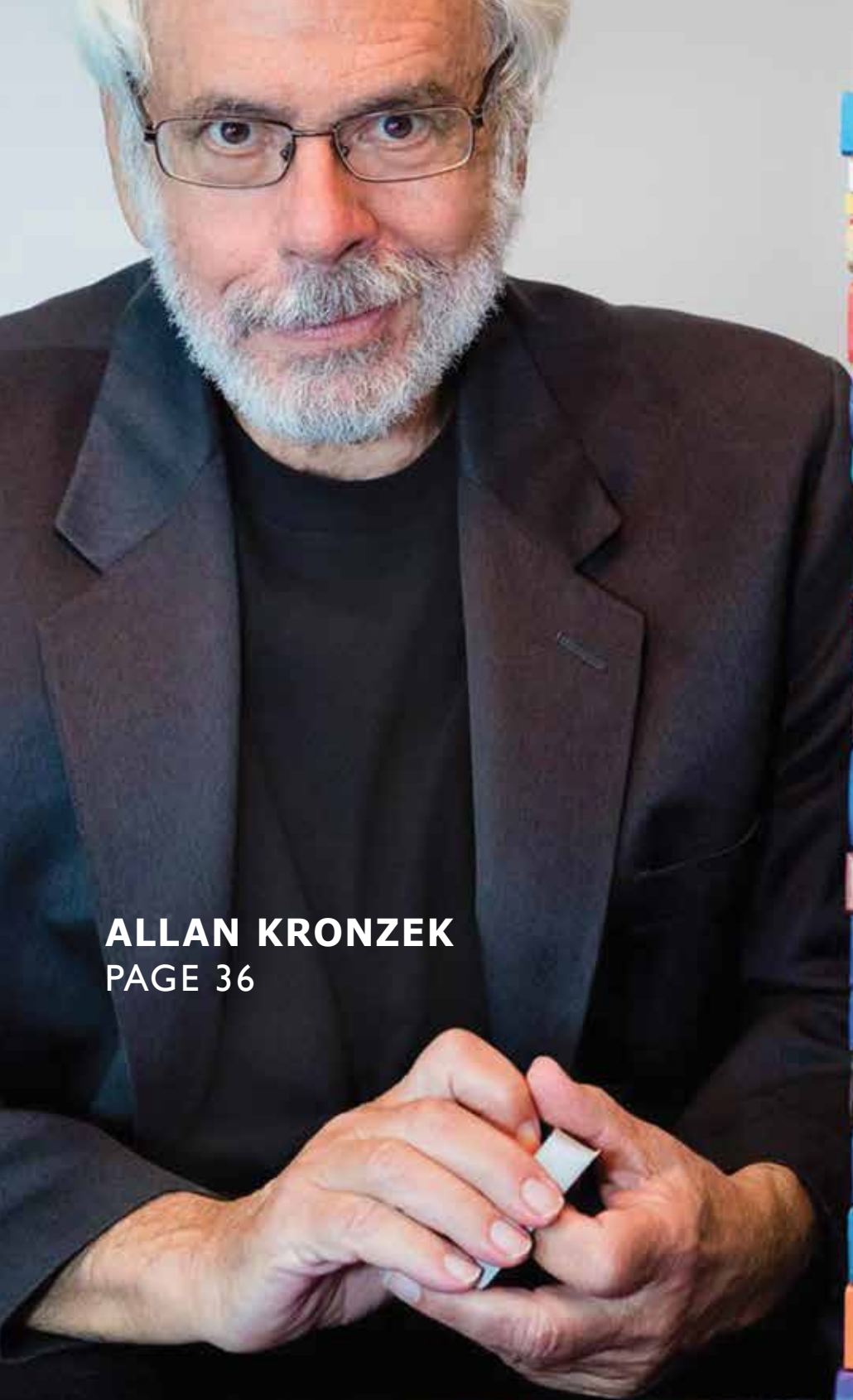


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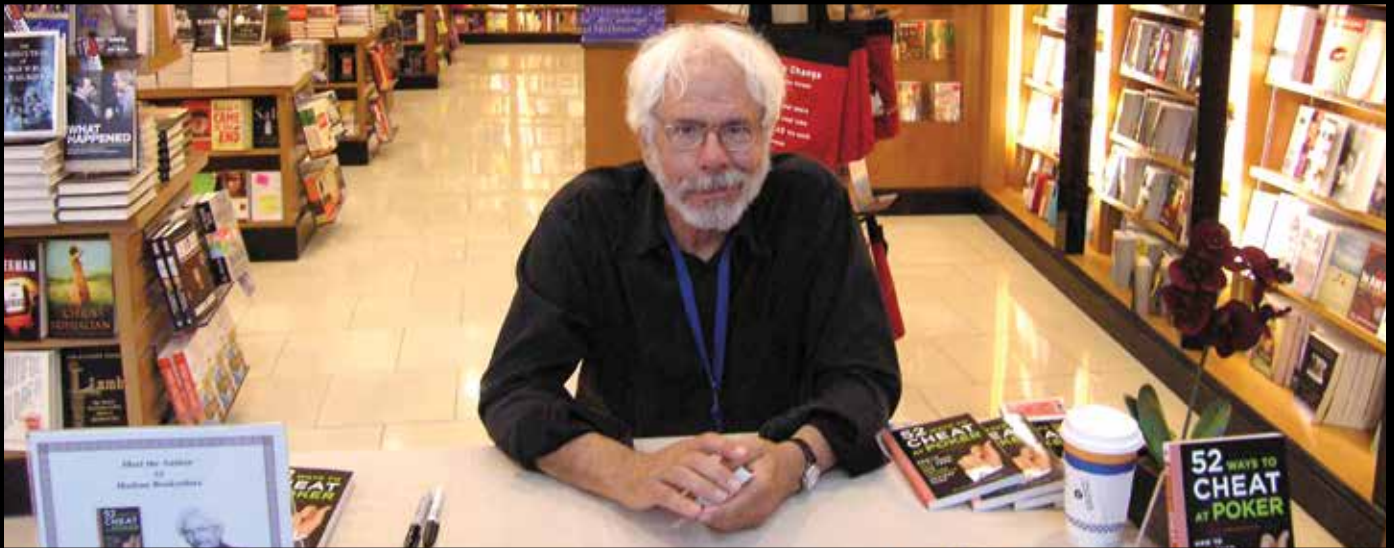
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ALLAN KRONZEK
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ALLAN KRONZEK: MAGIC, MUGGLES, AND MUSIC



Allan Kronzek is the author of *The Secrets of Alkazar*, a neo-classic text for beginning magicians, which has a fan base that includes Michael Weber, Bill Kalush, Eric Mead, Michael Close, and others. His other books include: *The Sorcerer's Companion – A Guide to the Magical World of Harry Potter*, which was a *New York Times* bestseller and which has sold more than a million copies worldwide, in twelve languages; *52 Ways to Cheat at Poker*, which was a critical, if not a commercial, success; and the soon-to-be-released *The Book of Powers*, which was commissioned by The Conjuring Arts Research Center, and which contains material from Kronzek, Tamariz, Maven, Gertner, Weber, and many other luminaries. This fall, Vanishing Inc. published *Artful Deceptions*, a collection of Kronzek's previously published card routines plus new material never before released.

Yuki Kadoya, who translated *The Secrets of Alkazar* into Japanese, sat down with Allan to talk about his life, his books, and his approach to magic.

Yuki: Please introduce yourself to us.

Allan: These days when someone asks what I do, I say I'm

a writer, then wait a beat, and add "and a magician." For many years I called myself a broadcaster – I used to manage a rock and roll radio station, which was terrific fun. When the station was sold I jumped ship and went freelance as a writer and a magician. Amazingly, both of those things have worked out. My performing has been mainly in schools and libraries. I do a science program that uses magic to talk about perception, critical thinking, and the scientific method. Another program, *The Art of Fooling*, traces the history of magic as a performing art. It's ideal for sixth grade because it covers the same historical periods they study in social studies. As for close-up, for years I had a weekly gig in a very hip bar where I developed many of the routines in the new book, *Artful Deceptions*. I also did strolling. But these days, most of my close-up is social situations and among friends.

Besides magic, my other passion is music, jazz and classical, all styles, all eras. I live in Sag Harbor, New York, an old whaling town that's charming most of the time, but turns into a mob scene during the summer. I'm married to Ruby Jackson, a terrific artist and funny lady.



**Young
Allan Kronzek**

Yuki: Let's talk about your first book, *The Secrets of Alkazar* (in the Dover edition the book was re-titled *A Book of Magic for Young Magicians – The Secrets of Alkazar*). What's the story behind that book?

