



Anthony Darkstone In Conversation With Jon Racherbaumer

There are not many people who have been gifted with the skills of a brilliant writer. Even fewer people have the talent to write about magic and magicians. Jon Racherbaumer knows how to use words. He knows a great deal about magic and magicians. When it comes to writing about magic and magicians Jon Racherbaumer is the acknowledged leader.

His name is well known to the magic world and hence also to the readers of The Linking Ring, m-u-m, Magic and Genii. He has written almost 70 books, and to date, well over a million meaningful words on magic. He has the unique ability and genius to make the esoteric understandable.

He is, without any doubt, one of the most prolific writers on magic.

With the excellent use of language and vocabulary he brings passion and value to our ancient art. I am honoured to be on the same Panel of Advisors with him on the magic web channel and it was a distinct honour for me to be on the close-up panel of judges with him at The Society of American Magicians 2001 convention in his home town of New Orleans.

I am proud to be his friend and number 1 fan. I have had the privilege of spending fun times with Jon and I enjoy referring to him as The Thesaurus. He has always been a great source of inspiration to me and I'm indebted to him for several reasons – much too many to list.

I am delighted & honored to share one of our many conversations.

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ADB: Hello, Jon, and thanks for taking the time to share some of your experiences and thoughts.

JON RACHERBAUMER: My pleasure Tony; it is always fun with you.

ADB: Thank you Jon... .likewise. If I recall correctly, some family members sparked your interest in Magic

JR: That's right Tony, my interest in magic was sparked by two uncles. They both performed pocket tricks. Another boyhood friend, Terry Kiser (a retired Hollywood actor best known for playing "Bernie" in the cult film "Weekend with Bernie"), showed me several tricks from a magic set that fooled me badly.

Then I later saw Dr. Harlan Tarbell's full-evening show, which really hooked me. I also borrowed books from the library and started hanging out in magic stores such as the Mazda Magic Shop in Oak Park, Illinois. I joined the Mazda Mystics Ring in 1954. From that day forward, the "snowball" kept rolling and getting bigger.

ADB: The world knows Jon Racherbaumer as a prolific writer and columnist. Where and how did this passion for writing begin?

JR: This may surprise you Tony but as a kid, I detested reading. I didn't begin to seriously read until I was 16 years old when I discovered Emerson's Essays. Back then I also started scribbling free verse; however, the notion of writing anything serious about performing magic didn't hit me until 1967, the year I met Eddie Fields. He asked me to write a notebook of his tricks, which later resulted in my first book, *The Artful Dodges of Eddie Fields*. This led to self-publishing *Hierophant* and *Kabbala* in the 70's.

ADB: I read somewhere that since you were very young man you've always had a secret fear of performing? Is this true and, if so, is it still true?

JR: Dread is a better word; and it was not very "secret." as any perfectionist knows, there are an infinite number of things that can go wrong...especially onstage. Secondly, I prefer to improvise a lot and dislike rehearsing behavioural things—not the tricks, which must be rehearsed—but what I say and do. These are reactionary things, directly obtained from the unpredictable behaviour of spectators. This of course is a scary proposition and, yes, it *still* makes me edgy and nervous. However, this is a source of energy, as well. I like to say that "a magician is a reactor playing the part of a magician."

ADB: Yes I totally understand ...I am , like you , rather fond of not rehearsing the behavioural things and so I know exactly what you mean ... but please amplify ...

JR : In the Don Alan book I wrote (quoting Don): "spontaneity requires a lot of rehearsal." However, having to speak lines verbatim from a scripted performance is like wearing a psychological straitjacket. I would rather work from a predetermined premise or outline. This leaves "room" to make minor adjustments and improvise within that roomy leeway. Working close-up is like being on a blind date with someone you wouldn't mind marrying.

ADB: Share with us your thoughts about your kind of performance and your views on how magic should be performed.

JR: Hmmm! Alright . Putting stage magic aside, close-up magic should be gloriously intimate and vitally interactive. The "fourth wall" is non-existent and, to me, performing is not what I do, but about what happens *with* spectators and *for* audiences. It is about forming a momentary, memorable *relationship*. It is about making the audience, in some meaningful measure, love what you obviously love.

This is less abstract than it sounds. Imagine the same challenges facing a lover about to woo someone he desires. There is a strange combination of fear and daring at work. In short, I want them to remember an emotional experience, not an intellectual one. I want them to care about what they experienced and see some relevance --no matter how slight-- to their life.

