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MAGIC

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Mark Haslam



A few years ago, a performer appearing in The Magic Castle's Palace of Mystery created quite a stir. Erika Larsen and Jim Steinmeyer, already fans, joined Neil Patrick Harris and legendary theatrical lighting designer Jules Fisher in the back row for a packed weekend show.

The performance went extremely well, with Jim pronouncing a new, original piece of the performer's "great," and Neil Patrick approaching the performer to say "You fooled me!" before insisting on shaking the performer's hand as a concrete expression of his appreciation. The week had all the trappings of a dream debut, but the magician at the center of all the attention was actually in his twentieth year of performing at the Castle.

For most magicians, seeing Mark Haslam for the first time provokes the strange combination of intrigue and uneasiness that comes from seeing a polished performer who has apparently appeared out of nowhere. While many approach him after shows to make a personal connection, the ones Mark refers to as "the missing teeth in the smile" sit silently for performance after performance, trying to penetrate his methods as the rest of the audience laughs and applauds. The most experienced among them, though, appreciate that Mark's real secrets of stage and audience management are simultaneously as hidden and in full view as those of a master card cheat.

Growing up, I had two magical idols: Dai Vernon and Billy McComb. When I arrived at the Castle in 1993, the shadow of Vernon's recent passing persisted, but his spirit remained strong in former acolytes Bruce Cervon, Larry Jennings, and many others. Billy, meanwhile, was still very much alive, performing regularly and dispensing the same sort of good-natured wisdom found in his magazine columns and in the indispensable *McComb's Magic: 25 Years Wiser*; yet Billy's own acolytes and associates — including Alan Shaxon, Terry Seabrooke, Nick Lewin, and Mac King — appeared at the Castle only sporadically, because of their demanding schedules in Las Vegas and around the

MARK HASLAM

A Class Act

By Gordon Bean

world. So when I saw Mark Haslam for the first time, during his debut week that year, his performance hit me with a force I have rarely experienced. Here was someone a few years younger than I performing with all the confidence and ease of the most accomplished master.

Like so many have before and since, when I approached Mark after the show, I found him thoroughly charming, but with a definite English aversion to self-promotion. Over the years, though, he's told me the story that led up to that debut week — a story that has a most unsurprising launching point.

"The idea of being a professional really all started with McComb," he says. "When I started subscribing to *Magigram*, the first time reading his column was what seeing The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was for many musicians. That was what I wanted to do, and that was how you did it."

One of the great columns in magic, "At Homb with McComb" integrated detailed descriptions of tricks with the particulars of the writer's life in such a personal, chatty way that they seemed like letters from the most charming uncle one could imagine.

Mark's interest, sparked by an elementary-school janitor who performed some card tricks, had already been fanned by a copy of Will Dexter's *Famous Magic Secrets* that his greengrocer father had passed along from one of his customers. Soon, the secrets passed on by McComb were joined by ones a little closer to home. Though remote, the small village where Mark grew up in England's Lake District was near the meetings of The North Western Society of Magicians, where the local vicar and undertaker were both members.

Mark recalls being driven to a club meeting by an elderly member.

"Who is your favorite magician?" he asks.

"Billy McComb," Mark answers.

"I saw him once at The Magic Circle," the member replies. "He is very professional. They asked him to perform a

trick and he actually went to change his shoes for the show."

Twenty-five years later, Mark has just given the closing remarks after the second show on a Saturday night in the Palace of Mystery at The Magic Castle. As he heads offstage, lingering pipe smoke tells him that Billy has been standing in the wings. Mark enters his dressing room — and there he is.

"Good show, lad. You know, you're the only magician I've seen who takes good care of his stage shoes; no one else seems to bother."

As Mark puts it: "Especially when you're not performing with much in the way of props, you have to take out the creases. It all has to be perfect."

The next of Mark's prime influences very much continued his education in the virtues of elegance and precision.

