



Anthony Darkstone Brook in Conversation with Norm Nielsen

Norm Nielsen knows Magic. He knows how to perform it. He knows how to create it. He knows how to build it. He knows how to collect it. He is part of an elite group of Magicians who can speak with great knowledge on several aspects of the Art of Magic. In all likelihood, he is the single most qualified authority on Magic Posters.

Together with his charming & gracious wife Lupe, he lives in a wondrous and enchanting home in a Las Vegas suburb. Their home exudes an air of enchantment and very positive Magical energy. Sharing that home with them is their amazing & very magical dog, Misty, a born performer in her own right.

I had met Norm briefly a few years ago. We re-connected through Gilles, a mutual friend in Paris. Norm was informed I was going to Vegas. He kindly extended an invitation for me to visit him & Lupe at their home. What a delightful & memorable time. I was greatly honored to be treated to a personal tour of Norm's vast and impressive collection of Posters. I was thrilled & much honored to be asked to sign his Guest book.

<http://www.nnmagic.com/>



ADB: Hello Norm. Thank you for taking time to converse. Over the years, much has been written about you in various prestigious publications and sites. You are indeed well-known

internationally by magicians and lay people. I read somewhere that it was your barber that got you hooked on magic. I understand you followed him around trying to figure out how he did his cigarette tricks. Please share with us some of those early years and how you managed to work out the methodology of his tricks.

NN: It's a pleasure to have this opportunity to share with you Tony. When I was nine years old, my dad took me to a barber, that my dad knew performed magic tricks. Little did he know the effect it would have on me. The barber (named Herman Raditz), vanished a cigarette several times and made it reappear. Being a shy boy, I didn't find him again until two years later. On Sundays, Herman would go to several different taverns in the afternoon, and I would sit on the side drinking a 7-Up and watch him perform half a dozen tricks for the customers. After considerable repetition I began to learn how the tricks were done. Herman would not show me the secrets openly, but knew I would learn by watching a number of times.

When I was in my teens, Herman took me to my first magic convention in Whitewater, Wisconsin – sponsored by the Houdini Magic Club of Wisconsin. At the convention, I was exposed to my first real magic shop at the dealer's room, where I met Joe Berg and bought my first trick which was a Color-Changing Silk Tube.

ADB: At that first convention, you were inspired by Neil Foster. What was it that Neil said or did that propelled you to enroll in The Chavez School of Magic in LA?

NN: Neil Foster and Al Sharpe appeared on the gala show of the convention. Al Sharpe did a Miser's Dream, which was very inspirational, but when I saw Neil's act, I was blown away. I heard from someone that Neil was teaching at the Chavez School of Magic.

So when I graduated from high school my plans were to go to California and attend the Chavez College of Magic.

ADB: I understand that you had a bit of a tough time whilst you attended the Chavez school. You worked at a factory and bused at tables whilst you were putting in 5 hours a day, 5 days a week at the school. Well, that's' dedication. Tell us a bit about those experiences.

NN: That is funny; I never thought this to be a very tough time because I was fulfilling my dreams. Spending five hours a day doing magic was a piece of cake, and in order to support myself I had to work. So I worked on the midnight shift at Lockheed for seven or eight months, and then through a friend got a job as a busboy at the King's Arms Restaurant in Hollywood.

ADB: You became quite skilled and were ready to make your mark but an Agent in Hollywood literally changed your Life & indeed your perception of show-business by a single remark....

NN: Yes. I graduated from the Chavez school in 1953 and I had learned all the technical skills but I still needed to develop into an Entertainer. The Agent you are referring to said, "You are magician #453 with this Chavez routine and very skilled at it. Now you must begin to throw out the act you have learned. Develop something of your own."

Harsh though it may sound, it was indeed the best piece of advice anyone had ever given me. All I really wanted to do was make a living at what I loved to do.

ADB: That you most certainly did. You are quite literally known the world over for your signature effect with the white violin. How did that evolve?

NN: Initially I did the Chavez routines, and worked with doves, cards, cigarettes and a large Zombie. But I knew I had to find something different. The first thought was to do a floating trumpet with the keys moving, but I soon realized that the audience would not be able to see the keys moving and it wouldn't mean anything. Then I had a picture in my mind of a violin floating instead of the Zombie ball. I love the sound of a violin anyway, which enhances the effect.

