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DAVID

Williamson's Back

AND

HE'S RIDICULOUS



DAVID
Williamson
NOT SO RIDICULOUS

BY DAVID BRITLAND

In 1961, in the little town of Xenia, Ohio, some farmers found a pod in a field, still smoking. Inside, wrapped in a close-up mat, was a baby from another world. That baby was David Williamson. Xenia was subsequently laid low by a huge tornado which left David's magical education to a man going by the name of Quacky the Clown. Or at least that's what David Williamson said when I saw him interviewed for his new DVD set, *Ridiculous*. I haven't been able to verify the smoking pod story. But he was born in Xenia. There was a tornado. And a guy called Quacky the Clown. And, watching David Williamson perform magic, who could possibly doubt that he is from another world?

The usual accolades don't do justice to the talents of David Williamson. He's an award-winning magician. One of the world's best and most versatile sleight-of-hand artists. A terrific teacher of magic. A great comedian and an exceptional stage performer. But for me David Williamson is more than that. He's a magician who changed the way we do magic.

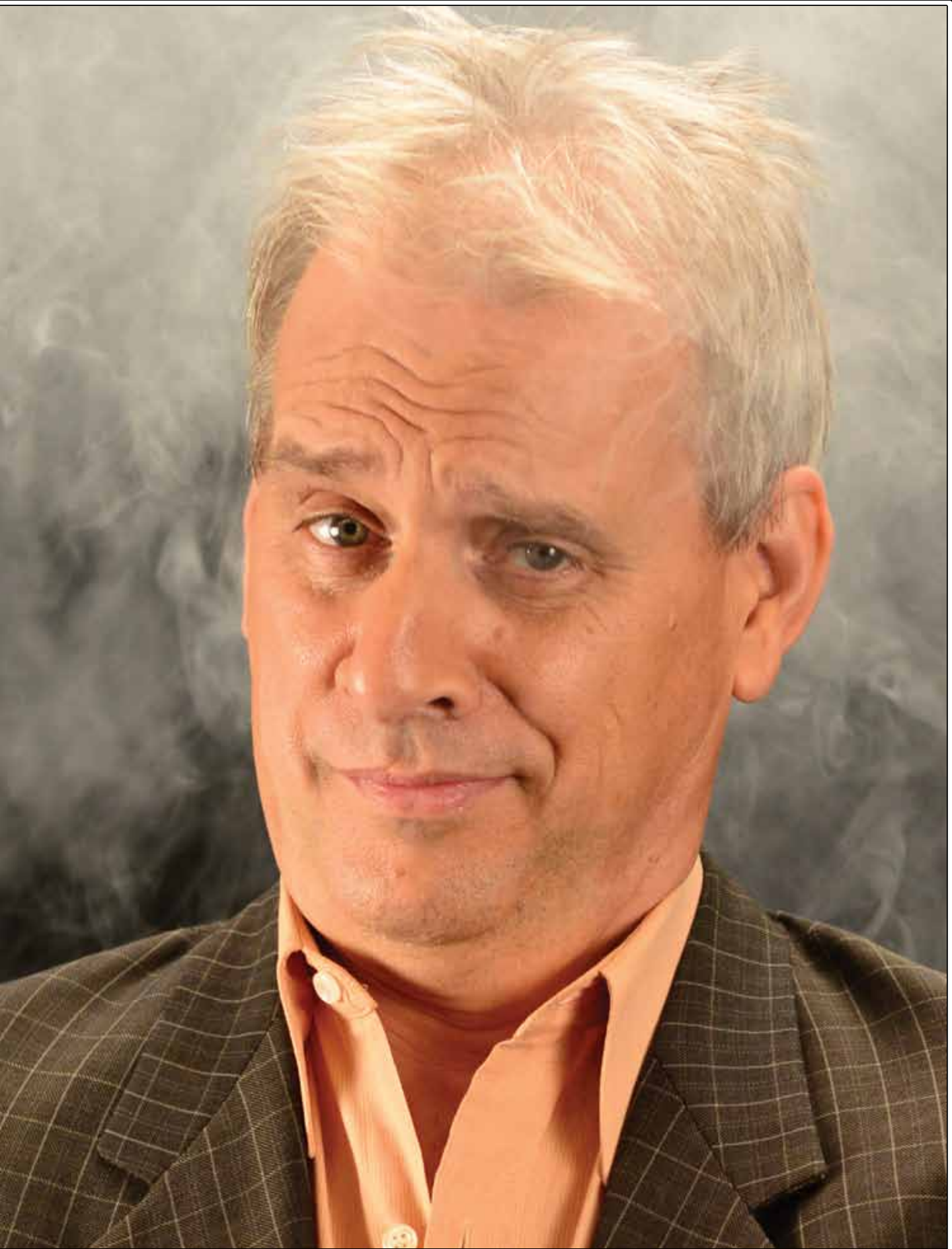


PHOTO BY JP CEZANNE

DAVID BROUGHT TO MAGIC ...

