

*This interview was conducted in May 2016, during a tour of 'This is not a magic show' around UK theatres, funded by Arts Council England.*

INTERVIEWER

So, Vincent. You were a teenage magician, you practised magic studiously everyday, for five years. Then you left all that behind you, and studied theatre and performance art, and worked for a decade as a theatre maker and performance artist. Now you've gone back to magic, and made a show based on sleight of hand card magic, entitled *This is not a magic show*. You sit at a table with a pack of cards, you spin narratives about not having a way of starting the show, you seek help through calling a 'magic hotline', where someone called Derren advises you to begin with a coin trick.

I guess my question is: what's magic doing in a theatre?

VINCENT GAMBINI

Well, some magicians would argue that the art form belongs in the theatre: modern magic was really instituted by the 19<sup>th</sup> century conjuror Robert Houdin, who entertained Parisian bourgeois audiences in his small theatre, dressed in a respectable tailcoat, as was the fashion at the time.

If we follow that historical narrative, then all I'm doing is returning magic to its place of modern inception.

INTERVIEWER

The piece is called *This is not a magic show*. The title seems to intentionally activate a thread of questions: perhaps this is not "just" a magic show, there is more to it than meets.... the genre?

GAMBINI

Yes, though the risk is of putting magic on a lower level than the serious, or let's say more culturally validated forms of theatre and performance. At any rate, there is the possibility of approaching the work not as a generic magic show, and to differentiate it from the kinds of unbearable clichés that still weight heavily on magic and magicians.

I have largely approached *This is not a magic show* as a work of performance, especially given the ways it draws on various theatrical forms and approaches I've encountered over the last decade or more: the show's mode of presentation resembles that of a performance-lecture; its main dynamic revolves around a self-reflexive "meta" commentary; and lastly there is a playful interplay between autobiographical truth-telling and fiction, with the gap between "myself" and "Vincent" undergoing strange metamorphoses throughout. These are all elements and approaches that I take from contemporary theatre and performance.

INTERVIEWER

Wouldn't you say that magic acts already use similar devices? For example, meta-commentary seems rather embedded in the form, since magicians are always asking audiences to question what they are seeing, to question the act itself.

GAMBINI

That's a very good point. In a sense I am not proposing anything new. However I would say that, barring a few exceptions, many theatrical or performance possibilities – possibilities familiar to anyone who has studied or follows contemporary theatre – are often absent from magicians' acts. So all I'm doing is trying to foreground certain possibilities, without losing sight of what remains the central element: magic tricks and illusion. The place of honour is reserved for the card effects, produced through invisible sleight of hand, a practice that I have been happy to return to, for it did occupy me for years on end, during solitary (and not so solitary) teenage days... Now you have me thinking further about certain binaries, the question of magic versus theatre, or cheap entertainment versus artistic cultural performances: earlier this year my producer Sally Rose and I recently managed to get this small but perfectly formed tour of the show funded by Arts Council England. In early conversations with an ACE officer, we were told that magic might not merit funding, in the same way that they don't fund comedy, because comedy is perceived as a largely commercial activity; magic runs a strong risk of being closely associated with that. So, in this respect, in the grant application it was important to stress that this performance is *not* a magic show (or at least not "just" that). I am a little torn, though happily so. Maybe it is a magic show, but presented in a way that gives magic a chance to be better appreciated, because it is supported by a viable contemporary theatre framework. By which I mean that it is constructed using approaches taken from performance and theatre: Spalding Gray is in there somehow, sitting at his table telling real-life tales, as are the works of Forced Entertainment, or the theatrical meltdowns of comedian Stewart Lee. Most magicians, to my knowledge, seem entirely unaware of these alternative approaches to theatre. Which is why, at present, the show isn't presented at magic festivals and magician's conventions, but rather at theatre and performance festivals and venues, arguably not the kinds of contexts one might associate with magic shows.

#### INTERVIEWER

Do you ever tell people that you're a magician? If I didn't know anything about you and your trajectory, after seeing the live show I might assume you to be a regular working magician, which is how you present yourself in the piece...

