

Q and A with Chris McCauley (Bowers)

Q. When did you decide to become a Magician?

A. I was in a bookshop: Barbarian Books. It's right near Barry's Magic Shop. I picked up a book on magic. Suddenly I thought "Hey, I could be a magician! Maybe that way, I could make money while engaging in an artistic sort of thing!" I walked up to Barry's and told him I wanted to start, and I bought a book. This was 4 years ago.

Q. Just like that?

A. Just like that.

Q. What led you to this decision?

A. Well, I started to get back into magic when I was in college. I did magic when I was a kid, but I never studied it that seriously. I got into juggling and magic a bit and entered into a talent competition with a friend of mine. Then, after college, I drifted between careers, and thought about getting a master's in philosophy, but there was no market for that, because it was right after the dot com crash. Each professorship in academia had around 50 people applying for it. Since I would have to lay out my own money for grad school and go into debt, I decided against it. But I still took a few graduate courses in education, and became interested in alternative curriculums.

Q. What did you base the Mystery Academy curriculum off of?

A. It's based on the Martial Arts model of Dale Tompkins, to be exact, and his organization TKA, where I teach Karate. Karate is an interesting learning experience. It engages every single one of the senses. It has a lecture portion, an individual practice portion, and a cooperative practice portion. This is very unlike academia, which is mostly lecture. I also modeled the business aspect off of TKA. Dale had the idea to have his classes run through existing educational institutions (elementary schools and rec centers) instead of renting out or buying a building. I also set out to create an educational program that could be run through the county.

That way, we take care of advertising, fees, and renting the space easily and inexpensively. This lets you concentrate on teaching.



Q. Why, exactly, did you want to start Mystery Academy?

A. Well, I wanted to teach kids, but, being learning disabled, and having a lot of difficulty with school myself, I possessed angst for traditional grade based learning. I thought the idea of a teacher assigning a value to your performance demeaning, and to be absolutely blunt, morally wrong. Too many times in myself and others, I saw hard work rewarded with bad grades, and no work rewarded with good grades. The belt ranking system made more sense. It provided structure without confining artistic desire, and it provided achievement without specific valuation. As well, in Karate there was a serious acknowledgement that your belt rank wasn't ever completely indicative of your ability, just your performance.

Q. Well, that explains the curriculum, and why you set it up that way, but why did you want to do it? Why do you want to teach kids?

A. That's a good question. Well, what do I like, and what do I want to teach? I like Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology, History, Acting, Comedy, and Performing. I like doing these things, studying these things and teaching these things. Magic encompasses all those areas. I also think that children are really cool. I actually never grew up.

Q. What do you dislike most about education and the way children are treated?

A. Mostly I dislike it when parents and teachers are patronizing. Patronization is a false message that children quickly pick up on. They know that you don't really mean it, and it hurts them. I never compliment children unless I really, in my heart, mean it, and children know that. When I compliment them they know that I respect them as a performer. I'm not going to tell them that the trick was perfect when they drop all the cards on the ground. When you patronize children, you are both belittling them and lying to them, while at the same time robbing them of achievement. How can they achieve if you tell them everything they do is wonderful? You're setting the bar at the zero level of achievement.

Q. So you see Mystery Academy as an antidote to that? Do you really think that you can promote a more positive attitude than normal educators?

A. I hope so. There are things about regular education, particularly in the public speaking/magic/comedy/acting area, that I hope Mystery Academy will address. There is, in a way, a socially unconscious selection of males over females for speaking performance. This trend upsets me because to be honest, my best students in my classes in the 5-10 age range are females, period. A boy in this age range being better than a girl is rare to the extreme. In every single way they are superior to males at magic, both from a performance aspect and in the area of sleight of hand. There is simply no comparison. This is because girls are more socially developed at this stage they aren't as afraid of being the center of attention (and feel comfortable there). In the area of sleight of hand, females are superior because they have a kind of naturalness to their movement that boys their age rarely possess. Boys are taught to be strong, and that strength leads to tension, and muscle tension ruins sleight of hand. Girls at this age range haven't yet begun to feel self conscious, yet boys already do feel that way, are nervous, talk differently and in monotone, and so forth.

