

Behind the Scenes

by Steve Cohen

I CAN'T ADEQUATELY EXPRESS how surreal it is to stand in the wings of the Ed Sullivan Theater, waiting to be introduced. Fifteen minutes prior to show time, I was sitting in my sixth floor dressing room watching David Letterman deliver his monologue on a small plasma television. It was like watching his monologue any other night at home. Moments later, however, I was on the ground floor, standing in the wings of that same theater, peeking out into the darkness. Running through my mind: "Am I about to walk onto the Letterman show I was just watching?" It was like seeing a two-dimensional scene turn three-dimensional.

Fortunately, the producers helped me to feel well prepared. Seven days before my appearance, they granted my request to visit the theater and sit in the guest chair at "home base" (the raised platform where Letterman's desk is located). I spent two hours in the theater that day, practicing my sleights in the guest chair, and going over camera angles with the director and producers. I even practiced walking out from the wings several times, to become accustomed to the route, the trajectory, and the temperature (it's very chilly.)

During this pre-show visit, I met band leader Paul Shaffer and explained that I'd need to borrow one of his rings for my performance the following week. He let me handle his wedding ring and confirm that it would be the proper size for my ring-in-walnut trick. I also met many of the staff: the director, executive producers, stage hands, audio techs, and writers. I did several card tricks for them in a casual setting, to get them excited about the upcoming "Close-Up Magic Week." Of course, I also had an ulterior motive—to become a familiar face. The director, Jerry Foley told me that this visit helped save us a lot of time in creating a comfortable working relationship for the following week's show.

The only person who I didn't meet was David Letterman. In fact, the only time I shared with him occurred on the day of the show, at his desk, while cameras were rolling.

Close-Up Magic Week

Allow me to back up several weeks and explain how I came to be involved. On a Thursday in early May, I received a call from the Letterman talent booker asking my availability for a possible "Close-Up Magic Week." By the following



Monday, the booker called to confirm both the week and my appearance.

On our first call, the booker asked what magic I would present if my performance were confirmed. He indicated that they needed three and a half minutes of material. I instantly thought "No Card Tricks," since other magicians would certainly be choosing card magic as part of their acts. In reality, I would have loved to present card magic on the show. However, since I knew that I was competing against other magicians for this opportunity, I decided to offer something that others wouldn't likely propose.

For several years I'd been researching methodology and presentations for the "Borrowed Ring in Walnut." I found references to this routine in a 1902 *Sphinx* magazine, and at the time it was already an old trick. My approach to magic has always been to take classic plots and update them for modern audiences, and I'd challenged myself to design a routine that concludes with a borrowed ring appearing inside of a walnut, inside of an egg, inside of a lemon.

Before the Letterman call, I was about 95 percent complete with the new routine. I used this booking as an incentive to finish my work on the handling. Fortunately I present many public shows at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel each week, and I got a chance to work the routine in front of live audi-



My dressing room

for my appearance.

Allow me to make a public apology to my family for being a particularly negligent father and husband during this period. I essentially ignored everyone and shirked all family responsibility so that I could refine the handling and work out a script that would fit in the allotted time. I set up chairs and a desk in my living room in the same format that I had observed in the Ed Sullivan Theater, and practiced over and over until I gained muscle memory.

I lost five pounds in sweat during the week leading up to the show. My shirts were drenched at the end of each rehearsal, no exaggeration.

A rich resource early in the week was Jason Randal, a long-time repeat guest on the Letterman show. I called Jason at his California ranch and he was extremely generous with his time and with the information he shared. I know that the other performers also conferred with Jason to receive advice before their appearances. Nobody knows the conditions of the Letterman show better than Jason, since he already had six appearances under his belt. I believe that Jason was as generous as he was because he knew that we *all* needed to

ences for the week leading up to the television taping.

My collaborator Mark Levy worked with me to round out the routine, and assisted even more importantly with moral support.