Allan: Alkazar came about after I'd left New York City, where I was working as a freelance writer, and moved to Sag Harbor. One of the first people I met was a literary agent. When she discovered my interest in magic, she asked me to do a series of articles about magic for the children's magazine *Cricket*. I only did two of them, but that's where the character of Alkazar was born. I liked the way the articles came out and wanted to expand them into a book. I also felt like I was filling a void. There weren't many magic books aimed at beginners that also talked about theory and presentation, or tried to convey to the young reader that magic should seem "magical." Also, I wanted the reader to learn some really good tricks and to understand that practice, failure, and mistakes were part of the process. The give and take between Alkazar and the student helped make that clear.

Yuki: Who is the model for Alkazar?

Allan: Alkazar was a gift from the muses. I never took lessons of the kind described in the book, until after the book was published. Alkazar came to me right away, more or less full blown. He is, of course, a version of the archetypal storybook wizard, and also an embodiment of my critical side, which sees the flaws in whatever I do, whether it's writing, playing the piano, or performing magic. A few years after writing the book, I studied with Slydini; he was Alkazar – sly, critical, demanding, insisting on perfection in every detail, and, of course, a master magician. Years later, I almost believed that Slydini had been the model for Alkazar, but in truth the book was done before we met.

Yuki: I like your witty writing style. When I translated *Alkazar* into Japanese I tried to keep the tone. Did you study writing?

Allan: My first two years in college I was a theatre major, studying directing. Then I switched to literature and began writing the usual papers, as well as taking creative writing courses where I wrote many stories and a novella. I had one or two good teachers, but mainly I learned by doing. After graduation I went to Hollywood and landed a job writing a screenplay that was never produced. Then I moved to New York City, started studying jazz improvisation with Lennie Tristano, and supported myself for the next several years mainly by writing. I worked freelance for several publishing houses, cranking out jacket copy for paperback books. My specialties were mysteries, science fiction, and "kook books," like how to talk to your plants. But my favorite job in those days was writing "tabloid trash" for a company that published three sensational tabloids: *Peeping Tom*, *Limelight*, and *The National Star Chronicle*. I would go into the office three days a week, sit at a big desk, and not leave until I'd turned out seven or eight stories.

Some stories were more or less factual, like "Nuts Are Walking the Streets," which would be about the overcrowding in mental hospitals. Others were completely fabricated. We would start with a catchy, sensational headline, like "She Was Made Pregnant

by Hitler's Ghost," and then invent the story and run it with a photo of a pregnant woman. Or we would start with a photograph of, say, a man standing next to an elephant, and write the story, "He's Teaching His Elephant to Talk," which would have witty quotes from the pachyderm and astonished bystanders. Amazingly, I think this is where I learned the most about writing. The papers had a very sharp editor who understood the importance of telling a story clearly, directly, simply, and in a way that amused or informed the

reader. And since we were also amusing ourselves, we could add an additional layer of cleverness or irony that was meant to appeal to those readers who understood the stories were bogus, just as long as we didn't spoil the primary level of meaning. I must say, this job resonated with the trickster side of my personality. And it was quite a kick to see my work appear on newsstands every week.

Yuki: After *Alkazar* your next book was *The Sorcerer's Companion – A Guide to the Magical World of Harry Potter*. It became a *New York Times* bestseller. How did that make you feel?

Allan: As you might expect, it was wonderful. The first edition came out in September of 2001, right after attack on the World Trade Center, and it seemed for a while it might get lost. Promotional events were cancelled, TV appearances that were supposed to happen didn't, and the audiences at readings were often tiny because people were afraid of going out. But eventually, when people saw the book in stores and leafed through it, they bought it. By November the publisher was reprinting, and when the Harry Potter movie opened we got some national print and television, lots of radio interviews, and the book really took off.

One of the benefits of being a bestselling author is it raised my status as a magician. I noticed when I performed close-up magic for people I didn't know well, but who knew about the book, the magic was accorded more artistic respect.

Yuki: Why did you write this book with your daughter?

Allan: Elizabeth's an excellent writer and a historian by training, and I had always wanted to do a project with her. It came about this way:

After *The Secrets of Alkazar* I wanted to write a book for the same young-adult audience about the origins of magical beliefs and practices. I touch on some of the material in my *Art of Fooling* program and I knew kids were fascinated by the topic. They were also very unclear about whether this kind of magic – things like curses, spells,



Lena Yaremenko Photography



Allan, Howie Schwarzman, and Howard Schwartz



With Juan Tamariz

witchcraft, and the supernatural in general – were real or not. There were no books in the schools that came close to discussing these topics from a rational, skeptical point of view. So I was working on this idea when along came the Harry Potter craze and suddenly millions of kids were reading about these things. So it seemed natural to take the book I was planning and frame it in Harry Potter terms.