ADB: You once told me that actions speak louder than words and that you often like to perform silently. Tell me more about this...

JR: Yes, I did Tony....which brings us back to stage work. There my goal was to re-enact an action sequence that would have the look and feel of a dream. The "magic" had to be remarkably visual and surreal, dramatic and illogical...it had to be beautiful to watch because of its hypnotic and otherworldly aspects.

Patter (speaking words) interferes with casting this kind of spell. Beautiful music, however, can lift audiences onto the dream-waves being created by the "magic." besides, when you are on stage and hear the music yourself, it inspires you to reach for all the transcendent moments that then seem within your reach. I wanted to reify what I saw and felt watching Channing Pollock, Neal Foster, and Cardini as a youngster...they transported me to an alternate universe.

ADB: Yes indeed ..transcendentan alternative UniverseWhen you were 11 years old you entered a contest and even at that tender age and too young to shave, you had your own beard made from your own hair. There was a very special lady involved. Elaborate a little on that story, please...

JR: It was a pet-hobby parade that was judged in the end on the basis of costumes. The special lady you mention was my mother, who was a thespian and make-up artist. She always went all out. I won several Halloween costume contests...masquerading as raggedy Ann and little black sambo (which was politically correct in those days). My face and hands were black, my hair was black and nappy, and I wore rimless glasses. When she made me up as a magician, rather than use a fake beard, my mother used hair from my head and attached it to my chin with spirit gum. The whole process took hours.



ADB: You love words. I love words. You have admitted on many occasions that you love words with as much passion as card sleights. This is evident from the vast amount of books and articles that you have written. Why this passion with words?

JR: Think about it. Words *are* magical. Language is a form of bewitchment. By uttering certain sounds, by enunciating things we call “words,” we are able to convey feelings, ideas, and thoughts. You must respect that kind of power and verbal sorcery.

However, I didn’t get passionate about words until I saw the film, “Hamlet” and heard Dylan Thomas read “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.” later...much later...I fell in love with the language used by poet, Wallace Stevens, and novelist, Vladimir Nabokov. Think about it: what do magicians (even the great Merlin) do to invoke “magic”? They utter magic words!

ADB: I love that remark of yours , “verbal sorcery” – such power ... too many of today’s Magicians seem to ignore that ... care to comment

JR: What is written in the Bible? “in the beginning there was the word...” for everything to begin, God spoke, uttering an invocation (magic words?) —“let there be light...”

ADB: Absolutely, the sound ; you and I can spend months talking about “ Ab Ba Ra Cad Da Bra”. I will resist that temptation and also move away from magic for a moment you work out a lot and watch several movies every week. How do you find the time?

JR: There are 24 hours in a day. You, me, everyone Tony ... you got to make time. I’m as curious as Jerry Andrus about almost everything. I try to read at least 6 books weekly and watch at least 10 films.

I check out at least 20 books every week from the library and I subscribe to 18 non-magic magazines. A few of my long-term interests are body-building, reading literature, book-

collecting, martial arts, studying philosophy, poetry, film, theatre (theory), and mathematical recreations. I go to the gym 3 times a week. Although I'm a bit long in the tooth for heavy lifting, I can still bench-press 225 pounds. Yes, indeed. I have too many interests to list; however, here are a few of my long-term interests: body-building, reading and studying literature, book-collecting, martial arts, philosophy, poetry, film, theatre (theory), astronomy, and mathematical recreations.

ADB: I subscribe to that ... philosophical , physical and mental ...and a fair measure of good-natured mischiefwhich brings us neatly to someone we both admired & still do Jerry Andrus... now's there's a mind ... well.. was ... I had the honor of visiting Jerry Andrus in his home back in 2007. I wrote a piece about that visit but cannot truly do him justice . A truly remarkable mind. Love to hear your thoughts on him

JR: I wrote that Jerry Andrus was one of magicdom's most beloved eccentrics. He did not march to a different drummer. He **was** a different drummer—perhaps **the** different drummer of his generation—the drummer who drummed alone in two universes: his and the much larger one. And he was comfortably at home in both universes. The poet, Wallace Stevens, wrote that “it's a tragedy not to live in the physical world.” Well, Jerry did not make that mistake. He deeply inhabited this physical world in all its guts and glory and throughout his life he was never bored or boring, never dull but always interesting.