For someone like me who has not appeared regularly on television, it is intimidating to look ahead to an appearance that will be viewed by several million people. Mark offered me wise advice: "You need be no better than you already are." Over the course of the past three years, several Letterman producers and talent bookers had been scouting my Waldorf shows. Mark reminded me that they had already been impressed with what they had seen, so there was no need to self-impose any pressure to out-perform myself. It's like a baseball player who signs a new contract; the signing team offers a multi-million dollar deal based on the player's prior performance. He need only be as good as they have already observed. This advice—you need be no better than you already are—helped soothe my anxiety, and for the week leading up to my appearance, I was relatively relaxed.

Preparing for Letterman

Having said that, however, there would be no excuse for lack of preparation. I committed that I would perform at my absolute best, and dedicated the ensuing 10 days to train



Preparing with Mark Levy

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look good as representatives of the magic community.

Since I was the only guest based in New York City, I wrote the others and offered to meet them when they arrived. Before my own appearance, I had the opportunity to see John Carney and Michael Ammar. Also, Johnny Ace Palmer corresponded with me briefly by e-mail, and wrote, "We'll be making history this week." After thinking about it, I had to agree: five magicians would be performing on the same stage that hosted Elvis Presley and The Beatles. I felt a spirit of brotherhood among all five of us.

After Ammar and Carney had completed filming their segments, they offered me first-hand advice and suggestions

After arriving in the theater that afternoon, I met the director for my rehearsal. They told me to prepare for two full run-throughs. Arriving at center stage, I explicitly pointed to the aerial camera, and said, "I must insist that we not use that camera." He asked why, and I explained that there were two points in my routine that could be grossly exposed if shot from above. He seemed genuinely surprised when I told him about some of the "flashes" caught by the aerial camera earlier in the week.

To be absolutely certain that he would shoot my segment correctly, I explained two critical parts of the method to the director, in private. This is prudent advice that I learned from Anthony Owen. I felt that it would be worth exposing two secrets to one man in hopes of better deceiving several million people. There were still some elements of the trick that he did not understand, mind you. I exposed only enough of the trick to the director so that he could film it most effectively.

During the rehearsal, Mark Levy sat in the audience with my manager, Holly Pepe, watching the monitors. I had one run-through that lasted about 10 minutes. David Letterman does not attend rehearsals any more, so the talent coordinator sat in Letterman's chair as a stand-in. I performed the routine in front of the producers, writing staff, and crew. Their reaction was positive—and the Letterman stand-in said, "I'm sitting two feet from you and I can't see how you made that egg disappear." The director approached with a smile and said that he "got it," but I wasn't satisfied with this verdict until I heard from Mark and Holly that nothing had flashed on camera. Mark said,

"We couldn't have shot it any better ourselves."

Rehearsal over, I retired up to my sixth floor dressing room and waited. The waiting period was rather long, but the Letterman staff kept checking in with me to take care of any needs. They were extremely attentive, letting me know at each step of the way what to expect next. Their friendly and expert handling helped to pass the time since there was always another small goal to be fulfilled. First they stopped into my dressing room with legal paperwork to sign. Later, an intern dropped off a souvenir bag of Late Show memorabilia (hat, t-shirt, etc).

About 30 minutes prior to show time, I was escorted downstairs to the makeup studio. The makeup artist was very chatty and friendly, helping to alleviate any possible nervousness on my part. (She even had her Golden Retriever with her, resting on a pillow below the counter.) After applying foundation and powder on my face, she blurted, "Are your ears always so red?" I had no idea what she was talking



Borrowing Paul's ring

about how to improve my own appearance. Since I had never met David Letterman before, I was concerned that our first meeting might seem rather forced or uncomfortable. However, according to Ammar and Carney, Letterman was genuinely cooperative, and appeared to have a good time.

Since I was the final act in the week to be recorded, I had the luxury of watching all of the others before my turn. (The Friday show with Michael Ammar was pre-recorded on Monday.) I observed Letterman and his reactions to the other magicians. I also closely watched the camera angles.

On the morning of the taping, I received a telephone call from the segment producer, who interviewed me about possible discussion points with Letterman. During that call, I told the producer that I did not want the overhead camera to be used since there was a risk that some of the magic methodology would be exposed on camera. The producer promised that he'd do his best, but that this sort of decision was ultimately the director's call.

about, but sure enough, the capillaries in my ears were blazing just below the skin surface. Although I'd been attempting to stay cool prior to show time, my body was shifting into fight mode. It was my autonomic nervous system making its grand entrance. The makeup artist toned down my ears with some light foundation, and I returned to my dressing room.

