

Eugene Burger (1939-2017)

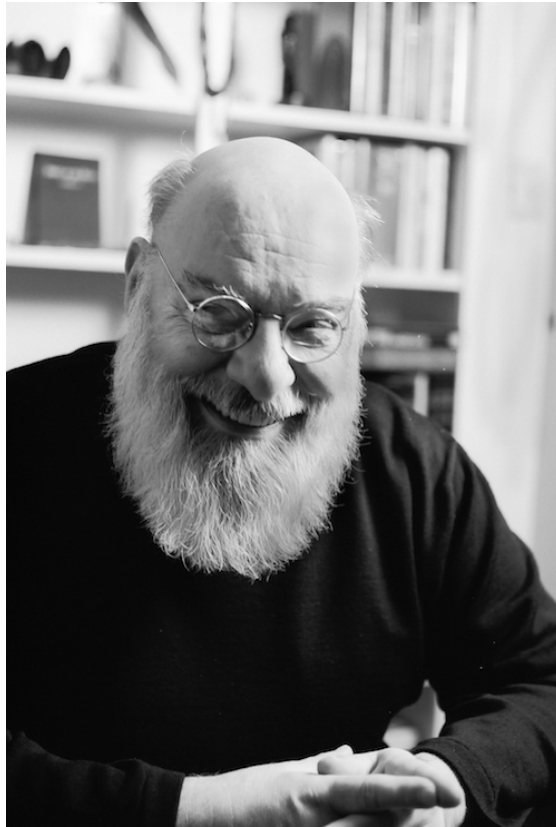


Photo: Michael Caplan

A Celebration of Life and Legacy by Lawrence Hass, Ph.D. August 19, 2017

(This obituary was written at the request of Eugene Burger's Estate. A shortened version of it appeared in *Genii: The International Conjurers' Magazine*, October 2017, pages 79-86.)

**"Be an example to the world, ever true and unwavering.
Then return to the infinite."**

—Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, 28

How can I say goodbye to my dear friend Eugene Burger? How can we say goodbye to him?

Eugene was beloved by nearly every magician in the world, and the outpouring of love, appreciation, and sadness since his death in Chicago on August 8, 2017, has been astonishing. The magic world grieves because we have lost a giant in our field, a genuine master: a supremely gifted performer, writer, philosopher, and teacher of magic. But we have lost something more: an extremely rare soul who inspired us to join him in elevating the art of magic.

There are not enough words for this remarkable man—will never be enough words. Eugene is, as he always said about his beloved art, *inexhaustible*. Yet the news of his death has brought, from every corner of the world, testimonies, eulogies, songs of praise, cries of lamentation, performances in his honor, expressions of love, photos, videos, and remembrances. All of it widens our perspective on the man; it has been beautiful and deeply moving.

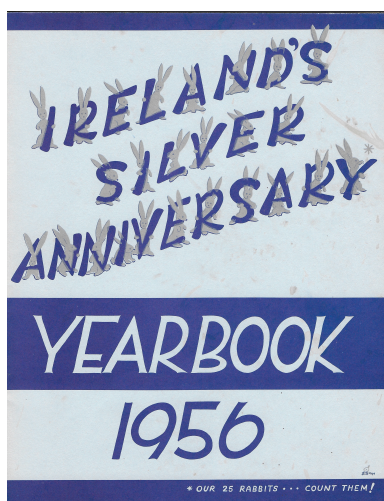
Even so, I have been asked by Eugene's executors to write his obituary, a statement of his history, and I am deeply honored to do so. For nearly twenty-five years, I have been taking notes, keeping records, collecting materials, and holding interviews with him. Eugene asked me to do so. More than most people, Eugene was *fully aware* this day would come and wanted his story to be told.

"The first step in following your dreams is waking up."