Jerry also understood what Joseph Campbell knew: “if the path you are on is beaten, it is not *your* path.” Jerry could have been a path-finder, but he preferred being a *path-maker*. This is why he did not read many magic books. This is why he never performed tricks by other magicians. He appreciated what others created, but he was not interested in imitation or interpretation. This is also why his creations were idiosyncratic and, at first blush, a bit strange.

When Harry Anderson heard the sad news of Jerry's passing, he offered an upbeat aside - one that perhaps Jerry would have appreciated:

“if you close one eye and stand six feet away, Jerry still looks alive!”

As far as I'm concerned, Jerry's legacy of books, films, videos, optical illusions, and other artifacts will always be spectacularly alive. They exist as a kind of “composite soul” that even Jerry might have believed in. One of Jerry's lines now resonates again: “usually when we're fooled, the mind hasn't made a mistake. It's come to the wrong conclusion for the right reason.” May we correctly be conclusive for right reasons as magicians everywhere celebrate sweet memories of being fooled while never feeling foolish. May we also be grateful for the abiding gifts, real and illusory, that Jerry left in his stead.

ADB: You just blew me away Jon Those are the most magical words I have ever heard ... thank you. Let's now get back to card magic for which, you are quoted as saying, " I have a fatal attraction." This led you to Ed Marlo. Tell me a little about your time with him.

JR: Well, Tony, I had the good fortune and privilege of knowing Ed Marlo for almost 30 years, during which we shared many sessions, telephone conversations, and letters. He had a profound influence on my approach to the technical aspects of card magic and how important it is to be passionate and deeply involved in all aspects of it. This was part of Ed's genius and unlike many of his peers, he wrote down most of his findings and kept detailed notes. Spending time with him was indescribable. From an energy standpoint, it was like getting jolts of high voltage, surges of pure dream-stuff. When Ed died, I thought that my magic-connection died. There is, alas, still a “black hole” of emptiness, a dead zone, a disconnect. Marlo was my magical godfather, my dragoman, my mentor, my friend.

ADB: You are 6 foot, 1 inch. You weigh in at 260 pounds. You have long hair and a long beard. Is this a deliberate image or something that just evolved?

JR: Well.... I no longer have long hair now. In fact, I'm lucky to have hair...period. In the past, I never cultivated a particular "image." in fact, because of my eastern religious leanings, I have strived to eliminate or at least minimize anything "ego-aic." what one ends up looking like, if one simply lets it naturally evolve, is often surprising. I initially grew a beard because I looked too "immature" and could not enter nightclubs or adult establishments. The long hair is a holdover from the 60s. Someone once said, "at age 50 one has the face they deserve."

ADB: He! He! He! There's a few punch-lines as a response that are forming rapidly but I shall resist..! Jon, New Orleans home and you have a special feeling for it. Apart from the jazz music, what's the special attraction?

JR: My father moved from Chicago to New Orleans in 1958 and I worked for him during the summer of 1959, falling in love with the exotic, dreamlike, old-world ambiance of the city. When I returned to New Orleans for a Mardi Gras celebration in 1963, I stayed, or as I like to put it, "...and I'm still trying to recover!" There is a strong sense of things being transitory in New Orleans. Everything is in a state of dramatic transformation. Decay and decadence coexists with tropical lushness and fresh beauty. The Big Easy is also a place of escape and recovery. Many people come to "chill out," have a "breakdown," or start a "new life." I enjoy the tension between surrendering to the Southern-Gothic, laid-back lifestyle and dealing with pressures to succeed in a fast-track, big-city way. I lived for a while in the French Quarter and soon realized why writers such as Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and others chose to live and work here. New Orleans is truly a Dream State, and to put it another, more relevant way, a "magical" place that tolerates diversity and eccentricity.

ADB: You've been a magic wordsmith and magician for some 50 years and you must have some amazing stories and experiences. Is there any one or two that you could paraphrase in a couple of sentences?

JR: Meeting Marlo, Chan Canasta, and Tony Slydini, and watching them create extraordinary things with ordinary objects were "stories" unto themselves. Performing for the Governor and mafia leader in the same state, (Louisiana) in the same year, was also amazing. The former is going to prison; the latter spent time in prison. I also performed 3-card Monte for Rupert Murdoch, the gazillionaire media mogul. (I let him win.) And discussed conjuring with Canadian novelist-poet, Margaret Atwood. I had the pleasure of sharing an Italian meal prepared by Francis Ford Coppola. I recently shared another meal and glorious conversation with French film director, Bertrand Tavernier. Talking about all this smacks of shameless name-dropping, but I have found myself in the company of many gifted people without having sought them out. Most of these meetings just magically happened. I feel enormously lucky and privileged.

