

# No Touch Magic Experience

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Magician

I perform regularly at Houdini's Magic Bar. There is one in Canterbury and one in Broadstairs in the UK (see <http://www.houdinis.co.uk>). Close up magic is performed at the bars, along with a couple of more formal parlour type shows. Due to various lockdown restrictions in the UK, the bars have been shut for a number of months, opened for about six weeks and at January 2021, are unfortunately closed again.

While the bars were open they operated the following Covid compliance rules:

- All staff including magicians were temperature tested on arrival, and hands sanitised
- All patrons hands were sanitised on entry
- Tables were socially distanced, with no more than six at a table (in line with Government regulations at the time)
- The tables were cleaned for each new group after the previous group had left
- Drinks menus were disposable and replaced for each new group
- Performers wore face shields/visors (but could wear a provided mask if they wished)
- Patrons were not permitted to touch any of the magician's props, cards, sharpies, pens etc
- Magicians were not permitted to place anything on the spectator's tables
- And others...

In short, Covid was taken very seriously, something that the patrons appreciated.

In general, when I perform close up magic I have the spectators inspect props, select and sign cards and give away cards as souvenirs. I perform a number of effects where the magic happens in the spectator's hands. Due to the Covid rules, obviously some significant changes are required.

Some of the issues and the ways I worked around them are detailed below – in no particular order. Other performers will have different ideas, but these seem to work for me and hopefully they will provide some information that is useful

once more venues open up again and we can start performing albeit it in a Covid restricted manner.

- I explain to the spectators that they are not permitted to touch the cards etc. I find that explaining this at the beginning helps set their expectations – especially if they are regulars and are used to picking a card from a face down fan of cards etc.
- “No Touch” has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, I can use more gimmicks than I might normally feel comfortable with as they cannot be inspected. However, some handlings may need to change, and some effects might need to be jettisoned.
- The “flow” of performances change. For example, if a card is to be selected and marked to show there are no duplicates, then it has to be chosen, marked by the performer and placed back in the deck. For a single card, this is not too bad. However, if you are having more than one card selected and marked, then the process is more time consuming than normal (where one spectator may be signing their selected card while a second spectator is choosing theirs). There is more potential “dead” time as you are marking the cards than usual and so there is a need for more thought in filling this “dead” time.
- As I am not giving out signed cards as souvenirs, I have a full deck in my hand. It means the spectator can just say what card they want to use. This is a change from selecting a card from a face-down fan where they do not know what they are going to get and also allows for some discussion on why they chose that card, what that specific card represents etc.
- Spectators normally select a card and try and keep the face hidden from the magician as if it is secret. Interestingly, I have found that they do not worry about you knowing what their card is in the Covid environment. I think having explained the “No Touch” rules they realise that some aspects of the performance will be different.
- It is awkward to hold a deck in one hand, hold a sharpie in the other, remove the cap, mark the card and replace the cap. It is much easier if a “clickable” sharpie is used, given that objects cannot be placed on tables.

- I am required to wear either a face shield/visor or a mask when performing. Neither are elegant. I find the face shield/visor more comfortable to wear, the spectators can see my facial expressions, and my voice is not muffled by the fabric.
- I wear a horizontal type ID holder on a lanyard around my neck. This acts as a visible pocket. For example, if I have a card chosen, I can mark it and place it in the ID holder, and then have the second card selected. This means that their selected cards never leave their sight until I place them into the deck as part of the routine. It also acts as a holder for a prediction and as a coin purse (see further below).
- Normally I would perform some effects such as a coins across routine where the final coin jumps into the spectator's hand to join the others. This ending is obviously not possible with the Covid restrictions, but if at the start of the routine the coins are taken out of a purse which is then placed into the ID holder around your neck, then the final coin can jump to the purse which has never left their sight.
- Some effects need to be re-routined, either due to the fact that the magic cannot happen in the spectator's hand or because the inspection of props by the spectator can often provide misdirection for some sleight or move.
- Some presentations may need to change slightly. This may not be as easy as it sounds. For years I have performed a rope routine which starts with the spectators inspecting the ropes and making sure they do not stretch. Partway through the routine I refer to the fact that they have "pulled" the ropes. Of course, this phrase now needs to be dropped or altered as they have not touched the ropes. As I have performed this effect hundreds of times the flow of the wording is almost unconscious and I have to be very careful to remember to alter the wording when I get to that part of the routine.
- I normally perform a signed Bill to Lemon routine (where a spectator's marked bank note vanishes, to be found later inside a lemon). This is obviously not possible in the normal way as I cannot borrow a bank note. However, I have found an alternative that works very well. I use a pre-printed IOU and write the spectator's name on it and sign it for him. It provides some amusement as he is now apparently on the hook for the value of the IOU. Although it might lose some of the emotional

impact of it being his money, the effect still plays just as strong as they see the IOU impossibly being taken out from the centre of the lemon.

