

Feminine Magic

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ABSTRACT

Having been introduced to magic by my father, I have adapted the classic methods to work in my role as a mature female teacher. Using performance and mysterious narrative, intriguing props and playing on my femininity, the classic magician routines have served me well when performing for teenagers. Reworking the classic routines in this way ensures that a school magic club for teenagers serves the various needs of both male and female students.

KEYWORDS

teenagers, girls, magicians, femininity, performance, confidence

I held out the deck of cards, a bicycle deck. I had said nothing. I had done nothing beyond holding out a deck of cards in dealers' grip. The teenager turned to his friends and said 'I know this one'. The girls wandered off.

A week later, the teenagers were around a table. I slowly unwrapped the leather pouch and took from it a very old deck of cards. I told how they had belonged to my great-grandmother and have magic powers that I don't understand. I held the precious deck out to show them, in dealers' grip. No-one already knew it and none of the girls wandered off.

This essay is not just about being a female magician, but about being a feminine one. I'm always dressed in long skirts, lots of jewellery and all the trappings of somebody who loves being female. This essay is about the reasons I feel there are not many feminine magicians.

Teenage boys, and many men, do not like a woman tricking them. It diminishes their status among their mates. Teenage girls are not interested in a wonderfully clever production of four aces from an apparently shuffled deck. They are young women for whom poker is an intensely dull topic.

I live, write and teach in Australia. For many years, I have performed a show in schools called 'Science and the Paranormal'. It is essentially a celebration of the joy of physics. I demonstrate that the physics explanation for walking across a pit of glowing coals without getting burnt is far more interesting than any 'mind over matter' pseudoscience and how spontaneous human combustion can be modelled, without the spontaneity and without a hint of the paranormal. Amid the weird and wonderful science, I embed magic routines to explore the nature of time and the psychology of experimentation. In that setting, where I'm there as a scientific authority, the magic works in absolute treat. even in a theatre full of hundreds of teenage boys, no-one already knew that one. No-one was threatened by my tricks.

But take out a deck of cards in a close-up scenario, and it all changes. It's fine for a woman in long skirts and spider rings, to use trickery on stage in science demonstrations, but it's not fine for the same woman to trick you in front of your mates at close range.

There are many suggestions for handling spectators and retaining control, but that just doesn't suit my style. I suspect doesn't suit a lot of women performers. So I chose another direction and handed over the power to the cards. It's the cards which trick people, not me. They trick me as well. When asked how I did that, I simply shake my head and claim ignorance. In a stereotypical feminine guise, it just works. They know, in truth, that I am a magician and they have just been tricked. But this time they laugh.

My close-up set consists of stories of my great-grandmother, the source of my ancient cards. Great-grandmothers, as I'm sure you realise, are sweet little old ladies. Mine starts out being fooled by trickster, the original owner of the cards. They are sympathetic, of course, and glad that the trickster who dared trick an old lady is defeated. Great-grandmothers were never young, it seems. The term implies an elderly status. Using a curse, which is quite within the realms of a sweet little old lady, she waves her spider rings and gains the cards for herself. As the routines progress, my great-grandmother is slowly revealed as a trickster herself, using these cards for her personal gain. The opening routine reveals how the cards have come down through the family, the instructions for their use hand written in a small book which is always kept with them. Within the leather pouch are small packets of cards wrapped in old paper. The spectators always ask what is in them, and each is carefully unwrapped, demonstrated and carefully wrapped again, each routine a little more sinister than the last. My great-grandmother's sweetness dissolves over the course of the set and with it, so does mine. I start as a sweet little lady, and end as a magician. Teenage boys are not threatened at the outset and are drawn in before they assume the traditional dominant role.

This set of routines works extremely well for both boys and girls, but I will tend to use more manipulation of the cards with boys, and more interactive narrative with girls. I do that because that's what I found works. I also use the same set with adults, with the same slight changes depending on the audience.

What about girls and boys who might want to become magicians themselves? I have run magic clubs in schools for many many years, but until recently they were either in all-girls or all-boys schools. The differences between the genders showed up most clearly over the last few years establishing a magic club in a co-educational school.

I specialise in teaching enrichment programs in mathematics, science, creative writing and the humanities in secondary schools here in Australia. Most of the students I deal with are very bright, some quite quirky. I've always run lunchtime clubs which serve the fundamental purpose of having a room open where anyone was welcome, where misfits fit in. What went on in that room was dictated by the enthusiasms of the characters who walked in the door, whether part of my enrichment program or not. Science fiction, maths puzzles, Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy, poetry, geek joys, journalism, writing, strange guests, sitting around and arguing – and magic. I did some magic and was always asked if I would start a magic club.