—Eugene Burger, magic lecture, Chicago, 1998

Eugene Burger was born in Chicago in 1939. His adoptive parents Rose and Bill raised him in Portage Park. He fell in love with magic at the age of seven after he saw Jack Gwynne and his "Royal Family of Magic" at the Oriental Theater in Chicago. Eugene pursued magic passionately as a boy and teenager. He spent his weekends haunting the *five* magic shops in the Chicago Loop at that time, and especially enjoyed Joe Berg's shop where Joe gave him kindly, excellent advice.

In his teens, Eugene's father would take him to magic hotspots around town where he watched excellent magicians, especially Schulien's Restaurant, where Don Alan performed, and Dix and Norb's Magic Inn, where he met Alex Berecz. Both of these talented magicians served as inspirations and gave expert guidance (for which Eugene remained forever grateful). As a teenager, Eugene was extremely active in magic. For one thing, he appeared with Don Alan on the *Bud Bowman Magic Show* in the early 1950s, performing "The Mutilated Parasol." (Eugene: "Thank heavens, no copies survived!") And in 1956, he had his first publication, his "Linking Rope Routine" in *Ireland's Silver Anniversary Yearbook*.



Nonetheless, when Eugene went to college, magic fell away from his mind as he graduated from Beloit College (in Wisconsin), then pursued and received a Masters of Divinity degree from Yale University and a Masters of Philosophy degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign. While at the University of Illinois, Eugene was a highly regarded teacher of Comparative Religion—the Asian flavors of which are familiar to anyone who has read Eugene’s writings. (The *Tao Te Ching* was, almost certainly, Eugene’s favorite book.)

While teaching, Eugene worked for a while on a doctoral dissertation, but then “woke up” one day, realizing he was simply done being an academic. He moved back to Chicago with his friends Marcella Ruble and Dennis Rook, where they shared a house in Evanston. There, he spent a number of years in various social services positions, including that of Director of Welfare for the City of Evanston.

However, during that time (around 1974), magic reawakened in his mind—and especially séance magic—as he, Marcella, Dennis, and a new friend Erik Counce created and launched a successful séance show titled *Hauntings* that played in and around Chicago (and which is thoroughly memorialized in Eugene’s 1986 book *Spirit Theater*). Eugene played the Medium, and many wonderful photographs from that time exist, taken by Eugene’s friend, photographer, and videographer Michael Caplan.

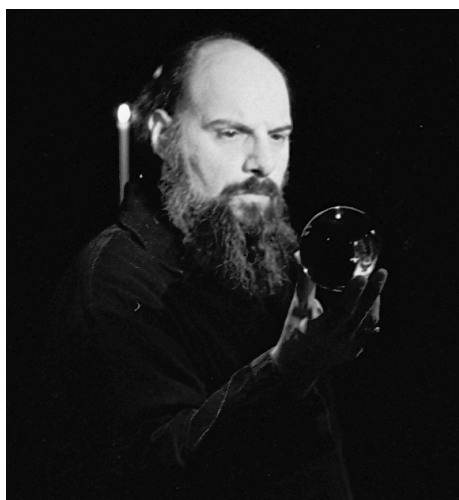


Photo: Michael Caplan

Eugene frequently talked about how Marcella, Dennis, and Erik saved his life. He was desperately bored with welfare work and magic performance was again deep in his spirit (so to speak), so they told him to quit his job and become a magician . . . which he summarily did. In early January of 1978 he submitted notice of his resignation and by the end of that month he was free.

“The most basic question of magic is this: what do I want my magic to be?”

—Eugene Burger, Mystery School, 2003

Armed with five or six tricks that he had performed as a teenager, including Sponge Balls, his Top Change Trick, and some of the Schulien “discoveries,” Eugene started performing four nights a week at a nouvelle cuisine restaurant called 50 East (on 50 East Oak Street in Chicago). He had a successful run there, yet things quickly change in the restaurant business so he moved on to Don’s Fish Market, the Marriott on Michigan Avenue, a Russian restaurant hilariously named Borscht

and Tears, and eventually landed at Great Godfrey Daniels in Skokie, where he worked for six years.