Mark Levy chatted with me for a few spare minutes, and then it was show time. The segment producer led me to the elevator with Mark and Holly, and all of us descended to the stage level. The prop master took my case and set it in the agreed location, and I stood in the wings with Biff Henderson. From my vantage point, I couldn't see if my prop case was correctly placed, and I couldn't see Letterman himself, since a pillar is positioned in just the right spot to obstruct your view.

Before I even had time to think, I heard Letterman present my introduction:

"Our first guest is known as The Millionaires' Magician, and performs regularly at the legendary Waldorf-Astoria right here in New York City. Good gig! Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Steve Cohen. Steve, come out here."

I walked out briskly thinking, "I've got to nail this."

Unless you've actually been a guest on the David Letterman show, I don't think you have the authority to critique the performers who appeared during Close-Up Magic Week. Even for professional magicians like the five of us who have given thousands and thousands of performances in our lives, the conditions on this show were particularly tough.

The obvious first challenge is the physical layout of the desk and chairs. In order to perform magic to the host, you must turn severely to your left, barely sitting on the edge of the guest chair. As a result, the live audience and the cameras can only view your profile. I considered facing front and playing to the camera, but the producers insisted that I should aim to entertain Letterman.

His desk is somewhat high in relation to the plush guest chair, and the chair cushion causes you to sink even lower. It's somewhat awkward to execute sleight of hand at chest height if you're accustomed to performing it lower, at abdomen level.

The theater is perfectly silent and dark. On television it appears as if the theater is brightly lit, but in fact the lights

are focused so brightly that onstage, you are unaware of the audience—unaware of anything, really, except Letterman. A large wall of cameras blocks the orchestra seats from the stage. I couldn't see the audience as they were deep in the shadows, and I could hardly hear their laughter in the distance. They seemed miles away. It was like performing in a bubble.

The largest challenge, in my opinion, was the wild card of David Letterman himself. As I indicated earlier, he does not meet the guests before they walk out to his desk, and



it is somewhat overwhelming to meet a television icon for the first time on camera, while the cameras are rolling. I've performed for many alpha-males throughout my career, however, no one is more in command of his environment than David Letterman sitting behind his desk. He's been presenting his television show in the same format for over 25 years, and it's fair to say that he "owns" that space. We magicians had no advance warning as to whether he would act in a supportive or adversarial fashion.

As I sat down in the guest chair, I remembered advice from my departed friend, magician Mark Sicher, who said, "Assume that they already love you." In other words, don't push too hard to gain an audience's approval. If you assume that they already love you, you can simply be yourself, and do what you've trained to do.

That approach worked well. Letterman was supportive

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and gracious throughout my segment, and helped emphasize key points of my story presentation to the audience. He reacted genuinely when the walnut and egg vanished, and was seriously fooled when Paul Shaffer's ring vanished from the shot glass and ended up inside the walnut.

Concluding Thoughts

Looking back, I suppose that I could have chosen to perform a more familiar routine instead of challenging myself to perform a new item on national television. The producers originally had requested the "any-drink-called-for" routine that's a permanent part of my repertoire. They had seen me perform "Think-a-Drink" at the Waldorf, and had been talking internally about it for several years. However, the full performance of that routine requires approximately eight minutes, while the producers specified that we should prepare three and a half.

I think that the borrowed ring in walnut was the right choice for this appearance. I purposely chose a story trick since it would enable me to steer the performance at my own pace. I knew that no matter how unpredictable Letterman's response might be, he would at least give me the courtesy to finish my story.

Also, the ring in walnut effect is simple to describe. This



is a criterion of all of the tricks I select to perform. To me, a trick has to "sound" good when recounted to someone who wasn't there to see it. For instance, "Did you see the guy who made the ring disappear and end up inside of a walnut?" paints a more vivid picture than "Did you see the guy who made four Aces gather together in one pile?"

The experience of appearing on the *Late Show with David Letterman* was one I'll always remember. I appreciate the camaraderie shared between all of the performers, and hope that Letterman and his staff feel strongly enough about our appearances to invite more magicians back in the future. •

