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**STEVE SPILLS
THE BEANS**

STEVE SPILLS THE BEANS

BY BOB GILL



Strap yourselves in, for we have a sprawling action-packed story to wrestle to the ground and attempt to do justice to. A rich, magical (in all senses of the word) life well lived, by a man who has devoted every waking hour (and probably populated many of his dreams: and believe me, this guy had some pretty out-there dreams in his time) of 60 years of his life to performing magic on the world stage.

Steve Spill is rather like one of those bloodless vampires: he works at night, really gets around, and has no plasma: magic is the lifeblood that courses through his veins. You name it, he's done it: sleight-of-hand close-up work, stage, comedy, bar magic, residencies, cruises, the largest arenas, entrepreneur, impresario. As a result his address book reads like a Who's Who of almost any magic luminary you can name; and they queue up to pay tribute to him.

He is that rarest of rare, a unique performer and character: there's no one else in our industry quite like him, and how often can you say that? A few years ago he sat down and related every detail of how he achieved it through five distinctive books, all as enjoyable to read as they are informative to study. His persona is of that unusual blend: an ageing yet sophisticated hippy with a wacky sense of fun underpinning deadly magic employing impressive chops. He was born to perform and still relishes doing so: he looks most at home on a stage.

Imagine if someone at the very top of their game offered to spend a couple of days with you to teach you everything, the full nine yards: how to create, how to write, how to perform, how to engage with an audience, how to be funny, how to supercharge your magic, how to approach and consider your magic, and how to earn a decent living from doing so. And say he did so for considerably less than \$1000; you'd jump at the chance. Well, that's what his five books taken together offer: nothing less than a degree course in performing comedy magic of the highest quality. And this guy can write: his personality shines through every paragraph, his explanations leave nothing out because as a pro Steve Spill leaves nothing to chance.

I made Steve's acquaintance through his books, when I reviewed them, and was delighted to meet him when he came to The Magic Circle to lecture last year. When his latest arrived recently, it was time to sit him down and interview him, and it was both a pleasure and a privilege to spend an afternoon in his company: the hours flew by... he's an easy guy to spend time with.

They say never meet your heroes. Well, in this case I have — when he came over to lecture at The Circle last year, and then again for this interview — and I'm delighted to report that the madcap hippy I expected to meet turned out to

be considered, astute, energetic, surprisingly humble, extremely articulate, funny and utterly charming. He must be a delight to hang out with. And, perhaps, therein lies the secret of his enviable success...

Steve got the magic bug from a bug. Born on 3 January 1955 the boy whose mother knew him as Steve Spillman was just five when his father was confined to bed for a couple of weeks. Bored, he pulled out a couple of pieces of packing string and showed young Steve the classic trick joining the two strings into one. He had learned it from Steve's grandfather, so there was certainly a trace of magic in the Spillman genes. Steve was captivated by the sight, and from then on childhood toys were sidelined for magic tricks, encouraged, aided and abetted by his father.

Sandy Spillman was an on-air personality in nascent television in San Francisco, where he'd read the news, host chat and game shows, run phone-ins, make the commercials and probably sweep the floors. Boosted by this exposure, he moved the family to LA in 1960 to make his assault on Hollywood, with only sporadic success. In the process he was hooked up with a CBS producer called Bill Larsen, who along with his wife and brother were planning the transformation of an outlandish chateau in uptown Hollywood into a commercial enterprise devoted to magic: the very idea. The Larsens duly offered Sandy the night manager/host job, and in the absence of any television or film work he leapt at the opportunity.

Thereupon the Magic Castle became Steve's playground, and the likes of Dai Vernon, Francis Carlyle, Charlie Miller and Kuda Bux his childminders, along with any acolytes from around the globe who might be visiting, invariably for the purpose of securing a seat at the feet of The Professor. After school he would cycle over to the Castle, creep in via a hidden side door and, flagrantly flouting the Castle age limit of 21, consort with these legends of magic:

I learned such a lot from those four icons.