#### GAMBINI

A funny thing I've noticed has to do with how I present myself to people who don't work in the arts. When I say "I'm a performance artist" or "I'm a theatre maker", the reaction is a little subdued: there appears to be little interest there, perhaps because people don't really know what those terms mean. On the other hand, when I tell people "I'm a magician", I very often see eyes aglow and all kinds of questions start being fired. People are really intrigued, which is both strange and heartening to me, as I still have major misgivings about magic, its strong associations with children birthday parties or weddings, or with dubious TV magicians dressed in black t-shirts and presenting themselves as messiahs.

#### INTERVIEWER

As a spectator watching *This is not a magic show*, in a theatre context, I find myself doubly puzzled, or amazed. Firstly, I am amazed by the tricks themselves, which leave me completely baffled. I have no idea how you can take a pack of cards, which I have seen and shuffled myself, and proceed to turn each card entirely blank, on both sides. I can see everything, yet I see nothing. But also I am somehow thrown by having this experience in a theatre context, perhaps because I associate the time and space of theatre as one for reflection, deconstruction, or revelation, and not for loud gasps, incomprehension and mind-boggling amazement. I am curious then about the place of amazement in a theatre.

#### GAMBINI

Let's go back a moment to the distinction between high and low art forms, if it's useful. In the performance pieces I've made in the last ten years (presented under my real name, Augusto Corrieri), I always worked towards a kind of clarity, or availability, so that even audiences not versed in the history of the avant-garde might stand a chance of genuinely connecting to the work. For instance: in a large room in an art gallery, unseen by the audience, five dancers are busy dancing; whenever spectators open the door and step inside the room to see the work, the dancers pause, remaining frozen mid-movement. When the spectator exits, the dancers resume. In a piece like this, you don't need to be conversant with John Cage's *4'33"* to engage with what's happening.

Now with Vincent Gambini, it's the opposite route: I'm pushing magic, a hyper-accessible and even simplistic art form, towards the avant-garde, towards more complex forms of contemporary performance... For instance, in the show I accompany a card trick not with regular 'patter', but with a text composed of the kinds of things spectators tend to say in reaction to viewing magic, "Oh my god, get out of here! You are joking me, that's ridiculous, how do you do that?!" This playing with the imagined audience commentary is not new: you find it in the postmodern narratives of a writer like Italo Calvino. So in my work the higher forms (theatre, performance art) are lowered, and the low form (magic) is pushed higher up. Perhaps we don't need to think in terms of high and low; it can simply be about challenging where things belong, playing with where categories and boundaries are marked.

#### INTERVIEWER

Has there been a renaissance of magic of late? I think of TV magicians like David Blaine or Chris Angel, going up to people on the street and getting these amazing reactions. Before it was David Copperfield and his large-scale illusions presented in big theatres, filmed for TV. What has changed?

#### VINCENT GAMBINI

There has been this big transition from TV magic shows recorded in a studio, a format associated with Paul Daniels in the UK, to the more irreverent street magic of Blaine, which features a shaky camera, everyday clothes, and focuses on those amazing audience reactions, people literally collapsing to the ground in disbelief at seeing card tricks. These reactions can appear as more genuine than those of a TV studio audience. But this is somewhat a tired formula now. TV street magic uses comparable trickery to that of older

TV formats, when it comes to camera angles and editing; what we see at home isn't, let's say, what's truly happening. This isn't necessarily problematic to me, it's all just deception we could say, but I get the feeling that the Blaine shaky camera model has had its day, and that mainstream audiences understand that lo-fi production is just as 'constructed' as traditional studio models.

I am interested in reviving an older formula, that of the live theatre-magic show, but reframing it through a contemporary sensibility: I want the small show at the theatre, the intimate gathering of thirty or fifty people, framed formally as a theatrical event, and I want it marked by the histories of theatre, performance art, literature, cinema, magic. The aim is for the work to be ticketed and promoted so that people don't just come to a generic magic show, they come to *this* specific work of theatre-magic. As with novels and literature, I personally hardly ever reach for a generic book to read, 'a thriller', 'a classic': I mostly gravitate towards a particular author, or a specific topic or approach. I think magic suffers from being somewhat generic: barring notable exceptions (Penn & Teller come to mind), magicians seldom seek out the art forms' odd particularities, or develop works that play with the set up of theatre itself. No doubt this is linked to commercial pressures surrounding professional magicians. I say this: bring on postmodern, contemporary-theatrical magic!