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Behind the Scenes With **JOHNNY THOMPSON**





THE MAGIC OF JOHNNY THOMPSON

By David Ben

[Above] Johnny Thompson (center) with
Magicana's Julie Eng and David Ben.

The sound you may be hearing? It's a sigh of relief. *The Magic of Johnny Thompson*, one of the most anticipated magic books of the past few years — indeed, decades now — is at the printer. Here is a sneak peek as to why it is so important, and why it took so long.

The book is important because — hey, it's Johnny Thompson!

If one canvases the rich history of magic in print, the best books tend to be those written by or about professional practitioners. Works by or about Robert-Houdin, Hofzinsler, Houdini, Leipzig, Malini, LePaul, Schulien, Wonder, and Vernon, among others, are pivotal texts. Johnny Thompson is part of that esteemed group. And, although he often adopts the self-effacing moniker of “General Practitioner” — someone who has made a living performing all facets of magic, from close-up to stage, magic and mentalism, in large theaters and on the trade show floor — Johnny Thompson is, to extend his analogy, really much more like a highly skilled surgeon, one who can apply his brilliance to any specialty. He truly is adept in all areas of magic. I doubt that any of the previously mentioned performers, nor any others that you might care to list — Kellar, Thurston, Miller, Alan, Henning, Pollock, Blaine, or Copperfield — have mastered so many facets of the great art of magic to such a degree as Johnny Thompson. He thoroughly buries the old adage, “Jack of all trades, master of none.” In magic, Johnny is truly the Master of All.

The Magic of Johnny Thompson serves another purpose. It is a bridge to a living past, presenting new information on Max Malini, and on Johnny's mentor, Charlie Miller. Just as Vernon was in his generation, Johnny is now one of the few, if not the last, major link between the great creators and performers of the generation that came before him. He became that link naturally, keeping confidences. Practitioners of the art like Marlo, Riser, Zarrow, and Diaconis knew that, if they tipped something to Johnny, he would not share it without permission, and when he did share it, he would give credit where credit was due. So, *The Magic of Johnny Thompson* not only contains advanced technique, and the

nuances that have been developed over the course of several decades by Johnny, his mentors, and his peers, but it also sets the record straight — published and unpublished — for all concerned. Johnny's passion for the history of magic shines through. It makes us proud to be associated with the lineage.

It is true that the book has taken a long time to come together. It might be interesting to explore how *The Magic of Johnny Thompson* was produced. It will shed light on why the best magic books often spend years in development.

First, you have to find a writer. Now, make no mistake, Johnny himself is a fine writer and he certainly knows the material better than anyone. Writing, however, takes an enormous amount of time, particularly when it is a labor of love. And let's face it: all magic books are the labor of someone's love.

Johnny's primary vocation was performer, and although he is now semi-retired, he is more active than ever, particularly as a consultant for Penn & Teller, among others. He has also served in the past as a consultant for Lance Burton, Criss Angel, and David Blaine.

So, Johnny has been too busy making a living performing, and sharing his knowledge, to take the time to write the book himself. Johnny also knew that it would take someone who could write but who also had an appreciation for the finer aspects of the art, to capture the essence of his craft, and to tease out the details and communicate the nuances that separate not just the professional from the amateur but, more importantly, the artist from the journeyman.

Enter Jamy Ian Swiss.

Jamy was the obvious choice. Although Jamy is known for his writing through his book reviews, essays, and observations on magic, Jamy is also a performer. More importantly, Jamy performs sleight-of-hand magic and it is sleight of hand that is at the root of Johnny's magic. It also helped that Jamy has known Johnny for decades, having first seen him on stage in the *Miracles of Magic* show, produced by Tannen's Magic at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in New York in 1969. The two of them have spent a great deal of time together and developed an especially special bond in the late 1980s while both were in Japan

to see Ton Onosaka. And then, as Jamy writes in the introduction to *The Magic of Johnny Thompson*:

In the summer of 2003, John called to tell me he didn't have much on the calendar for the next few months — why not come to Vegas and start work on his book? We could take our time.

I had demurred from this task for years. It was tempting whenever he would ask me, but I didn't really want the responsibility of attempting to do justice to such a colossal body of work, especially that of a beloved mentor. The invitation was flattering but intimidating. Every time we discussed it, I declined as gracefully as I could.

