

Never Been Busier. Personal Reflections on My Lock-down Experiences

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March 2020 will forever be remembered by me for the country entering lockdown and a two day period where five months' worth of shows and gig bookings (including a full run at the Edinburgh Fringe) were cancelled. Seven months on and we return to lockdown after a summer where restrictions were lifted and the number of cases rose again. Being back in lockdown has given me an opportunity to reflect on the past 7 months and put my experiences down on paper.

I am a full-time performer (Magic, Storytelling¹ and curator of Mr Punch's Cabinet of Curiosities) and prop maker (magic and live action role-playing props) and all my income comes from these activities. I went full time 18 months ago after 25 years working in IT in the City of London and UK universities.

I lost all my spring and summer bookings in a two day period, like many of my fellow performers. The immediate future looked fairly bleak for the short to long term and it was clear that I needed to embrace this as a big opportunity rather than bemoan my lot in life. By being put into lockdown I was forced to stop what I was doing and given something I had never had before, the gift of time. I use the phrase 'gift of time' as I have never been in a situation where all my plans had been cancelled, and I was being forced to stay at home.

I spent the first week reorganising my home workspaces. My 'spare bedroom' magic studio and electronics workshop got sorted out and my garage workshop was cleared and reorganised. Along with this was an electronic cleanse of email and electronic files. Finally, I marked the start of lockdown by beginning a new notebook.

It soon became clear this was not going to be a short lockdown, so I looked with interest to Rishi Sunak's (Chancellor of the Exchequer) support schemes for the self-employed. As someone who has always paid their tax (I like schools, the NHS, and local services), I was expecting some form of support. Sadly I managed to join the estimated 500,000 people who 'fell through the cracks' and

¹ www.ashtoncartermagic.com

was ineligible for any of the schemes, including Universal Credit. So no Government help and many a rude word for our 'glorious leaders'. With no immediate support available I needed to find ways to generate income. I watched with interest as performers tried to transition to online performance. Zoom became the word of the season and magic dealers tried to provide effects suitable for online shows.

As lockdown continued I received two commissions for magic props which gave me a much needed boost. Both required significant time in design and creation and would enable me to pay bills, but this was hampered by all the shops I get my materials from being closed.

One of the many casualties of the lockdown was in-person meetings for social groups. I have a popular series of talks available on a variety of magic topics for such groups and word of mouth amongst the groups provides me another source of performance and income. At the request of one of these groups I converted my schools magic workshop to be online friendly and began offering online magic tuition. So far I have taught over 400 people introductory level magic. This has been a very rewarding avenue as many of my students have been ladies, and within the magic community we need more female practitioners.

I was invited to take part in an online reinterpretation of the classic work 'The Decameron' by Giovanni Boccaccio (c. 1353), written in part as a response to the 1340's plague epidemic that hit Italy. In Boccaccio's book seven women leave the plague-ridden Italian city of Florence and escape to a secluded villa. Concerned at what may happen they carefully selected three male friends to join them. To pass the time, the group decide that each of them will tell a story in the evening and take turns to be the 'King or Queen' of the day, providing a theme for the day's stories and introducing and concluding the story sessions. Over the two weeks they stayed in the villa they told 100 stories, with days off on holy days and one day a week to enable household chores to be completed.

The project was initiated by Dr Daisy Black, a medievalist, theatre director, storyteller and folk dance teacher, who works as a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Wolverhampton². Using Facebook to recruit volunteers for the project, over 60 storytellers volunteered their time, creativity and technical skills to record 100 stories in total. These were then divided into

2 <https://daisyblack.uk/>

groups of ten stories and people volunteered to become the 'Monarch of the Day' and introduce the tales.

The project was as inclusive as it could be and people were invited to submit a tale regardless of them being professional or amateur storytellers. Participants were asked to record their stories with whatever technology they had available, whether that be a full studio or just a mobile phone. Some people recorded in their homes, at their places of work or outside in gardens and fields. The important thing was that the stories should be less than 10 minutes and audible.