During this time, Eugene started writing and publishing (with friend Phil Willmarth) his early, famous, extraordinary booklets, including *Secrets and Mysteries for the Close-Up Entertainer* (1982), *Audience Involvement* (1983), *The Secret of Restaurant Magic* (1983), *Matt Schulien's Fabulous Card Discoveries* (1983), and *Intimate Power* (1983). (These booklets and others are collected in *Mastering the Art of Magic* from 2000.)

These early books had a remarkable, unusual reception. On one hand, many magicians, including famous ones, greeted them with the highest regard. (Channing Pollock, for one, said he was “astonished” when he read them.) Here was this man, someone named “Eugene Burger,” expressing profound things about magic and magic performance—things not present in the magic literature of the day. Yet a small number of other magicians and an occasional reviewer were flummoxed—they simply didn’t get it. “These essays, this *theory*, so what? There aren’t enough tricks!” Quick aside: to the end of his days, Eugene would boom with laughter when he thought of those reactions.

Because of these books, magicians started making pilgrimage to Chicago to watch Eugene work. Jay Marshall and Phil Willmarth would happily bring them to Great Godfrey Daniels where they would be floored by the reactions evoked by this man with the long beard, table after table after table. Audiences *loved* him. After seeing Eugene on one of Jay’s outings, the late, great Bob Read exclaimed, “Everything he does is a closer!” (Eugene was deeply pleased and grateful for this quote.)

“Truly great people dwell on what’s real and not on the surface . . . on the fruit and not the flower.”

—*Tao Te Ching*, 38

In 1982, at the beginning of this highly productive period, Eugene performed for the first time at the Magic Castle, where he had a two-week run in the Close-Up Gallery. Eugene stayed with his close friend Max Maven—whom he had first met in December of 1979 when Eugene interviewed Max for *Spirit Theater*. In Hollywood, Eugene experienced sweet success and the special magic of the Magic Castle—spending time with all the stars, including Larry Jennings, Billy McComb, and Dai Vernon, who gave Eugene several important touches that improved his work (“No, no: don’t squeeze all the sponge balls into a big clump as you put them away! Pick them up in small bunches; it adds to the mystery.”)

Above all, Eugene spent extraordinary time with Max. Eugene and Max were the best of friends from the very beginning, based, Eugene said, on “deep mutual respect.” Over the years, Max created many opportunities for Eugene, including shows, lectures, and tours (of Japan, among others). They performed several two-man shows, and in the early 2000s they worked with Tina Lenert to create *The Nocturnal Trio*, a show that played at the Magic Castle and at FISM. But there was an even deeper level, for Eugene always saw Max as his teacher, creative guide, and mentor. Eugene said he brought nearly everything to Max for feedback, improvements, and refinements, which Max generously gave.

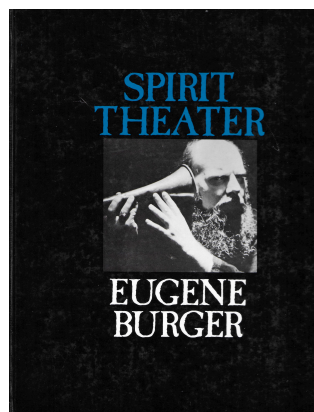
Eugene absolutely loved his times in Hollywood with Max, and he loved the Magic Castle. He performed there regularly over the years, lecturing most every time, and he was clearly much beloved. In 1984 and 1985 Eugene received the “Lecturer of the Year” award from the Academy of Magical Arts. In 1997 and 1998 he was named “Close-Up Magician of the Year.” In 2006 the Academy awarded him a highly prestigious “Performing Fellowship.” Starting in 2008, Eugene made it a point to perform at the Magic Castle every year as part of “Magic & Mystery School Week.” In 2008 and 2009 he performed in the Close-Up Gallery—about forty shows during each run (rather than the usual twenty-seven) to help meet the incredible demand. After the Peller Theatre started weekend runs in 2010, Eugene loved making two-man shows there, which he did with Michael Carbonaro, Rob Zabrecky, and most recently me.

