

# Gospel Street Magic

by Oz and Wilde

*A certain man stepped into the midst, and placed on a three-legged table three small cups, under which he concealed some little white round pebbles such as are found on the banks of rivers; these he placed one by one under the cups, and then, I don't know how, made them appear under another cup and finally showed them in his mouth.*

These words are found in the writings of second century philosopher Athenaeus revealing that the market places and streets of cities are an age old venue for the magical arts. During the Greek and Roman empires, magicians and sleight-of-hand artists amused onlookers that came from far off places to buy and sell in the public square.

So what exactly is Street Magic? When we started this project we figured it had likely been pretty well defined. After all there are all sorts of "street magic" items for sale. However, upon closer look, most are just standard effects, many of which have no business being performed out of doors. Our conclusion was this is apparently the latest "sell word" for magical props. However the more we delved into the term and the history of magic in general, what could be considered modern street magic actually falls into two very different genres; traditional street performance and guerilla magic.

## Traditional Street Magic

This form of magic is commonly known as "busking." In this, the magician draws an audience from passers by and performs an entire act for them. In exchange, the magician seeks remuneration either by having a receptacle for tips available throughout the act or by "passing the hat" at the end of the performance.

Street magic most often consists of sleight of hand, card magic, and occasionally mentalism, though the ability to draw and hold an audience is frequently cited by practitioners as a skill of greater importance than the illusions themselves.

Anthropologists chronicle this form of street magic from approximately 3,000 years ago - and there are records of such performers across the continents, notably Europe, Asia/South Asia and the Middle East. While it is a very old performing style, its history is not particularly well documented in print. In his diary, Samuel Pepys mentions seeing magicians performing in this fashion and one can see street magicians in depictions by Hieronymous Bosch, William Hogarth, and Pieter Brueghel. Book XIII of Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) describes magic tricks of the type performed by buskers in the 16th century.

New York magician Jeff Sheridan is considered one of the top U.S. street magicians to emerge from the surge in street performance artists which picked up again in the late '60s. He authored the 1977 book, *Street Magic* and allegedly was one of the performers who inspired and later taught the young David Blaine after Blaine saw Sheridan perform in Central Park. Even more recently, Jim Cellini (aka Richard Sullivan) and Gazzo Macee (aka Gary Osborne) have garnered accolades from magicians for their contributions to the venue of magical performance.

### Guerrilla Magic

The second category of the street art form is more appropriately referred to as "guerrilla magic." This is because it is a relatively recent style of performing magic illusions where the magician performs a single trick or two in a public space (such as on a sidewalk) for an unsuspecting, non-paying audience. The desired effect of this "hit and run" style of magic is to give the audience a feeling that what they are seeing is impromptu, unrehearsed, and experimental. It is, however, highly debatable whether magic should be performed for people without asking or without being asked to do so.

This style of "street magic" is associated with David Blaine (who literally started the phase) and more recently, Criss Angel and was largely developed to play well on television beginning with the 1997 ABC television special *David Blaine: Street Magic*. Many magicians respect Blaine's choice of material and give him credit for creating an image of the contemporary magician distinct from other magicians in recent television history, such as David Copperfield or Doug Henning.

Some "old school" magicians may dispute whether any such category as guerrilla magic even exists, since it is primarily associated with only a handful of performers. As time goes on however, thanks largely to imitators, it is clear that it is a form of magic.

## So Why Gospel Street Magic?

Kif shares: *Celebrating my birthday in April of 2008, my family took me to Santa Monica to one of my favorite restaurants, Ye Olde King's Head, an English pub that has great food and even better atmosphere. While we were there, we walked down the 3rd Street Promenade. There were several folks out on the street, a young girl singing while her soundman, likely her father, sat on the side. There was a gent with a monkey who for a buck would tip his hat and shake your hand. There was a couple playing music and selling their CDs. A few guys were doing break dancing (I think it is still called that). All of these folks were gathering a crowd. Then, I saw three guys standing in a spot, sharing the gospel, and it didn't appear anyone was listening. Clearly no one was gathered around or for that matter giving them any attention.*

Why? Well, first off they were not doing anything to attract a crowd. "You need to confess your sins and let Jesus into your life." Great message...unsuccessful delivery. Yes we know the message will not go out void. But is it always really going out? Communication is a two way street. We fail to communicate if the intended audience isn't listening.

