

Inducing Challenges

Let me shuffle the cards!

Make it go to my pocket!

Can you put the pieces together again?

During a lively session of Close-Up magic spectators occasionally suggest effects or conditions. While some of these suggestions are nothing more than little jokes ("Can you make my boss disappear?"), others are actual challenges, either meant to put the performer to the test or put forth in the hope to get to see some even more fascinating effect.

Getting challenged can be a problem: What if a spectator wants to shuffle the deck in the middle of your favourite memorized-deck routine? What if you spent the last ten minutes to demonstrate your supposed ability to divine freely chosen cards and now a spectator takes out her own deck, picks any card and asks you to name it? Challenges can create awkward moments. Incidentally, I believe those moments are weak not because they show that our magic is "only" a work of fiction – that should be clear anyway (see the introduction to Unforgettable page 78) – but because these moments are dramatically inconsistent. It's like the old joke: Somebody knocks on the clairvoyant's door and the master asks: "Who is it?"

But of course, there's also the other side of the story: Meeting a challenge usually generates reactions way out of proportion of the actual effect. I think two implications in particular make those moments so memorable: First, a spontaneous challenge apparently rules out advance preparation. Second, the performer seems to be able to achieve anything. Spectators' spontaneous challenges can lead to some of the strongest moments possible in the performance of Close-Up Magic.

So, are challenges good or bad? On the one hand we want to avoid dramatically weak moments; on the other hand we don't want to lose the potential for a sensation. What do we do? Do we design our performances to leave only very limited place for challenges and sacrifice some opportunities? Or do we encourage challenges and risk not being able to meet most of them? This article takes a closer look at a third approach: Why not try and prevent those challenges we cannot meet and at the same time induce challenges we can meet? If our spectators keep challenging us, but only with challenges we are well prepared to meet, we will have the best of both worlds.

The interesting point is that challenges do not seem to arise at random. They seem to be somehow triggered. If that were true, it would offer great opportunities: If we understood the causes for specific challenges, we could eliminate these causes in cases where we want to avoid being challenged and create them in instances we'd love to be challenged. Of course, we cannot really look into our spectators' minds, so there can hardly be a general answer. The following are just a few observations that might hint in the right direction.

Desire

People tend to challenge us to do something desirable. This principle might account for challenges along the lines of: "Can you make a beer appear?", "Can you make my boss disappear?" or "Get me a million dollars!"

Symbolism

The "desire"-principle might also apply at a more abstract, unconscious level. It has been argued that there are strong symbols inherent in certain magical effects. Let's take "Triumph" as an example: A deck of cards is shuffled face-up/ face-down. The result is a mess. This automatically seems to create a certain conflict that waits to be resolved. If a deck accidentally drops to the floor and the cards get mixed up, there is a reasonable chance that somebody suggests to "straighten them out by magic!" In contrast I have never been challenged to "magically mix the cards face-up/ face-down".

Of course, there may be independent reasons for that observation, other than some obscure "symbolism". For example, is much more difficult to sort a deck than it is to mix it up. People might suggest using magic to put the cards in order simply because it saves work and time. But if that was true, how would we explain the same contrast in the case of "The Linking Rings"? Linking or unlinking the rings is equally impossible and takes about the same time. Nevertheless, one state seems to trigger a challenge much more frequently than the other: When we show two separate rings and link them together, chances are that after a while spectators will challenge us to take them apart again. When starting with two linked rings and taking them apart, however, the challenge to put them back together does not arise nearly as frequently. (And if it does it is mostly followed by the request to unlink the rings again.) Maybe the explanation for these observations lies in symbolism? Might the unlinked condition of the rings be considered the more "relaxed", "free", "natural" state, while the linked condition contains an inherent conflict that cries to be resolved?

All well and good, but what does all this have to do with actual performance? A lot, I think. One practical consequence of the above observations about Triumph, for example, could be this: When performing an effect which ends with the deck ends in a face-up/face-down mess (like for example Darwin Ortiz' "Blockbuster" out of

“Cardshark” (Ortiz 1995) or “Party Animal” from “The Book” (The Flicking Fingers 1998)) be prepared for the challenge to “put the cards right again”. If you don’t want that to happen, place the cards away immediately or do something to prevent the challenge.

Or, and that’s the other way of dealing with the situation, immediately after the effect secretly straighten out the deck (using, for example, Lennart Green’s Angle Separation ¹). Then briefly complain that this trick always leaves the deck in such a mess and wait for somebody to suggest you magically straighten the cards. If somebody takes the bait, you can milk the situation, first pretending that this is, of course, impossible, making the spectator insist, etc. and finally really doing it.

