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WHO ARE YOUR FAVORITE MAGICIANS?
(PART 1)

THE JOB OF THE ARTIST IS ALWAYS TO DEEPEN THE MYSTERY.

—FRANCIS BACON, ARTIST

There are several magicians whose work I admire above all others—Penn & Teller, David Copperfield, and David Blaine, to name a few. One of the most gratifying parts of writing this book is getting to spend time with each of them to learn about their processes. But all of the magicians in this three-part series have one thing in common: You've probably never heard of them.

JERRY ANDRUS
(1918–2007)

Magic is arcane. We magicians keep to ourselves, so much so that some of the best magicians in the world aren't even professionals. They practice their craft between shifts or underneath their desks, away from the prying eyes of their bosses. Perhaps the most prolific magician of all time—with more than two thousand original tricks published—was a machinist in a factory. One of the finest sleight-of-hand performers I've ever seen is a sales associate at FedEx. And then there is Jerry Andrus, a lineman for the Pacific Power Company in Oregon, one of the most creative magicians who ever lived. When I met Jerry, I was just starting to perform on the magic convention circuits. At that time Jerry was already a star, receiving honors and ovations in the convention shows I was opening.

One of the things that made Jerry unique is that from an early age he vowed to *never* tell a lie. Only with Jerry, it wasn't lore—he was serious. When I first heard about Jerry's vow, the playful side of me wanted to test it as soon as I met him.

"What did you think of the guy with the doves?" I asked.

"I don't really care for that kind of magic," he told me.

I tried again. "Did you like the trick I showed you yesterday? The one where the coin appeared on top of the deck?"

"It was over too quick."

Damn, I thought.

It wasn't just that Jerry never lied; it was his delivery that resonated. He leveled blunt, unvarnished truths without an ounce of hesitation or coyness.

Never telling a lie is hard enough in daily life. Try *not* to tell the everyday white lies that get us out of dinner with neighbors or assure our kids what great artists they are. It's not easy, but possible, maybe. What's hard to fathom is how a *magician* can go a lifetime without telling a lie. And yet Jerry Andrus *never* lied, not even onstage. He wouldn't say, "Please choose any card you like," unless you *really* had a free choice. It's a brave, unnecessary, and artistic choice, and it makes performing magic almost impossible. Well, it *would* . . . for anyone but Jerry Andrus.

Jerry's second self-imposed guideline was yet another feat: He performed only original material. If someone else created it, he wouldn't touch it. This is true in a general sense with other magicians I admire, but Jerry was fanatical. He wouldn't even use standard moves in his effects. (It's nearly impossible to explain to non-magicians how impressive this is.) Magic, like everything, is based on certain fundamentals. Everyone—and I mean *everyone*—uses these moves and a hundred others in their own sequences and combinations. They are the building blocks of our craft. But Jerry invented his own sleight-of-hand vocabulary. Every move and moment in his original magic was made up of a dozen or more original sleights. The sheer creative power required is staggering.

My favorite Jerry Andrus effect was called "Zone Zero." Jerry displayed a large board with a hole in the middle of it. He then presented a bright yellow ball and placed the ball in the hole. When he did, the ball disappeared. He would show both sides of the board, then reach his hand back inside "Zone Zero" to retrieve the ball. The effect is right out of a comic book, with holes that supposedly go into other dimensions. Classic Jerry.

Because he wasn't a professional magician, Jerry cared nothing for practicality. He was free to innovate without the constraints a professional worries about: angles, reset time, durability, or level of difficulty. He published a move in the 1950s called the "Sidewinder Shift," where a chosen card was pushed through the deck and secretly out the other side, concealed between the hand and the wrist. It was so difficult that people didn't believe it could be done. Having seen—or I should say, *not* seen—the "Sidewinder Shift" in action, I can say it was invisible and perfect in Jerry's oversized hands.

Despite his low profile, Jerry is famous among magicians and known also in the skeptic community. He was an outspoken agnostic who opposed pseudo-science in all its forms. His performances could be heavy-handed at times, but he also offered explanations and comfort to his audience as he fooled them. "I can fool you because you're a human," he would say. "You have a wonderful human mind that works no different from my human mind." He wanted people to know that being fooled by something didn't mean you were stupid.