Back in 1982, Eugene returned to Chicago after his great success in Hollywood, but he was still paying his dues. He lived modestly in his one-bedroom apartment on the Gold Coast of Chicago, in the same building where Bert Allerton had lived—an apartment Eugene kept for the rest of his life. He would take the bus to Great Godfrey Daniels, carrying his little magic box and carpet, and, after that, to the Café Royal in the Saint George Theater. He would rent cars so he could accept bookings in the suburbs of Chicago. It was not easy. At the same time, Eugene’s star continued to rise among magicians: he had achieved considerable fame from his booklets, lectures, and convention appearances. And he had a growing number of private students as his reputation as a gifted teacher spread. Soon it would all go to another level.

“I have something *wonderful* to show you tonight!”

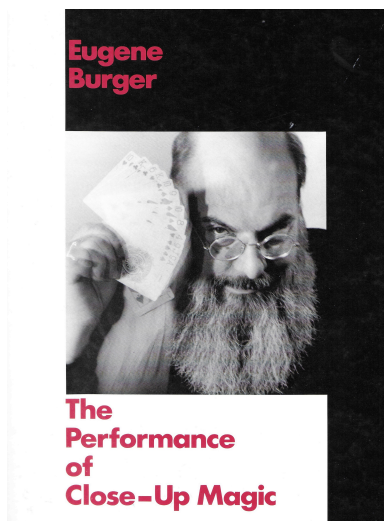
—Eugene’s pre-show mantra

One of the people Eugene met in the early 1980s was Richard Kaufman, who enthusiastically embraced the prospect of publishing *Spirit Theater*. A little backstory is required: *Spirit Theater* was actually the first magic book Eugene had written. (It was, I teased him, the doctoral dissertation he had always wanted to write at the University of Illinois, but couldn’t.) Eugene had started writing the book during the great fun and success of *Hauntings*. Jay Marshall had agreed to publish it, but frankly, Jay wasn’t enamored of a book on spirit magic, and the book languished. Everything was different when Richard got his hands on it. Richard utterly transformed the book: he got photos, powerful graphic elements, and inspired Eugene to add many things to the original manuscript, including tricks. Eugene always said that *Spirit Theater* was as much Richard’s book as his own, and he was forever grateful to Richard for it.



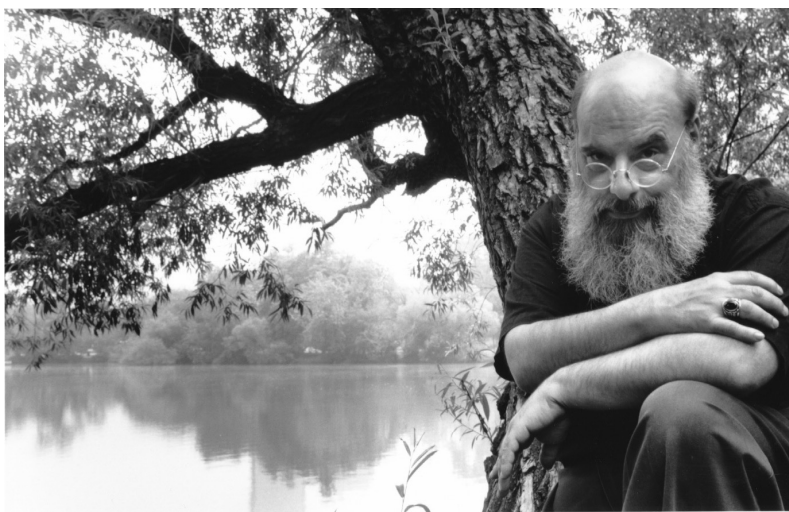
Spirit Theater was published in 1986 and received with the highest enthusiasm. For one, Jim Steinmeyer sent Eugene a letter that said, “You have defined and identified an important (and previously ignored) branch of magic—and at the same time written the authoritative textbook on it.” (This letter is in one of Eugene’s scrapbooks, and he was proud of it.)