With such a wide selection of people taking part came a wide selection of stories, from traditional folk tales through to modern musings, covering the full range of human emotions. The videos were uploaded to YouTube and can be viewed via this link: <https://youtu.be/OUAzKGnzqHo>. One year on, in April 2021, the 'Modern Decameron' has received over 15,000 views. The project received more stories than was required and an additional two days of stories were uploaded. It was a joy to be part of this project and watching the other storytellers was a fun and relaxing way to spend time during the initial weeks of the lockdown.

In the first week in August I was pointed towards a new tea shop/bar opening up in Sheffield that had a wizard theme (The Steel Cauldron³). After speaking to the boss I had an interview and was hired on the spot as 'Wizard in Residence' (the first such role in the UK as far as I can find). The Cauldron took over a disused bar and the owners signed the lease and received the keys for the venue the day before the March lockdown was announced. Without access to building materials and tradespeople, they transformed the old bar into a fabulous wizard themed venue, including eclectic chairs and tables, indoor fairy tree, bookcases full of potion bottles and spell books and all manner of wizardly bric-a-brac.

As the Government urged everyone to spread the virus through 'Eat Out to Help Out', a scheme whereby the Government would subsidise meals by up to £10 per person, the venue opened. The timing of the scheme coincided with the school summer holidays and we were delighted to be fully booked for the entire month of August. For any new business, the first few weeks of trading are a huge learning curve, and the team at the Cauldron had no opportunity to gently open to ensure everything would run smoothly. On the day it opened we had 300 people enjoy their 'Wizard's Teas', a variation of the traditional

3 <https://www.thesteelcauldron.co.uk/>

afternoon tea comprising of cake, sandwiches, sweet treats such as chocolate frogs and magically named drinks including glitter filled soft drinks, butter-beer milkshakes and all manner of teas and coffees. I plied my trade as host and wizard amongst the packed out Cauldron alongside two other magicians. Moving from table to table performing magic, duelling with wands and generally having a great time playing with the guests, all of which had to be done in a 'Covid secure' way, particularly wearing a mask at all times and sanitising both our hands, but also our props. I changed much of my close-up magic set to remove instances of the guests having to touch my props such as holding objects.

The venue opened to fantastic reviews and happy smiles from young and old. It was amazing to see so many people getting dressed up in their wizard costumes and we hosted many wand-wielding wizards, witches, warlocks, fairies, goblins, several vampires and a family of goblins. This gave me a much needed boost after the frustrations of losing gigs at the start of lockdown. During the 87 days in 2020 the Steel Cauldron was open, we had no reported cases of Corona Virus infection in the staff or guests and we put this down to our careful instructions, cleaning schedule and ensuring as much ventilation of the building as possible.

This role also gave me the opportunity to develop my love of character based magic and playing the wizard has been a joy. Never one to 'not get involved', I made it my task to learn as much as I could about the business of running the venue and as the Government urged the people in the creative arts to 'Retrain'⁴ I can safely say I became a trained barista.

As lockdown eased in September I continued to work at the Steel Cauldron, build props and give talks online, and in many respects I have never been busier.

During the initial lockdown it was very interesting to see how the magic industry and its performers responded to an overnight ending of live performance in the United Kingdom. Magic dealers very quickly responded by bringing out new effects and instructional videos focusing on performing online shows. As a magic creator myself, I can appreciate the need of the magic dealers to move quickly to ensure their businesses could survive. The shelf life of a new magic trick is very short. Once a product has been released, it will sell

4 <https://www.classicfm.com/music-news/coronavirus/chancellor-rishi-sunak-suggests-musicians-get-another-job/> last accessed 13/04/2021

quickly for a couple of weeks and then the next 'latest and greatest' trick will arrive and sales will slow down considerably. This requires magic dealers to constantly be releasing new items.

Performers began doing shows online and trying to market these new types of show. My personal take on this was a feeling of being underwhelmed by what was happening. Magic as a performance art is almost unique in making the audience part of the show. At its best, magic creates an intimate bond between performer and audience member that is best appreciated without the poor camera angles, bad lighting, lag and dodgy internet connections that some online shows created.