Q. Why don't females often continue and fulfill these roles in our society?

A. What's unfortunate is that when females in our society reach the age range of 11-13, this ability drops off, because they are pushed into other roles. Instead of being encouraged and taking this ability farther, this potential isn't allowed to fully develop. Socially, females are often discouraged from performance, unless it is a "socially acceptable" area of performance like ballet or choir. They are discouraged from areas like comedy, magic, public speaking and other areas of live performance and men are encouraged to pursue these roles. Name six popular female stand-up comedians off the top of your head. I bet you can't. I know I can't! Name six popular female public speakers off the top of your head. It's difficult isn't it? But if this ability is encouraged, rather than locked away, females become amazing performers, entertainers, and leaders.

Q. Do you really think that teaching a bunch of magic tricks to children is that important?

A. That's a good question, because teaching here is really only a few simple tricks. But, in some way, the tricks are nothing; they're only a vehicle with which to teach other things. That's why we have a Magicians' Code, to begin to teach kids the principles of basic ethics. Eric Henning came and lectured about the history and symbolism of the magic wand for 30 minutes to a group of 7 year olds at Mystery Academy just recently. They sat spellbound the entire time! Magic teaches history and mythology as well. It's also a DIFFERENT type of learning. When I was doing badly in school, I thought I was a bad person, a stupid person. Lots of kids do badly in school. But school isn't the only way to learn. There are quite a few learning disabled students at Mystery Academy, because their parents are trying anything to get them to learn! We even have some mentally handicapped students.

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But school isn't the only way to learn.”**

Students discover that they are good at a participatory type of learning, a tactile type of learning. I think that's important. Then when they discover that they can achieve at something intellectual, they realize that they can achieve at school as well.

Q. Do you really think that Mystery Academy reaches that far into the minds of children? That it can affect their actual confidence?

A. I know extra curricular activities did for me. Without Karate I would have given up on school, I would have never made it out of high school, much less college. But Karate taught me that I had other intellectual capacities, and I could use those in school. I realized that I was smart, that I could achieve, and that through perseverance I could succeed, even against overwhelming odds. Think about how many life changing teachers you had. Those teachers are few and far between. At Mystery Academy, we are entirely no pressure. We're here to teach magic, but if we teach a mentally handicapped kid for a month, and all we can achieve is one good card trick, that's enough. We're there for the continuing positive regard for the children, not to make sure they can find a card. That's just a pretense.

Q. What is the Mystery Academy ranking system? Why is it important?

A. Magic is VERY loose in organization and structure. There are no certifications, recognitions or academic achievements in the area of magic. There are few official designations. Mystery Academy is currently developing these ranks and the curriculum to give achievement levels to Magic for both children and adults. Having achievement levels provides structure, without attaching stigma to failure. Students are given a broad choice of material, and freedom in performance, but it helps them achieve specific goals in this format. The examination takes two stages, critical examination and public performance. The critical examination is done by a panel of magicians on a pass/fail basis. The public performance is done for the public; students test and perform various materials together.

Q. What do the different ranks mean?

A. They all have mythological significance. They represent different stages in life, magical, psychological, and artistic development. They measure performance achievement but not actual ability. The rank only indicates that your performance was at a certain level on that particular night. It does not measure you as a person, but is a symbol of your attainment in magic.

Q. What kind of magician are you?

A. I specialize in coins. Coins, for some strange reason, are the item most familiar to a martial artist. The technique is very physical and demanding, but the tricks are simple. Many card tricks involve memorizing a complicated series of steps. Coins are also hard; they work well with strong hands. Cards, on the other hand, require a delicate touch. I don't have a delicate touch. Cards are subtle. There is nothing subtle about coins, they are strictly physical. You don't do complicated moves and procedures to do a coin trick. There is no memorization or light touch. There's simplicity with coins. What's the maximum number of coins you use in a trick? Six? Twenty for the Miser's dream? A deck has 52 cards! How am I supposed to remember all that?