But the Burger-Kaufman partnership did not end there. In 1987 they produced Eugene’s *The Performance of Close-Up Magic*, what Eugene believed was his best-selling book ever.



Performance collected Eugene’s powerful essays on performance from his column in *M-U-M* magazine and supplemented them with a number of his professional routines, including a detailed description of “The Haunted Pack”—his masterful version of Al Baker’s “The Pack that Cuts Itself.”

As magicians around the world embraced that book, Eugene plunged into writing his next one with Richard, *The Experience of Magic* (1989).



Original Cover Photo: Michael Caplan

Following the pattern of *Performance*, Eugene alternated philosophical essays on magic performance with extraordinary routines, including his script and handling of one trick he always

said “took him around the world”: “The Inquisition.” Eugene was fiercely proud of *The Experience of Magic*; he felt it contained some of his very best writing, and for what it is worth, I agree. “Unfinished Pictures,” “The Tyranny of the New,” “The Sense of Mystery in a Japanese Garden,” to name a few, remain *essential* essays for any magician.

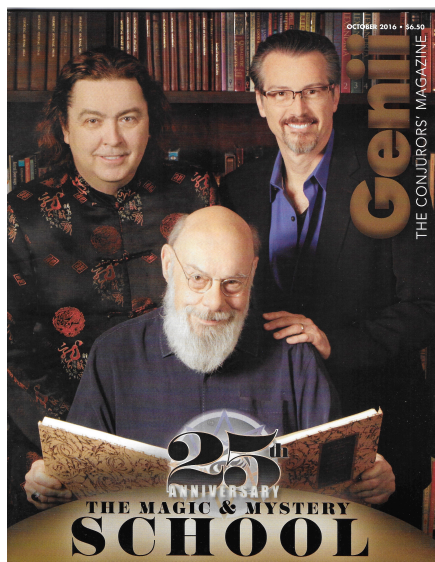
Meanwhile, and because of these tremendous books, Eugene became an international *star*. Bookings, conventions, television, tours, FISM: Eugene was now fully recognized and celebrated as an exceptional performer, inspirational writer, and visionary philosopher of the art. Back in Chicago, Eugene started performing every Wednesday and Thursday night at a fabulous, high-end restaurant named *Biggs*, where he was building a dedicated clientele of corporate executives, doctors, and lawyers—the toast of the town. This is perhaps part of why *Chicago Magazine*, in its 2003 “Best of . . .” issue, named Eugene “Best Magician in Chicago.” Yet this was still only the beginning.

“When people lack a sense of awe, there will be disaster.”

—Tao Te Ching, 72

In 1987, Eugene Burger and Jeff McBride met at a New York Magic Symposium when they were doing a television taping. Jeff heard Charles Reynolds tell Eugene he was “kind of like the Krishnamurti of magic.” Jeff didn’t understand the reference at the time, but the following week the book *Conversations with Krishnamurti* appeared in Jeff’s mail, sent by Eugene, and their profound friendship and productive partnership began.

In 1991, Jeff approached Eugene with the idea of being the Guest of Honor at an “unconventional magic convention” in upstate New York that would explore the history, symbolism, and mythic elements of magic performance. Eugene enthusiastically agreed, suggested the name “Mystery School” for the event, and the first *Mystery School* was offered in April of 1992. This was the beginning of a whole new dimension of Eugene’s life, professional career, and reputation as a master teacher of magic.



My detailed history of the McBride Magic & Mystery School was published in the October 2016 issue of *Genii Magazine*, so I will not repeat myself here—although I recommend reading the article for a full appreciation of this essential aspect of Eugene’s life.

What I will briefly say is that in 1999 after eight experiential events that received extraordinary press, Jeff, Tobias Beckwith, and Eugene—the School’s Dean—transformed the “mystery school events” into the *Magic & Mystery School*—emphasis on “school.” And in 2000, they started offering “Master Classes,” named after the teaching process of performance critique utilized in music conservatories.