As an example of how to apply the concept of inducing challenges to a well-known effect, let’s take David Williamson’s “Torn and Restored Transpo” from “Williamson’s Wonders” (Kaufman 1989). At the end of the first phase of this routine, you are left with a selected card torn into four pieces. Again, this situation seems to contain an inherent symbolic conflict. Instead of simply continuing the routine (in the second phase the card is restored and in the third phase the creases are removed) you could pretend the trick is over. Pause and play with the pieces, arranging them on the table to form the card, etc. If there is any truth in the theory of symbolism and my own experience is not just a collection of mere coincidences, somebody will sooner or later challenge you put the pieces “back together”. When that happens, you can be reluctant at first and dramatize the situation any way you see fit before finally actually doing it. This specific routine by David Williamson allows you to push the concept even further: You might easily cause somebody to challenge you to remove the creases by saying: “This leaves the card just as in the beginning! Brand new, just as it came from the factory!” With just the slightest bit of luck, this obviously wrong claim will provoke contradiction and cause somebody to point out that the card is still heavily creased. Pretend this is the most demanding crowd you have ever performed for and finish by effortlessly fulfilling even their most extravagant wishes.

Past experience

Apparently, challenges can be triggered by past experience. Suppose during your act you make cards appear out of thin air. Later somebody asks for a business card and you cannot find one. There’s a reasonable chance somebody will half-jokingly suggest you “just reach out and grab one from the air!” Similarly, if you perform “Miser’s Dream” and later are a quarter short to pay your drink; don’t be surprised to get challenged.

¹ Green, Lennart, GAS – The Green Angle Separation. See also Giobbi, Roberto, Card College Volume 4, pp. 903–905

One more example: During an effect you give a spectator a deck of cards to keep in his pocket and impress upon him not to let you touch the cards. After successfully finishing the trick retrieve the deck and continue with some other effects. A few tricks later you hand the same spectator a deck for safekeeping, this time without the request not to let you touch them. When you ask him to give you the deck near the end of this trick, he might remember the previous conditions and refuse to give you the cards, instead challenging you to let him count the cards (or whatever). Needless to say, you have designed the routine in such a way that you can now pretend to be in major trouble while in fact easily being able to meet the challenge.

Apart from desires, symbolism and past experience, certain verbal structures seem to hold potential to induce challenges:

Wrong claims

Inducing the challenge to remove the creases in David Williamson’s routine introduced yet another strategy to trigger a challenge: Provoking a contradiction by claiming something that is obviously wrong. Even though it is not included in the description, I am currently experimenting with this in the finale of Colour Sense: Before naming the suit and value of the last card, I say: “You see; I can feel everything about the cards. Red, black – everything there is to know about a playing card!” This might sound bold and obvious, but a few times already somebody said: “Can you also see the suit?!”

Emphasis

After secretly loading a card into a spectator’s pocket, instead of simply having him reach inside and be surprised, you could try to induce a challenge through emphasis as follows: Make a duplicate travel to your pocket. Return it to the deck, steal out the card and announce you will do it again, only “more difficult”. Place the deck far away and again remove the card from your pocket. This time when you say: “and once more, the card is in my pocket!” put some emphasis on the word “my”. If you try this for yourself right now, you might find that emphasizing that word brings to mind the phrase “as opposed to somebody else’s pocket”. If necessary repeat the short effect together with a similar sentence and the same emphasis. You may feel this is like waving a huge red sign but when the spectator finally suggests you make the card appear in his pocket, he will usually have no doubt it was his own idea.

Ambiguous communication/apparent misunderstandings

Another way to make spectators request something is actually to suggest it yourself without actually saying so. To stay with the card-to-pocket example: After having made the card travel to your pocket a few times, say: “And of course, it can go to

any pocket!” and at the same time clearly gesture towards him/his pocket. Immediately follow with “This one or that one...” this time pointing to various pockets on your own person. Even though the first part of the sentence clearly communicated the idea of the card going to the spectator’s pocket, you have not actually said anything to that effect. This allows you credibly to deny that the idea has ever crossed your mind. (You, of course, meant any of your own pockets!) To the spectator, it will seem like a short misunderstanding, at most. But now that the challenge is out, let’s see you do it! Well, if you insist...

Incidentally, a simple way to give the impression of not having planned anything and at the same time make your spectators insist on their challenge is to pretend not to understand. For example you might say: “What do you mean, in your pocket?” The spectator will repeat his idea, explaining it even more clearly. This will almost automatically sound like a challenge and give a very clear conflict.

These few examples should suffice to show that, like so many things in magic, inducing challenges is a question of balance. On the one hand the strategies must be clear and bold enough actually to work and trigger the correct challenge at least some of the time. On the other hand one must avoid falling back on sledge-hammer psychology that would make the procedure obvious.

And at the risk of stating the obvious, one last important point: When meeting an induced challenge, the situation and final effect must appear unrehearsed. You are seemingly just picking up a spectator’s spontaneous idea. This is not the moment for elaborate “presentation” or carefully scripted poetry in rhyme and metre.

Credits and Comments

While I am not aware of any written discussion of this concept, I certainly do not claim any originality. There are countless examples of the strategy in action in the performances of (mostly Close-Up-) magicians all over the world.

Sybolism

One of the first to explicitly talk about the role of symbolism in magic was Juan Tamariz. Some of his early writings on this topic can be found in the “Circular”, the organ of the “Escuela de la Magia de Madrid” A thorough discussion is to be included in his upcoming work “The Magic Rainbow”. Anything I may know about these things, I learned from Juan.

