price place you like eating that isn't fast food. It'll give you a nice place to spend a few hours on gig days away from home.

7 Don't buy service station sandwiches with cucumber in, they're always soggy.