Since then, Jeff, Eugene, and the Magic & Mystery School faculty have offered almost seventy master classes and other performance classes—both in Las Vegas and in cities around the world. Eugene *loved* teaching these classes. He typically opened each day with wise words for the students—discussing some element or another of what he felt they needed to learn to grow as performers. Eugene was a kind and patient teacher—a beloved teacher—and one important part of his legacy is the many thousands of students in Las Vegas, Chicago, and at twenty years of *Lance Burton Teen Seminars* who were touched and transformed by his vision of magic.

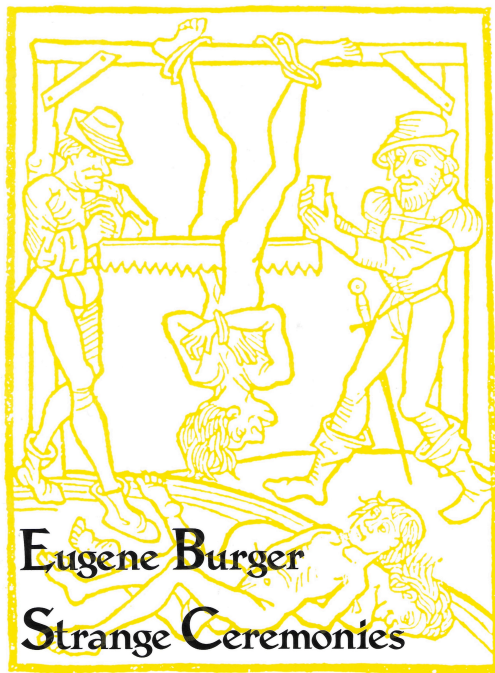
Equally important to Eugene about the Magic & Mystery School was the fact that he and Jeff got to spend so much time working, playing, and creating magic together. The two of them made *countless* shows, and Jeff helped Eugene transition to the *big stage*. (For only one example, in 2001 Eugene was a co-star in Jeff’s eight-week run at the Claridge Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City.) Eugene spent many weeks each year in Las Vegas with Jeff and Abigail: friends, partners . . . *family*. Eugene frequently told people that he and Jeff *never* had a disagreement. Eugene had his own room at the House of Mystery, and Master Class was a time of celebration, both during the day with students and at night with the dearest of friends.

“The only thing we can ever do is keep singing our song.”

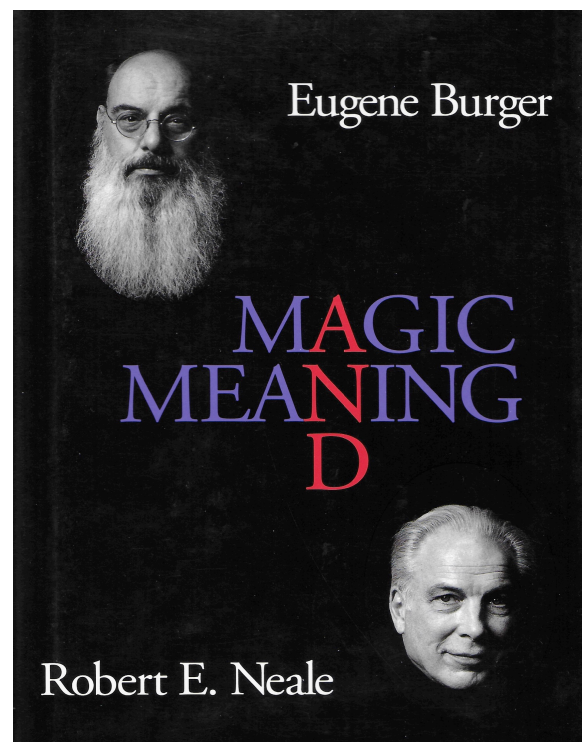
—Eugene Burger, a favorite saying

So far I have mentioned only a few of the books Eugene wrote and published. But any respectable recording of his career needs to discuss others. Eugene had a special way of transforming the world of magic and magicians while rather courageously staying true to his vision about what performance magic was and why it was so important.