But this time, he talked me into it. I knew his work so well. He had the summer free and so did I, so why not come to Vegas and get started? We'd have a book in a couple of years.

That was more than a dozen years ago. The beginning was exciting and fun. I went to Vegas and lived with John and Pam for about a month. I talked magic with John most evenings, either staying up later or getting up earlier the next day to write. He would read it, and we would review the material in detail. We made our own hours, and I tackled some of the most difficult chapters first: The Egg Bag, the \$100 Prediction. I knew the bird section would be a challenge ...

It was a glorious month. In the years since, we returned to work in fits and starts, a few weeks here, then a long gap, then a few more weeks there, our respective lives, work, and travel schedules interfering.

Along the way, we traveled, met up, visited... We added tricks to the book, and more tricks, and still more tricks. The project grew.

And it progressed — too slowly, no doubt, but it did crawl along on its own steep and unsteady pace.

And then, in 2010 at 31 Faces North, the conference produced by Allan Slaight and Magicana in Toronto, Johnny and Jamy approached me about having Magicana publish the book. Of course, we had no idea how large an undertaking it would be, but when Johnny Thompson asks, who can refuse? I owed him a great deal.

I first met Johnny, albeit briefly, in the early 1980s. I got to know him much better, however, in 2001, when he showed up on my doorstep in Toronto, with a giant bow on his head — a surprise present from Slaight for my fortieth birthday! Jay Marshall was another surprise guest. At the time, Johnny offered to show me anything I was interested in. I refused his generous offer, as I had been trained by Ross Bertram never to ask another performer to share a secret. I told Johnny that, because of that, I could not make any

He thoroughly buries the old adage, “Jack of all trades, master of none.” In magic, Johnny is truly the Master of All.

formal requests. I added that I would be happy to watch and absorb whatever it was that he cared to show or share with me. It was, however, up to him. Needless to say, he showed me a lot, and my eyes popped.

I also knew Jamy, of course. We first met at a holiday party hosted by Roger Dreyer in New York, and we hit it off. He was aware of our show *The Conjuror*, which pleased me, and we discovered that we were both interested in Jack Miller's handling of the Linking Rings. We became good friends, and have spent much time together in Toronto, New York, and other places.

Although we agreed to publish Johnny and Jamy's opus, it became

clear that we had no real sense of its size or scope. And over the course of the next few years, it became evident that neither did Jamy! The reason: the project was ever-shifting, ever-expanding, like one of those great astronomical phenomena. Johnny Thompson is simply a *tour de force*, constantly revising his repertoire, adding new touches, new handlings, discarding the old, and then reviving them later — perhaps decades later — adding the insight of experience to make them even better. And, as Johnny wanted everything to be in the book, *The Magic of Johnny Thompson* was, until the day we sent the proofs off to the printer, a real shape shifter.

The magic world is replete with books on sleight of hand. Very few, however, detail the finesse required to elevate fundamental techniques of, say, palming, false dealing, and false shuffling to the realm suitable for the advanced performer. To Johnny's eternal credit, he was not interested in releasing a book with cursory descriptions of technique. No "use your favorite method" in these pages. Johnny employed different deals, different shuffles, different shifts, with one goal in mind — to employ the best move at the best moment in each particular routine as presented before a particular audience. Johnny applied this standard to everything he touched — parlor pieces, mentalism, illusions — and to Jamy's credit, he was willing to follow Johnny's lead, and to capture and communicate the nuance in everything Johnny has performed or developed.

The scale of the whole undertaking did finally hit us after we assigned Magicana's James Alan to the project. James hunted down published handlings of Johnny's work that Jamy had not yet had the time to review, as well as Johnny's presentations in other media. Magicana's recent exhibition on *The Magic Palace* television show was a particularly fruitful resource, as Johnny performed quite frequently on the program. Jamy would use this additional source material to write up tricks for Johnny's review. It was then that we learned that many of the methods that Johnny used over the years — particularly those performed on the Stevens Emporium and the L & L tapes — had either evolved over the intervening



PHOTO: JULIE ENG

Johnny Thompson's hand in close-up, detailing an otherwise hidden move.

years or had been simplified to make them accessible to more magicians. Sometimes, Johnny also kept the real work a secret just to preserve a confidence. But now, for the book, he comes across with both the scope and fine-tuning that have made his handlings so legendary, even with fabled sleights like the Zarrow Shuffle. Coupled with some lovely finesses by Vernon and Johnny, the sequence described in the upcoming book makes for the most deceptive handling of the Zarrow Shuffle ever to appear in print.

