the reality of illusion: the magic castle in hollywood

peter m. nardi

Within walking distance of the famous Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Hollywood—where visitors compare their hand sizes and footprints with cemented celebrities—stands the Magic Castle, another entertainment palace, perhaps less known to the public. But tourists cannot just walk into this one with their cameras and guide books. To enter this hidden world where illusion is reality, they must first know the secret—and the magical password.

The Magic Castle is a unique place, world-renowned among magicians, and a world in itself. Officially, it is the home of the nonprofit Academy of Magical Arts, founded in 1962 by two magician brothers, William and Milton Larsen. Eager to establish a private social club for magicians, they leased the turreted mansion built in 1908 by real estate developer Rollin Lane. The house is a mirror image of Kimberly Crest, the architectural landmark home built in Redlands, California, by the founder of the Kimberly-Clark Paper Company. During the early years of the twentieth century, the Lane House itself was a recognizable landmark throughout what were then the uncluttered and sparsely inhabited Hollywood hills. In January 1963, the Larsen brothers opened it as the Magic Castle, yet another Los Angeles landmark.

Experiencing the magical arts in this Victorian setting requires an invitation. Only members and their adult guests can spend an evening of illusion at the Magic Castle (visitors under 21 are limited to the Sunday brunch and shows). To become a “regular” member, candidates must perform a ten-minute magic routine for the membership board and be interviewed about their knowledge of all things magical. Regular members do not need to be professionals; amateur magicians, like me, can become regular members. But even people without any skills in legerdemain can join as “associate” members, at twice the dues, to entertain friends or business clients. Associate members do not have access to the magic library, lectures on how to perform magic, or other perks designed for those who really know their stuff.

Once invited to the Magic Castle by a member, you experience the magic as soon as the car turns into the hilly driveway off Franklin Avenue in Hollywood. The house appears angled above, creating a sense of mystery and adventure. A strict dress code of coats and ties for men and formal suits or dresses for women—unusual for even the best clubs and restaurants in Los Angeles—evokes an old-world atmosphere that seems more appropriate for dinner at a real castle hosted by Agatha Christie characters.

Guests first enter a book-lined room decorated with an old grandfather’s clock and a fireplace, yet apparently without a door to the rest of the house. Some of the illusion is broken by the receptionist’s desk and obligatory gift shop, but upon presenting a membership card or a guest’s pass and $15 entrance fee, visitors are asked to walk over to a golden owl perched on a bookshelf and utter the magic words, “Open Sesame.” At that moment, the bookcase rumbles open to a corridor lined with magic posters, leading into a larger, dimly lit room with a working fireplace, a sweeping staircase, and a grand salon bar. Antique fixtures decorate the place, including a large bar made of hundreds of pieces of hardwood and decorated with slides of attractions from the old Los Angeles Hippodrome Vaudeville Theater. You are in another space and time, a warm British club by way of the Disneyland Haunted House and a performing arts museum, not a flashy modern Vegas showroom of stage illusions, dancing girls, and white tigers.

What first strikes the visitor is the formality of the scene—how dressed up everyone is, chattering like people at an elegant cocktail party. Drinks in hand (but smoke-free in California), people are overheard describing what illusion they just witnessed, or wondering aloud how some trick could possibly have been done. Off in the corner, a few people, mostly men, are doing card tricks. These are the members who gather here regularly to socialize, share secrets and tips, and discuss business. In another corner, a performer might be putting on an informal show of his best tricks for the guests he brought for the evening. The Magic Castle is both a social club for member magicians and a place to entertain the public.
Even people who claim to be uninterested in magic are awed by an evening here. The entire environment is devoted to magic. Guests leave with the smell, taste, words, and unexplained phenomena of illusion. Laws of gravity, common sense, and rationality are apprivingly broken, creating a world of accepted deviation. The marginal becomes centered, the illusory becomes tangible.

Visitors are accomplices in the flim-flam. They agree to be fooled from the moment they utter “Open Sesame” to the gold-plated owl. And we go along for the ride to another era, witnessing many of the same tricks that entertained the public in Victorian times. In a variety of ways, the Magic Castle recreates the experience and feel of entertainment from a different time and place. The low-tech magic equipment (decks of cards, silks, linking rings, ropes, and coins) dominates the space, not the neon lights, techno music, and computer screens of so many contemporary stage shows, or the shops along Hollywood Boulevard a block away. Here is a replica of a more “traditional” time when men and women dressed up amid the warm woods and fireplaces of a 19th-century mansion, willingly accepting the simplicity of the entertainment and the old-fashioned nature of the experience.

Closer inspection reveals that this environment is a world of classic roles. Observant visitors will notice the typically “instrumental” male world of phallic magic wands and swords slicing and dicing female assistants. Historically, and even today, women are often restricted to being palm readers, séance mediums, and mind readers as they perform their more “expressive” magic. Once in a while, the Magic Castle hosts a show by a female magician or schedules an all-women week, inadvertently highlighting the gendered nature of typical performance.

In addition, the international fame of the Magic Castle attracts performers from around the world, yet the magicians are disproportionately white. Although there is a strong Asian influence in magic (especially from China, Japan, and India),

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the image of the magician in the United States is predominantly white and male. What is it about magic that favors white males, unlike many other areas of popular entertainment and performance?

In another time and place, magic was viewed as supernatural. For centuries, illusions were believed to be the work of evil spirits, as the old posters lining the Magic Castle walls testify. Drawings of red devils, disclaimer from ministers, and images of the occult decorate 18th- and 19th-century playbills and theater announcements. In the age of reason, magic was usually based on the latest scientific discoveries that had yet to diffuse to the public: optics, mirrors, electricity, even moving pictures were the secrets of the earliest magicians.