In 1991, Eugene and Richard Kaufman released *Strange Ceremonies*—a fascinating, brave book that attempted to explore and interpret for general magicians the then-burgeoning area called “bizarre magic.”



In 1995, he and Robert E. Neale, working with Stephen Minch, released the revolutionary book *Magic and Meaning*. Some reviewers at the time had no idea what to even say about it—there had never been a book for magicians like this. Thoughts, “theory,” disruptive claims about both the history and performance of magic . . . Well, so much for reviewers! *Magic and Meaning* went on to be one of Eugene’s most successful books, perhaps the *second* bestselling one of all.



Eugene also created magic videos and DVDs that came to fruition in the early 2000s, and which remain standard viewing for any serious magical artist. These include *Real Secrets of Close-Up Magic* (1991) and *Gourmet Close-Up Magic* (1995)—filmed and directed by Michael Caplan and now collected in *The Chicago Tapes* DVD set. Later on came the three-volume set, directed by Max Maven, *Eugene Burger's Magical Voyages* (2002). More recently, there was *Eugene Burger Presents: Exploring Magical Presentation* (2008) and in 2014 and 2016 respectively, two Penguin Live lectures. In 2008, Eugene was the focus of a wonderful documentary by Michael Caplan, *A Magical Vision: The World of Eugene Burger*.

Books, videos, teaching, performances, and lectures all over the world . . . this is why Eugene was so richly honored over the course of his career. For a few examples of so many, in the year 2000, Eugene was named by *MAGIC Magazine* as one of the “One Hundred Most Influential Magicians of the Twentieth Century.” And in 2012 he received the third-ever “Special Award for Theory and Philosophy” from FISM.

“Hello, Eugene, it is great to see you!”

“Good to see you, too.”

“We are getting older, aren’t we? It is scary.”

“I don’t think so, really. I think it is important to be a friend with death.”

—Eugene Burger, overheard at a magic convention, November 2011

The last ten years of Eugene’s life were magical. Often late at night over a glass of wine he would pat my arm and say, “Larry, I have been so very lucky. We are so very lucky to get to do this work!”

A couple of years ago Eugene told me he had never had so much work in his entire career. That certainly seemed true because he was flying nearly every weekend to deliver magic lectures and workshops, shows, conventions, tours (with Jeff and I), and of course to Las Vegas to teach at the School. Eugene had many students in Chicago who absorbed his available time off the road. And he continued to have a substantial private and corporate party clientele. Further, when Eugene wasn’t performing or teaching, he was advising others. For example, he was Director of Magic in Ricardo Rosenkranz’s smash success in Chicago, *The Rosenkranz Mysteries*, and he was the long-time advisor for *Magic Chicago*, created and produced by Robert Charles and Benjamin Barnes. And he never, *ever* got tired of seeing magic shows.

Eugene’s health throughout his entire life was exceptional, and he successfully avoided needing to see doctors. However, on Christmas Eve of 2009, he had a minor heart arrhythmia and was hospitalized for several days. His doctor put him on a strict low-sodium diet and he was an excellent patient: he changed his eating habits and dropped over sixty pounds—something he had wanted to do his entire life. To facilitate this, he weighed himself nearly every day so he could regulate his eating, and he was incredibly disciplined in this, as he was in so many other things.