"I had been watching David Nixon on television and recording his shows on a Monday evening with an old cassette recorder and a hand-held microphone. He was charming and funny, just like your grandfather, and I'm sure I soaked in a lot. But then I saw Fred Kaps perform his Floating Cork and saw a real magician."

By this time, Mark was ordering props and books through the post, and his mother would get him the weekly theatrical publication *The Stage* from their local newsagent. There, he saw that the ITV network was looking to audition young magicians for an upcoming show. After a successful audition in Manchester, Mark's mother rented a car — in case theirs didn't make it — to take fifteen-year-old Mark down south to Bristol for the taping, where Mark shared the bill with Johnny Hart and ventriloquist Ray Allen. He featured the Multiplying Pipes and recalls the producer saying, "Where are they coming from? Everyone else was doing that floating silver ball thing."

Also that year, Mark ventured down to Ken Brooke's legendary shop in London, as well as out to a convention in Blackpool. In Ken Brooke's, Mark spotted a single copy of a hardcover book titled *The Magic of Fred Kaps*, out of

reach behind the counter. “It was black with, I believe, white lettering, and I had an internal panic that I wouldn’t have enough money. It was all I wanted, but when I finally mustered up the nerve to ask for it, Ken Brooke just laughed and told me it wasn’t for sale — it was just a dummy book with a fake cover. Turns out the same thing happened to Mike Caveney, so at least I’m in good company.”

In Blackpool, Haslam had the dreamlike experience of not only meeting Kaps himself, but being given the duty of guarding the great man’s prop case while he went to wash his hands before a show.

“Somehow, I had worked up the courage to ask for an autograph,” Mark says. “That case of his was immaculate, with not a space wasted and everything in its place.”

Back at school, Mark’s Latin teacher wanted him to go on to university, but Mark had his sights set in a different direction. An appearance as Jack Worthing in a school production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* had led to a faculty member sending home a letter saying that though many fancied a life on the stage, Mark was the one who could actually do it. When Mark travelled down to London to audition for The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and for The Central School of Speech & Drama, however, he met with an ironic avenue of resistance, given the many accolades later given to his stage elocution.

“I remember sitting outside Central, going over my Shakespeare, when a lady approached me and asked if I was auditioning. When I replied I was, she said ‘You don’t think you will get in with a Northern accent like that, do you?’”

More successful was a subsequent audition for a pantomime in London, and this run was followed by a summer season performing magic at a hotel in Ibiza, and then numerous dates in workingmen’s clubs in the north of England. The last one of these was in Liverpool. After the first of Mark’s two sets, the committee chairman came backstage and told

Mark, “You’re very good, son, but they can’t dance to you.” It was then that Mark learned that the poster outside had been advertising “Mark Haslam, Musician.”

As had Paul Daniels and Wayne Dobson before him, Mark found that his repertoire and stage reflexes were sharpened by the direct response of the audience in those unpretentious venues. They weren’t where Mark wanted to end up, though, and before long he was booked by an agent into an established illusion act that had cruise contracts in place but no magician.

“There I was, jumping around doing illusions and far too many costume changes,” Mark remembers. “I didn’t even own any of the props. I was just the magician playing the part of an illusionist.”

On at least one occasion, though, it was a part requiring the understated Haslam humor. During a performance of the Substitution Trunk, the audience had seen Mark magically replaced by his female assistant as he stood on top of the trunk, holding the usual circular curtain. But then a problem presented itself. Earlier, Mark’s assistant had accidentally bent the key in the lock, making her now unable to open the trunk. Finally, with the applause trailing off, the ship’s two stagehands came on and pushed the trunk behind the curtain. And that’s how the show ended. The next night on the cruise, Mark was set to be the emcee, and he arranged to have the overture and offstage announcement “Please welcome your host, Mark Haslam” followed by the stagehands pushing the trunk back out through the curtains. Wearing the same outfit as the night before, Mark emerged, calmly dusted himself down, and said “Good evening.”