Each one of my friends/mentors had his own thing: a nuance, a particular way of doing things, a gesture, a story, a philosophy, an attitude. I learned prop management and angles from Miller, clarity of effect and the proper way to accent moments with comedy without destroying the magic from Carlyle, conveying and embellishing impossibility and mystery from Kuda. Vernon taught me how magic should be constructed and how it looked to the spectator. He was famed throughout the magic world for his sleight of hand, but he had an intensely commercial sense of what worked and played well for laymen.

I was a sponge and absorbed something from each of them into my mental file. Right



Performing on Stage



Dai Vernon, Max Maven and Steve

up to this day, little bits and pieces that seemed to inherently fit me surfaced and worked their way into my performances, and the combination added to my personality, gave me something new. Part of Carlyle's delivery, but not his words, the way that Miller would look at an audience after something amazing happened, a little sly confident half smile like Vernon's.

And from all of them I took an abiding love for good magic, the belief you could build a life around magic, and best of all how to enjoy life as a worldly adult. Better than a formal academic education; the Castle was my college.

Dai was a great companion for me, as young as I was. He taught me something more important though — how to dream big and forge your destiny, and have the balls to make your dreams come true. Although he wasn't a professional magician as such, he was an artist, with artistic sensibilities, and he instilled in me to follow the way of the artist.

That meeting point of vision and work ethic

has stayed with me, and served me well, throughout my life. The thing with Dai Vernon was he was a dreamer. He remained a teenager his entire life. He was basically irresponsible... purely because he never had to take responsibility; he never had to worry about the day-to-day things we mortals have to contend with. He was by no means an attentive husband or father, preferring to lead a separate life of his choosing to a family one. He had wealthy patrons all around the world who would pay for him to enjoy their hospitality and largesse just to have him hang out and impress their friends.

The Larsens did a smart thing installing him in an adjacent apartment and have him hold court every evening. I doubt he ever paid for bills, food or drinks for much of his adult life. All this kept him young, and playful: he was such great company, easy with people of all ages. He was charming, with a twinkle in his eye, an enviable way of appealing to everyone; like James Bond men wanted to be like him, and relished his fund of anecdotes ▶



Bozena and Steve



Performing on TV, and with Bob Sheets

and the colourful life he'd led amidst magicians, gamblers and nightlife. And he was a ladies man too... I remember seeing photos of him arm in arm with strippers, and not of the card variety. So he led a charmed life in so many ways. No wonder he lived to such a ripe old age and aged so well. As a kid I adored him; he played a big part in shaping the direction my life took.

Although he was busy evenings playing host to the acolytes who came to pay homage to him, he was free during the days. On Wednesdays at one o'clock he'd take piano lessons in the Irma room from Ray Grismer, in exchange for a magic lesson. So I started to sneak into the Castle to sit in on Ray's lessons. So I got in the habit of meeting up during the day. Then I would meet him in his apartment next door to the Castle, and help him with his shopping and hang out with him.

At the same time, I owe such a lot to my dad – he was a much-loved figure in the Castle, and with the regulars who frequented it, so I found the magic fraternity very welcoming. Remember that the Castle wasn't packed nightly the way it is now, often there



would only be magicians there. So it became a tight-knit group, almost like a second family to me.

Remember Irma? There was a secret little room accessible from outside the building that no one knew about, and my friend Dave was an incredible pianist, he could play any song you'd care to name. He used to do so from this little hidey-hole. I would climb in with him and smoke joints, look through the two-way mirror at the people in the Castle. And I truly believe that if I hadn't grown up there and hung out all the time I'd have never conceived of the notion you could create a venue dedicated to magic.