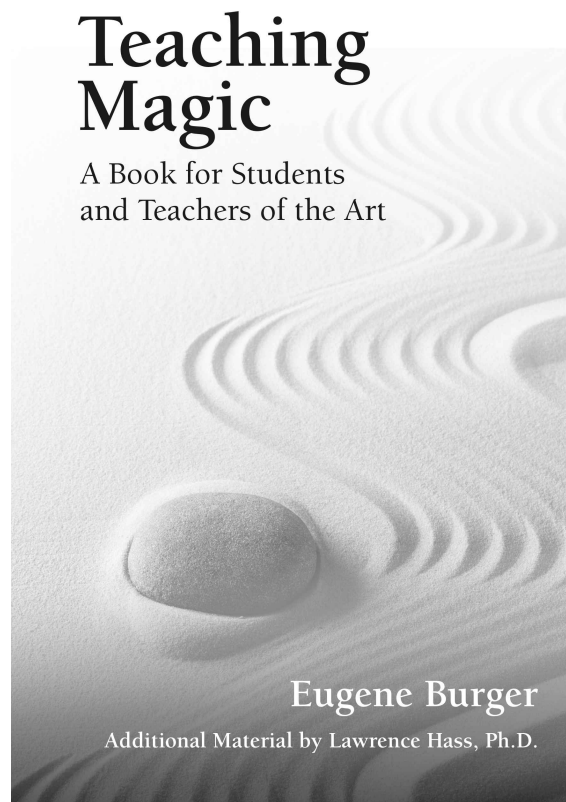
Over a period of many years—perhaps as long as I had known him—Eugene discussed with his closest friends a profound desire to “die well.” He took seriously the ancient Greek, Stoic, and Roman concepts that learning how to live required learning how to die. He and I frequently discussed Martin Heidegger’s powerful ideas about living authentically by staying aware of one’s death.

Even so, Eugene was in remarkable health during the past several years. It was so easy to forget he was in his late seventies! He had lost a little voice, but we just mic'd him. He slowed down a little, but that was okay—we just dropped him off by the front door of theaters, restaurants, and lecture venues. And at show time, he *always* hit the mark!

However, in June of this summer, 2017, Eugene had been feeling unusually fatigued. So his dear friends Ricardo Rosenkranz and Robert Charles took him to see the doctor, and thus began a diagnostic process that eventually discovered Eugene had an aggressive tumor that had spread throughout his body. Less than two months later, he was hospitalized on August 5 and passed away on Tuesday, August 8. If it is any comfort, I can tell you Eugene died exactly as he wanted: quickly, with no parade of goodbyes, with no pain, and surrounded by a group of loving friends. From the time he entered the hospital to the moment of his death he was never alone.

“... when the bonds between us seem broken forever, we *hope that's not so.*”
—Eugene Burger, “The Thread of Life and Death”

Eugene Burger is gone, and the magic world grieves. But Eugene has more to share. In early 2017, he and I began working intensely on a new book titled *Teaching Magic: A Book for Students and Teachers of the Art*. I sent the book off to the printer just before Eugene's diagnosis, and so it is untouched by awareness of his loss. *Teaching Magic* will be released this fall. [Note: *Teaching Magic* was published on October 21, 2017.]



Finally, because Eugene was so conscious and thoughtful about his death, in the wake of his hospitalization in 2009 he approached me with a detailed proposal asking me to write and publish two posthumous books that would finally reveal his unpublished routines—some of which he had been holding back from the very beginning. Thus, since 2010 Eugene and I have been working intently on these books: planning, organizing, gathering, filming, writing, editing, and so on. They still have a ways to go, but they are fully underway and follow Eugene's intentions to the letter. And so there will be many more lessons for us from the Master.

But today, and for months to come, we mourn. We have lost one of our brightest stars and heroes, someone who absolutely loved magic, someone who taught us, through his shining example, that magic can be a great art, someone who called upon us to remember that magic isn't about tricks at all. As Eugene said many times, magic is about *life*. And he showed us over and over with a simple strand of thread he was at peace with the fact of death—the great mystery.

Eugene Burger is survived by *all of us*—the worldwide community of magicians who loved him.

(last corrected: January 15, 2018)

Note: on August 17, 2017, Eugene Burger's Estate founded a new scholarship fund at the McBride Magic & Mystery School to honor the Master. To make a contribution to the Eugene Burger Legacy Fund, which creates special merit-based awards for deserving students in his name, please go to: www.magicalwisdom/eugene.