A SEEMINGLY EFFORTLESS STYLE IN WHICH THE MAGIC SEEMS NATURAL AND SPONTANEOUS. DAVID'S OWN INSPIRATIONS WERE SLYDINI, DEL RAY, AND ALBERT GOSHMAN. BUT, IN THE 1980S, DAVID BROUGHT A YOUTHFUL ENERGY TO HIS MAGIC THAT WE WERE NOT ACCUSTOMED TO.

I first heard about him at a lecture by Michael Ammar in 1982. It was hosted by Paul Daniels at his home in Holland Park. It was an inspiring lecture. Michael Ammar performed and explained some innovative magic, the best of a new generation of magicians. He also mentioned a friend of his, David Williamson, the creator of *The Striking Vanish*, a move that has since become a standard. A couple of years later I saw David lecture in London, an event arranged by Chris Power and JJ who had already picked him as one to watch. Their

magic just happens.”

This is what David brought to magic, a seemingly effortless style in which the magic seems natural and spontaneous. David's own inspirations were Slydini, Del Ray, and Albert Goshman but, in the 1980s, David brought a youthful energy to his magic that we were not accustomed to. We'd paid homage to the *Stars of Magic* era legends, as we should, but it was a rare day when you sat down at a table to entertain your spectators. David Williamson's magic was built for the “now.” You stood, you worked the room, the body language was loose and guileless, and the magic,

it was many years in the making.

Xenia is in America's Midwest, approximately 20 miles from Dayton. It was where David Williamson spent his childhood, fighting with his two brothers, climbing trees, and throwing rocks at passing trucks. The seed for change came, as it does for many magicians, with the arrival of a magic set, a Christmas present when David was nine years old. It was the same year he read a book at school about Houdini. The last chapter described how to do the French Drop. David practiced it, well enough for the teacher, Mrs. Moore, to pat him on the shoulder and say, “Maybe someday you'll be a magician.” It was, says David, “The first time anyone had said I'd be anything.”

“That year Shepherd the Great, a magician, came to our school. He did a great little school program. Mrs. Moore knew I was interested in magic, so she talked to the magician and he allowed me to come backstage and let me load his gear into his van, which had a rabbit and top hat painted on its side. I felt honored. I knew I was in the fraternity then and knew that was what I wanted to do.”

David's magical epiphany came during Shepherd the Great's performance of the “Color Changing Plumes.” David describes the plumes being pushed through the tube, “He had a red plume, put it in the tube, and a blue one came out. And he put it back on the stand. Red to Blue. Then he takes a yellow one puts it in the tube and a red one comes out. And I started to see a pattern. Ah ha! I'm on to this guy. Then he takes a green one and puts it in the tube. And I turned to my friend and said the green one is going to come out yellow. And a purple one came out! At that moment, I thought wait a minute. There's something going on here. I need to find out



magazine, *Opus*, later declared him their favorite close-up magician, praising his fluid sleight of hand and the way an aura of magic seems to surround David Williamson creating an impression “that

really did just seem to happen free of structure and formality. It was a new way of performing and one that every magician wanted to emulate. That style exists because of David Williamson and



**ACE CUTTING
(PERFORMANCE)**



**ACE CUTTING
(EXPLANATION)**

what's going on. He sucked me in. He clobbered me. My brain was on fire."

The next milestone on the journey occurred when he was 11 or 12 and read *The Amateur Magician's Handbook*. Written by Henry Hay (June Barrows Mussey) it owed much to his travels around the world as a young man where he met the greats of magic like T. Nelson Downs and learned from them. It made concrete the idea that there was indeed a fraternity of magicians sharing secrets. It was a group that David very much wanted to join.

David's grandfather helped him build a magic box, one of his own design. He could show it empty, reach in, and pull out a bunch of silks. He still has it. But its debut at a school talent show didn't go so well. He reached through a flap in the box to pick up a bundle of handkerchiefs that was hanging on a nail behind the table. Unfortunately the flap closed on his hand and he couldn't get it free. "I pulled and I couldn't get my hand out," says David. "It was almost like a comedy routine."

David performed magic at county shows, birthday parties, and old folks homes. To get more work he took to wearing a T-shirt that had "Magician for Hire" printed on the front. "Did I ever get any work from that?" asks David. "No. Did people say, 'Let me get the number for that?' No. It was stupid."

However, another promotional idea did work. His box-building grandfather had an old fashioned printing press in the basement. He taught David how to set type and soon he had his first business cards.

Magic sets, home-built production boxes, and business cards: all familiar waypoints in the journey of the magician. But the next milestone was one that few can mark on their map, a tornado strike. It happened in April 1974 and was the second largest tornado outbreak in the history of the U.S.A. David's home town of Xenia was hit with devastating force, 32 people were killed, over a thousand injured, and a large part of the town laid waste.