Looking to diversify his booking possibilities during this period, Mark learned mime and movement and put together a silent routine centered around a magical white hatstand. “In those days in Europe, it was good to have a ten-minute visual act.”

This got him his first bookings as a solo act

on the ships, but it was the age of Copperfield, and agents wanted to see “money onstage,” so soon it was back to the large-scale props.

“I found myself in Puerto Rico in a Vegas-style casino show. On the opening day rehearsal, the levitation mechanism failed, and so that night I did stand-up magic. The next day, the producer called me into the office and recounted how he had dined in the hotel restaurant the previous evening and all the adjacent table had talked about was ‘the English guy doing magic.’ He told me I didn’t need the illusions and that I should just walk out there with magic in my pockets.”

For Mark, it was the turning point. He had always wanted to take the material he had developed in the workingmen’s clubs and hone it to a new elegance. And now he had his chance.

“I sold the furniture to an established cruise ship illusionist. His ship was leaving and the storage room elevator was broken, so we rigged a pulley system and I ended my illusion career pushing a 300-pound flight case into the blackness of an open elevator shaft and then seeing it sink out of sight.”

Mark was now heading in the right direction, but it was another series of fortunate events that would elevate him to the highest level of the cruise world.

By the beginning of the nineties, Mark was living in Miami while spending most of his time afloat. One afternoon, his friend Paul McEvoy, then entertainment director at the Regency Cruises and now the head of his own management agency, was visiting Mark and noticed the cover of the book engrossing his friend — *The Uncanny Scot: Ron Wilson*. Paul told Mark that he knew Ron in his capacity as an agent for entertainers working the ships (a venue Ron himself had helped pioneer) and that he would be pleased to arrange a meeting the next time Mark was in Los Angeles. Mark took him up on his offer and soon found himself as Ron’s guest for his first visit to The Magic Castle, with his debut week in the ParLOUR following not too long afterward.

“During my first show in the ParLOUR, I had Peter Pit, Ron Wilson, and Billy McComb in the audience,” Mark remembers. “After the show, we all got together and swapped stories and I knew I was *At Homb*.”

Monday became Castle night, and Mark spent many hours with Billy and Ron. “You knew the night was over when Ron ordered a scotch and milk, and Billy would announce that he had to ‘walk a bursting dog.’”

Mark’s big break came when Ron got a call that a comedian had been fired mid-cruise, with a replacement needed right away. Making this a particularly difficult request was the fact

“I ended my illusion career pushing a 300-pound flight case into the blackness of an open elevator shaft and seeing it sink out of sight.”



Present-day Mark Haslam alongside two photos of his younger self, practicing the Multiplying Pipes, and in character makeup for a tragi-comic role.



The
**SECRET
CLASS**



it was coming from the Seabourn Cruise Line, the pioneers of the upscale small-ship cruise market. No magician had previously found success with Seabourn's discriminating clientele, but Ron overrode their objections and assured them that Mark would be the perfect choice. He was proven correct, not just for that cruise but for the continuing relationship that has seen Mark heading out each year on multiple voyages.

Carrying under 200 of the world's elite travelers around the globe — with some guests remaining on board for several months out of the year — a Seabourn cruise in those days was more floating manor-house party than floating hotel. When, a couple of years back, the era of the line's small ships closed, Mark was asked to perform on all three of their final Atlantic crossings as well as to appear on the inaugural cruise of the new class of ships. Over the years, he has stretched out to include the larger luxury line Crystal, where he retains his usual fee even as other magicians trade their talents for a complimentary cruise. Seabourn, though, remains his main showcase.

Johnny Thompson followed Mark onto Seabourn and recalls: "Their stages were cabaret-style, with the audience on all sides. That's perfect for the way Mark works, and I always heard from the staff and managers how marvelously he scored there."