It took several years to develop the violin. The first time I tried it was at the Playboy Club in Los Angeles. On my last show, I asked the band to play something as close to "violin sounding" as they could. There was no vanish at the end, and no climax, and I did not perform it again for the next six months.

Then I found a violinist who was the first violinist from the Turkish Symphony Orchestra. His name was Feti Kopez. He was visiting with a neighbor of mine in Kenosha, Wisconsin. I asked him if he could record some eerie music for the Floating Violin I was working on. He said: "We are having some guests over tonight, and if you will do the Floating Violin for them I will be in the adjacent room watching you and can play the violin." It worked very well, as it gave a lot of life to the violin. He played an old Turkish lament of a mother losing her son. Talk about eerie! Later he recorded the music for me.

ADB: In common with many Magicians and indeed lay people, I have experienced the sheer joy and pure enchantment that you create with that effect. What an amazing background story! Indeed the story about the music is just magical as well. You have performed that effect the world over at several prestigious venues and much has been written and talked about regarding that effect. Personally, I am rather fond of the text you kindly shared with me; This would be an appropriate point to quote John Fisher's words from the book Paul Daniels and the Story of Magic: "This warm, engaging performer weaves a very special spell of wonderetc., etc., Nielsen's specialty, however, is his floating violin, rightly considered to be one of the most beautiful illusions in magic. The instrument takes on a bewitching life of its own as it soars, spins, and plays hide-and-seek behind a silk scarf in Nielsen's hands. Balanced precariously across the strings, the bow moves tantalizingly to and fro to play hauntingly of their own accord. In a last attempt to tame the instrument, the magician throws the scarf high into the air. In less than a second, the violin literally melts away. Nielsen walks forward to acknowledge his applause; from the wings the violin enters at ground level and makes its way to his side. As Nielsen takes his bow, the violin dips the head of his fingerboard as its own cheeky mark of respect. Seldom has a magician endowed a supposedly inanimate object with such telling personality."

Reading words like that must be, no pun intended, music to any performer's ears. Given this wonderful description, you must be overjoyed knowing that your years of work in creating this Masterpiece was all worth while.....

NN: Yes you are right Tony. You know, it is indeed gratifying for any performer or inventor to know that one's work is appreciated. To this day, it gives me personally great joy every time I perform it.

ADB: I can understand that, it is why we perform ...The applause, the acknowledgements. Nevertheless, you told me that you have retired from performing. You said that your last performance was on 28 September, 2008 at the famous London Palladium at the Siegfried & Roy Tribute Gala show. Please share with us the background on that show and your final performance.

NN: The producer of the show was Paul Stone, and I was extremely honored to have been asked to perform at the Tribute Show for Siegfried and Roy. Not only was this an opportunity to perform at such a prestigious venue, but I have always been a big fan of Siegfried and Roy. I also know that John and Pam Thompson, who were in the show with me, were also very excited, as this was the first time we were working at the Palladium.

When I walked out on stage, to my surprise, the audience was lit – because French television was shooting the show for a television special – and as I looked up at the balcony I could see all the glistening eyes and faces of the audience, which is so unusual when you work a theatre like that. Normally, it might make me nervous to see the audience; instead, it gave me a warm welcoming feeling.

ADB: Well, I guess there is only so much travel one can do and I guess there comes a time when there is a lot to be said for sleeping in your own bed every night!!!

Performing may be over for you but you are busily involved in your workshop and your collection of Magical artifacts, especially Posters. I've been a guest in your home and was just overwhelmed by your collections. Orson Wells hangs imposingly over the door gazing down like some Celestial watcher. Chung Ling Soo looks amazingly inscrutable as he peers knowingly from the walls, Tang horses proudly prance across Oriental tables, Cardini passes the time checking the his watch and looking at his original Billiard balls. Many of Señor Wences' amigos,

including the original Pedro lie silent & speechless under glass.....you first met Moreno Wences at The Crazy Horse in Paris, James Dimmare added a Cue ball or two to Cardini kindly share with us some of the stories behind these

NN: Probably 20 years ago, when I was working in Madrid, Victor King (an Argentinean magician), gave me a couple of posters of Fu Manchu. Actually, they were poster pieces. It took two posters to make one. When I got back home to Los Angeles, I pieced the poster together and hung it up in my office. It kind of grew on me.

