

3 STEPS TO CREATING DRAMATIC MAGIC

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A magic effect without a plot is just a trick or a gag. Those kind of effects can be fine by themselves sometimes. But there's no reason why you can't take a trick and make it into something more powerful - something more entertaining.

A plot doesn't have to be some involved script. It doesn't even have to have words. A plot is a story. A story has a beginning, a middle and an end. In the most classic form, a story involves chasing your hero up a tree, throwing rocks at him and then safely getting him back down. The premise is introduced, the stakes are elevated, things are made complicated *then* everything is resolved.

Often magicians confuse story and plot for patter. Their idea of making a trick dramatic is to give some mini-soliloquy. You can do this, but you don't have to. The story starts for the audience the moment you step on stage or up to their table. The protagonist doesn't have to be some character you talk about or some card that is selected. The protagonist can be you.

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Let's look at the most basic card trick; finding a selected card. A spectator chooses a card and returns it to the deck, which is then shuffled. The magician finds the card. Although that premise follows the basic elements of storytelling, it doesn't do so in any dramatic sense. Shuffling the deck is the equivalent of getting the magician up the tree and throwing rocks at him – only he knows this is going to happen in advance and the rocks are made

of sponge. For the story to be compelling, the plot has to appear unpredictable to the magician. To make it interesting, you have to complicate things for the magician in a way that he didn't expect.

To add the element of unpredictability (and tension), you need to make things look like they went in some unplanned direction. This doesn't mean the magician has to be a bumbling fool who screws up his tricks and manages to fix them at the end. Something has to happen to make the outcome uncertain.

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Imagine if the magician has the spectator choose a card (a forced one) and then hands the spectator the rest of the deck. The magician tells the spectator to shuffle the cards. After the shuffling begins, he tells the spectator to hold on to their card and count backwards from ten. The spectator most likely already shuffled their card back into the deck. When they call attention to this (or the magician makes this apparent) it becomes obvious that things did not go as planned. The card shouldn't have been shuffled back in yet. To everyone watching, it appears that the outcome is now in doubt. Our magician is up a tree.

Because the outcome is uncertain, the audience wants to see it resolved

At this point, provided our magician is a competent actor, he's placed himself in the very middle of a dramatic storyline with just a deck of cards. Because the outcome is uncertain, the audience wants to see it resolved. A magician finding a card under normal circumstances is no big thing. Finding it when the trick went horribly awry is a different matter.

The climax of the effect builds as the magician tries to identify the card without the help of his original magic scheme. He can rattle off names of various cards and all sorts of pseudo explanations (Your card is a Ten of Diamonds because you have ten fingers and are married. No? You don't have ten fingers?). The more desperate it looks, the more rocks being thrown at him.

After a certain amount of tension is built, it's time to resolve the situation. You can either choose a purely dramatic resolution or a comedic one. A dramatic resolution would have you identify the card by employing some scheme involving psychology or mind reading. A comedic one could be as simple as pulling a giant version of their card from your pocket or from an envelope under their seat.

The strength of the *Magician's Insurance Policy* effect (where the magician screws up a card trick and pulls out an insurance policy with a giant version of the card) isn't the prop of the Insurance Policy. The power is in the ability of the magician to create tension *leading up to* the resolution. Most performers screw up the trick in an obvious way and then pull out the Insurance Policy as a gag closer. They miss out on the opportunity to create real tension and real drama.

Strong stories require an element of surprise

From our example you can see that creating dramatic magic doesn't require an award-winning playwright. All it requires is an understanding of what entertains us. Strong stories require an element of surprise. You can introduce the element by looking at it from the audience's perspective and then imagining where things can appear to go off track.

Here are three steps to creating dramatic magic:

#1 Change expectations

Ask yourself what the audience's expectations are at any given moment. What can you do to change those expectations?

- An error occurs through miscommunication
- An error occurs through prop malfunction

#2 Build tension

What can you do to build tension? Is there a way you can make the outcome appear to be in doubt?

- Your quick fix doesn't work
- Your resolution is incomplete

#3 Resolve the conflict

How can you dramatically resolve the conflict? You can choose to make the resolution appear magical and beyond your control or something you planned.

- The spectator finds their card mysteriously in their own pocket.
- You tell the spectator the card is under their seat (you planted it there).

This method works with other effects besides card tricks. You can scale it up to illusions as well. Let's use the classic *Sawing a Woman in Half* effect as an example. The challenging part about this effect is the fact that the amazing part happens right away. Once the woman is cut in half, the rest is just an entertaining dénouement. The way to twist this effect and change an audience's expectation, is to present it as something else. What if you told the audience you were going to pass a saw blade harmlessly through your assistant? After you saw through his or her body (there's no reason why your stagehand can't be a victim) you prepare to show that they are still intact and unharmed. In the process of opening the boxes you accidentally push the boxes apart and divide your assistant in half. The separation becomes more dramatic when it's not expected. My personal choice would be to end the trick right there and just push the boxes offstage in different directions. Everything else is anti-climactic.

Look closely at what the audience thinks is going to happen and find a way to change that to uncertainty. Avoid confusing them. They should know what the problem is, but not the resolution. As a magician, your job is to create a resolution that is both surprising and magical.