- Some effects just have to be jettisoned temporarily. For example, I often perform an Anniversary Waltz routine where the couple hold a card between their hands. I then let them keep the card as a memento. Given the restrictions, this is not possible. I have come up with a different romantic effect for couples which involves them each signing a card. I cannot give the cards to them as souvenirs, but I do ask if they want to take a photo of them at the conclusion of the effect. At least that way they can have a memento of a romantic moment.
- I can't blow on the cards to make the ink dry – partly because I shouldn't be blowing and partly because the visor gets in the way. Think ahead of time how to wave the card around to dry the ink once you have written their name on it. For many performers it may not matter, but if you are an elegant performer, waving your hands around frantically to dry the ink is not a good look... Then again, neither is wearing a face shield.
- I am not be able to have the spectators inspect the props I use. However, I explain that I would normally hand them out and tell them what I would normally tell people to check. I then do the checking myself in front of them. I am trying to keep everything as fair as possible in their minds. However, it does have an impact on the natural flow of the routine.

Although magic can be performed with these “No Touch” restrictions, there is a question as to whether the experience for the spectator is diminished. Collins Dictionary defines magic as “the power to use supernatural forces to make impossible things happen”. Undoubtedly, “No Touch” magic achieves this. Impossible things do happen. However, the definition is very much a technical one. It misses much. It does not address how magic makes the spectator feel. The emotional sense of wonder and amazement, the memory that lives on long after the performance is neglected in the definition. Close-up magic in particular creates these emotions in the spectator. They are stronger when the magic happens in their own hands, when they inspect the items being used in order to confirm there are no gimmicks at play, when they shuffle the cards themselves etc. These all act to make the magic more intimate, more personal, and more impossible and hence the emotional impact stronger. It is no surprise to magicians that the playing card that was signed by the spectator,

vanished and then produced from some impossible location is often kept by that spectator for years. In one aspect it is just a piece of paper, but to the spectator it is more than that. It is an impossible object, a link that reminds them of the wonder they experienced. In a "No Touch" world therefore, the magic loses a little of that emotional feeling. For example, would a spectator feel the magic was more incredible and impossible if it occurred in their own hands rather than the magician's? Of course they would. And yet with "No Touch" magic that is not an option. The issue for the magician therefore is how to recreate that complete emotional feeling in the "No Touch" performing environment.

In many ways I am very lucky. I have had the opportunity to perform, which is something that most magicians in the UK have not been able to do. I have found the audiences to be very understanding about the performing constraints, and much more accepting than I anticipated. I believe many are pleased to be out and experiencing some live entertainment once again.

As I write this, the vaccination program has just started in the UK. However, I believe that the lessons above will be useful for some time yet. The vaccination roll-out will take quite a few months. At some point performing venues will be permitted to open again. However, I am certain that initially they will still have strict regulations and social distancing in place. The patrons will be a combination of those who have had vaccinations and those who have not. Therefore, "No Touch" magic will be the order of the day for a period of time. In addition, I expect there will be a long transition period for some people as we "re-set" back to normal distancing from social distancing. Given that the message of social distancing has been reinforced over many months by the Government and has become a way of life, it will take time to adjust back to normal.

Last point coming up... and apologies if it sounds a bit "preachy". **Don't underestimate the good we can do.** One spectator thanked me profusely after I had performed a couple of effects for him. He explained that he had never suffered from depression in his life, but he had been recently. On top of that he had just had a very bad week. The magic I had performed had taken his mind off all those issues for a few minutes and he felt he had to go out of his way to thank me. They may be simple tricks to us, but we really do have the ability to make people's lives better, even if just for a few minutes. A few minutes though, is a lot in these worrying and uncertain times.

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