

THE GENII SESSION

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THE TEN BEST CARD TRICKS ... EVER

THIS MONTH'S COLUMN is an attempt at answering a question I'm often asked, namely what I consider to be the 10 strongest and most artistic card tricks. I'm also often asked which ones I perform regularly, for what reason, and in which variant.

Umberto Eco in an interview stated that he considered lists to be a literary genre and actually gave a lengthy lecture on the subject of literary lists—this lecture has been published in his book *Confessions of a Young Novelist*.¹ As a further proof of my humility I herewith publish my list of what I consider the 10 best card tricks ever invented (in alphabetical order) plus some comments on each:

1. AMBITIOUS CARD

Everybody who has performed even a rudimentary version knows what a great impact it has on any lay audience. The subtext of a card freeing itself from the restraints of the mass (the pack) and rising to the top, thus liberating itself and finding its place at the top of the crowd is strong and its symbolic meaning universally appealing.

For study purposes I recommend Dai Vernon's routine in *Stars of Magic*, which is just magnificent.

I've performed many variations of this routine, and you can find one of the most elegant in *Card College 2* in the chapter on the Double Lift, Part 2.

The Ambitious Card is the ideal plot that allows for a lot of improvisation, making it short or long, depending on the situation—and that's precisely one of its great assets.

Although the trick is almost an "automatic pleaser," there are several interesting problems to take care of. You must:

- Arrange the sequences in an order in which the drama increases with each repetition.
- Maintain audience interest during the multiphase construction without giving the audience the false impression that the trick is over after the second repetition.
- Find a good climax.

¹ Eco, Umberto, *Confessions of a Young Novelist—The Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature, "My Lists,"* Harvard University Press 2011.

2. BRAINWAVE (DAI VERNON, WITH PAUL FOX'S IDEA OF RED AND BLUE BACKS)

This is arguably the best mental card trick. I prefer Paul Fox's version where the reversed card is shown to have a different colored back, as it eliminates the obvious solution laypeople have in such situations, which is that the performer could have secretly reversed the card as the deck is spread (this would be the case in the classic "Invisible Deck").

If well presented, the trick feels straightforward and looks like the real thing. Furthermore it is immensely practical, as only one deck has to be carried and it plays well in close-up as well as on a fairly large stage. In the latter case, excellent lights are necessary and the staging and wording need to be very well thought out.

My version is as yet unpublished, but you might have seen me do it as I have presented it at several magic conventions in the past 10 years, using a red card I place in a glass—this turns out to be the card freely named by the audience. The method is different, but the effect is the same as "Brainwave."

For many years I have also used Fred Kaps's version, where you use a sticky Joker with a different back, located on the deck's face. The named card is then placed on the Joker and the double card shown to be the only card in the deck with a different back.

This is a great method that can be adapted for birthdays, as Edward Marlo did in one of his versions ("Female" in *Thirty-Five Years Later*), or for companies by putting their logo on the back of the card.

I hope to one day find the time to publish the version I used to do in small theaters with a beautiful presentational idea by Carlhorst Meier, where you have three roses in a vase. You then throw the roses to three ladies, who make up the identity of the card, which is then found to have a red back. I can hear you thinking ...

3. CARD ON WALL (PINETTI'S VERSION)/CARD ON CEILING

This effect happens twice: the first time when it is per-

formed, and the second time when the card on the wall (or, even better, the ceiling) is seen and somebody tells about the effect—this latter aspect is a feature which very few tricks possess.

The first professional version to be described, as far as I know, is in Henri Decremps' book *La magie blanche dévoilée* (1785) and features Giuseppe Pinetti's (the Copperfield of the 18th century) version. Not very practical, but fantastic in effect.

The first version I ever performed was Matt Schulien's, as it is described in Phil Willmarth's book *The Magic of Matt Schulien*. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in performing close-up magic for lay audiences.

For some time I performed "Stuck-up Card," a handling published by Don Alan (in *Close-Up Time With Don Alan*), where there is a double-faced card on the face of the deck that has the head of a thumb tack stuck to the side facing the deck. A duplicate of the card is forced and lost in the deck (best palmed out). You can then clearly show that the selection is neither on the top or bottom. You then only need to secretly fix a pellet of wax to the face card and throw the deck toward the ceiling, where the bottom card will stick, showing the duplicate face of the selection and the tack. Beforehand you've shown a few thumb tacks, apparently taken one but really none, and appear to have thrown it into the air, where it has magically "caught" the selection.

Whatever version is done, in my opinion the thumb tack or similar device is essential for it to be a real magical effect. Personally I don't like the popular version where you control the card to the top, band it, stick wax on its back, then throw it at the ceiling. Any intelligent spectator, as soon as he has recovered from the admittedly unusual surprise, will merely ask: "How did he get the chewing gum on the card?" I don't consider this a magic effect, but I won't argue its effectiveness and marketing success.

4. CARD STABBING

This is one of the few really dramatic card effects. I wish I could have seen Malini do it. But you can find good versions in *The Dai Vernon Book of Magic*, in *The Tarbell Course*, in *Dai Vernon's Tribute to Nate Leipzig*, and many other places.

For the past 20 years and more I've been using a version to close my parlor and stage act—that's how highly I think of it. Basically I use a wooden board and a newspaper to cover the cards (rather than wearing a blindfold). This is a method you can find in *Tarbell*, with an idea by Bob Driebek—however, in the many years I've been doing it, I have added many bits and pieces that make it the "pièce de résistance" of my act. I could give a lecture just on this one trick ... and have (but I could do this on most other great tricks as well).