Several evangelists using magic to do street outreach may use illusion successfully to draw a crowd, but when the "magic stops" and the gospel is then being shared, it was common for the audience to wander away. Much like a seasoned street performer depending on tips at the end of their performance, things are required to "hold the crowd" until the end.

This is the focus of this writing, to help the evangelist learn how to not only gather and hold the crowd, but share the gospel at the same time.

## The Lessons of the Street

Above all else, the most important skill the street performer must learn is to call and hold an audience. The ability to have busy people stop and gather a crowd isn't easy. For most magicians, in the majority of performing situations, calling a crowd isn't a factor. Usually, we walk out and our audience is there waiting for us. Furthermore, we presume they will be giving us their undivided attention.

So understanding what the street performer goes through, both in calling and holding a crowd, is essential. It clearly applies to the presentation of Gospel magic anytime, street, stage or classroom. And while most of our audiences may not "walk away," if they are not engaged, they will likely miss the message. And for Gospel performers that is crucial. It's not the magic, but the message we really want them to remember. And while what follows generally applies to many

different venues, the focus will be on sharing with the street evangelical performance method.

The effects you should use:

This obviously has a lot to do with what your environment is going to be. Guerilla acts obviously need to be carried in your pocket where a traditional street act should include larger things, as you will likely have a table. What both should have in common is easy reset, and easy to replace. The latter may not make sense if you have never performed on the street, but more stuff gets damaged, broken, or “disappears” in this venue than any other.

Since it is easier to point out what to avoid than it is to guess what will work best the following are things to avoid:

- Effects that involve and use fire. Fines are likely, audience members’ suing you when they get burned as the slightly damp from perspiration flash paper burns slower than expected and is blown into the audience and lands in their hair.
- Silks effects that play big and pack small, will get very dirty very quickly from the oils in your hands and the elements. Your hands are not going to stay clean outdoors and everything is going to “take in the elements.
- Flat things that set on stands are “wind targets” and will blow away. If your are going to do something with say an envelope holding a prediction...then bring up someone to hold it.
- Darkly painted props. Nothing like reaching for something and burning your hand. Dark colors absorb heat and if you grab something hot...guess what...you will let go of it and it probably won’t be in a controlled fashion.
- Anything that requires you to wear a blindfold. When you take it off...the crowd will almost assuredly be much smaller than when you put it on in the first place.

“Cups and Balls” is a strong street effect. They can be easily washed or polished. Now when selecting cups don’t use the one’s from England that are silver and gold plated or beautifully engraved. Those will really impress the folks in your magic clubs, but on the street people just won’t care and they won’t hold up. You won’t keep them in a nice bag between performances and they will get banged around a lot. Make sure you have along a duplicate set. If one cup gets dented somehow, you have three replacement cups. Furthermore, having extra balls for the routine is also a must. Those have a tendency to fly off the table and bounce into a crowd and “no one can find it.” Translation: Someone has a souvenir and they don’t want you to know.

Like with the cups, your “bag of tricks” should include duplicate props for your program. Things break and you probably won’t have repair kits for everything with you.

## Addressing an audience

If you believe effective street performers are doing it with all improvisation, think again. Experience has taught them what does work and what simply does not. The street performer's goal is to keep a crowd until the end so they can collect tips, and they are only going to do what they know is going to work. They know what they will do each step of their show before they go out. Improvisation only comes when they already have a totally worked-out script to fall back on. They must know their patter and tricks forwards and backwards.