David told the story at the Essential

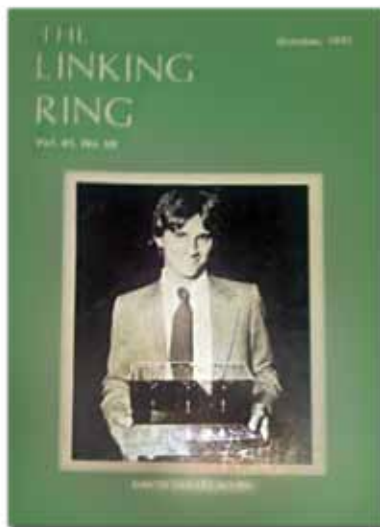


Magic Conference in 2012. The tornado came at a strange time in David's life, things were not good at home. His parents had been constantly arguing. They got divorced. And now his town had been flattened. It was from this social

and physical wreckage that a bizarre note of optimism emerged ... Quacky the Clown.

When David describes Quacky you can't help but imagine Crusty the Clown from *The Simpsons*. Quacky lived in a trailer strewn with beer cans where his daughter inflated the modeling balloons for the day's show. Then he wandered through the tornado-wrecked streets of Xenia, wearing yellow duck feet clown shoes, doing magic tricks, making balloon models, mooing and barking and kicking kids away whenever they came too close. David loved it. "It was the most ridiculous, wonderful thing that could possibly have happened to me at that point."

David followed Quacky everywhere, eventually being allowed to assist by carrying the net full of inflated balloons. In a quiet moment inside Quacky's trailer, he advised David never to take up the performing life. It was advice that





fell on deaf ears. What was not to like about Quacky's life? "He's got wheels, he's got somewhere to live, he can go wherever he wants." David wanted to be just like Quacky. "I see a guy actually making a living and traveling around the Midwest," says David. "It gave me a romantic notion of what a professional performer must be."

It comes as a surprise when David says he wasn't a natural performer. Compared to his brother Gary he was less outgoing, a talented kid with lots of friends. "My younger brother Gary was one of those kids who could do anything. He could pick up a guitar and within half an hour he could pick up a song. If he took three balls he could learn to juggle in an afternoon." To David's horror he even turned his hand to magic.

"He could pick up a deck of cards and he could Back Palm. He could Back Palm, two, three, four cards. He could squeeze out a Pressure Fan quicker than I could. I finally made him stop. No more magic for you. Let me have magic. I made him stay away from magic. That was my area."

"It was also a way for a shy kid to put himself out there a little bit and get noticed by people at school. School is a competitive place for a kid. There's a lot going on and you have to find your place. Magic became my thing, my safe place."

The fraternity of magicians that David had imagined became a reality

in 1973 when he visited Abbott's Magic Convention. His mother had read in a newspaper that there was a magic festival in Colon, Michigan. She offered to drop him there while she drove on to visit her sister in Wisconsin.

"There was another kid from Cincinnati who was about my age and interested in magic. My mom knew his mom. I had a little pup tent. She dropped us in a dairy field in Colon and then she took off toward her sister's house. There we were, 12 years old. We barely knew how to pitch the tent but it was the greatest weekend of my life. We sat there at the picnic table every night with Colman lanterns and these guys showing us magic tricks."

Karrell Fox, Tom Mullica, and Monk Watson were among the performers that impressed David. He watched Gene Anderson lecture and perform his famous "Torn and Restored Newspaper." He saw Jose de la Torre change the color of penknives. And was totally mystified by a mysterious floating ball under the control of Neil Foster.

From Hank Morehouse he bought a bunch of recommended books and stowed them away in his tent. Unfortunately the tent was pitched in a gully and on the first night of the convention it rained. Everything was ruined. But then something happened that further convinced David that the world of magic really was something special.

"This guy jumps into his Mercedes.

He was a mentalist. I don't know who it was. I know it wasn't Max Maven because I don't think he drives does he? But Max is the kind of guy who would do something like this. He saved all our stuff and he replaced everything that was damaged. The next day he brought us new copies of all the books we had bought. That made a big impression on me about the fraternity of magicians."

Fraternities have secret initiation rites and David learned that magic conventions were no exception. At the TAOM convention in Texas he met Johnny Ace Palmer. "I think we were in our late teens or something. Some old guy comes by and says 'we want you two boys in the Presidential Suite at midnight for the Order of Merlin meeting. There's an induction ceremony, be there.' We were all excited. We didn't know what this was. We were so proud of ourselves being invited up to the Order of Merlin Society."

"We were brought into this suite, a private dining room. The doors open. There's candles everywhere. I don't know who all the guys were but it's a bunch of old gray-haired magicians that you never talk to because you're the cool teenagers. But Jay Marshall was definitely there. And Ed Campagna, the boss of the TAOM in those years. He was an interesting guy who worked for NASA. Lots of stories there."

"They were all sitting around this candlelit table. It was very intimidating. They had towels on their heads like Swamis. Like *Genii* has. Turbans. Johnny and I come in. It's like *The Wizard of Oz*, how they go down the hallway and shaking. We're shaking in our boots."

"And they said, 'You have been chosen to be inducted into the voodoo society of the Order of Merlin.' So they had this ceremony with all this double talk. I forget exactly what was said. But they had us say the names of two wizards, Willard from the West and Herrmann from the East. And we recited these incantations. It was all very serious and very mysterious."

