# *'What Is This…'*: Introducing Magic and Theatre

By Augusto Corrieri

*'A magician is an actor playing the part of a magician.'*
Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, 1868[1]

Magic—think playing cards, wands, and coins that inexplicably transform, levitate and multiply—is a very particular theatrical activity. That is, if it even passes for theatre. Barring a handful of recent exceptions, magic has received no attention from theatre scholars, despite the fact that the expanded field of theatre and performance studies prides itself on embracing marginalia and semi-forgotten practices.[2] This omission may have a lot to do with magic itself, whose secretive and inward-looking social milieu is closed off to 'laymen' (as magicians are fond of describing outsiders). Tourists wandering inside the enchanted citadel of magic are likely to face an attitude of deep mistrust. Conjurors tend to behave as a closed sect whose main role is to carefully guard unfathomable secrets (really a series of principles and ingenious applications); they are often extremely fearful of any changes or disruptions to the art form, yet blissfully unaware of or untroubled by magic's near-total lack of cultural capital. Add to this an appalling

1 Houdin, Robert [1877] (2011), *Secrets of Conjuring and Magic, or How To Become A Wizard* (New York: Cambridge University press), p. 40.

2 The field of magic remains vastly understudied and misunderstood, particularly within theatre studies. However, a number of valuable academic cultural studies have emerged over the last decade or so. These include: During, Simon (2004), *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge US: Harvard University Press); Mangan, Michael (2007), *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring* (Bristol: Intellect); Coppa, Hass & Peck eds. (2008), *Performing Magic on The Western Stage: From The Eighteenth Century to The Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave); Goto-Jones, Chris (2016), *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism and The Making of the Modern World* (St Ives: Cambridge University press). On the relation between magic and cinema, see Beckman, Karen (2003), *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press); Solomon, Matthew (2010), *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and The New Magic of The Twentieth Century* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press); Williamson, Colin (2015), *Hidden In Plain Sight: An Archaeology of Magic and The Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press). Last but not least is the University of Huddersfield's publication, the first *Journal of Performance Magic.*

lack of social diversity (the magician is still overwhelmingly a white male figure), and it is no surprise that scholars, or anyone else for that matter, might be put off by magic. And so, despite a few successful TV shows, conjuring is disregarded as a trivial pastime or children's entertainment.

Theatre and performance studies scholars have recuperated and reframed other forms of popular, mass, or 'trash' entertainment, often following the guiding light of critical debates around representation, bodies, gender, sexuality, forms of labour, etc. Magic, however, is apparently a reach too far, even for scholars of marginalia. It seems there is something about magicians *pretending* to make objects vanish, *acting* as though they can manipulate the laws of space and time, that fails to garner any serious consideration. A magic performance can be defined as the creation of the illusion of impossibility, in a simple paradox whereby that which *cannot* happen is seen to occur in the here and now. However, as US magician David Blaine put it in a recent interview, 'people know there is no such thing as a magician, so therefore it's a man [sic] pretending to be a magician, which is cheating' (qtd. in Kaino, Glenn & Delgaudio 216). If the conjuror's performance is *not real*, why waste time analysing such a charade?

My suspicion is that conjuring is deemed undeserving of 'serious' or critical attention to the extent that the magician's *pretence* and *acting* (such as pretending to possess magical powers) cannot be taken seriously. A kind of anti-theatrical prejudice is at work, whereby the unreal is regarded as unworthy, echoing Plato's dismissal of the arts (paintings, plays) as mere deceptive imitations of reality. We might also understand this disavowal of magic by shifting the gaze inward, towards academic and non-academic theatre communities. Disavowal, as Freud would have it, rests on a curiously self-reflexive dynamic, whereby we come to disavow what in fact matters to us; by dismissing magic—as unreal as it might be—, are theatre scholars and practitioners not engaging in a 'specific mode of defense', a refusal to recognise 'the reality of a traumatic perception' (Freud 141)? In other words, is theatre so nervous about its own insubstantiality—its potential frivolity, its

uncertain cultural prestige, and the unshakable burden of pretence and fakery—that it needs to scapegoat and admonish fellow conjurors and wonder workers?

Perhaps as we turn to consider magic, we might experiment with two ideas or possibilities, as briefly rehearsed in this text: firstly, that magic *is* a form of theatre (what else could it have been?); secondly, and far more curiously, that magic's main function is to interrogate theatre: to question the illusory apparatus itself, as well as its evolving mechanics of belief/disbelief, appearance/disappearance, reality/fiction.

**When Magic Became Theatre**

The term 'magic' merits some historical framing, which helps us to understand when and how it metamorphosed into theatre. Secular magic, or 'white' magic (again think playing cards and vanishing handkerchiefs) is largely defined in opposition to forms of sorcery that lay claim to the supernatural ('black' magic, real magic, magick, dark arts, etc.). The distinction between secular and sacred magic can be dated back to 1584 and the publication of *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, by the Englishman Reginald Scot. Challenging the church's demonization of so-called wizards and witches, Scot set out to show that magic was no supernatural feat, but rather a phenomenon that could be analysed and understood: seemingly impossible feats, such as those performed by street mountebanks and charlatans, relied on clear and explainable methods.