Imagine being blessed to have counted such a cast of characters as your closest friends; the decade from mid '60s to '70s were an incredible time for Steve. As a result of such a glasshouse of intense mentoring, and the opportunity it gave him to perform regularly in the spotlight of the most revered magic attraction in the world, Steve became regarded as something of a teen prodigy. His first book, 1973's *My Hands Can Be Yours*, was the work of a confident, experienced practitioner with a blend of wisdom and confidence born of precocity, and was greeted

with widespread approbation. By the time he'd reached the age of entry to the Magic Castle he had gained several years flight time and was more than ready to take off as a professional magician.

At the same time, thanks to the better acts he witnessed onstage at the Castle, bloomed his lifelong love affair with stage shows. Aged just 18 Steve started doing free gigs around LA music venues appearing with similarly unpaid folk singers, comics, speciality acts, who all embraced the on-the-job training these gigs afforded. It was a far cry from learning second deals from Vernon and Charlie Miller's Egg Bag.

This was where this San Francisco hippy established the Cheech and Chong-inspired (Google 'em, kids) 'Highdini' character he had been experimenting with, mirroring the lifestyle that persisted from the sixties' flower power era (he came from San Fran, remember). He woke up one day with the idea of Highdini: Houdini, Highdini, and that saw the beginnings of his transition from close-up to stand-up. His latter books explain in excruciating detail the prop comedy he built around the drug culture... Six Cannabis Leaves Repeat, anyone? Several big fake bouquets of marijuana would appear from nowhere then vanish in a puff of smoke. Throughout the act he'd snort tablespoons of white powder from an outsize spoon; as a finish to the bit he'd grab his nose and a long stream of salt-like stuff poured out. One by one eight smoking pipes magically appeared between his fingertips, which made him dry as a bone and gave him cotton mouth, causing him to spit out dozens of cotton balls. Then it looked like he drank a huge thirst-quenching pitcher of beer in an instant. Throughout these drink-and-drug-inspired tricks he pretended to be a little stoned, "in the same way Dean Martin 'acted' drunk when he sang songs". Yeh, right: we'll believe



With Bozena outside Magicopolis



Steve Spill and Bob Sheets

you, Steve.

Bursting with chutzpah, he would open for major rock bands of the calibre of The Eagles, Neil Young, the Byrds, Van Halen and Little Feat at enormadomes. For ten bucks a gig. And, one presumes, access to the best drugs money could buy. Plus hot and cold running groupies.

You had to fight to gain even a modicum of attention from those audiences [but not the groupies, presumably]. Forget the niceties or even comic lines; it had to be visual, highly energetic bordering on manic, crazed. Of course we all knew why they were there: to drink, smoke substances, make out and get off on the music. I can't imagine any one of those thousands assembled on some field rocked up thinking, "I hope they have a magician." They only booked me because I hustled so hard for the work, and I was so much cheaper than a support band. Most of these gigs had two bands, and needed to kill time between bands, to reset instruments.

Highdini was my saviour; he worked because he was one of them, but through a crazy lens. And it helped that I was fearless. Most of the time they'd just ignore you, which is even more dispiriting than being heckled. If they mocked, at least that meant they'd watched you. But some nights they loved it, and you walked off those stages full of adrenaline with their cheers echoing in your ears. Mastering these shows gave me a kind of power I had never felt before. At times I had total command of these crowds, and that's what I grabbed on to and kept.

It was another valuable stage in my ongoing performing education. Did I enjoy it? I expect so!

At 21, Steve started working as a magic bartender at the Jolly Jester saloon in Aspen, Colorado, where he made the acquaintance of Bob Sheets who became his next important mentor. It was here that he developed several of the routines that became his watchwords, in particular his Bill in Lemon routine that became

something of a staple among magic bartenders. *Working with Bob Sheets was sheer delight, and an education in himself. Bob was a very funny guy, a magnetic personality. We perfected a double-act behind the bar that was just crazy; high-energy, riffing off one another, two different styles that somehow meshed together and complemented each other perfectly. A reviewer cited that cliché about comics being funny and comedians saying things funny, and applied it to Bob and me; I had the lines and bits of business, but Bob was the real deal: a lovable bear of a man who had funny bones. And he was great in the moment: a fine improviser. And not afraid to take risks — and when they failed it was even funnier.*

We were fearless: we took charge of those rooms, took them by storm, while at the same time learning ways to sell a lot of booze, which of course was the whole point of the enterprise from a commercial point of view; we were paid to entertain, but primarily to keep customers at the bar spending freely. We had a ball along the way, and the customers could see that and just enjoyed the mayhem. It was the very best proving ground, and we worked insanely hard but had ourselves an absolute ball.