James also played a pivotal role in chasing down credits, confirming where possible the name of the author, and the correct title and publication. Despite the proliferation of digital information, and cross-referencing of data, pursuing credits to their lair is still a difficult undertaking. One cannot, for example, rely on a Google search, a foray into Ask Alexander, or a search of Denis Behr's site for accuracy. While certainly useful, they are not definitive, and at best serve only as a snapshot of a purported public record.

Nailing down the historical record was always interesting. It is often reported, for example, that Vernon disliked the idea of producing the final

card in *The Travelers* from a wallet, and yet that is exactly how Johnny recalled seeing him perform it. Johnny said that when he first saw Vernon perform the piece on *The Steve Allen Show* in the early 1960s, Vernon's performance left an indelible mark. He swore that Vernon produced the card out of the wallet. Sure enough, according in Mel Brown's detailed notes of Vernon's appearance on that show, which were sold at auction last August, Vernon did perform *The Travelers*, and he did produce the final card from the wallet! So, documenting the origin of ideas, and correcting the printed record, which sometimes included disowning elements attributed to Johnny in print and assigning the proper credit to the person who taught him the technique, took a great deal of time.

James also organized the material so that we could process it internally. It was also his job to flag stylistic inconsistencies in the writing. Given that Jamy had been working on the manuscript over the course of many years, it was not surprising to see that his own writing had evolved. So, James tabled inconsistencies that we could then present to Jamy for his consideration and revision. As we knew that there would be a burn-out



A panel session in Toronto about the forthcoming book, with (from left) Paul Vigil, co-authors Jamy Ian Swiss and Johnny Thompson, Alpen Nacar (obscured), Jared Kopf, and Jason England.

factor — one can only read, and reread, so much before losing focus — we restricted the number of times that any one person could read the manuscript, searching for inconsistencies or language issues, before turning it over to another member of the team.

Overseeing all of us, of course, was Julie Eng, the executive director of Magicana. Julie has become the go-to person for just about everything imaginable in the magic community. It's not surprising, really. Regardless of the size or scope of the project, she excels at bringing it to completion with verve, practicality, creativity, and originality. More importantly, in addition to her unparalleled organizational skills, she has a keen eye for design and editing, and is a talented photographer. (More about that later.)

As Jamy was completing the writing, and it was being passed to Johnny for his comments, we had more than enough in hand to create a table of contents. The issue, of course, became how the material should be organized and then parceled out in the book. Fortunately, as an organization, Magicana has always been interested in curating magic. Eventually, a solution came to light: We, of course, had to anchor the two volumes

with the wonderful routines that have been the cornerstones of Johnny's career and, indeed, his creative life: *The Gambler's Ballad*, *Mixed Macs*, *The Balls in the Net*, *the Egg Bag*, *the Cups & Balls*, *The Bird Act*, and *the Trade Show Act*. Then, we decided that we would balance those with the specialty tricks and routines that may be less familiar to fans of his work, which grew out of his close association with a roster of magical greats like Harry Riser, Ed Marlo, Zarrow, Vernon, Malini, Ascanio and, of course, Miller.

We also decided that, although there are many offerings of Johnny's handlings of the material of his friends, as this is Johnny's book, we generally avoided variations of Johnny's work by his friends and peers. One of the exceptions to that rule is Jamy Ian Swiss' handling for the large loads in the *Cups & Balls*. It has been included in the book not because Jamy was the author but because Johnny now incorporates that very handling into his own routine. And, to Jamy's enormous credit, even though he wrote most of the text, and his style of writing is uniquely his own, it is still Johnny's voice that comes through throughout the book.