The demystification or secularisation of magic, however, wouldn't happen overnight: for centuries performing magicians preferred to label their feats as *legerdemain*, juggling or dexterity, since the term magic was still linked, in the popular imagination, to grievous meddling with the supernatural and occult. It was only with the French conjuror Robert Houdin (1805-1871) that magic acquired something like a distinctly aesthetic status: donning the bourgeois top-hat and tails typical of the time (which have since become a cliché of the conjuror's attire), Robert Houdin sought to distance himself from street magicians and hustlers, framing magic as a distinguished indoor

entertainment, an emotional and intellectual presentation for dedicated theatre audiences. Houdin described conjuring as 'the art of *fictitious* magic' (42, my emphasis), and whilst some performers since his time have professed to present 'genuine' miracles, in the form of spiritualist séances or mind reading (a good example is the fraudulent Uri Geller, whose supernatural spoon-bending feats were, lo and behold, magic tricks), most conjurors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have operated in the distinctly aesthetic, rational, and secular framework instituted by Robert Houdin. In his 1868 book, *Secrets of Conjuring and Magic, or How To Become a Wizard*, as well as detailing the methods and structures of his show, Houdin famously offered the first definition of this modern, secular miracle worker: the magician 'is an actor playing the part of a magician' (43).

By shaking magic free of superstition and dark beliefs, Houdin allowed conjurers to fully participate in the modern project of engaging with fiction *as fiction*. The magical appearance of doves and rabbits, or the unexplainable transformations of coins and cards, would no longer be viewed with fearful suspicion, but rather accepted as open artifice and aesthetic gesture. Whilst an echo of wizardry or 'real' magic remains, the theatrical frame guarantees that the magician's actions are understood—however impossibly, maddeningly, jaw-droppingly—as fully licensed deceptions.

**Magic Goes Meta**

Modern magic's aim however wasn't just to deceive or amaze: its motor was precisely a kind of theatrical double awareness, or cognitive dissonance, emerging in the late nineteenth century. Audiences at a magic show perform a double task: to know that everything they are witnessing is illusory and unreal, and to simultaneously allow themselves to be utterly amazed by the *impossible* feats taking place before their very eyes.[3] What is rehearsed with the advent of conjuring is a certain

3 Simon During has worked closely on the link between modern magic and fiction: 'The rise of secular magic is closely tied to the increasing power, substantiality, and dissemination of fictionality. It's no surprise that the realist novel takes off as a genre

kind of ironic dis-belief, a paradox of detached immersion, whereby spectators are asked to experience true enchantment whilst remaining fully aware of the illusory construction underlying it (a construction that is, ideally, entirely elusive and undetectable). In a magic show, the infamous 'suspension of disbelief', in which a viewer or reader might consciously disregard the method for the sake of enjoying the fiction, is curiously upended: whereas in a stage production of *Peter Pan* the wires holding up the flying actor are mentally 'erased' by a willing spectator, in a conjuring show the illusionist's flight has to appear wholly real and impossible: no matter how much you try to figure out *how* the illusionist is capable of floating in mid-air, in the end you give up and concede that the only solution to the mystery is that which you know it cannot be: magic. As Teller (of the Las Vegas-based magic duo Penn & Teller) puts it, 'magic is about a fundamental conflict between what you see and what you know' (qtd. in Kaino & Delgaudio 201). What happens is not possible, yet it happens. We know this impossible event cannot happen, we even know that it's *not* happening, yet here it is, fully unfolding in real time and space, as though everything we knew about the world were suddenly open to question. As film theorist Karen Beckman writes, in her book *Vanishing Women*: 'Magic provokes critical spectatorship though its self-acknowledged performance of undisclosed activity' (190). Modern magic is fundamentally a form of meta-theatre: intensely and inherently self-reflexive, its *raison d'être* consists in spectators questioning the act itself, questioning the framework they are caught in, and questioning the scope and limits of their own questioning.

What the conjuring act truly conjures, more or less explicitly, is a reflection and an ontological interrogation of the very framework that sustains it: that is, the theatre. '*What is this?*' is the question audience members ask themselves when transcendent awe is coupled with an

at the same time as an entertainment industry based on secular magic: they share a cultural logic. What they both require is the famous "willing suspension of disbelief", which … means that you believe and don't believe simultaneously.' (qtd. in Najafi, 93). Recently Peter Lamont has cast doubt on the historical view according to which conjuring was once synonymous with witchcraft before emerging as a distinct modern theatrical form.

unshakeable certainty in the purely rational nature of the theatrical exchange. What is this? What is it that is taking place before me? How can this simulated feat appear so real? More than just detectives seeking to solve a mystery or puzzle, audiences witnessing magical illusions are charged with the role of philosophers: to contemplate the nature of 'reality', as well as the peculiar situation that is the theatre, in which such presentations are possible.

Magic tricks, and the wonder and bafflement they can produce, are only a means to an end—that end being a self-reflexive interrogation of the status of the act itself. Magicians are truly purveyors of radical doubt, their acts capable of triggering a vertiginous series of open-ended questions: is this really happening? How can this impossible feat be fake if it has all the traits of being real? Why is there such a gap between my perception (I can *see* a human body suspended in mid-air) and my understanding of phenomenal reality (I *know* human bodies cannot be suspended in mid air)? Does my perception coincide with that of others? Am I really here, seeing this? Is the real secret the fact that the magician can actually *do* magic (but if so, why bother doing it in the theatre)? What distinguishes acts carried out in the theatre? And what is theatre anyway? In short: *what is this?*

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