I remember a young Eric Mead and Doc Eason hanging around — Doc Eason was a busboy at the Tower to begin with — and they became clones of ours. They all became excellent bar magicians and went on to earn a good living.

*I rather fell out with Doc later on, when he sold several of my pet routines and became so closely associated with them. They weren't his to sell and I admit I resented it; I wrote about it extensively in *How To Make Love The Steve Spill Way*, out of sheer exasperation, taking*

the opportunity to explain the finer points of my routine that had never been published. Such things mattered to me back then; now I am more philosophical about it all. If I'm honest their appropriation had no lasting effect on my reputation; and through my books and DVDs I've reclaimed them as my own, so that's good karma. Those who mattered knew.

In 1980 Steve teamed up again with Bob Sheets and moved to Washington DC for a more formal dinner show, *Magicomedy Cabaret*, which did good business for five years and received consistently praiseworthy notices. Bob acted as a brake on my more outlandish ideas. They had Scotty York working the bar whilst they did the main shows in the lounge. And a very young John Kennedy, David Williamson and Tim Conover worked the close-up room table-hopping for us. David and Tim went on to excel at stand-up, but then they were in their early twenties; Steve was a wise old head at 28.

This was where Steve first got to grips with putting a full show together, experience which was to serve him so well later on. Scotty collaborated with Steve to build some ingenious props: he was very gifted at arts and crafts. Remember his self-lighting lamp? Years ahead of its time, and of the state of technology back then.

It ran its course, and saw him finally cement the move to stage work, which became his first love. The comedy club scene was booming, Steve yearned to return West, so they went their separate ways. His launchpad for that scene was the Comedy Magic Club at Hermosa Beach, where they bookended two comics with a magician in between. He did the Burnt Bunny opening, the Mindreading Goose, and the Needles. This got him a spell in *Spellbound*, the equivalent of today's *The Illusionists* touring



Life, Death, and other Card Tricks



Lecturing at Blackpool

show, which played casinos around the world. Steve was sandwiched between two illusionists, who for a while were The Pendragons and Mark Kornhauser, sometimes there would be a problem with the tigers and Steve had to step in and cover.

The next decades saw him maintain a continual, busy schedule of live solo appearances; performing his unique brand of comic magic at comedy clubs, casinos, and corporate events across America, in Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. And through it all, his love affair with magic continued undimmed:

I just love the idea of surprising people, leaving them with that specific feeling of amazement I experienced so wonderfully in the Castle. That feeling I got as a boy watching the surprise twist endings on shows like Twilight Zone, leading audiences down the garden path and turning the hose on them.

I like the challenge of crafting presentational elements that go beyond deception and give an experience that reaches out to your emotional, intellectual or philosophical core in one way or another. It truly appeals to me how magic is an honest craft that allows you to tell lies in a socially acceptable way. I like putting 2 and 2 together and making an audience see 5; the

idea that things can look one way when they're really another; the built-in irony of magic.

We alter perceptions with dyslexic displays of honesty that range from tiny little manipulative untruths to big, fat, in-your-face lies. To be a professional magician is to be an expert at dispensing disinformation, duplicity, hypocrisy, distortion, deception and fakery without any of the guilt or unpleasant consequences. And I enjoy the thrill of getting away with it. It appeals to the boy in me.

Comedy was as important an element to me as the magic, right from the beginning.