Finally, even though each volume



Julie and Johnny going over notes during a photo shoot in Las Vegas.

starts strong, and ends stronger, the reader can enter the opus at any point, spend some time with a trick, routine, or sleight, and work on that. The reader is sure to always find something new.

As for the layout and design, our guiding principle was that it was to be Johnny's book — that is, it must reflect not only his material, but also his sensibility as an artist and as a person. Knowing Johnny's affection for the *Stars of Magic*, the design pays homage to that monumental work. The book features an extraordinary number of photographs, black and white in the best *Stars of Magic* tradition, in a large format to give both room for images on the page, and space for the text and tricks to breathe — and a dash of color — Erdnasian green in the title and headings for a bit of pop. We also wanted the book to open on the table with ease. This meant splitting the material into two volumes. The final plan called for two volumes — over 325 pages each! — nestled together in a slipcase. We also persuaded the parties involved that this was meant to be a book of tricks, with the biographical content incidental to the magic. This meant that Johnny's life story would have to wait. Johnny's life is an extraor-

PHOTO: JASON ENGLAND

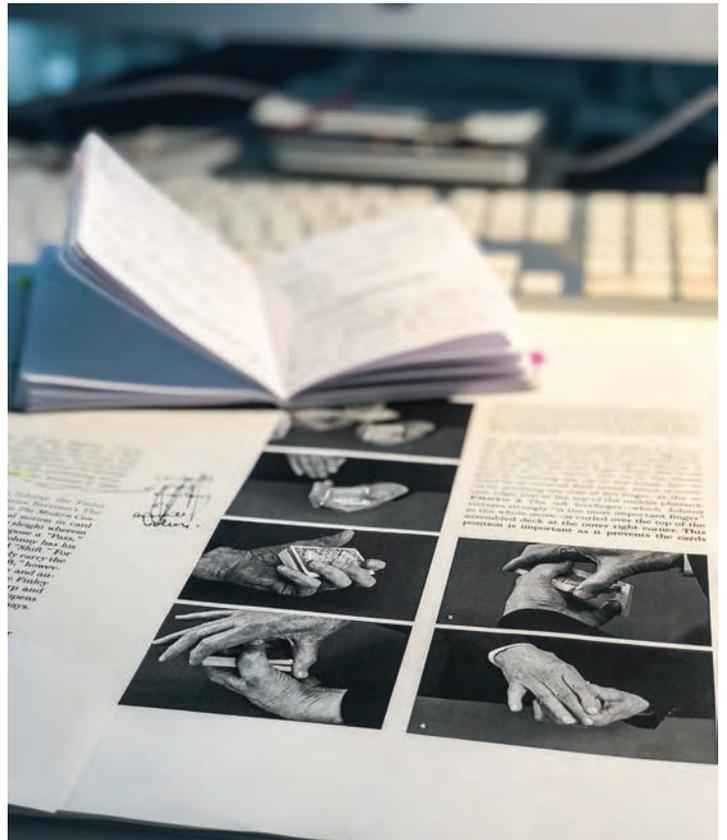


PHOTO: JULIE ENG

PHOTO: JASON ENGLAND



[Top] Karl Johnson and Julie confer while shooting explanatory photos. Hand-written notes, printed plans, and computer files were all referenced during the creative sessions for the book.

[Bottom] Julie Eng and Paul Vigil look on as Johnny performs during a video archiving session.

dinary one, touching upon all branches of show business, not just magic, and warrants its own work. Fortunately, Johnny is already at work on his own memoir as a separate project.

With the look and the feel of the work on track, Julie traveled to Las Vegas several times to photograph Johnny performing the rich material included in the book. Anyone who has seen the photography in *Zarrow - A Lifetime in Magic* and *The Experts at the Card Table* will recognize Julie's style immediately. In addition to her eye for arresting composition, contrast, and detail, Julie is poised, patient, and relentlessly efficient. For Johnny's book, Julie actually found herself shooting both material that had been written up already, and some that had yet to be written.