In many ways, the content is exactly what I had planned on writing about anyway. I approached Elizabeth about this; she had read the Harry Potter books, loved them, and was all for it. As a team we made the project legitimate and easy to sell: I was a magician who worked in schools, and she a writer and editor with a Masters in Renaissance history from Princeton. It was a perfect fit. I'm proud of the book. It's everything I had meant the original book to be and it reached a wider audience than I ever expected. The third edition was published in 2010, after the last Harry Potter book came out. Elizabeth, I should mention, is my daughter from my first marriage to the writer Bibi Wein.

Yuki: When and how did you get started in magic?

Allan: I'm not precisely sure, and I have yet to counterfeit a biography about my

initiation into the magical arts ala Robert-Houdin and Torini. I do remember the first magic show I saw and one effect in particular. The performer tied a red ribbon between a full pitcher of milk and an empty glass; on his command the milk visibly and slowly vanished from the pitcher and appeared in the glass. Then he cut the ribbon and the effect ended. It was one of the most amazing things I'd ever seen. Later, I was given a Mysto Magic Set, which was probably my first experience with apparatus: a Ball and Vase, Drawer Box, and a fake card printed to appear as a fan of cards. I was nine or ten, and I found this stuff fascinating, both the cleverness of the secrets as well as the fantasy of power. My parents encouraged me, partially because I had a heart murmur at the time and wasn't allowed to participate in sports. So this seemed like a perfect hobby. Once a month or so, my dad would drive me to the magic shop, Regows' House of Enchantment. Regows was the name of the owner, Jim Swoger, spelled backwards. That encouraged me to try the same with my name and for a short while I was known as The Amazing Keznork.

As a teenager I did a lot of kids' parties and performed for whoever dropped by our house. I did Linking Rings, Die Box, Milk Pitcher – the usual stuff. I joined the I.B.M. as a junior member and got encouragement from several of the members. Early on, I read all of the magic books in the public library and a few years later, when I was in high school, I discovered a used book store run by a magical hobbyist that had wonderful books that the public library didn't have, like *The Royal Road to Card Magic*, *The Art of Magic*, and another T. Nelson Downs book on coin magic with pictures showing impossible palms of fifty coins. So, this was how I began. When I started college I took a hiatus from magic for a few years, although I did learn hypnotism and did an act at a coffee house for a short time.

Yuki: Did you have good mentors in magic?

Allan: I didn't have a real mentor, not in the way that my fictitious student has Alkazar. As an adult, though, I did study with three masters: Slydini, Frank Garcia, and David Roth. At this point I had abandoned apparatus magic and wanted to do pure sleight of hand. Frank taught me how to handle a deck of cards, what touch was, and how to shade the moves. I went to David Roth and Slydini because of how beautiful their work looked. I also learned a great deal when I began attending the 4F close-up convention, more than thirty years ago. Every year you're exposed to some of the greatest magic on the planet, thanks to Obie O'Brien. What could be better?

Yuki: What books influenced you most?

Allan: The first book I responded to in a big way, when I was around fourteen, was *Houdini on Magic* by Walter B. Gibson. It had absolutely everything: close-up tricks, illusion secrets, magic history, an exposé of phony mediums and spiritualists, how to escape from ropes and boxes, pick locks, read minds, and walk through a brick wall. And most important, it also had a hero I could identify with – Houdini, master magician, escapologist, daredevil, pilot, author, historian, and champion of truth and justice. And he was Jewish, like me. I found the book incredibly rich on many levels. It confirmed in me that I wanted to be a magician and that magic was wonderful. It also had a silent coding system that I learned with a high school friend. We used it to fry our friends, and, on one occasion, the local I.B.M. ring.