Although today's magicians tend to view the likes of Vernon, Miller and Carlyle as serious sleight-of-hand proponents, being in their company was to be in a wave of laughter. Not jokes with their magic, but a rather worldly, adult, showbiz brand of cynical, slightly insulting humour. It became very apparent to me early on, way back even then, that most audiences accept the role of a magician as an entertainer who pretends to do the impossible for the amusement of the audience. Dai saw that in me, and actively encouraged me to work with it and develop it.

When the comedy clubs and open mic nights started to spring up in LA they were

ideal audiences for Highdini; right up-to-the-minute and engaging those young audiences, many of whom were comics waiting to go on.

I'm a bit of a sarcastic smart-ass old hippie who doesn't take himself too seriously and could never present myself as someone with special magic powers.

Having said all that, onstage I always try to glue my presentations together with something I want to say or try to illustrate with a trick, be it autobiographical, observational, philosophical or whatever. Those ideas or the procedural situation of doing the trick itself or the audience interaction along the way are some places where the comedy in my magic comes from. It is, I believe, this desire in him to have something to say alongside the mayhem that makes the Spill experience so engaging. He tries to give what he is doing some sort of context, some sort of meaning. That's what the great comics manage to deliver.

That said, it's hard to see any worldview in the routine he is likely most associated with amongst magicians: the Mindreading Goose is just immersive, slapstick silliness. It was John Kennedy who was experimenting with a goose stick puppet, and he got nowhere with it, so handed it to Steve to see if he could do anything with. You can see snatches of his performances of it on YouTube. He appears sporting long hair, wearing dark sunglasses, an arresting electric blue silk suit, and held under his arm is a life-size stuffed animal puppet: the clairvoyant Mind Reading Goose. He puts a felt tip marker in its beak, and that goose writes predictions on a pad of paper, scribbled writings that accurately predict what audience volunteers do in the moments that followed. At one point it divines a chosen letter of the alphabet as 'P', whereupon it reveals its prediction in the form of a stream of faux excretory product gushing over the front row. It is a bizarre bit of schoolboy humour honed over a bazillion performances in comedy clubs and on rock stages. It vied with Rocky Raccoon and our own Sooty as classic pieces of onstage magic silliness featuring a puppet. In his latter years he has dropped the routine, claiming it no longer quite fits his still irreverent but less manic persona: "I guess I grew up and grew out of him. But I've been toying with bringing it back". At one point he put it on the market; it sold at least 600 (at \$1500 a throw: nice business if you can get it)... "yet I only know of maybe ten people or so who actually do it." Scott Alexander and his grandmother made the geese. It's described in full detail in *Magic Is My Weed* if you're interested. David Williamson includes it in his one-man show in Chicago.

Yet for someone who has published such a wealth of original, quirky material Steve remains remarkably circumspect about it.

Out of the many hours of material I've developed over the years, relatively few items were completely original. I'm living proof that it's not what you do... it's the way you do it. What I do is re- envision classics, creating something original about the plot as well as the method — in other words the secrets behind how the effect or the magic trick itself works and is perceived by the audience.

There are far fewer 'notes' in the magic craft than other performing arts like music or acting. A lot of what magicians do is making things apparently appear and disappear, and magically move from place to place. The great magic inventor Stewart James describes the magician as "a choreographer of objects," and the three fundamental effects of productions, vanishes, and transpositions constitute much of that choreography.

His books are a testament to this philosophy; at The Circle he delighted and impressed the Members present with his rendition of Bill In Lemon, Linking Finger Rings and Swallowing Needles, three classics he has taken, worked, breathed new life into, creating something of beauty and originality in presentation, method, routining and handling, all the while instilling them with an essential, identifiable Spillness. They remind you that behind the hair, the silliness and the showmanship lie strong, rock-solid, magical mysteries built on a lifetime of stage time.

And then there's Magicopolis. A life-changing concept born out of Steve sleeping around.