ADB: Shameless name -dropping ... Jon perish the thought ... it is exactly what I've asked and you kindly shared ... Would it fair question Jon to ask if there have been influences ...?

JR: Of course ...As a youngster I loved watching Channing Pollock, Cardini, and Don Alan perform, each for different reasons. Later, I was bowled over watching Tony Slydini, Albert Goshman, Eddie Fields, and of course Ed Marlo. I learned a lot about subtlety and psychology from Eddie Fields and I learned all about advanced cardmanship and technique from Marlo. In fact, Marlo had a profound influence on me. As far as literary influences are concerned I must cite Martin Gardner, John Northern Hilliard, Walter Gibson, Ted Annemann, Bruce Elliott, P. Howard Lyons, and Victor Farelli.

ADB: Eddie Fields , Ed Marlo ... I know they hold more than a passing interest ... What type of magic do you most enjoy watching?

JR: There is not a category or particular genre that I prefer, but I enjoy any performance, which is intimately *interactive*. That is, the audience must be an integral part of the performance and a certain degree of improvisation must be present. THE BUZZ WORD RIGHT NOW IS “IMMERSIVE.” This usually occurs in a close-up milieu. Also, I prefer magic that uses commonplace properties. In other words, do some *extraordinary* with the “ordinary.”

ADB: What type of magic do you least enjoy watching?

JR: I'm not fond of “epic magic” or “grand illusions.” in Las Vegas and other glitzorama places, “size matters.” the bigger, the better. However, as soon as they pump up the volume, turn on the fog machines, set off the pyrotechnics, and wheel-on the big boxes, I need a snooze-alarm to stay awake. Therefore, I do not enjoy illusionists and find almost anything televised to be inferior to live performance. As technology takes us to new heights and fantastic places, magic will be hard-pressed to compete with future virtual realities.

ADB: Can you share with us the names of a few Magicians who you consider exceptionally noteworthy

JR: This is a difficult to answer. There were four magicians who personally enchanted me, vis-a-vis, and seemed to do truly miraculous things—Ed Marlo, Chan Canasta, Tony Slydini, Finn Jon, and Lennert Green. I also was transfixed by Tommy Wonder and Juan Tameriz. Marco Tempest seems to be on the right track.

ADB: What type of magic do you most enjoy performing?

JR: Anything with playing cards and acts of pure consciousness, i.e. mental magic.

ADB: Do you ever perform tricks by other magicians?

JR: Everything I perform, if and when I perform, I've learned and taken from other magicians. I truly believe we are “parasites of our precursors” and I'm indebted to many, many creative and enterprising magicians over the years. If it were not for them, my repertoire would consist of the prayer vase and the ring off string.

ADB: Do you have a favorite effect or let me phrase it another way, an effect that you favour doing more than others ?

JR: “Open Travellers,” a four-ace trick using the invisible palm. My favourite trick to *watch* is Corinda's “Powers of Darkness.”

ADB: I suppose this is somewhat of a rhetorical question to ask an author but what are your views on books versus videos as learning tools?

JR: Both mediums are important; however, video is a co-expressive tool that permits students to witness timing and how certain performers idiosyncratically handle their methods and presentations. Learning from books is a much different, personal, and lasting experience.

Videos tend to create copycats because the viewer is actually “learning by imitation.” what you see is what you end up doing. Material learned from books is assimilated, then *transmuted* by our own personality. The material becomes us; it is internalized. It is also integrated into what you already know.

ADB: Over the years, in common with many of us , you have accumulated many prized possessions but if I put you on the spot to name one right now .. what would it be? Apart from Jessica of course !!!! What is your most prized possession (regarding magic)?

JR: Ed Marlo's personal copy of *The Cardician*.

ADB: Now that's what I call a prized possession!!! You obviously enjoyed many highlights in your life ..care to comment on that ...?

JR: It's difficult to choose the highlight because there have been many highlights. Having the opportunity and privilege to meet and share life-experiences with so many great magicians and special people over the years are not only highlights, they are *guide*-lights. It never ceases to astonish me that the written word reaches so many people and affects them....Being able to write about magicians and magic is an ongoing "highlight."