Confirms Paul McEvoy, who had gone on

to be Seabourn's Director of Entertainment: "Mark's ratings were always exceptional. He averaged about 8.8 out of a maximum of 9.0, and the guests absolutely loved him both onstage and when hosting a dinner table."

Maintaining such a high rating level requires a deep but portable repertoire. Within Mark's case — no less immaculately packed than that of Fred Kaps — are three complete forty-minute sets. Being isolated at sea can come with unique challenges, though, and near the end of an Asian cruise Mark once had the cruise director ask him to pull together another fifteen minutes for a variety show when the classical pianist fell ill.

"I had nothing left," remembers Mark. "It was a long cruise, and I had already done three performances. But fortunately it was one with many days at sea, and those attract a large contingent of bridge players. The on-board bridge master was a titled woman from England — Lady Something or Other — and by chance I was working on Ron Wilson's A Hand to Remember from *The Uncanny Scot*."

The trick involved a deck switch, however, and Mark didn't know how he was going to pull it off. "Not only would I be under close scrutiny, I also wanted to just wear my waistcoat and not the full suit, so as to look a little different from the other show. Luckily, I did have one remaining tie they hadn't yet seen. So I hatched a somewhat elaborate plan."

Before the show, Mark invited Lady Something or Other to the library and asked her to bring several decks of cards, telling her he was doing a bridge-themed trick and needed her help. He sat her in the corner of the library and, asking her to pick one of the decks and give it a good shuffle, he announced that he was going to memorize the resulting order.

"I took the cards from her, ran through them at a ridiculously fast pace, then returned the deck to her to bring to the show that night. During the show, I explained to the audience what had happened in the library, and after she had confirmed everything and produced her deck of shuffled cards, I used them to play a remote game of bridge using 'the power of memory.' It was a big success, especially since she was so highly regarded in the bridge world."

Rewind to the ship's library. Lady Something hands the shuffled deck to Mark. Mark starts to run through them, but then he stops.

"It isn't very bright in here, is it?" he says.

"No, it certainly isn't," she replies.

"We should get into a little more light."

With Mark leading, they walk toward the entrance.

"It's that light bulb," he says, pointing to a fixture back in the library.

Lady Something turns around to look and, at that instant, Mark switches the deck he's holding for the stacked one his wife Ivonne



Haslam onstage in The Secret Class — presenting card effects in front of the video screen, levitating a table, and discussing the exploits of Houdini.

has been holding just outside the door.

"I had prepared several decks from those available on board so I could match her selection," Mark confesses. "And I had also made sure to go in there ahead of time to unscrew the light bulb."

To supplement the material packed in his case, Mark developed a pair of lengthy performance pieces, both needing no additional props, and both designed especially for the ships. The first of these was a gripping presentation on the life of Houdini, accompanied by a succession of images to which Mark matches his narration without requiring so much as a glance back at the screen. The second is nearly as long, even more dramatic — and uses just a single deck of cards.

"I had always wanted to perform a close-up act with a stage mindset," he says. "Something designed from the start for a stationary camera, with my hands and cards never leaving the frame, like actors on a set."

One consequence of the small size of the original Seabourn ships was that they often made their way to remote locations. Once, in Tahiti, Mark spent an afternoon in a hammock while developing his faro shuffle technique, his prone position producing his distinctive elbows down, fingers up starting position.

And after Juan Tamariz's *Mnemonica* appeared in its original Spanish, Mark sent away to Spain for a copy that the bilingual Ivonne

then translated for him. Over a lengthy period of composition, he set to work adapting and routining certain of El Maestro's pieces from that work, as well as from *Sonata*, into a larger sequence that started with the palate-cleansing simplicity of Triumph before heading into a flowing, seamless escalation of effects.

"I wanted the audience to feel as though they were attending a classical concert rather than a standard magic show," says Mark.

To achieve his goal, he drew on the last of his looming influences: Martin Nash. Just as seeing Martin perform one of his legendary card acts at the Castle had inspired Raphael Benatar to become a magician, so did the handsome Canadian's calm authority and use of Shakespearean dramatic structure inspire Mark in the creation of an act of his own.