One Tuesday afternoon in April 1995, on a plane to or fro amid a blur of gigs, staring out at the clouds, he was in a reflective mood. He was forty years old, living the dream. And yet... and yet. Living the dream brought with it the thing that kicks every pro, in or outside magic: the road. Living in Santa Monica, but only spending a handful of nights per month sleeping in his own bed, it felt like his home didn't see him at home very often. Worse, even though his work didn't require getting up before the crack of dawn every morning it was starting to feel... routine. A nine-to-five job. He grew a fear new to him: of phoning his show in.

He craved greater control over his life, more independence, to not be answerable to anyone else, not depend on others for work. Instead of constantly changing cities to find new audiences, he needed a way to stay in one place and have new audiences constantly find him. This was an issue because, as a corporate-event entertainer, or a comedy spot in a variety show, even as a headliner, it was not him the punters came to see; he just happened to be the act on show that night. Call it a mid-life crisis, a canny reassessment of where he was in life, or a yearning for the intoxicating freedom of being a servant of nobody, slowly the idea to produce,

perform and deliver every aspect of his own show, in a theatre he'd designed, built, run, and named, percolated over a couple of years. Perhaps the example of the Castle still resonated within his psyche. He found the right spot, the Central Tower building that dated back to 1929.

Magicopolis was not born suddenly. It grew gradually in his mind, as he set about turning his ideas into reality. The challenges are too numerous to specify here in the ludicrously insufficient wordcount allotted by the taskmaster that is Our Esteemed Editor; he details them in full excruciating detail in his book *I Lie for Money*. He was not short on inspiration or ideas, but hustling for backers came hard to him at first, but he threw himself into it with his usual determination.

To write, produce and perform a show in a theatre that you designed, built, own and operate, you have to be equal parts dictator and diplomat. You must be both the astonishing magician and visionary storyteller on stage, and the guy shovelling raw sewage in the middle of the night because no one else would and everything would be lost if it didn't get done. You must be both an extravagant artist and a penny-pinching jerk. It isn't easy, it isn't always fun, it isn't about money or fame. It's about what it takes to share your vision with those who want to see it.

It took three years, during which he had to continue on the circuit to both pay the bills and invest in this ideal. In 1998 the doors of Magicopolis opened, a dedicated magic theatre in walking distance from his home in Santa Monica. A home he by now shared with the new-found love his life.

All my life I've been fortunate. People ask me what I put any success I've achieved down to, and I say, "Luck. Right place, right time, right people." Some guys hit their forties and have a midlife crisis. I, on the other hand, fell in love. Stunning-looking, smart, talented, Polish actor/writer Bozena Wrobel would soon become my best friend, my wife, my lover, my partner in crime, both onstage and off, whatever the occasion demanded.

Bozena intently listened to my grandiose Magicopolis scheme. I took her to the empty building on Fourth Street, with spray paint cans we drew on the floor where the stage would be, walls, lobby, dressing rooms, the project was a constant topic of conversation. Besides her physical beauty and inward loveliness, Bozena had the intelligence that would prove so vital in what had now become our long-range plan of happiness.

Just a few months after we met, on a romantic weekend I pulled a rabbit out of a hat. We flew to Vegas and were married at a drive-through wedding chapel, followed by a drive-through reception for two at a fast-food chain restaurant... total time on the taxi meter thirty-nine dollars. Marrying Bozena was the best thing that ever happened to me. Today she feels the same way... that marrying her was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Before Bozena, as a solo performer, my content was largely comedy. Our collaboration added a female actor/writer's skill set to the mix. She had ideas, a deep knowledge of scene construction, and an expert capability of playing any character imagined. Bozena embodies the lives of beings I can interact with — vampires, séance ►



Magicopolis Opening Night



Bozena in the dressing room

mediums, even a horny man. The only character I can credibly play, was, and still is, an embellished version of myself.