"Finally we had two voodoo balls and they said to put both voodoo balls in one hand. And we did. And they

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said, 'Now squeeze the magic voodoo balls.' And we squeezed them and all the guys sitting around the table went 'Ooooooooooh' as if in pain. Then they'd break into laughter. Then they go, 'Okay get lost! Next!'

~

David entered his first magic competition in Galion, Ohio. He didn't win but Michael Ammar came up to him and complimented him on his performance. He was three years older than David and more knowledgeable. Ammar, along with Gary Plants whom David also met there, would not only become very influential on David's growth as a sleight of hand worker but lifelong friends.

PHOTO BY JP CEZANNE





It might have been Gary Plants who played a part in one of David's pranks some time later. "I'd been tipped off, by Gary or someone, about a trick that Daryl had been fooling everyone with. He was cutting a swathe across the country doing his lectures and fooling everyone with this trick." Daryl was appearing in Cincinnati and David went along with his girlfriend Marsha, who had been primed about the magician-busting effect. Afterward they went to eat and, sure enough, Daryl did the trick that he'd been fooling everyone with.

"So he does this trick for us and he doesn't know us from Adam. There was this teenage girl sitting at the table with this skinny kid and he blows everybody away with this card trick. Then Marsha turns to me and in a loud voice says, 'Isn't that the Mexican Joe Crimp.' And I could see Daryl thinking what the heck? I'm in the middle of nowhere Ohio and this teenage girl knows what I've been fooling every card man from coast to coast. Moments like that are just great."

David and Marsha began dating in high school. "She was always the girl I passed in the hallway. I remember the



first time we were in a class together and I was doing 'Chink a Chink,' the David Roth version, where the hands float above the coins. It really looks like magic when done from the right angle and done well. And I must have done it well because she turned to me without irony and said, 'Are you a warlock,' as if warlocks existed. I went, 'Yes I am.' That was the beginning. That was the first time she spoke to me."

They married when they were in college. It was an unpretentious affair. David found a preacher out of the phone book and for \$35 he came to his mother's house and said the right words and the marriage was made. Marsha studied for her degree and then went to language school in Vermont but David lasted only two years as an art major. Despite a love of cartoons and animation his heart wasn't in it.

"Marsha supported my career many times. She worked a full time job and allowed me to dabble in magic and try to get a career going. Then we switched places when we had children 10 years later, Ben and Anna. She was able to stay home and by that point my career

was going strong enough that I could be the breadwinner. That's what I recommend to young magicians. They say, 'I want to be a professional magician, do you have any advice?' I say yes. Make sure your girlfriend gets a good education and a good job and you might have a chance."

At that time David's professional life as a magician was about as glamorous as the life of Quacky the Clown. While in college David performed magic at dinner theaters in the evening, but to pay the rent he also had to wash dishes at a Greek restaurant, The Colony House in Fairborn. In the magic world he was making his mark winning the Gold Cups at the 1981 Pittsburgh I.B.M. convention. It was a competition Mike Ammar had talked him into.

"I brought the Gold Cups home, put them on the shelf, put on my apron, and the next day went back to washing dishes for the lunch crowd at The Colony House. It taught me a work ethic. And every once and a while, Taki and George, the two Greek brothers who owned the restaurant would say, 'David come out here.' And I'd be in my





apron. 'Show my friend a trick.' And I'd do a card trick. 'He's an international award winner.' The guys like, 'Really?' 'Go back in there get the plate clean. You left too much cheese on it last time.' Yes Sir! Those were good times."

In 1984 Marsha left for a semester to study in Leningrad. Meanwhile David accepted an invitation from Thomas Van Buren Lenger to lecture in Hannover, Germany. Michael Ammar had recommended him. "It was a life changing experience. Any time you take a kid from the Midwest and put him in Europe it's culture shock, but it opened my eyes to a bigger world and different ways of living. It was just fantastic."

"I'll never forget sitting at a magic convention and Ascanio was there. And Johnny Lonn was there. And there'd be some guys from France. Bernard Bilis and Jean Jacques Sanvert and just all the great European magicians. There may have been five or six languages represented at the table. I was just this kid from Ohio and I had no idea what they were saying. So I sat next to Roberto Giobbi, who simultaneously translated every conversation for me. And then put it in context on top of that. Historical and cultural. So Roberto became a great friend. He was my Rosetta Stone whenever I was in Europe. Whenever I saw Roberto at a convention I would stay by his side. Not to mention his incredible magic knowledge and his chops. He was another teacher along the way for me."

"I bumped into Chris Power and JJ in Italy on that tour. They became great friends and my advocates in England. They helped me get work at magic con-



ventions. Ron McMillan was there in London and the whole McMillan family embraced me as one of their own. The International Day Convention became a big part of my life for years after that, and all the people in England that I met."

The impact that David had on magicians in the U.K. was huge. David was performing first class magic, demonstrating serious skills but not being in the least bit serious about it. There was a youthful vigor to it. An energy and natural humor that had been lacking in magic, a craft that often took itself too seriously. He was connected, not just with the audience but with the time he was living in. I think it's fair to say that when U.K. magicians saw David Williamson work, they found a shining example of how magic could be reimagined for a new generation of magicians.