"There's so much in the style and the structure of the card act that you can trace back to Martin," Mark says. "Between The Charming Cheat and Tamariz, I'm definitely standing on broad shoulders."

Even with his minimal props, Mark finds having a second set boxed and ready at home to be crucial.

"If my luggage goes missing when I return from a cruise, I can still perform — it has happened a couple of times, when I have returned directly into a week at the Castle. There's no point in insuring the props, as they have no real face value. The highest-value item I carry

is my microphone. Their true value is in allowing me to perform."

At the Castle, Mark is one of the rare performers who appear in all three main showrooms, and though his quick wit tends to be what defines him for lay spectators, it is the stage management skills and careful construction underneath that most impresses his peers.

Says Jamy Ian Swiss of Mark, "I'm a fan, and have been since I first saw him at the Castle a few years ago. I really love the crispness of his work, with not a wasted word, nary so much as a stammer. And also the fact that he does this pretty serious and abstract non-visual card stuff and makes it play for large audiences, which is no mean feat."

To Mark, though, the foundation for such command goes even deeper than his careful scripting.

"Proper preparation is crucial," he emphasizes. "If a singer forgets a lyric, it is a small glitch in the performance. If a magician misses a trick, its essence is destroyed. So you need to be in control of every aspect of what you do."

Audiences feel absolutely safe in Mark's hands, instinctively sensing that his ease onstage derives from his early start as a performer. To continue the comparison to a real-life card cheat, his operating under fire for the vast majority of his life gives him the sort of confidence that's almost impossible to achieve otherwise.

John Gaughan saw this firsthand during

a recent week at the Castle in which he and Mark shared the Palace stage — John performing his historical reconstructions, and Mark doing his minimalistic stand-up material.

“I remember Mark as a perfect performer, in that nothing seemed to bother him,” Gaughan says. “His routine was always right on, in spite of those complex card effects he performed. It was beautiful.”

For Mark, the best part of his Castle experience was the chance to spend time with the heroes who had become his friends. Billy and Ron both gave Mark treasured props of theirs, and Martin made a point of getting people in to see Mark perform the card act that he said was one of the best he had ever seen.

The last time Mark spoke with Billy was when the older performer called him to cover a show. “I don’t feel well, lad,” Billy said. It was St. Patrick’s Day, and Billy told him, “Just turn up and do half an hour — oh, and tell them you’re Irish.”

In a tribute to Billy that I put together for *Genii*, Mark wrote about Billy’s professional footwear. A little later, he wrote a posthumous appreciation of Martin, and then — closing out another era — he hosted the Castle’s memorial for Ron.

Normally, these sad events would have had to wait for some sort of artistic response from the two of us, but since we had already begun a project based on the theme of mentorship in magic, we had a definite head start. Back in the spring of 2002, Mark had walked into the Castle library on a quiet Friday afternoon and asked me if I wanted to collaborate on writing a one-man show for him.

I often wonder what would have happened if we hadn’t been alone that afternoon. Mark had brought up the same possibility at least five years earlier, but when nothing had gotten started, the idea had faded away. This time was different. Undoubtedly influenced by the magicians-in-a-hotel premise of *The Penumbra*, the magazine put out by Bill Goodwin and myself, we immediately decided that the show would be based in a fictional Lake District hotel and that it would feature an additional climax to Mark’s card act, conceived on the spot. For a project that would have innumerable forking paths during the following thirteen years, it was a remarkably sure first few strides.

The new card act climax was one of those solid, immediately practical ideas that appear only once or twice in a career. Mark would go on to work out its details with his typical precision, elevating that act to an even higher level. He would leave it out of his future performances in the Castle’s Close-up Gallery, though, since it was also one of those ideas that are ripe for appropriation.