Two more important books from my teenage years were *Learn Magic* by Henry Hay and *The Royal Road to Card Magic*. I think Hay was the closest thing I had to a mentor. He had very good advice, a sense of humor, an encouraging attitude, patience, and he taught many good effects. That's where I learned Sympathetic

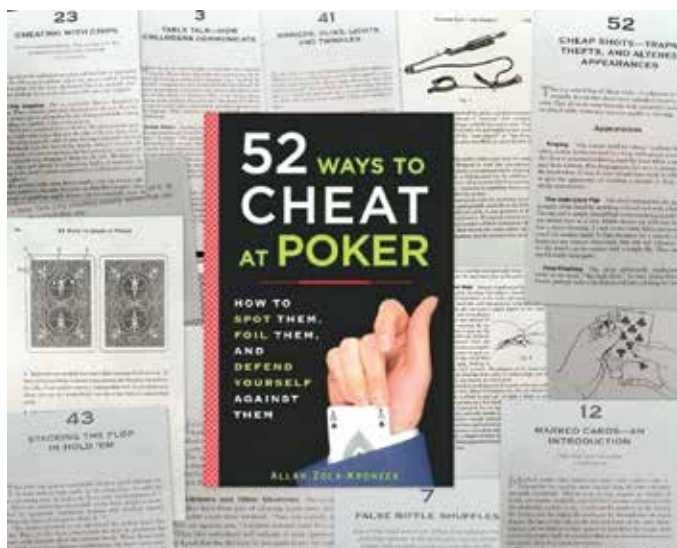
Silks, The Misers Dream, a thimble routine, and some nice card work. I think there are echoes of Hay's voice in *The Secrets of Alkazar*. I've also been influenced by Juan Tamariz's books – *The Five Points in Magic*, *The Magic Way*, and *Sonata* – not only because of the wonderful effects and intelligence, but for the love of the art that's expressed so joyously and openly. Reading Juan made me more open about my own love of magic. And finally, there's *Our Magic* by Maskelyne and Devant. When *The Secrets of Alkazar* was first published, Michael Weber reviewed it for *MAGIC* and called it "an *Our Magic* for kids." And that's true. *Alkazar* is consciously built on the *Our Magic* model.

Yuki: Let's get back to your books. Your next book was *52 Ways to Cheat at Poker – How to Spot Them, Foil Them, and Protect Yourself Against Them*. How did that come about?

Allan: This was back in 2002. Poker was huge at the time; there were no recent books on cheating. The title popped into my head and I thought, well, I can hang a book on that. Then I realized that out of fifty-two ways, I knew about six. So I researched the other forty-four, added historical material going back to the sixteenth century, and rounded it out with amusing anecdotal sidebars. The book was a critical hit because it's so packed with information and written in a snappy style. But the title turned out to be a mistake. None of the poker magazines would review a book with "cheating" in the title, so there went that get-rich-quick scheme.

Yuki: How did you do your research?

Allan: At the beginning of the project I spoke with Steve Forte and George Joseph; both of them made helpful suggestions, which was very kind of them, because they were each writing their own books on the subject. Jason England was my technical adviser and made many useful suggestions that kept me from embarrassing myself. But basically my understanding of the subject came entirely from books and a few excellent DVDs by the likes of Steve Forte, Sal Piacente, and David Malek, all of whom are acknowledged in the bibliography. But as far as prying secrets from real cheats and hustlers, I did none of that, nor did I want to. For me, the real subject of the book isn't cheating at poker – it's the cleverness of the trickster imagination and the ingenious problem solving that goes on – albeit for nefarious purposes.



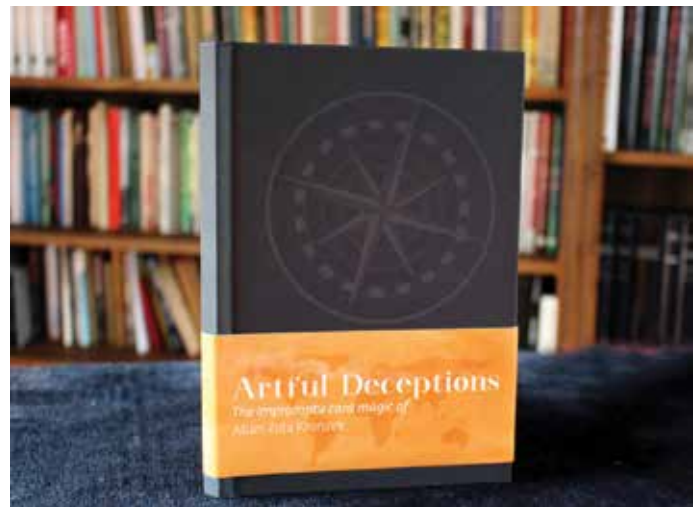
Yuki: You've also written a book for the Conjuring Arts Research Center.