5. OUT OF THIS WORLD (PAUL CURRY)

Along with "Brainwave," this has to be the best mental card trick. The effect is so incredible, the procedure so clear, and the method(s) good enough, that it makes for the almost perfect card trick. The only drawback is that it

isn't suitable for all occasions, since you need time and an attentive audience—it requires a lot of common sense and years of performing experience to know when to do this and when not.

In the past I've used dozens of versions with full or partial decks, sleight-of-hand and self-working (see a nice version in my *Card College Light*, where the synergy of a routine is used to get into the necessary set-up).

The best version I've ever seen is Juan Tamariz's, although Michael Weber has also come up with several very clever methods that will fool even well-informed magicians. Paul Curry's original is described in many places, including *Worlds Beyond*.

6. RISING CARDS

This is perhaps the only trick category where the effect is visually extended in time. All other card effects are conceptual (which, of course, is their strength), needing a longer dramatic construction to then culminate in a final effect. Also, it falls in the category of "animation," which is used less often in card magic than in other types of prestidigitation.

Generally I prefer routines where several cards rise, ideally three.

Currently I have no version in my active repertoire because I simply cannot do everything. But I used to do the routine in *Expert Card Technique* with three cards, as well as a version for stage that used Anverdi's "Electronic Jumbo Card Rise."

For close-up, I've obviously used the Devano Rising Cards for many years, which is superb, but also Ted Biet's gimmick, and routines using two cards connected with an elastic band (at the moment I can't remember who to credit for this idea). Dave Solomon makes and sells a good gimmick for this with two Jokers and dental dam.

Don't disregard simple manual versions such as those using the McMillen plunger principle, or "Pinkie Does it" and the "Pop-Up Card," both in *Royal Road to Card Magic*. The latter two are especially good when used within a series of revealing several selected cards.

A very good routine is Dr. Hooker's, accurately described by Jim Steinmeyer in an article in *Genii*, and inaccurately elsewhere (such as in *Greater Magic*), and brought to life again by John Gaughan and Jim Steinmeyer twice at the Los Angeles Conference on Magic History—I had the good fortune to see it, but that's another story.

The best practical professional routine I've ever seen is, again, by Juan Tamariz.

The topic, however, is worth a complete lecture, even a convention.

7. RITO DE INICIACIÓN (LUIS GARCIA/JUAN TAMARIZ)

As far as I know this has only been published in Spanish. It starts out with the cards in new deck order. Then an endless series of amazing tricks are performed, several of which are the most astonishing gambling demonstrations one could imagine, and at the end—after maybe 30 minutes of great card magic—the entire order is restored.

This was shown to me by Juan Tamariz, based on an

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idea by Luis Garcia, over 20 years ago, and to this day it is the best card routine I've ever seen in my life—and I've seen a few ...

Although everything was explained to me, I never dared to do it (you would have to practice every other day just to remember the handling).

8. SLOW MOTION ACE ASSEMBLY (VERNON, ASCANIO, AND TAMARIZ)

I have a personal love affair with Ace assemblies and that's enough for me to justify its inclusion in this list.

I can't count the versions I've done in the almost 40 years I've now been practicing and performing magic. Certainly Ascanio's versions, done by him, were something to behold (see the books by Jesus Etcheverry *The Magic of Ascanio*). "Picasso Aces" by Phil Goldstein (in *Focus*) is a version in which the Aces have different colored backs than indifferent cards to which I have added many details of handling and which, for many years, was Lennart Green's favorite. Each time we met he would say, "Roberto, do the off-color Ace assembly for me!"

I also really like and have performed many times Dai Vernon's second method from *Stars of Magic*. And then there is, of course the Hofzinser routine using double-faced Aces now called by the misnomer "MacDonald's Aces"—I've done dozens of versions (one I liked very much is in John Mendoza's second book *Verse Two* by Mary Wolf).

Once again the ultimate version I've ever seen is Juan Tamariz's "Slow Motion MacDonald" and it should be published in one of his forthcoming books (please don't write me asking when it will come out—nobody knows, but when it is published you'll see it advertised).

9. TOTAL COINCIDENCE (TAMARIZ)

This trick is one of the masterpieces of card magic, especially when done by its inventor. It is, however, much more difficult than it seems, particularly because the method is basically self-working. Its major difficulty is the rhythm and the ability to count cards several times without having the spectators fall asleep.

10. TRIUMPH (DAI VERNON)

I either do the original handling as described in *Stars of Magic* or my handling described in *Card College 3*. In the first volume of *Revelations* DVDs (highly recommended, but difficult to watch), the trick is performed and discussed by Dai Vernon—here he teaches an important lesson: every trick needs a plot in order to have an emotional hook. A card trick, or any magic trick for that matter, which doesn't have an emotional hook is an inferior trick, a mere demonstration of how clever the performer is. Read what Vernon has to say in *Stars of Magic* and use the text (patter) he suggests—it is wonderfully simple, but converts what would otherwise be just a trick into a "performance piece."

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

To this list of 10 I would like to add as a bonus "Matching the Cards" by Nate Leipzig—the version I described in my "Genii Session" column in *Genii*, November 2005.

To close let me say that the reason I think these 10 tricks (plus one) are so good is that they are classics. By definition this means that they have a clear plot, a straightforward procedure, an impenetrable method, and above all a subtext that clearly speaks to the audience's subconscious and makes it fascinating, attractive, interesting, symbolically meaningful, and therefore magical and entertaining.

If you can master just one version for each item in the list above, you could easily belong to the top 10 percent of card magicians in the world. But even if you don't, simply by studying various versions you will have a wonderful time, grow in the process, and have a feeling of great satisfaction. That's far more than many people can say from their daily activities. •

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