Photo shoots of this magnitude and complexity, however, could not be done without the help of like-minded people. Fortunately, Julie assembled a team in Vegas willing to do just about anything for their beloved Johnny. In addition to Penn and Teller, who altered their schedules so that Johnny could alter his to accommodate the photo shoots, Jason England, R. Paul Wilson, and Paul Vigil, amongst others, volunteered their time to help out in the most important ways. Julie shot thousands of photographs over the course of several extended shoots and visits in studios erected first at the home of Jason England, and then later at Stan Allen's offices of *MAGIC Magazine*. Jason was also on hand at each shoot, archiving each performance on video so that we would have them available to check later to ensure the accuracy of the text and for greater ease in pairing each image to the words.

To prepare Johnny for each shoot, James Alan would create a prop list for the session. Pretty much whatever prop was needed, Johnny still had on hand, which further attested to how the material in the book represented his true working repertoire. And it is a large repertoire. The crew — led by the example of Johnny and Julie — was focused, and determined to shoot until all hours of the morning. The shoots could be eclectic, and even uncomfortable at times. At one point, Johnny and the crew even had to fend off an aggressive untrained parakeet — borrowed

from Lance Burton — who had his own pecking order: first Johnny, then Julie.

In between Julie's forays to Las Vegas, we had regular — almost daily — production meetings in Toronto revolving around the text. Of primary concern was the editing. (Proofreading would come later.) Fortunately we had the right man for the job — Karl Johnson. Karl is a professional writer and editor, with a keen insight into card work — he wrote *The Magician and the Cardsharp* — and he knew Jamy well from Jamy's days in New York. Karl also felt an abiding indebtedness to Johnny because of the time Johnny spent with him while he dug into the saga of Vernon's quest for the Kennedy Center Deal, and especially Johnny's willingness to open up freely about his years spent with Charlie Miller, which contributed greatly to the portrait of Miller in Karl's book. Karl embraced the project, and we flew him to Toronto to have an initial face-to-face production meeting where the four of us — Julie, Karl, James, and myself — could work out a flow for processing the material. As an editor, Karl became heavily involved in the project and even flew out to Las Vegas twice to join the crew in the photo shoots.

As for organizing the material, we elected to follow the process developed for our publication *The Experts at the Card Table*. A Dropbox was created with subdirectories for each chapter, and further subdirectories for each trick within each chapter. Each of the subdirectories dedicated to specific tricks housed the photographs and video captured of the trick, as well as the various versions of the text as they made their way through the various layers of editing and production. The final copy was, of course, the copy approved by Johnny. So, it is safe — and important — to say that every word of this book was reviewed and approved by Johnny Thompson himself. Johnny's tweaks and corrections to what we were submitting to him as the final draft were always enlightening. He would add a phrase or sentence here and there to ensure that the particular finesse or move he was focusing on was communicated clearly to the reader. He would alter the scripts, ever so slightly where required, to reflect the actual

words he uses, words he had labored over for years to achieve a particular beat or meaning.

Meanwhile, on a regular basis for the past year or so, Julie would speak with our printer, Friesens, in Winnipeg to make sure that we were coordinating closely on what exactly we wanted in terms of look and production for this historic book. The trend today, of course, is for magic books to be published in China and then shipped to North America. We prefer to work with the firm we know in North America, a firm that bends over backwards to provide us with more than just the requisite technical support. They sent us, for example, bound copies of blank pages to give us a sense of the size, weight, and feel of our finished product. They also made sure that Julie had an open line to their print technician. He made numerous suggestions on how to prepare the digital files, particularly with how the photographs were to be treated for publication, so that they would reproduce beautifully on the page. They even sent us test proofs of sample chapters, with different finishes, so that we could decide which look best served our vision. It was at this point that we decided that each copy of the book should have the look, feel, and quality of what typically passes as a "Collector's Edition" in the magic community, including a tipped-in signature page.

So, there you have it.

With the advent of on-demand publishing, many magicians believe they can do it all by themselves — write the material, add illustrations, and then print and ship the finished product. What was both interesting, and extremely rewarding, for this project was that a group of very accomplished people, with strong personalities and beliefs, banded together to work with and for someone they admire and truly love — Johnny Thompson. ♣

David Ben is the artistic director of Magicana, an arts organization dedicated to the exploration and advancement of magic as a performing art, based in Toronto. Magicana is also the publisher of The Magic of Johnny Thompson; the two-volume slipcased set will be available in early 2018; see www.magicana.com/thompson.