Among his many quirks, Jerry wrote poetry, invented his own button-free dictation machine, and was a pioneer in an alternative layout for the now-standard keyboard.

In 2003, I found myself on tour in the Pacific Northwest and asked Jerry if we could meet up. He invited me to what he affectionately referred to as the Castle of Chaos, the home he had lived in since 1928. (After his death in 2007, a couple bought and restored the house, and it's now a registered historic place open to visitors.)

The house was comically small and in disrepair. It had a distinctive keyhole window in the front, and the whole property, inside and out, was, well, jerry-rigged. He had designed an organ that was integrated into the electricity of the house—as he played, lights flickered on and off. The organ itself was a messy sea of wires that looked more like a homemade bomb than an instrument. He had a treadmill in his kitchen on which he mounted his computer—back when computers were huge and had separate towers attached to monitors. I remember that a pan on his stove was incredibly filthy. "Jerry?" I asked, pointing to it.

Without shame or interest, he replied, "I don't wash my pans." Jerry never lied.

His backyard was what everyone—from neighborhood kids to Jerry Andrus fans around the world—wanted to see. It was an optical illusions laboratory, filled with creations as big as cars, cobbled together with rotting wood and rusted-out nails. There were concentric rings hanging from the trees, which seemed to pass through each other in impossible ways, and a sign with an arrow that always seemed to point toward you, no matter where in his yard you were standing. Whatever fame Jerry had as a magician and skeptic paled in comparison to his notoriety as an illusion designer. Many of the illusion toys you may have played with as a kid were created in Jerry's backyard. He was paid for a few of them, but he wasn't the type to patent his ideas or chase copyright infringements. I was told he died more or less penniless, which is not surprising, because he was clearly unmotivated by money. Even while he was alive, museums featured solo exhibitions of his awe-inspiring optical illusions.

"Box Impossible" is the signature Jerry Andrus illusion everyone wanted a selfie with, decades before selfies were a thing. It was a box with no top and bottom, and when you looked at it from the right angle, your subject was both inside and outside the box at the same time, an Escher drawing come to life. Much like Jerry himself, it begged for a second look.

RUNE KLAN

1976–

In 2010, a clip emerged of a shocking, audacious magic trick. Denmark's Rune Klan, a caustic comedy magician, borrowed a woman's shoe and proceeded to bake a bread roll inside it. He poured in flour, then water, then a pinch of salt, lit everything on fire, and—*poof!*—pulled a bread roll from the woman's shoe.

The woman happened to be the queen of Denmark. The clip was a viral sensation, and to this day if you ask any Dane about Rune Klan, they'll respond, "The guy who baked bread in the queen's shoe?"

Magicians have been baking cakes in borrowed hats for more than seventy years, but using a shoe is somehow even more bizarre, particularly when it belongs to a monarch.

Rune and I met as kids—he was twenty-one and I was fifteen. At an age when many of my nonmagician friends were spending their summers at camp, I convinced my parents I was responsible enough to tour the country doing magic shows and lectures. Rune and I toured the country together as "move monkeys," the magic equivalent of skateboarders, our acts filled with unnecessarily difficult moves because, well, we could do them and most people could not. I learned from Rune that to be great, you had to be bold. I knew even then that Rune was a genius destined for great things.

Twenty years later, I believe he has achieved greatness. I'm biased, of course, but Rune is performing the most innovative material in magic today. He's famous now in Scandinavia and has a Warholian Factory near his home, a large studio space in which he spends his days. It has a length of aerial silk chained to the ceiling and a pop-up book the size of a Jeep. The tables are covered with prototypes and inventions, cobbled together with duct tape

and sloppy glue jobs. Local magicians pop in and out to work on their own material, and Rune will offer his help if he's not asking for some himself.

