The Elements of Presentation
Larry Hass
2022 Magic and Meaning Conference P-E-P Talk

Summary
1. It is uncontroversial that when magicians talk and think about magic performance we employ a basic distinction between "technical method" and presentation. I think it's also pretty uncontroversial that in the last 50-70 years (and perhaps much longer) technical method has generally been accepted as the more important of the two. In fact, many magicians explicitly state that method is the *most important thing, the most fundamental part of a piece, the foundation of the whole edifice* because "without a good method there is nothing to see!" Even those of us who don't explicitly hold the Hierarchy of Method may have absorbed its language and values, and so it can function like a set of unconscious lenses through which we engage our art. Through these lenses, if presentation comes up at all, it's typically treated as mere adornment, as window-dressing, like clothing—something that is superficial and interchangeable—certainly less important and less essential to a performance than its method.

2. I think this Hierarchy of Method is deeply mistaken and hinders our art—and the perception of our art. One aspect of this problem is that magicians appear to be unclear about what "presentation" even refers to. Looking carefully at how magicians use this term—in conversation and in print—we can see at least *eight* different uses of the word, some of which are inconsistent with the others. In other words, in our current subculture "presentation" is a fuzzy, imprecise, and apparently confused concept. Whether this is *caused by* or an *effect of* our obsessive focus on technical method is an interesting question, but not one for us today.

3. After a rigorous examination of what we mean and *want to mean* by "presentation," I have come (so far) to identify four *Elements of Presentation*. I say "elements," but in fact I believe "presentation" refers to a family of elements that are interwoven in a performance piece. This vital, dynamic complexity might be why we have had a hard time with the concept. In no particular order, I would suggest the elements of presentation are:

    1. A piece's **Theme:** What *it is about*; the *idea* being expressed by it. A few examples:
        — Eugene: "An episode from the history of religion told with a pack of cards, OR: "Sometimes things that appear simple aren't so simple after all; a single spool of thread… ."
        — David Copperfield: "When I was a boy, I always wanted to fly…"
        — Penn & Teller (paraphrase): "With this trick, we are going to break the four basic rules of magic… The fourth rule: you never, *ever* perform the Cups and Balls with *clear, plastic cups!*"
        — Dai Vernon: "Magicians often have to overcome difficult situations. One night a young fellow interrupted, 'How about letting *me* shuffle the cards?'"
        — Me: "I believe magic is light—it is light amid the darkness of the world."
        — True of non-speaking routines as well. Think of Jeff's Mask Act or Water Bowls as obvious examples.
    2. A piece's **Script or Music,** what typically conveys and expresses the theme.
    3. The performer's **character and wardrobe (costume)**
    4. The **appearance of the stage (performing space)** and **the props**—the **design.**

4. If this account of presentation is compelling, there are (at least) two major consequences.

The first consequence is a highly practical one: if these are the elements of presentation, we now have a very clear sense of the targets we must hit as we develop a routine. We need to ask, for example: What is this piece going to be about? What "good words" or "good music" will express convey that theme? Is this piece consistent with my character? Is what I'm wearing consistent with my character and the theme? In what context or setting will this piece have the best chance to succeed? What properties and props should populate my performing space? In short, for us to better see the targets of presentation allows us to have a much better chance of hitting them in our work! **In other words, getting clear about this "family of elements" can empower us to create *better presentations.***

The second consequence is more theoretical, but equally important: the details of my account imply that privileging method above all else obscures equally important aspects of our work. The metaphor I have for this is that our "technical method muscles" are *enormous,* like big, huge arms, while the rest of our "performing body"—our presentation and performance skills muscles—are teeny-tiny and underdeveloped. Imagine what a person built like that would look like: unhealthy, sad, and perhaps laughable.

The objection: "But, Larry, method is *the most important thing* because without a good method you don't have anything worth watching!" My reply: That last clause is true, but once we understand that presentation refers to nothing less than **the theme, words, music, character, and design** it is also true that without a good presentation you also don't have anything worth watching either.

In other words, my view is that Method and Presentation in a magic performance *are equally important.* You don't have anything worth watching without BOTH OF THEM being executed at high levels.

In conclusion, *magic performances worth watching* involve not a *vertical hierarchy* between the technical method and presentation, but rather a *horizontal lemniscate.*2
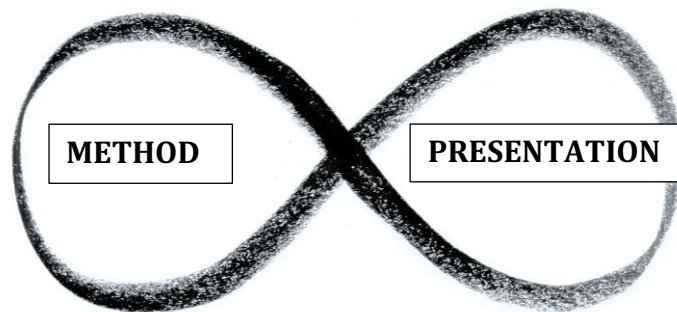
(And we haven't even discussed PERFORMANCE SKILLS. Next year......)