ADB: You once told me that having regrets is not necessarily a bad thing

JR: Well.. I've had, like most , a few regrets . A few. Most of them, however, have been tempered by time. But I always consider things I have not yet done and may never get around to doing. These will become inconsolable, abject "regrets"...Sometimes Thoreau's line brightens me: "To regret deeply is to live afresh."

ADB: You have vast library of books. You have even referred to yourself as a hoarder ...so, if someone asked you to recommend 10 magic books or videos, what would they be?

JR: The ten books would be: *Greater Magic* (John North Hilliard), *Expert Card Technique* (Hugard-Braue), *Royal Road To Card Magic* (Hugard-Braue), *J. B. Bobo's Modern Coin Magic*, *13 Steps To Mentalism* (Corinda), *Dai Vernon Book of Magic* (Lewis Ganson), *PRACTICAL MENTAL EFFECT (TED ANNEMANN)*, *Encyclopedia of Impromptu Magic* (Martin Gardner), *Magic & Meaning* (Burger-Neale), and *Expert At The Card Table* (Erdnase).

ADB: We once had a lengthy conversation about effects that fool us and why we should try and avoid performing them ... elaborate a little on that please ...What advice would you give to someone when they are selecting tricks to perform?

JR: I can't tell anyone what effects to perform or not as it is like advising someone about which person to date, woo, and wed. Nevertheless... I usually tell students to mistrust tricks that fool them. Just because something baffles us does not mean it's a great trick or entertaining presentation.

Many magician-foolers don't "play" in the real world; instead they fall flat. You must love—*really* love—performing the tricks you select for your repertoire simply because you'll be performing them over and over, hundreds and hundreds of times. There also must be an aspect in the trick that continually renews your interest or challenges your imagination. The method, after all, seldom changes. Fortunately, the steadfast variable in all performance is the *audience*. The relationships between you and your audience will always be different. This relationship is the crux. Therefore, select tricks that consistently make your spectators responsive and they perpetually bring you joy. The resultant exuberance, by the way, will be infectious. Your audience will sense it and will be induced to become a part of it. Finally, choose tricks that express your personality, attitude, and point of view.

ADB: I'm sure you get asked for advice all the time about what helps to make a good Magician....how do you usually respond ?

JR: Read and have as many real-life experiences as you can. Read lots of magic books; however, read *other* books, as well, and expand your horizons. In short, become a well-rounded, educated person. Study film, theatre, psychology, philosophy, science...in other words, strive for depth.

I've seen many students focus on one or two aspects of magic, usually technique. They can expertly perform a gazillion sleights and they know dozens of ways to perform "Triumph," but they don't know how to "entertain" or inspire.

ADB: I am so glad you brought that up ... lay people as a rule don't really like Magic ... most seasoned Professionals know this only too well and therefore strive for the key element which is to Entertain

JR: "entertain" is a useful word, but it does not fully entail what we think it does. Dictionaries tell us that it means "to agreeably hold an audience's attention." yes, as performers we must do that; it's a given. I like what the trickster (in myth and literature) does: he enters your personal domain (unbidden). He then discombobulates your mind and touches your heart. Then he leaves (disappears?) With the hope that the experience he has given you is transformative!

ADB: Absolutely, indeed ... I am rather fond of the coyote myself ... thank you a gazillion times for that enlightening definition Jon , you understand the part that continual progress plays in our lives ... relate that to performing Magic Your suggestions

JR. Tony, all of us are part of a continuum until we let out our final breaths. I continually revise as a writer and person, and I hope to entertain and express many more thoughts and suggestions in the future. I hope to write a few more books. But if you press me to make a few suggestions, they would be these: dive in and get whole-heartedly into the fray. Study, practice, and participate at the highest level possible. Be yourself. In the process, please appreciate your teachers, mentors, and precursors. Respect them. Pay homage by being the best magician you can.

ADB: if you could hang out for a couple of days with some people (either living or dead) and not be interrupted by phone calls or secular demands, with whom would you like to hang out ?

JR: Vladimir Nabokov, Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.N. Hofzinsler, and James Dean.

ADB: Jon , as always , it has been a very great pleasure spending time with you. Thank you .

JR: You are most welcome Tony . Been a real pleasure for me too.