The description given here is of a new magic club at a rural high school. It describes one particular group of students aged between 11 and 15. Although I believe the

gender divide would be similar with other groups, it cannot be assumed that any individual girl or boy would fit the stereotypes which emerged.

The magic club was declared open to all, the news spread only by word of mouth. At first I had a dozen boys and one extremely confident girl. We played around with different genres; some chose cards, some coins, some ropes, some sponge balls, some performed in silence, some as comedy, some alone and some in small groups. Personas developed, preferences emerged. A few started attending less regularly when they found it wasn't just one long revelation of secrets. A lot more appeared, all boys, asking that they may be included. Every new member of the club was given a pristine deck of bicycle cards and shown a few simple routines, just to get them going.

One Friday, four young girls in their early teens asked if they could see me outside the room. They wanted to do magic, but were scared to come in. They had assumed that any girls in the group would be required to (and I quote) 'play the bimbo tarty assistant'. That is the only image of women in magic they have seen in the media. But those in my enrichment group had seen me performing. Now they wanted to try it too, but were worried about the large and sometimes boisterous, group in the room. Given some of the boys loved showing off, I suggested they just come in as audience. They were welcomed by the boys, who delighted in performing for them. That week, they just watched. The next week they were given their deck of cards. Another three girls arrived the following week and sat and watched and claimed a deck.

One of the boys was far more interested in creating flashy spreads and fans than performing actual tricks. He was mesmerisingly good at manipulating a deck; fanning them, spreading them in curves on the table, making them lift in waves of movement. He was extremely weak academically, barely able to read, but something about the cards enthralled him. He practiced and practiced. The girls were in entranced, asking him to flourish and spread the cards over and over. His confidence grew with their attention. With their new decks in hand and his guidance, the girls were soon producing perfect fans, gorgeous spreads and showy shuffles.

One week, I showed the whole group my collection of unusual card decks. Most of the boys were briefly interested and return to their bicycles, coins, ropes and trick wands. Most of the girls were intrigued. The boys would happily perform routines which were underprepared. The girls were reluctant to perform even when fully practiced.

Although some of the girls borrowed one of my decks, within a few weeks the girls had been online and search through deck after deck after deck until they had found something that they felt really suited them. They were turning up with wonderfully

illustrated fantasy decks, antique decks, character decks and tarot decks. Some decks were tiny, others just weird. Some of the girls were sought out high card quality because they still wanted to do their beautiful fans and magnificent spreads. For others this was of no consequence. Two of the girls went into mentalism as well, and one into balloon animals, but most loved choosing their cards. They made props to go along with their stories and wrote complicated scripts, usually involving two or three of them.

Within another few weeks, I had two independent magic clubs meeting in adjoining rooms, both quite happy to watch each other's performances but interacting very little on development of their routines. One was predominantly girls, but by this stage one of the boys had decided he liked what was going on with all the props. He changed camps. The other group was predominantly boys, but my very confident girl stayed with them, performing the same routines as they did. Two other girls arrived and joined the boys group, but their interest was in the boys not the magic.

The way each of the groups developed their routines and learned the tricks of the trade was also markedly different. I had thirty of the standard magic tuition DVDs available, and many of the boys watched them and learned from them. Very few of the girls did, other than for balloon animals. Both groups used YouTube once they understood what was possible, and sought out the methods which suited what they wanted to do. The boys were far more likely to copy a routine, patter and all. The girls were far more likely to seek methods to adapt to their own creativity. The boys worked independently, but liked my excessive praise when they performed. The girls wanted me closely involved in every stage of development.

It was after a few more months that I noticed a change. A few of the boys and a few of the girls had taken their magic very seriously and were working on it for hours at home. Their parents had started investing in their magic, financially and with support. Those boys started to ask the girls for ideas for developing their personas and adapting the tricks they particularly liked to their own style. The girls, who were by now performing confidently, started coming up with ideas and asking the boys if they knew methods which would serve the purpose.

They also started performing publicly. The boys were entering talent competitions or performing at local events. The girls had put together a children's party show which they did at birthday parties for their younger siblings.

What does all this say about girls, boys and magic? They behave differently, as audience and as potential magicians. But that generalisation can never be applied to individuals. My very confident girl is still performing with her bicycle deck and no-one even suggests they've seen it before. She commands the spectators from the

outset. Although none of the boys have chosen to use unusual card decks, a few of them have started creating narratives and unusual props for their performances.

And my very weak student? He still creates the best fans and the most beautiful flourishes. It's the first thing he's ever done in his life a standard better than others. It's the first thing he's ever done his life with a standard even remotely equal to others. And his schoolwork has improved immensely.

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