"I went all over Europe, 30 some cities. Riding the trains. It was fantastic. I was 20 or 21 years old. Marsha was in Russia so we didn't see each other for months that year. When we finally got back together in Washington D.C. she went to graduate school and I worked as a waiter in the afternoons and did magic at the dinner theater at night. And we built a life."

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Back then, Washington was a great place for magic. David remembers Steve Spill and Bob Sheets performing at the Inn of Magic, a supper club in an exclusive part of the city. "They did a show together and it was the greatest magic show I'd ever seen. It was funny. It was amazing. And the chemistry of those two guys on stage, I haven't seen anything like it even today."

Other magicians congregated at the venue; Scotty York, Bob Kohler, John Kennedy. Meanwhile David was working at the dinner theater doing close-up at the tables and some stage routines. In 1986 a different opportunity came his way. His friend John called and told him about Magic Masters, a chain of magic shops created by Ken Fletcher that was opening up around the country and

with plans to build one in Washington.

"I said why would I want to do that. I don't want to work in a magic shop. That sounds awful and horrible. John said they were paying commission plus basic. It was about what I was making but not quite. Then he said they have dental insurance. They pay dental? I said I'm there!"

It was at Magic Masters that David would be reacquainted with someone who would become a major figure in his life, Rocky Raccoon. "I saw Rocky Raccoon years before Magic Masters, performed by a fantastic performer named Jeff Justice who worked the convention circuit in the early 80s. I would see him at the TAOM or up in Columbus at the Magi-Fest. And he had great hands with Rocky. He could make

it look alive. And he had an original routine with it that just killed everybody. And I bought one from him just like everybody else. And I couldn't do anything with it and it sat in my drawer for years. Then I joined Magic Masters and I realized that Magic Masters was the house that Rocky built. For every magic trick that they sold over the counter they sold 20 or 30 Rockies."

Dennis Sowers and Mike Abston, two of Magic Masters' top salesmen, taught David how to perform with Rocky. "Dennis could make Rocky look alive. I think his brain had separated at some point where half of it was Rocky. Rocky would pay attention to other noises and look around while he's holding a conversation. If he said something about Rocky, Rocky would look at him. What?"



THE Vanishing MAN

BY JOHN LOVICK

David Williamson is the vanishing man. Before I explain, I'm going to state unequivocally that there are more hilarious, gut-busting, brain-crushing, amazing, literally unbelievable stories about impromptu miracles, one-time-only performances, magician-fooling effects, and practical jokes engineered by David Williamson than any magician alive. But Williamson's greatest performance is the after-hours, off-stage miracle "The Vanishing Man".

If you were lucky enough to be at select conventions in the 1990s, you probably heard about (or perhaps witnessed) this impossibility. It would begin with David gathering a select group of people in a hotel suite.

He would explain that he had a modern variation of a classic effect, based on the "locked room mystery" sub-genre of fiction. He'd invite people to step into the bathroom with him. He'd point out that there are no extra doors, the ceiling tiles don't move, there are no access panels in the walls, there are no windows, etc. He'd say, OK go out, and count to ten. After counting to ten, a friend (acting as the door monitor) would give the instructions to go in and look everywhere, in the trash can, under the sink, in the ceiling panels, everywhere. Do everything you can to try to find him. They'd walk in with an incredible sense of anticipation for what they would see.

This legendary stunt was inspired, in part, by a similar legendary stunt performed by Ken Allen in the 1950s. Ken Allen was a magic dealer and inventor, who started working for Abbott's in the 1940s before branching off on his own. At the S.A.M. convention in May 1952



PHOTO BY JF CEZANNE

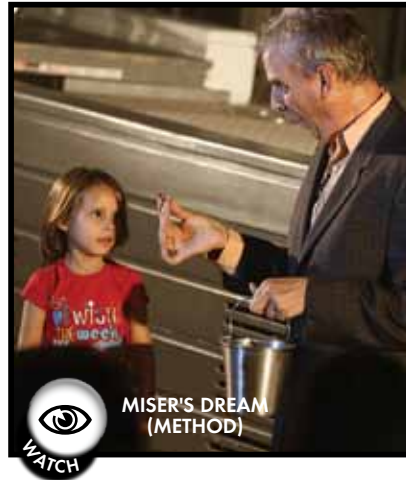
in Boston, in room 419 of the Statler Hotel, he performed a legendary stunt. Word would circulate that there was something very mysterious going on in his room, a must-see genuine miracle. As soon as a few people gathered in the room, Ken Allen, along with two assistants presented the following mind-boggling performance:

Ken stood backed into an alcove in front of the door leading to the bathroom as the two assistants, lifted a blanket in front of Ken so that he was out of sight for about five to thirty seconds (reports vary).