Q. Who is your favorite Magician?

A. I can answer without hesitation. Albert Goshman. He was an incredible sleight of hand artist, and had an incredibly funny character. My Dad bought me his book when I was like, ten years old, and I still have that copy. Though I was too young to understand any of the tricks, I read his life and times and found it very inspiring. His philosophy was very strong, his technique excellent, he was incredible all around. He said "YOU ARE THE MAGIC!" "The tricks," he said "just come along for the ride." Denny Haney is also incredible. He's incredibly funny, and he's incredibly technically proficient. His card manipulation skill is rivaled by no one; at the same time, he has an incredible character on stage. Both his skill and his performance are consummate. An inspiring thing about successful magicians in general, is that they come from very, very low on the totem pole of life. There is no nepotism in magic, and money doesn't really help you. You have only your art to sustain you. There isn't a professional performer out there that hasn't been tested in the fire by disappointment and hard, desperate times.

Q. What's your favorite book on Magic?

A. Once again without hesitation: "**The Amateur Magician's Handbook**" by Henry Hay. In it you find the nuts and bolts of magic, extremely difficult stuff and surefire stuff as well. You also get a serious dose of philosophical insight. "**The Magic Handbook**" by Peter Eldin is the perfect text for Children. I recommend it highly. The **Tarbell Course in Magic** is completely amazing. Bill Tarr's "**Now You See It, Now You Don't**" is the only treatise on magic where the pictures actually make sense to a regular person. J.B. Bobo's "**The New Modern Coin Magic**" is a must have. One of the clearest writers in magic is Phil Goldstein. Those are my official

recommendations.

Q. You do largely comedy magic, why comedy magic?

A. It is virtually impossible to do magic without comedy in today's current society. More and more in our society people associate intelligence with their own self worth. If you "fool" them, that's like saying "you're a bad person because I'm smarter than you." Serious magic is nearly impossible in today's cultural climate (though it plays very well in Europe). In order to allow themselves to be fooled, the audience MUST LIKE YOU and ALLOW you to fool them. Self-deprecation, humility, lightheartedness and comedy are necessary. People want to be entertained, not made fools of. People must be given a CONTEXT in which to be fooled. If the context is correct, they will allow it. Contexts such as "I'm silly and fun to be around" will allow people to drop their guard. As well, a story about "what happened" is more entertaining to people, and people will allow themselves to be drawn in, because the focus is off of the audience, and the spotlight is on the experience. Tricks where the "magician makes good" are very powerful, because the audience sees you make an "apparent" mistake, and you ask them for their help in order to correct it. When you succeed they are cheering you on instead of being involved in an intellectual struggle. Even David Copperfield in his recent stage show does comedy bit after comedy bit, he's basically all comedy! Back in the 80's he was the "cool guy". Now he's a self-effacing jokester who puts people in bizarre situations. What a change! But that's how society is right now.

Q. Who are your biggest influences on your comedy?

A. Number one is my Dad. My Dad introduced me to the comedians of the 40's and 50's. W.C. Fields, The Marx brothers, the Three Stooges, and so forth. This comedy was so different from the crappy sitcom humor of the 80's that I latched onto it immediately. Thanks Dad! Also my uncles Tom and Jack have been EXTREMELY influential in my comedy, and they are all very dear to my heart. My aunt Claire, who just passed away, was hilarious even unto her deathbed. When in the hospital in her last weeks, a doctor came to her bedside and asked "Are you awake? Do you know who the president of the United States is?" She replied "Well it was Nixon when I came in here, but it's been so long I don't know who it is now!"

Q. That's very courageous, to laugh in the face of death like that.

A. Yes it is. Laughter is something unique to humans; it is part of what makes us human. I was just at Magi whirl, and I asked Mr. Kohlhafer, of Kohl and Company, what makes one person funny onstage, while another person isn't. He replied "Comedy is something very personal; it's not something everyone can share. If you aren't ready to be personal with an audience, you will never be that funny." I think that's very true, and I think that laughter is vitally important in our lives. I know I couldn't survive without it.

Q. Where do you see Mystery Academy in five years?

A. Hopefully we will have classes all over MD, DC, and VA, with different teachers (not just me) teaching magic. I know many magicians who are interested in joining Mystery Academy and spreading the legacy of magic to a younger generation. In our society, we have become too cynical. I think Mystery Academy can be part of the solution. People need to believe in Magic again because Magic makes people imagine, wonder, and believe that they can achieve the impossible.