While developing our show, we argued about most every bit and piece along the way until we came to agreement. If a disagreement on any certain trick, routine, or dialogue wasn't settled, we got rid of it. Sometimes those opinions changed to confront obstacles or logistics, and we made incremental changes or dumped whole bits, as we saw fit. Debating with ourselves, and each other, the arguments over creative differences make us really commit.

With the benefit of audience feedback, after each performance we'd replay the show in our heads, figuring how to make it better and better. We spent day after day in the theatre cutting and fixing and changing and switching. Our best work is about more than floating ladies, mind reading and sleight of hand. It's as much about what we want to say as the tricks themselves. It is about us, our lives, our feelings... many of the show's best moments were initially improvised on stage.

I know I'm gushing now, but Bozena and I



Dai Vernon and Steve

are as synchronized as the parts in a watch, when either of us goes off script and does or says something different, we can follow each other without missing a beat... and whenever we hit a perfect moment the audience feels it. We also work with the reality of the moment. In a play, if a light suddenly goes dead or someone throws up in the audience, the actors keep doing the script. When things out of the ordinary arise we use them, respond to them, weave them into our presentation. Just as I'd experienced all that time ago with Bob Sheets, sometimes not knowing what's going to happen next is a ton of fun.

Amongst his many friends in magic were Penn and Teller, who he knew from their early days on the circuit as a trio with a juggler, going out as Asparagus Valley. As they became widely known



Steve and Bozena

through their TV work and their Sin City show, Steve did some consulting and writing. They returned the favour by appearing at the grand opening of Magicopolis along with a host of names from the world of entertainment on the red carpet. With the extensive coverage this launch received, the venture got off to a fine start. Right from the beginning A-list celebrities would attend, and he would get them to sign a wall in the theatre.

For the next 20 years it opened seven days a week, two shows a day. The couple ran a magic shop adjoining the theatre, where visitors were offered a tour of the premises and a spiel about the show. Between them they covered everything: box office, marketing, sales, promotions, carpentry, decorating, illusion building, barkeeping, janitors, cleaning. It consumed their every waking hour, became their way of life. Eventually they found three understudies for Bozena, to give her breaks and allow her to focus on the business aspects, for which she had an unexpected flair. It was during this time (2015) that he wrote the book for the public *I Lie For Money*, which gave him something to sell in the Magicopolis shop. This was a learning ground for him, with the heavy

hand of the New York publisher's editor, and gave him a taste for writing, which in its way he enjoys as much as performing.

And it worked out well for them; it bought their home, and gave them an enviable lifestyle... not that they had any spare time to enjoy it. That got to a point towards 2020 when real life intervened, Covid-19 hit which saw them beached in Hawaii: tough break. Both Bozena's parents in Poland were taken ill. Having devoted her life to his dream, Steve now opted to travel to her home town and attend to her family. He asked around and found the right buyer, and cashed in on those two decades of complete dedication and sacrifice. Randy Sinnott's family purchased Magicopolis, and run it as a family to this day as Illusion Magic Lounge: theatre, wine bar and eatery. In the event he handed the keys over just months before a global pandemic made itself known throughout the USA, so good fortune continued to smile on the couple.

When the opportunity arose he's doing the odd cruise show, or magic-club lecture, which he found he really enjoyed, but generally they took it easy after the non-stop blood, sweat and tears demanded by Magicopolis.

Thoughts of a gentle gradual slide into retirement were banished when he found he missed it terribly: much more than he had expected. Inevitable really, when it had figured so large in their lives. And as Steve says, for him performing is such *fun*. Particularly in his own show. He wasn't kidding when he chose the title of that book of his: magic really *is* his weed. At the same time they were considering moving home.

So I can exclusively reveal in these pages that their chosen home will be in Hawaii, where they will be mounting a more modest version of Magicopolis in 2025. This time he has found someone else to take care of the venue and the admin, leaving the couple to concentrate on performing the shows. This is the third phase of his life story, with a slower pace. So now you have an excuse to plan a getaway to Hawaii. Aloha. Just mind the goose pee. **TMC**

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SHORT STORY LONG



BOB GILL AIMC

HOLY SMOKE BY STEVE SPILL
www.stevespill.com, 184pp., pen illustrations, \$150.