With the card act as a potent third act, the magician/mentor story we invented about what had led to its genesis changed again and again as we tried to find the proper balance between clarity and elaboration. That this process went on for over a decade was partly a function of our heading down the roads of an unmapped genre, but mostly it came from each of us enabling the other’s perfectionist tendencies. Finally, in 2012, we scheduled the debut workshop performance of *The Secret Class* at The Ojai Art Center Theater, located in a lush valley community of the same name, an hour and a half north of Los Angeles. The setting echoed nicely the pastoral Lake District setting of the show and had come about when Andy Street — a composer friend of Mark’s from England who had supplied the show’s evocative piano-based score and who now lives between Los Angeles and Ojai — suggested to the head of the Art Center Theater that *The Secret Class* would make a strong addition to its schedule. And so, on a lovely weekend that June, I flew in from the East Coast, and Mark and his family — Ivonne and then eight-year-old Elliott — drove up from their Canyon Country home. With a 120 seats, the theater had been built nearly 75 years before and had the lofty ceiling and graceful lines of that earlier age.

I had been both a writer and director of theater in college, but it was with the special admiration that comes from observing a friend in his element that I watched Mark navigate the inevitable last-minute crises that come with the debut of any live production — and then head off to focus on his own before returning to command the stage. The show was sold out, and as Mark was readying himself, I dealt with the uncomfortable issue of not being able to accommodate some who had made a long drive under the mistaken assumption that walk-up tickets would be available.

In the end, the house was buzzing, Mark

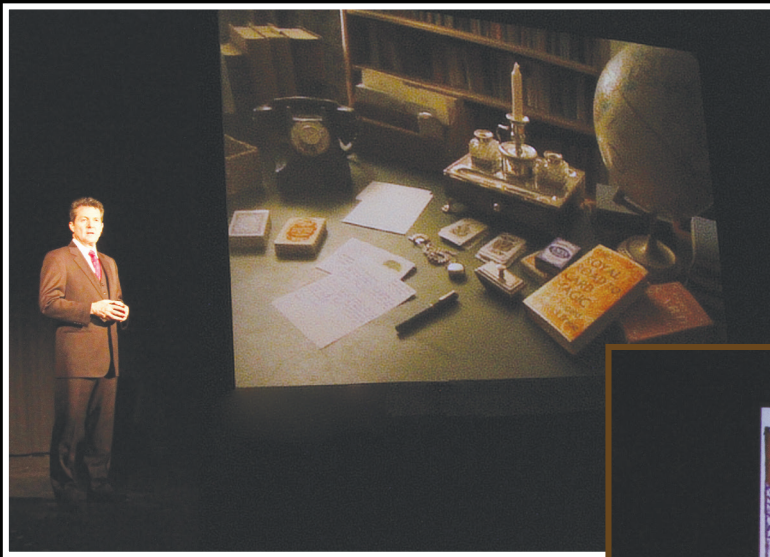
was waiting in the wings, and I was up in the elevated lighting booth with the theater’s tech operator. My job was to coordinate the onscreen images, both still and moving, with the sound and lighting cues being handled by my companion in the booth. Although we had rehearsed earlier in the day, those run-throughs hadn’t included the full card act, so when Mark finished narrating the film within the show — expertly shot and edited by his filmmaker friend Marcus Dillistone — and the screen switched to showing the card act, it was nothing my new partner in the booth had ever seen before. And somewhat unbelievably, it was nothing I had ever seen before. I had seen the act itself many times, of course, in both scheduled and unscheduled shows at the Castle, but never onscreen and never with the new climax. From up in the booth, the tech operator and I watched as the 52 enlarged cards became the equivalent of a trained company of players dominating the stage more than would actual human actors. Followed intently by every pair of eyes in the theater, one effect seamlessly followed another, until Mark was putting the stars of the show back into their box to hand as a souvenir to the spectator who had been seated at the table beside him.