Rune found fame early with an edgy comedic style that teenagers loved. But as he and his fans have matured, so has his comedy. In the beginning, he made fun of magic. He was an icon for the teens he played to—giant spliffs appeared from his mouth, a cloth held at crotch level "mysteriously" moved on its own, and when he tried to turn a washing machine into a raccoon, he "inadvertently" revealed a washing machine made of fur with a raccoon tail.

On his first national tour, he wanted to open the show by appearing magically before the audience. His team built a sturdy chamber of Plexiglas that would fill with smoke before he appeared inside. "It just wasn't my style," Rune explained. "It felt more like Copperfield than me." His solution was quintessentially Rune. The lights went down in the theater as *Carmina Burana* blasted. Huge arrows pointed toward the Plexiglas box as it filled with smoke, the production values and garish music conjuring a Cirque du Soleil vibe. Then the music cut off abruptly, and a spotlight shined near the wings of the stage. Rune walked on, sipping a beer. He pointed to the box and said, "That would've been *so* cool if I was in there, right?" It was absurdist, visual comedy, and the audience loved it.

But the shtick got stale. After a handful of tours and television specials, the same old routine wasn't shocking anymore. Rune was older, and making fun of magic felt too easy. That's when Rune blossomed into an artist.

He reinvented himself with a series of penetrating concept shows. In one, Rune partnered with some of the best musicians in Denmark and did beautiful, manipulative magic to live accompaniment, many of the tricks partially improvised each night. No two shows were exactly the same.

In *Childless*, his most recent creation, he explores the ten-year struggle he and his partner faced trying to conceive and, eventually,

adopt a child. There are laughs in the show as he parodies his thirty-something friends—the helicopter moms and dads—but it's mostly a heart-wrenching story of wanting a child and not being able to have one. The magic in the show is beautiful, but the story makes you weep.

"If an idea does not scare me, I will not do it," says performance artist Marina Abramović. Rune is the same—restlessly provocative.

My chief complaint about magicians, even great magicians, is that they often lack vision. Magic is boundless in both scope and scale—few magicians master the art of close-up magic, and fewer still can command a stage. They require totally different skill sets, yet Rune has both.

All of Rune's ideas sound like dead ends until I see them performed. "I'm going to do a card trick and talk about my dad's death," he said to me on the phone recently.

"Okay," I replied. What else could I say? It didn't sound like much of an idea to me. But in a couple of years, I'll see it onstage. And it will be wonderful.

RICHARD TURNER
1954–

Richard Turner can cut a packet of playing cards and, by feel and weight, tell you exactly how many cards he has cut. He can deal imperceptibly from the bottom and even the center of the deck. Turner, a Texan, has performed on television all over the world as "The Cheat," a riverboat gambler–style character, often wearing rhinestone shirts and a flashy belt buckle. Offstage, he has excelled at *Wadō-ryū* karate and, as a sixth-degree black belt, earned the title of Master Turner. He has even invented a card game called Batty that has a cult following related to the mathematical expertise required to solve it.

Also: Richard Turner is blind.

When Richard performs, his lack of sight is never mentioned until after his show, if at all. When the curtains part, Richard is already seated at a card table flanked by spectators. He is engaging and funny and wildly impressive with his sleight of hand. Most viewers never realize that he can't see the cards or his hands or the audience.

I've never fully understood Richard's artistic choice, but I'm not in Richard's shoes. It seems to me that the poetry—or maybe it's the paradox—of being one of the finest sleight-of-hand artists, who also happens to be blind, would be something to reveal rather than conceal. Surely it would increase the audience's appreciation for his artistry. Stevie Wonder isn't defined by his visual impairment, but it's an essential part of his narrative and is evident in his lyrics and live performances. If the audience was made aware of Richard's disability, the reactions might be stilted or steeped in pity. Richard's choice ensures that the audience defines his show by his exceptional skill set—and nothing else.