This fourth volume continues very much in the same vein as its predecessors from the pen of Steve Spill[man]: insightful practical advice coupled with some off-the-wall routines, threaded throughout with his distinctive, hippy humour.

It's interesting to see how Mr Spill's writing ability has developed over the six years these four volumes span. This one sees him at his most articulate. Quirkily, it follows a pseudo-theological path which, whilst a trifle convoluted, does work as an interesting, entertaining structure to the text. It also adds a dose of comic irony, given the author is a self-confessed atheist; if God wanted us to believe in him, he'd exist, wouldn't he?

Here's a taste of what to expect, from his preface where he sets out his agenda:

The way I see it, first and foremost, your task is to engage the imagination of the audience so they feel anticipation and suspense and that you've taken them into your confidence. The magic happens when they're leaning forward, attentive, emotionally involved, and genuinely intrigued by what you have to say and do. It is about connecting with the crowd. And it isn't only about what you say and do. It's also in the silences, it's in the looks, and it's in the moments between the magic.

I get e-mails everyday advertising tricks that are guaranteed to kill and destroy audiences. Their promos are designed to give the impression that this or that will make you a hero and the toast of the town. Theatrically they all seem to have the same 'magician wishes for it and gets it' plot.

One of the best things you can say about a work of art is that it is unique. You need to weave the word "I" into the course of your mysteries. One needs to make themselves the bubbles in the champagne, the yeast in the dough, the force that drives the sap in springtime, the tingle in the testicles.

An audience wants to know how you feel, who you are, what you think, what peculiar process it takes to achieve these impossibilities, not just 'this changes to that, ta-da!'

See what I mean about his penmanship? "Tingle in the testicles" indeed. The first section of the book is packed with great advice on how to be on stage. He takes themes covered in his previous books and

expands them. The wisdom he offers is based on way over Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule, many of which were clocked up by his twelve shows a week of his *Magicalopolis* show in Santa Monica.

This might suggest a degree of repetition, but not so. Pleasingly the thing that does persist is his hearty drizzle of good sense. The one advantage he has in spreading his advice over several volumes is that he can really delve into the thinking behind his creative process, with a living example of how he took disparate ideas and turned them into a routine. Indeed, the book fizzes with creative ideas that make you feel you are observing Steve workshopping disparate concepts.

There's an invaluable chapter that demonstrates putting his theorising into practice, with examples of spots he created for the corporate market, where he's been asked to reflect the theme of the conference concerned, or bringing a product launch alive. This should act as a spur for anyone considering dipping a toe in that market. On that score, he also has helpful advice for close-uppers wanting to make the step up to stand-up shows. In either case you know you're in safe hands.

The second half of the book contains a fourth set of his seemingly endless stash of routines. Ok, not your everyday scripting, but that's the point: he's found a way to make his material very much his own, and although you're unlikely to copy him, there's plenty to learn from the construction, rhythms, and energy as well as the props and handling solutions.

There's a lovely version of the Humming Flying Card, done with a frisbee; a highly visual prop gag with a jack-in-the-box; Vernon's Three Ball routine done with grapes; the Rice

Bowls with cat litter; Miser's Dream with a clear sandwich bag and a plot about picking up dog shit in the park; a Chinese Compass that actually makes sense and is funny; a nifty script for the Diminishing Cards... you get the idea: quirky; funny; strong magic. For the record, my pick of the litter is his handling of Tommy Wonder's version of Alan Shaxon's version of Ossie Rae's Hold Up; and a killer remodelling of the Multiplying Bottles.

So there you have it. Forgive the occasional lapsing into sycophancy; these four books, taken together, represent nothing less than an investment in your business and a four-part course into How To Be A Good Pro, all for around £500.

Viewed that way, it's a snip.

TMC