When I went to another magic convention, Mario Carrandi had a poster of Señor Frakson for sale which I purchased. Frakson was a friend of mine and I never knew he had a poster. I purchased along with it the Carter 3-sheet "Priestess of Delphi", and that was the beginning of the poster collection.

About the other items like Señor Wences' collection, I met Sr. Wences in 1974 while working at the Crazy Horse Saloon in Paris. We became good friends. His wife Taly, and I corresponded after that and we all met many times in New York over the years. When Sr. Wences died at age 103, Taly Wences sent me his act which was in a valise, along with a steamer trunk filled with a lot of Sr. Wences' personal items – photographs, early puppets, etc.

The Cardini Balls were obtained from James Dimmare. The story goes that Cardini gave a set of Multiplying Billiard Balls to Channing Pollock along with deck of his cards. Channing gave them to James Dimmare, and now I got these from James.

ADB: Simply fascinating these background stories and I know there are many more. Much has been published and will continue to be published about your vast collection of original posters. There is no way this article can do justice to your museum. I say museum, because that is what it is, it is much more than just a vast collection. Tell us briefly about this and indeed the Mirror cards on the wall to the entrance to your kitchen.

NN: The museum is a guest house on our property, which is currently being used to display a great part of the posters. We have changed the layout about three times in order to maximize the space. The Mirror Cards you are talking about Tony are exactly that – mirrors.

However, there is as you have observed, much more, each one is personally autographed by each performer, and there are 48 of them. These were made up in sets and there are still a few sets available.

ADB: We can, I am sure converse much on your Posters. But, let me move to another equally fascinating side of your Magic. Over the years, you have acquired a well-earned reputation as the inventor and manufacturer of the high-quality Nielsen line of products, which include, among others, Vanishing Bottles, Rubber Doves and Manipulation Cards. And of course, The Okito line of products.

NN: I started Nielsen Magic, in 1956, as a physical magic shop in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Jay Marshall booked me on a show for the IBM in Chicago where I met a number of the Chicago boys. What surprised me was that after the show, an older gentleman came up to me and handed me his card, and said: "Come and see me sometime." His name was Theo Bamberg (aka "Okito"). That is when I began to visit Theo in Chicago, periodically. Eventually he sold me his tools, and helped me in many, many ways. At that time I was also taking woodworking classes.

Theo was 86 years old when I met him, and it was about 2 years later that I completed the first Okito item, which was the Triangular Mystery. I took it to Chicago to show Theo who was now in a nursing home. When I walked in the room with the Triangular Mystery, Okito sat up in his bed and examined the prop. After about 20 minutes, he looked up at me, smiled and said: "It's goot."

Two weeks later, I found myself back in Chicago at Okito's funeral.

I was so fortunate to have known him. He also gave me permission to make any of the items that he made.

ADB: As always Norm, your “behind the scenes” back stories are just fascinating. All your products are detailed on your site and you have many satisfied Clients both in the US and elsewhere; I guess it would be an understatement to say that purchasing an “Okito” item from you is, to my way of thinking, buying a piece of history from Okito to you and to the proud owner. Do you make custom props if requested?

NN: Unfortunately, I don’t make special items, because we are already so busy with the posters and the items in our line. However, sometimes people have suggested that we make certain items and decorate them in “Okito-style” and we have been happy to do this. Buying a piece of history, well, I never thought of it that way but, I suppose that will be a job for future magicians to determine.

ADB: ..And I'm sure they will agree with me: Your clients also get a “bonus”... props made by an experienced performer. So it is really as you stated before, in conjunction with the Magic. The history, the tradition, the smoothness, the flow, the harmony. I am a great believer in The Harmony of Magic. Speaking of harmony, it has been a very delightful and harmonious experience spending time with you. I am so glad that you shared your time with us. Thank you Norm.

NN: Thank you Tony. You are very welcome. It has been a pleasure. Come by & see us again soon.

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