The blanket was then dropped, and Ken was gone. Everyone was permitted to search the entire room and bathroom carefully, but there was no trace of Ken. For half an hour, with hundreds jamming the halls, groups of five to ten people would search the room, the room, the bathroom, in the closet, under the bed, even the drawers, but never discovering the magician's hide-out. After all were satisfied he had disappeared, his two friends again held up the blanket, counted to ten, the blanket



PHOTOS BY JPCZANINE



MISER'S DREAM (METHOD)



INTUITION (PERFORMANCE)



INTUITION (EXPLANATION)

"In his hands the Raccoon became Dustin Hoffman or Al Pacino. Acting with pathos and anger, all the emotions. I don't know how he did it. Nobody is their equal. Dennis and Mike." Rocky Raccoon soon became a staple part of David's own repertoire, a highlight of his act and a vehicle for tremendous comedy.

1989 saw the publication of *Williamson's Wonders*, written, illustrated, and published by Richard Kaufman. "Richard came to me, I lectured in New Jersey and he was there. He said, 'Do you want to do a book?' I said, 'Let me think about it. Yes, yes I do.' Because all these other guys were having books. He told me later that this was the thinnest book possible to put a hardcover on. That's the thinnest hardcover book in magic and I'm proud of that fact." He should be proud of the material too, gathering together as it did the very best of David's repertoire.

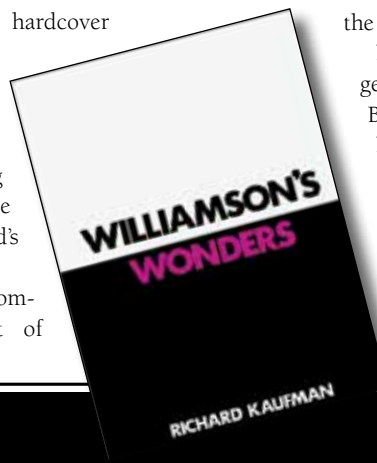
Comedy was becoming a bigger part of

David's style. He'd been inspired by Tom Mullica, among others, who had shown that great comedy can be accompanied by great magic. His appearances at magic conventions were eagerly looked forward to as his antics got funnier and more outlandish. "I got a little more goofy at magic conventions. I thought, well, there are other guys who do great magic. They don't want to see me do a four Ace trick. I can offer something else. So I started being a little silly." While welcomed by conventioners the silliness became a problem when it came to being booked by Bill Herz, one of the most influential bookers on the corporate circuit.

Mike Caveny had suggested David to Bill and Bill had rejected him. He'd seen him work conventions and thought he joked around too much. "That was my reputation for magic conventions because I got very goofy and

wouldn't take it seriously. So he didn't want to hire me. Mike said 'Look, just have him, I'll pay his fee if you don't like him.' That's an example of the way Mike goes out of his way to help people."

Bill booked David and, as Mike had predicted, everything went well. "Bill started hiring me after that and we became very close friends. And he kept



dropped and there he was, smiling. He repeated this stunt many times during the convention and all Ken would give for a clue was, "I used to be an acrobat." It created such a sensation it was even reported in a Boston newspaper.

Here is how he accomplished this. At that time, Statler Hotels had specially designed medicine cabinets in the bathrooms. Once a hidden lock was opened, the whole cabinet swung open allowing workmen to climb through into a sort of air shaft to do plumbing and electrical work. Ken had discovered a way to open the cabinet.

During the performance, Ken would duck down behind the blanket and crawl into the bathroom. He would open the cabinet, and climb into the space between the walls. He braced the rubber soles of his shoes against the opposite wall as he held onto the cabinet from behind. Because there was nothing between him and ground level, four stories down, one slip could have been fatal, which makes the fact that he repeated the illusion several times all the more remarkable.

There is a bonus to this story, and that is the rumor that Ken wasn't the one who figured out how to pull off this miracle. Another dealer tipped him off as to the mechanics of the medicine chest and encouraged him to perform the stunt. This raises the question, why did this rival dealer supply Ken with this information and encourage him to perform the "Vanishing Dealer" instead of doing it himself? Because he was having an affair with Ken's wife, and he knew he'd have a window of opportunity to be in another hotel room with Mrs. Allen, while Ken was creating a legend.

Hotels with this structural feature don't exist anymore (or are extremely rare) and Williamson was forced to pursue a different approach, which he did in his inimical creative way. If you were one of the lucky few who got to witness a performance, your experience would have been something like this:

After Williamson went into the bathroom, you'd hear a toilet flush, and you would wait your turn as people

went in one at a time and reemerge a few minutes later amazed, proclaiming that they had no idea where he went. As you stepped into the bathroom, you would check all the logical, obvious places, the shower, under the sink, etc. If you stepped around the corner where the toilet is, you would see Williamson crouched on top of the toilet with his hair wet, holding up a towel rack he'd torn from the wall, with a towel draped over it that he was awkwardly trying to hide behind. (Of course, what you saw varied with each performance. Sometimes he would crouch in the corner behind the toilet sucking his thumb, with a whipped cream-like swirl of toilet paper around his head, like a three-year-old who thinks he's invisible.) You would walk out of the bathroom, mostly likely with an perplexed look on your face, and say you were stumped, and then stick around to watch the rest of the group go in, now that you were "in on it". As more people went in the group of voluntary co-conspirators grew and it became funnier with every person who went in.