I know how Richard accomplishes his sleight of hand—with more hours of practice than anyone I've ever known. I've never seen Richard without a deck of cards, even when we've shared a meal, during which he mostly practices perfect one-handed shuffles. The thing I most admire about Richard is how he achieved his level of skill without the benefit of sight. Repetition practice is not unusual for talented magicians, and practicing without vision isn't an insurmountable obstacle. But the moves Richard has mastered are invisible to the eye, and that requires fine-tuning the angles and the finger positions of each hand. To achieve this, he is uncompromising about his technique. How does he know he's not exposing something from the front angle? How does he know what part of the deck to hide at the right time? Richard is as good at cheating techniques as anyone I've ever seen. All the other cardsharps sit at home all day long, staring into a mirror as they practice. Whereas Richard does it all in the dark.

He's nevertheless uncompromising about his technique. When I see him after a show, he's normally critical of his performance. It always looks flawless to me, but it "feels" off to him, an instinct he surely trusts because he must do everything by feel. The United States Playing Card Company employs Richard as a touch analyst, helping them with quality-control issues on the texture and feel of their cards.

Some years ago, before I ever shared a stage with him, I called up Richard and introduced myself. I told him I would be on tour in San Antonio and asked, sheepishly, if I might spend a few minutes with him to get an autograph. He invited me over to his house, and we spent nine glorious hours together, exchanging secrets.

Sharing magic with Richard Turner is a unique experience. At his kitchen table, he knocked me out over and over, fooling me with sleight of hand I couldn't see, despite staring at his hands from inches away. But how could I show him my tricks?

When I asked Richard for help with my bottom deal, he told me he wanted to "see" it, then placed his hands on top of mine and asked me to do the move.

"Too much tension in your left hand," he began, like a doctor dictating a patient's vitals to a nurse. "You should grip the deck deeper, and you should flatten your fingers to get rid of the finger flash happening as you take each card." We spent several hours at Richard's kitchen table, the master and an apprentice. His hands rested on mine for a great deal of that time, and if an outsider had been looking on, it might have appeared that I was learning by osmosis, soaking up Richard's decades of perfection. If only.

RENÉ LAVAND
(1928–2015)

At first, it would appear that René Lavand had little in common with Richard Turner. He was from Argentina and spoke almost no English, and unlike Turner's "The Cheat" persona, Lavand was suave, weaving stories and poetry into his close-up magic. But Turner and Lavand have more in common than being two elite sleight-of-hand artists. At age nine, they both developed disabilities. Turner lost his vision, Lavand his right hand. While playing at a carnival, René was hit by an errant automobile, and his right hand was crushed. He wore a prosthetic for the rest of his life.

Lavand came to magic later than most. He abandoned a banking career in favor of magic, first as a stage illusionist and eventually as a close-up magician. Lavand pioneered the powerful combination of storytelling and magic. His performances often started and ended with monologues that spanned topics as diverse as Pablo Neruda's poetry, living with war, and Argentinian folklore.

Because seemingly all magic tricks benefit from the use of two hands, Lavand had to invent his own physical "vocabulary" of sleights. He devised ways to shuffle and secretly unshuffle a deck of cards with just his left hand. He learned to false deal from the bottom and second and third from the top. Nearly all vanishes, appearances, and changes are accomplished during a transfer from one hand to another, whether it's with cards or coins or—in the case of Lavand's signature trick—a wadded ball of bread. But without a second hand to transfer *to*, Lavand devised an entire lexicon of new and wonderful sleights that effect these vanishes and changes with five fewer fingers than anyone else.

I first saw René when I was thirteen, at a show in Washington, DC. At the time I loved magic for what it was—something I used to fool my friends at school, a purpose for my restless hands. But René Lavand offered more. As he manipulated the cards, he quoted

Picasso and Borges and talked about the magician's role in our lives: "That's why I've come here—to stimulate *your* sense of wonder," he said. After his show I got to meet him, and I even managed to stumble through my own woefully inadequate trick for him, my thirteen-year-old hands trembling from start to finish.

At certain moments in our development, people come into our lives for just a moment and change the way we think about our craft or ourselves. Richard Turner and Rune Klan were instrumental to me because they weren't over-the-top characters. But René Lavand was larger than life, unlike anyone I had ever met. He opened my eyes to the idea that there was a level *beyond* being a great magician, that it was possible for a magician to be an artist.