When I was young, I loved reading descriptions of the sort of flurry-of-magic sequences performed by Horace Goldin and other Golden-Age performers, and during that nearly half-hour segment in Ojai I saw the closest real-life equivalent to what I had conjured up in my youthful imagination. Beside me, my new partner had been absolutely enthralled, freed by the audible reaction of the crowd below to loudly say “Wow!” at the images that, from our high vantage point, were directly in front of us.

Like any other powerful artistic experience, the elements of the card act blended into a single, simple impression; take away any one of them, and their effect would be compromised. Without the large audience and the darkened theater made possible by the projection, spectators would be mightily impressed rather than happily overwhelmed. But that large audience and darkened theater came with a matching challenge. Moment to moment, any misconstruction in Mark’s script or choreography — not to mention any mistake — would puncture the full sail of the act’s momentum.

Needless to say, there were no mistakes that evening and, after nearly two hours onstage, Mark was met by a spontaneous, full standing ovation. As with nearly any workshop production, though, a problem area had surfaced. Since our fictional hero’s inspiration to become a magician was seeing a lecture in

Any misconstruction in script would puncture the full sail of the act’s momentum.



Mark Haslam, bowler hat in hand, performing his conjuring aboard a cruise. [Insets] In The Secret Class, Mark is flanked by royal cards onscreen, and describes the magical effect of the items atop his mentor's desk.

the small Lake District hotel where he was a waiter in training, we had included Mark's complete Houdini presentation. This had gone well, but in retrospect we decided that its long narrative unbalanced the show as a whole, so, once again, we got back to work on the script.

Things were moving more quickly now, and we soon had a new venue, set up by a woman who had seen one of Mark's Seabourn performances and was on the board of one of the most prestigious private clubs in the world. Located at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 54th Street in Manhattan, The University Club has hosted many lectures and presentations since opening in 1899, but — as we would be told later — Mark's appearance would be the first by a magician.

For Mark, our staying and working there was not that far removed from his appearances at private clubs in Los Angeles, but for me it was a chance, even more than in Ojai, to see that his onstage ease derives in large measure from professional habits refined over a career.

"Stagecraft is very important to me," explains Mark. "When everyone has gone for a coffee, I like to pace the stage before a performance. It's important for me to familiarize myself with the performance space. When you rent a car, it takes a couple of minutes to get used to the vehicle, even though you are able to drive. When you walk onstage, you don't need the audience to witness your initial fumble to find the indicators."

That night, Mark's hand on the wheel was as steady as ever. And it was no surprise when, later on, a recommendation from the club led to a private engagement in an upstairs function room that again brought Mark in from Los Angeles, and me down from upstate New York.

Further workshop productions of *The Secret Class* in San Diego, Los Angeles, and — in a return engagement — Ojai have followed, and plans are being hatched for its formal debut, most likely back in Los Angeles.

Back in the magic world, appreciation for Mark has been building. Last June, on the final day of the 31 Faces North conference in Toronto, I was chatting with Derek DelGaudio before heading home. Derek can be among the most withering critics in magic, but when Mark's name came up, he brightened, as if hearing a lost chord:

"Mark Haslam — now there's a *real* magician." ■

Gordon Bean was formerly the Academy of Magical Arts librarian. He continues to create and release tricks performed around the world.

In my notes on the book *Roy Benson by Starlight* is the following quote by Okito: "It's easy to conceive of a trick. It's easy to figure out a method. It's not so hard to perform it and fool them with it. But how do you pack it?"

This resonates with many performers who travel with their magic. It has certainly been one of my lifelong obsessions, that recurring pragmatic thought: *How will I get it there?*

Aside from lugging stuff around, magicians have a hard time with choice of material. I work a lot with classical acts and Broadway singers whose extensive repertoires allow for performances made up of familiarity. And that works — people want music they know. But as a magician, the moment you pull out those rings or start tearing that newspaper, it's "They all do that one."