Audiences often thought magicians held real power to transform, disappear, or produce, as they thought priests and other religious leaders could. Yet, magicians were, and are, actors playing the part of someone with real supernatural abilities. Their power is learned, not inherent. But these power roles are typically assigned to men. Women are viewed as the conduits of power, the messengers—literally, the mediums—in communicating between the supernatural world and this one.

For magic to remain entertainment and not become a religious event, perhaps performers invoking power and displaying control over others’ experience of reality must be perceived as having higher status, that is, they should be white men from the middle class (or, in their tuxedos, the upper class). Would we be as pleased to be “one-upped” or fooled by people of lower status? The Magic Castle—in reconstructing a fin-de-siècle space and the classic roles of magician, assistant, and audience—gives us permission to suspend the modern world.

No matter how sophisticated we might believe ourselves to be in the 21st century, we are still fooled by the oldest tricks in the book. The Magic Castle thrives on that by reproducing the atmosphere of that Victorian drawing room era in three showrooms that offer different styles of magic. The wonders of close-up magic, typically with cards and coins, take place in an intimate room on the main floor barely seating 25 people. Here the rules of cause-and-effect are thrown into disarray by the skilful artist performing inches away without trapdoors, mirrors, or a “lovely assistant” to distract you. Sometimes the magician peppers his routine with insiders’ jokes or comments aimed at fooling the fellow magician members in the room, while always keeping in mind that the audience is primarily made up of nonmember guests who are there to be entertained and misdirected along alternate narrative paths, not where logic would normally take them.

Outside the Close-Up Gallery, in the music room right behind the main bar, people are requesting their favorite tunes from a ghost pianist called Invisible Irma, who immediately plays the song or responds musically to questions posed to her (Q: How tall are you? A: “Five foot two, eyes of blue.”). The piano keys move accurately and magically to the requested song. Up a nearby antique staircase is the dining area with its Tiffany glass domed ceiling and 160-year-old etched crystal windows from Scotland. Off to the side is a small room with priceless Houdini memorabilia and a large round table seating 13, reserved for the private séances held nightly. Walking from the dining area along a corridor of magic photos, posters, and playbills, guests enter another level of the Magic Castle, where a bar from a 17th-century London pub sits between two other showrooms, the Parlour of Prestidigitation and the Palace of Mystery.

The Parlour of Prestidigitation is a medium-sized room with a carved proscenium stage frame and around 100 seats that were once part of the old Santa Monica Opera House. (Reused furnishings like these offer their own ghostly resonances.) The performances here capture the kind of magic that might have been shown at a medium distance in a large living room or parlor, not inches away at a close-up table, or rows and rows away in some large stage auditorium. Typically, tricks with ropes, large cards, linking rings, mind-reading routines, and other small equipment are shown in the Parlour.

Most people are familiar with the kind of magic performed on TV by David Copperfield or in a Las Vegas act like that of Siegfried and Roy. Levitations, sawing a woman in half, disappearing doves, and scantily-clad female assistants (never males) typify the stage magic performed in the Palace of Mystery, the Magic Castle’s largest room. Hosted by an emcee magician or comedian and showcasing two or three different performers, the stage magic consists of classic illusions and routines.

Much of what makes magic fun requires a level of reasoning that is suspended or upended through the use of dialogue (the “patter”) and misdirection by the magician. To understand what goes on in performances at the Magic Castle, consider the work of con artists, phony mediums, and street-corner mountebanks who often exploit the secrets of magic and basic social psychology for their own nefarious ends.

A magic trick, in essence, is a structured social interaction working at multiple levels of meaning along with a narrative, and both depend on the definitions of the situation. Take for
example a close-up show in which the magician throws three cards down on the table and asks the audience to follow the queen of hearts. Guests do not wager on the outcome. Yet, while sighting in Times Square, visitors might be tempted to gamble on the whereabouts of the red queen with the guy manipulating cards on the makeshift cardboard table. This “three-card monte” trick is done the same way with the same cards by the Magic Castle magician and the Times Square card dealer. But the definition of the situation, and hence the presentation, changes: People think they are participating in a fair game of chance with the street performer and bet accordingly, but at the Magic Castle guests know it is a trick because they cannot figure out how it is done and are asking to be fooled. They share in the creation of the illusion and go along with the clichéd and stereotyped routines.

The magician’s skill is the ability to subvert the audience’s sequencing of causal events while preventing them from coming up with plausible explanations, even inaccurate ones. The goal of the street-corner con artist is to convince the gullible gambler that there is an honest opportunity to test one’s skills and acuity. You actually have a chance, just like the guy standing next to you who just won forty bucks. Or so you are manipulated to think. Never mind that the “lucky” guy is the assistant to the card shark (a “shill”), doing pretty much the kind of misdirection the magician’s female assistant does in a stage act.

The goal of a magic performance is to entertain, and this is accomplished through the manipulation of every element of the show. The Magic Castle does all this from the moment you talk to a bookshelf owl and are transported to an era long ago when scientific knowledge was sketchy, men’s power to transform was seen as innate, and real magic was a supernatural possibility. Magic works as entertainment when the performer and audience collude on the definition of the situation. And the Magic Castle, from its interior design to the traditional performances of magic, expertly creates the ambience necessary for visitors to suspend the modern and to share in the reality of illusion.

[For more information about the Magic Castle, visit http://www.magiccastle.com.]


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