Online shows are most akin to magic on television and to be successful, careful camera work, lighting and direction are needed to ensure the performer can create the same magical moments as their live performance. Setting up a webcam on your close-up mat and doing your normal card routines falls flat if you have not considered how your audience will experience the magic.

This was hilariously summed up by the person who created a 'Hitler Reacts Meme' where deep in his bunker Adolf Hitler bemoans the quality of online magic shows and rages about everyone jumping on the bandwagon⁵. I quickly decided online magic shows were not for me. However, my online tutorials and illustrated talks worked very well with this new medium, but still required careful planning and the purchase of some decent lights.

The practicalities of performing in 'Covid safe way' such as wearing a mask has been a challenge, but not as hard as some would make out as long as you speak up, slow down and smize (smile with your eyes). I am glad I took time to learn some mime and clowning techniques when I was in my 20s. These physical theatre methods have made it much easier to 'communicate' with people during my performances. I found the transition to performing in a mask easier to make than many of the magicians I interact with, and this highlights the lack of wider 'theatrical performance' skills we have within the magic community. When we work with magicians in a mentoring capacity we should encourage our students to look at, and learn from, other performance styles, to take acting classes and develop their storytelling skills.

The need to keep the magic in 'my hands' and away from the spectators' hands to reduce the potential transmission of the virus has been a challenge for many

5 <https://www.captiongenerator.com/1771422/Virtual-magic-shows>

performers. Giving an object to a spectator is a powerful way to involve them in the magic and make impossible things happen. A strong example is making a sponge ball multiply in their closed hand. Hard props, such as the wooden wand I use, could be easily and conspicuously cleaned with a small bottle of hand sanitizer in front of the audience, but in general keeping the props away from the spectators' hands was the best approach and regularly commented on in positive feedback from the customers.

Reflecting on this period of time for this paper, I am glad that I came into magic late in my life. I spent my early career working in private sector IT and project management roles in the City of London and in the charity sector. Those 25 years have given me a lot of experience of running and supporting businesses and implementing new methods of income. That entrepreneurial spirit, along with a broad set of key skills, has allowed me to have a much more comfortable lockdown than many. It was not easy and I had to make many changes, but I was always able to bring in enough money to pay my bills and I now have several new income streams that I am very happy with and that can continue in the future.

It is clear that performance opportunities will need to be creative in the coming months as we hope that a vaccine can be found and that Brexit will not be as disastrous for the country as looks like it will. Across the magic industry I have seen many performers bemoaning the lack of opportunities, but I have also seen some embrace the opportunities and take a few risks to develop their performance practice.

The 1918 Spanish Flu closed many theatres as well as the blossoming film industry. Flu bans on film theatres were imposed by public health officials in the UK and US⁶. There was a big shake up of the industry. I foresee similar post-Covid. It may take a long time to get people back into the theatres and for people to begin employing magicians again at weddings and events.

Yet if history shows us anything it is a continual need and place for live entertainment. I believe the gigs will return and the show will go on. As performers, we need to be flexible and embrace the changes we may need to make. I am happy to perform in a mask without my props being touched, but I have seen many complain this means they cannot perform! I doubt they will

6 Jordan, M. (2020) The Conversation 'Movie theaters are on life support – how will the film industry adapt? August 12, 2020 12.59pm <https://theconversation.com/movie-theaters-are-on-life-support-how-will-the-film-industry-adapt-143877> accessed 15 Nov 2020

survive with that sort of attitude and I will be more than happy to take the gigs they are missing out on.

Addition thoughts: April 2021

Since originally writing this paper in November 2020, the United Kingdom has entered into a second and third period of lockdown. We are currently opening up after being in lockdown since January, but the future looks brighter, several vaccines have been given approval and as a country we are doing very well in delivering it to everyone. We must tread carefully over the coming year, but the show must go on.