Billy McComb told me that, when working on a new routine, he would live with the trick, leaving it by his bedside and thinking about it all the time. I, too, obsess over the details of every inch of every routine. This slow process, in an era of immediate gratification, is one of the great private delights.

With these issues in mind, I want to talk about the evolution of a trick, one that began with the idea that it's

At Homb

always smart to have a few extra minutes about one's person. In my left pants pocket, I already carried a neatly folded scarf for my Five-Cornered Scarf routine, based on McComb's Seven Cornered Hanky and published in Gordon Bean's "Locked Room" column in *Genii*. This gave me a reassuring five-minute reserve, but I wanted more. So I looked into the Six Card Repeat, the Tommy Tucker routine that swept the magic world in the middle of the last century. It checked off the portability box, but it needed a stronger performance structure, and I didn't like the idea of littering the stage — or the audience — with cards.

I always look to use what I have in different ways and at that time I carried an English bowler hat — my largest prop. (This has since been replaced with a folding top hat for long-distance travel, but for in-town use I still revert to the bowler.) Early experiments had me throwing the cards into the hat. But that required a table, and the frame of action wasn't good. I needed to elevate the action, so I had the notion to incorporate a card-spinning technique I had discovered when I was maybe fifteen years old. Thoughts recycle and reemerge. Dusting off the one-handed spinning technique revealed that I could spin the cards in a large arc — a flourishing way to introduce the cards into the bowler. During each counting sequence, I discovered that I could wear the hat with the discards inside, eliminating the need for a table. The card spinning is an appealing moment for an audience and is perceived as great skill, which I suppose



PHOTO: VIRGINIA LEE HUNTER

with Haslam

By Mark Haslam

it is. The use of cards with a center spot like an Ace, Three, Five, or Nine proved to have a more appealing look as they spun their way toward their destination.

When I tried this new routine as an opener in the Parlour at The Magic Castle, the first card spun, landed perfectly upright in the center of a small ledge high on the proscenium above me, and the audience actually gasped. “That took five years,” I said, looking upward. Later in the show, the air conditioning caused the card to fall. As I was gesturing to someone in the audience, the card literally fell into my hand. I snapped its face to the audience: “Another five years.”

So now I had my quick backup trick nestled in my outer breast pocket, rarely performed but ready for action if needed.

Fast-forward to when I was hosting the show in the Palace of Mystery at the Castle. One of the acts on the bill was producing a huge live snake mid-act and requested that I return to the stage for a couple of minutes as he staggered off with the limbless reptile draped around his neck. I decided the Six Card Repeat would be a perfect fit — a self-contained two minutes. That Monday night, during the thirty-minute drive home, I was thinking about how to tighten the show and an idea popped into my head. This happens a lot when I’m able to talk aloud. (Always rehearse aloud. I committed to memory the entire script for my theater show,

in segments, during the early and late dog walks. With headphones as misdirection, I was allowed to mouth the script and be fully accepted by society.)

Back to the snake. “We need a couple of minutes in order to remove the snake, so here’s a quick trick with six cards...” I then executed the first phase and spun the cards into the hat. This got nice applause. I then looked to the wings and acted like I was being given instructions to stretch. “Looks like we need a little more time, so let me show you a trick with six cards...” This interaction with the wings continued for each subsequent count. I now had the perfect motivation for the Six Card Repeat. The audience loved it and so did Peter Pit. One night that week, Pat Page was in town for a convention and he told me, “If I were a thief, I would steal that presentation of the Six Card Repeat.”

Epilogue: I was working the Christmas week in the Palace with James Dimmare, who was doing two spots. In between, I was doing the Repeat and as I glanced to the wings I saw Bryan, the resident stage manager, miming the action to stretch. At first, I believed Bryan was just getting into the spirit of things, but I soon realized it was for real. James was having problems with the reset of his act and indeed did need a few minutes. The depleting cards in my hand were replenished with a group palmed from my pocket, and we continued: “Ladies and Gentlemen, a trick with six cards...” **M**