This means...you probably guessed it...practice and memorization. You have a script and you work to it. However, the plus side to this preparation is it brings with it confidence. And one needs all the confidence they can muster to overcome the natural fear of the unknown and unexpected. The more preparation we do, the more comfortable we will be. This helps to ease the fear that comes when we suddenly have to interrupt those around us with the call. "Ladies and Gentlemen, gather 'round. Come and witness some amazing illusions that have the potential to change your life forever."

Since we know that accepting Christ into our hearts is an individual thing, it is important for the performer to view the crowd as individuals. Therefore, our audiences should be addressed and your dialog should be a conversation, and interaction, not that they are listening to a "sermon" so to speak. When we really look at one individual at a time, instead of everyone and no one at once, from the perspective of the performer the audience is much more controllable and those watching feel much more comfortable and willing to stick around.

On the street, the best we can, every line we say should be directed at an individual in the crowd. When we speak personally to one person and wait for acknowledgement or agreement and then turn to another to make the next point, we establish a relationship. In contrast, the idea of looking over the heads of the crowd or focusing our attention at some vanishing point in the middle of the group, we lose the very nature of why we are there: to reach out.

Looking at an individual when we speak a line not only makes the performance seem more intimate and interesting, it can also relieve some of the fear that comes when facing a group. (Even on stage in a theater, where the audience is lost in the darkness, it works best to pretend that one can see individuals and act as though we are getting an acknowledgement when it is done.)

## Drawing in a crowd

With a mindset that what is about to happen is going to be an interactive relationship with an audience, the next question is, "So how do we get our potential audience to come over and watch the things we want to show them?"

I've got news for you, the guerilla style by the likes of David Blaine where they just walk up to someone and show them a trick will be much more hit and miss. Keep in mind you don't see all the people who said, "NO!" Also, since David had a camera crew following him, many who "played along" figured they might get on television. Go ahead and try it, but effective one-on-one gospel street magic will probably work best in a conversation...not as an instant act. Later, after you've been doing it...folks may come up and say, "Hey, can you show us a trick too?"

One method to gather a crowd is to use some silent, non-threatening skill that can attract people over to watch. Our fellow evangelist and friend to our ministry Mark Spence, who works with Ray Comfort and Kurt Cameron, does an impressive routine with the effect "d'Lites." This needs to be something that the performer can keep going until he gets a crowd together. Think about the "street acts" that catch your attention: jugglers, unicycle riders, etc. So for the street magician, perhaps card flourishes or a billiard ball production might work. This usually works better than barking out, "Hurry...hurry...step right up!" Animals always work well, but usually are not always practical for a street performer...especially if loading them in something is required. So consider an animal puppet or something else unique.

Another method is to start with a trick that is small and effective, only for one or two people and then continue performing until a crowd is gathered. Keep in mind the performer only has to stop one or two people, or a small group that is walking together and get them to watch something. Others will gather around faster if they aren't "the first ones."

Calling a crowd is often made easier if the one talking and the performer are two different people. This is one of the most effective, and certainly the least intimidating method of starting a show for the performer. It can be challenging to sell yourself. Having someone do it for you is a blessing. Street performers who do this often have that person take charge of leading applause and passing the hat, as it usually brings in more income. Maybe if you are out with another performer, you can do it for each other, rather than be one another's "competition."

Putting up signs around the performing area to announce the show can attract interest. These sometimes, but not always, announce a show time and can be a tremendous help in drawing a crowd. The "Next Show 1:15" type sign is extremely common among magicians in trade show settings. Intriguing props and costumes are also very helpful. Catch their eye...you may get their interest.

## You got 'em... Now how do you keep 'em?

People have a tendency not to leave in the middle of something. For example, with a street singer or musician, they stay and listen to a song and then during the applause wander off. So the street performer not only wants to keep every routine going as long as possible it should appear to be one seamless overall routine that lasts right up to the moment he hits them with the request for money.