Allan: Yes. The Center has an outreach program in New York

City called the Hocus Pocus Project. The idea is to use magic as an empowering tool for kids in hospitals, veterans, and youth at risk. Bill Kalush is a fan of *Alkazar*, and when he decided that the Hocus Pocus Project should have a teaching manual – hopefully to be underwritten and given away for free – he commissioned me to write it. The book is organized by the various powers one can demonstrate. This was Bill's idea and it works well. The book has a number of my own routines, but also a ton of material by guest contributors like Juan Tamariz, Max Maven, Michael Weber, Jon Racherbaumer, Garret Thomas, and many others. The plan is to release it as an ebook first, followed by a print edition. Stay tuned for a release date.

Yuki: This brings us to your current book, *Artful Deceptions*. This is the first book you've written for fellow magicians, correct?

Allan: Yes. Josh Jay and Andi Gladwin, owners of Vanishing Inc., approached me to write it after I pitched them the idea of a DVD. They thought a book was more appropriate to my type of material and I think they were right. The selling point of this book, at least to me, is that all the material is practical. It's all impromptu, no setups, no resets, no gimmicks, and all the effects are heavy in spectator involvement. The plots, for the most part, are not original, but the presentations are, and they're very strong. A few routines were published earlier as a booklet called *Destiny, Chance and Free Will*. But they've all been updated and illustrated. My secret hope is that lots of people will start doing these routines.



Yuki: What is the best medium for studying magic?

Allan: I think personal lessons from someone who knows is the best. Between books and DVDs, I prefer books, though I do buy and watch video magic. But no DVD has ever given me the sense of personal, in-depth instruction that can come from a really good magic book. Books can take you *inside* a trick.

Yuki: What is your advice for beginners in magic? How do you become a magician?

Allan: Find a teacher. That's the best. Next best is reading books and joining a magic club so you can share and learn with others. The same advice that *Alkazar* gives his student is what I would recommend today. Learn to make the magic magical, study presentation, choose tricks that are easy for the audience to follow, practice, practice, practice, strive for perfection, master difficult things, and learn from mistakes. I also think it's beneficial for



Also, the more you perform the more confident you become, and that in turn helps you become more relaxed and natural, which makes the magic appear effortless and therefore more “magical.” Card magic also gives you the opportunity to interact with your audience and learn to draw them into the tricks, which is important. And finally, when it’s just you and an audience and a deck of cards, there’s no doubt where the magic is coming from. It’s coming from you, not from the magic shop. And that will make you feel like a magician.

Yuki: I’ll ask most difficult question for you. What is *Magic*?

Allan: That’s an impossible question. I imagine it is the same in Japanese as in English that “magic” refers to spells and invisibility cloaks as well as card tricks and doves. The longest entries in *The Sorcerer’s Companion* were “magic” and “magician,” because of all those meanings, and all that lore over the centuries. Even limiting “magic” to the artful deceptions we specialize in, there are still dozens of conceptions of what magic is or should be.

So, let me answer your question by ignoring all of the complexities and subtleties and simply say that, for our purposes, magic is the experience of the impossible happening. And by experience, I mean a physical, emotional experience in which the spectator suddenly loses his ground, has the rug pulled out from underneath, and finds himself momentarily in a world where things happen according to different rules. Paul Harris has written about creating the moment of astonishment, and that’s what I’m talking about here. These experiences, when they happen, seem to resonate with people on a deep level. Their rational mind says no, this can’t be so, but the irrational, unconscious part of the psyche recognizes what’s going on and says, yes, I know that, I’ve thought that, dreamed that, imagined that. This impossible thing that just happened is actually, strangely familiar. I think that’s the appeal of magic, whether on the stage, or in historical practice, or in the Harry Potter books. Magic speaks to the unconscious, which has its own version of how things work.

So how do you create these experiences? With very strong, clear, slow, impossible effects. This doesn’t mean that every trick you perform can or should be astonishing, or that you can even achieve this every time you perform. But to me, at least today, this is the goal and the experience, if not the meaning, of magic. ❖

beginners to learn a lot of card magic, especially involving some sleight of hand. Generally, card magic gives you the most opportunities to perform. And whenever you perform you usually learn something. Sometimes it’s pleasurable learning – when you try something a new way and it works – and sometimes it isn’t so pleasurable – as when someone catches you performing a secret move and says so out loud. But it’s learning, and it makes you better.



Allan at home with his wife, the artist Ruby Jackson.