When the last person emerged, David would reappear and the group would disperse disciple-like, spreading the word about the miracle they had witnessed, creating an unbelievable desire among convention-goers who weren't in the right place at the right time. It would not take long before *everyone* was asking, "Have you see Williamson's vanishing thing?" People would *beg* Williamson to repeat it. It became an aspirational experience.

I'd heard the legend of Williamson's "Vanishing Man," and even though I'd been told what the "surprise" was, I still wanted to experience it, but assumed it was a thing of the past, and I would never get a chance to see it. But Williamson decided to revive it at the third Magic-Con in San Diego in 2012. Here's how it went down in the words of Doug McKenzie:

"I was hanging out with Williamson, and a few other people late at night. We were all just jamming and Williamson was doing gags, like the

Submarine thing where you pour water down someone's sleeve, and we were all in a crazy mood.

"At one point we all ended up marching to the bathroom off the lobby of the hotel; there were about twenty of us. David's "door monitor" set the scene and explained the ground rules. We watched David go into the bathroom, heard a toilet flush, and then waited until given the go ahead. We took turns going into the bathroom. When people emerged, they were instructed not to say anything to the rest of the group, let those of us waiting have own experience. But they were all acting strange. Some were laughing, some looked stunned.

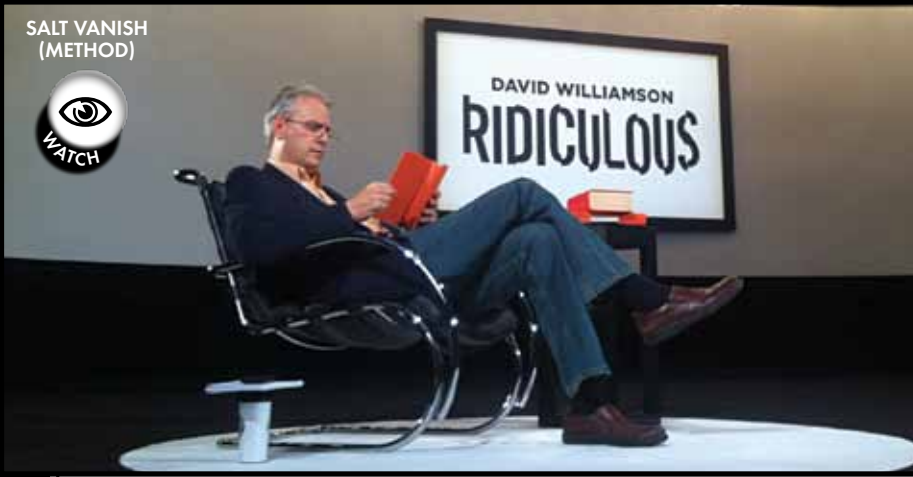
"Between people Williamson would occasionally stick his head out of the bathroom, and talk to the door monitor, or ask how many were left in line. When it was my turn to walk in, I didn't know what to expect—with Williamson, you don't know if it's going to be really, really good, or really, really funny.

"But I walked in and he was just gone. Completely. I couldn't believe it. The only evidence that he had been there is his jacket which was draped over one of the toilet bowls. I lifted the jacket to see if he was in the bowl, and of course he wasn't. He was nowhere.

"Later, when I told people he vanished, they said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' I had to tell them, 'No, he was really gone.' It literally is one of my favorite pieces of magic I've ever seen. It totally blew my mind."

Astonishment is an experience magicians crave, but rarely are lucky enough to encounter. That night Doug McKenzie, and a few other fortunate individuals, were astonished. They followed Williamson into a bathroom where there was no place to hide, no way to escape, and he was gone. The son of a bitch did it, he found an actual method.

David Williamson really is the vanishing man. •



Marsha and me and my family with a roof over our heads because of his booking me and his kindness over the years.”

David says he had two possible routes at this point in his career. The first was to work his act in the comedy clubs. They paid badly, you stayed in cheap hotels, it was a tough life. But it was also where creative entertainers honed their acts and bookers and television producers came to find their next stars.

“The other way was the corporate route that people like Paul Gertner and Bill Herz were doing. It wasn’t as populated and it was tougher to get into but offered a nice pay check. You stay in nice hotels, you’re usually done by nine or ten o’clock in the evening, and you can build a regular family life. I chose that route. You’re not going to be famous and you’re not going to be super rich, but you could raise a family, you can have a life, and

you can build a career.”

The 1990s saw a rise in TV magic, and two television producers, John Fisher and Gary Ouellet, both thought that David was perfect for television. John Fisher, who produced *The Paul Daniels Magic Show* for many years, saw David, Rudy Coby, and Jeff Hobson on a magic cruise and created a TV series called *The Magic Comedy Strip* in the U.K. Meanwhile Gary Ouellet was producing one huge TV magic special after another including *The World’s Greatest Magic* series of shows. He hired David for a *Champions of Magic* special set in Monaco. It was an experience that gave David pause for thought.