The most likely time for an audience to walk away is when something is over and the performer needs to put equipment away, and get out the next thing. There simply can never be any dead space. Whenever something is being put away, he tries to be taking something else out with the other hand. The performer's eyes should never leave the crowd. The patter should never stop. You never leave character.

A great method for learning to do this is studying the technique of the actor as it would apply to the improvisational situations that the magician faces. Viola Spolin's books, *Improvisation for the Theater*, and *Theater Games for the Lone Actor* are both gold mines for a performer, and teach the skills and theory needed in an enjoyable way.

Scripting your performance helps with segues from one effect to the next. The "and for my next trick" as you search through your bag... may turn out to be "the old vanishing audience trick."

One great method for keeping a crowd's interest is when something remains unresolved. Say in an early effect you borrow someone's dollar. It gets destroyed and you seem to not be able to restore it. Now you may do several effects in the process of seeming to try and restore their bill, but until you do... it is just one routine for them.

Speaking of audience involvement, when a large group comes up to watch, if you get one of them to come and be an assistant, at least that part of the audience will stick around for a little bit. So look for things that require two or more folks and pick them from these different groups.

## Getting the Gospel into the Message

When the street performer effectively engages their audience, they can have a much better chance of winning them over to his cause. The working street performer has this in mind all the time. And their cause is not to impress them or gain admiration, it is that what has been seen is worth payment. They want the crowd to believe they have worked hard, are very clever, and worth a buck or

two. For evangelical street entertainment, the passing of the hat isn't the focus, the passing of the message is the main goal. As has been stated before, if one waits until the end to share the gospel, the crowd that stayed for the magic, will have a tendency to stop caring and leave. So it is essential that the message is weaved into the presentation.

This is not to be interpreted as injecting religious statements during the segues. "...and as you can see the silk has once again vanished. Just like our sins do. Now I'd like to show you a card trick." No the message shouldn't seem to be an afterthought, but weaved effectively through out your script. Then, unlike the folks ineffectively sharing the gospel on the street mentioned earlier, they are listening. The gospel is being communicated effectively.

So what should that message include? First, that we have a problem which is sin. Second, that we can't do things ourselves to "clean up our sinful mess." Third, that there is a way (gospel message shared). Fourth, that everyone needs to make that choice. Understanding this helps us set up our show. A ten to fifteen minute street act will offer the opportunity to spread that out over several effects...touching on one or two of the points in every effect. Guerilla acts pretty much need to communicate the message in just one or two effects as this is not a long performance window.

### What happens at the end of the act?

Now in a church or stadium setting for an evangelical event, the crowd is usually asked to bow their heads and close their eyes. Then folks are given an alter call. This is strongly not recommended for the street. **YOUR CROWD WILL LEAVE!** Closing your eyes for a prayer breaks contact with them. Praying with folks, that needs to be one on one...and you can, at a point or two in your act, say that you would love to chat with people if they would like to know more about what you are sharing.

The street performer making their living on the street ends with the pass of the hat. You get something from the audience. However, for the gospel street performer, this is the time to "give them something." Clever tracks that fit your performance style are great for that. Especially if its theme has somehow been worked into the presentation. You could say something like, "Now at this point in the show, most street performers generally ask for a buck or two from those who have watched, but I want you to know I'm not doing this to line my pockets, but just a chance to amaze and also communicate a great message. Save your financial appreciation for the other performers. However, I do have a fun thing to hand out that also tells you more about what I've been talking about. I'd love to give you one. And if the message today has been tugging on your heart and you would like to chat about that for a moment or two, I'd love to do that. May God bless you all. thanks so much for your time and attention."

This comes across warm and friendly, and not that you are out recruiting for some religion. It has been said, “they don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Hopefully you’ve shown the caring in the performance, by what you are offering to give them and your willingness to chat with them.

If your giveaway is “useful” like a novelty thing or illusion, it will less likely end up as litter in the area where you are performing.

Remember, it’s the message that is important and the performance that helps stop them to listen.