“It’s one of those moments in my life where you think, ‘I’m taking a helicopter from Nice to Monte Carlo. I’m in this helicopter flying over Monte Carlo, there’s the casino there’s the harbor, the

beautiful boats and all the beautiful people.’ And I’m pinching myself. How did I get here? I’m the kid from Xenia.”

Whenever you ask David to explain where these seemingly golden opportunities spring from he is always quick to tell you what others did for him rather than what he accomplished by himself. He traces his success back to his earliest days via a long list of names and of events, like Abbott’s magic convention, that proved beyond doubt that the fraternity he wanted to exist, the fraternity he learned about from *The Amateur Magician’s Handbook*, was a reality.

“Obie O’Brien, Hank Morehouse, Joe Stevens, Don Tanner, Jep Hostetler, these are the unsung heroes of magic. There is no way you could make enough money to justify how hard these guys work and their goodwill toward young magicians. These are the guys who made opportunities for me. These are the guys that help our careers and help the art.”

There were many more opportunities over the years. The entertainment business survives on hope, the hope of the next big thing coming your way, the showbiz break that will change your life.

“I like to think that Marsha has helped ground me. I’ve walked away from opportunities because my family came first. There have been three points in my life where I’ve called Marsha and said, ‘We’re done, all I have to do is sign this thing and we’re set for life.’ Three moments like that and they’ve either fallen through or I’ve just walked away from them because they didn’t feel right. They would have been bad for Marsha and me, and bad for our family. I don’t regret those moments.”

The recent economic downturn in the U.S. and elsewhere led to a decline in corporate bookings. While there were further television adventures, a completely unexpected avenue opened up





in an offer to work the Disney Cruise Line. It was met with skepticism.

“I said I don’t want to do it. I did a cruise ship 25 years ago and didn’t enjoy it. I had to call bingo and dance with old ladies and stay below in crummy crew cabins. I didn’t really like it and being on the ocean. I figured that wasn’t for me. But economics forced me to say yes.”

The Disney Cruise Line wasn’t like any cruise David had been on before. The cruise industry has weathered the economic storm and continues to grow. The ships are vast and getting bigger. They come fitted out with nightclubs, cinemas, restaurants, bars, sports and gym facilities, and theaters—huge state of the art performing venues of the kind in which any magician would be proud to work.

David usually boards the ship halfway through the cruise. He’ll do a lounge show for the adults. The next night he might do two 45 to 60 minute shows for the entire ship in a theater that seats 2,500 people. In the afternoons he’ll teach a magic class. And there’s a 10-minute spot in the farewell show. The scale of the venue and variety of work has provided David with new creative challenges.

“I’ve had to work real hard to come up with routines that work for the ship. I had to rack my brain. What material could I do, because my little corporate club act wouldn’t cut it for these big audiences who were looking to have a lot of fun?”

“I went to the Blackpool Magic Convention this year. In previous years I’d be looking at the card gimmicks and the wallets and the card books and the stuff where I thought I belonged for years, the things that interested me. This year I was over there with the Paper Hat Tears and the folding wands and I was just loving it. I was buying all kinds of things because I know the kids on the ship are going to love this.”

I’d love to tell you exactly what David

and goofy moments we’ve come to know. But it’s also filled with great ideas and solid magic. He has been kind enough to share some of these ideas and all I can say is that I can’t wait to see them. I’m really amazed at the approach he is taking. This is David Williamson at his very best, innovative family entertainment that is clever, artfully performed, and big enough to hold a huge audience spellbound. David is once again in his element. Enjoying more than ever the life that only magic can offer.

A succession of unexpected kindnesses often leads us to the things we come to love. They are the milestones by which all magicians can mark their lives. For David it began with the gift of a magic set. A thoughtful teacher who introduced him to Shepherd the Great. A book by Henry Hay revealing a secret fraternity of magicians. A duck-footed Quacky the Clown who produced hope and magic when everything else had disappeared. And a mentalist at a convention who proved that the kindness of strangers can change a boy’s life. If you are looking for signs there are plenty to be found.

“I remember Bill Larsen,” says David, “who would always write ‘Genii Speaks,’ and he was such a positive person. And in hindsight you can look at it, and, if you

is doing in those shows. He describes it as “a crazy fun show” and sounds like it has those wild

were a cynical kind of person, it’s like corny, but they were always so nice: *We saw our friends around the world, we visited with so and so, you’re always welcome at The Magic Castle, it’s a wonderful group of people’.*”

“I just remember, being a kid, reading my *Genii* magazine, having a warm feeling for the fraternity of magic. It felt like a lot of nice people. So it doesn’t come down to the tricks or the career or the secrets or the professional jealousies. In the end, to me, it comes down to the people in magic. For some reason the people drawn to magic are really great people. I’ve walked through other careers, in my corporate days, and looked into other societies and groups of people. And it doesn’t seem the same. There’s something about the people in magic. I can’t put my finger on it but they seem to have big hearts. And that’s why I’m thankful for it.” •

