

## **Rusty Quill - EGSM024 – Stage Magic**

Content warnings:

- Explicit language
- Discussions of: mindreading, seances
- Mentions of: food, death, self-injury, guns

### **ALASDAIR**

The one thing that he drilled into us over and over again was avoid card tricks. And the, to this day I can hear him going, “There are 51 ways they can go wrong, and only one way they can go right.”

**(Group laughter)**

**[Show Theme - Intro]**

### **HELEN**

Rusty Quill presents - Enthusigasm.

### **HELEN**

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusigasm. The show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers, and today we’re talking about M-a-g-i-c ! And I am so, so excited and pleased to be joined by Alasdair, Martyn and Sean. Now as always, we are going to introduce ourselves alphabetically. So Alasdair, can you give me your pronouns and tell me what you do?

Rusty Quill Enthusiasism - EGSM - Stage Magic

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah of course. Hi Helen, how are you doing?

**HELEN**

Hi !

**ALASDAIR**

I'm Alasdair. My pronouns are He-Him. I co-own the Escape Artist podcast network with my partner Marguerite Kenner, and I am a journalist and game designer and professional pop culture enthusiast.

**HELEN**

Ah, lovely. Perfect. Now, Martyn...

**MARTYN**

Mmm.

**HELEN**

...give me your pronouns and tell me what you do.

**MARTYN**

Hello! I am Martyn Pratt, CTO at Rusty Quill, and general mischief achiever at Rusty Quill...

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

...also professional Alasdair Stuart fan.

**ALASDAIR**

Aah!

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Yeah. He, him.

**HELEN**

And lastly, Sean please give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

**SEAN**

Hello. As no doubt you've heard by now my name is Sean Smith, pronouns are he and him. I am a magician, a games designer plus author, and my standard response to, "Oh, have you read anything that, that I might know?" is, "Probably".

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Very, very good. Okay, alright. We're going to go right into this I think. Would anyone like to start us off by saying what your connection is to magic? Are you

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

a performer? Are you simply an enjoyer, like myself? How do we feel and what is our connection to stage magic?

**ALASDAIR**

Ah, if I could jump in, I have something for that.

**HELEN**

Yes.

**ALASDAIR**

I, I've been a fan of stage magic my whole life, and when I was growing up I was part of a youth magic group on the Isle of Man where I grew up, and performed multiple shows across basically every youth centre and primary school hall you could imagine, in like a 50 mile radius.

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

That's amazing.

**MARTYN**

That's really cool.

**HELEN**

Did you carry that on after you left?

**ALASDAIR**

Unfortunately not. I've kept the appreciation of it ever since. Oh, I did birthday parties as well...

**HELEN**

Aah!

**ALASDAIR**

...which are of, are really weird, because you have to have something happen every 15 seconds or the kids will wander off.

**(Group laughter)**

**SEAN**

Yeah.

**ALASDAIR**

So there's, there's no structure to it at all. It's just, "Rings, they're connected; they're not connected; that's a balloon; it's a rabbit now, cake."

**(Group laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

And it's exhausting, but it's really good fun. Now I actually kept the appreciation of it and my fondness for magic weirdly ended being a really

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

important part of the degree I went off to go do. But I haven't performed in a while. And I really keep meaning to get back to it.

**HELEN**

Aaw, that's amazing. I love the idea of being at a kid's birthday party, but actually being like the most stressful part of the job.

**ALASDAIR**

By some distance.

**HELEN**

It's a bit like; bam, bam, bam.

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah. Oh yeah.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

There's a reason why I've never done kids magic.

**MARTYN**

Oh really?

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

And, and also like I've, I've been a teacher – I spent 10 years as a secondary school teacher – I'm not afraid of children. But I am not wanting to perform to children. They are the worst audience in the world.

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

Yes, yes they are.

**SEAN**

Because they're so enthusiastic about everything. Which means it burns very, very quickly. A bit like Roy Batty.

**(Group laughter)**

I, I am a performer. I'm still a performer. I'd like to do more things on stage but there's not really any money for it at the moment nor, nor large audiences that can safely gather. But what I found really fun about doing stage magic particularly is just how much you can massively shift the entire audience's mood into one specific place, and like draw everyone around in this big thing.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**SEAN**

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

To the point where I was, I was doing some close up magic relatively recently at a party and like – this isn't just like guy with guitar style doing like, "I'll show a card trick...." No like I say, I was paid to be at a party as part of their scheduled entertainment and I decided it would be a lot safer to just stand in the corner and basically put on like ringmaster style voice to call over the small crowds and then do some things that way. So yes, I perform – have done I, well I've learned since I was 10...

**HELEN**

Ooh?

**SEAN**

...which meant that by the time that eventually I actually started showing people things, when I was about 16 or 17, I'd got past that point of actually being bad. So I think the first time I ever actually showed my parents anything, they were genuinely surprised that they didn't know what was going on.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**SEAN**

And yeah. When I was at university, set up a magic society which, which is still going to this day, which was like...

**HELEN**

Oh congrats!

**ALASDAIR**

Oh, good job.

**SEAN**

...which I'm quite fancy about, and unfortunately we built up more money than we could spend...

**MARTYN**

Oh no!

**SEAN**

...because as an official part of the student union we were able to like charge for services and the like.

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

But the problem being a lot of our members were on student visas for like international students, and so we can't pay anyone, and so we just built up an absurdly high amount of cash. So by the time I left it was like, we've bought as many packs of cards as we can possibly do. We've bought everyone hoodies. Like please, please stop giving us money.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

Aah! So yes, that was me.

**HELEN**

Mmm. Can you quickly go back for a minute and, can you tell us a bit about what close up magic? So, is that like the illusion thing with like coins in your fingers, or what is that?

**SEAN**

Yeah. So, in the main sense that if we take like stage magic being the stand on the stage and do magic...

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**SEAN**

...close up magic instead is, if I stand up close to you and do magic....

**HELEN**

Ah, okay.

**SEAN**

So the sort of thing you are likely to see at trade shows, or at weddings or the like, or potentially in like cafes and the sort. Sometimes otherwise called like walk about magic.

**HELEN**

Mmm?

**SEAN**

Because typically the magician will walk about, as in the name.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Very sophisticated.

**SEAN**

This is a, a very ancient and precise artform this.

**HELEN**

Yeah. And Martyn, what about you?

**MARTYN**

I bloody love magic.

**HELEN**

He he he he.

**MARTYN**

It's just, I've just been a massive fan ever since I was a, a really young kid. It was like one of the first shows and things I can really remember, just enjoying, and just a thing that I would just sort of obsessively kind of watch and get into. So, I think it started off – the first magician I remember, at least knowing the name of – was Paul Daniels...

**HELEN**

Mm hmm.

**MARTYN**

...just from I think a lot of his Christmas shows we had like VHS recordings of him, and I just watched them over and over again, and just see the same...

**HELEN**

Aaah !

**MARTYN**

...tricks that he'd do. And I, yeah it was just that whole persona that, that they kind of show you something and they, they lead you to believe a certain, that the world is a certain way, and then they'll sort of like do something that doesn't make any sense and kind of breaks that and I've just really always enjoyed that. Up until the point when I got a magic set, and then I was like, "Ah, this is just hard work and lying to people."

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

I, I kind of lost interest as soon as I realised that like, "Ah, right." If you actually know how to perform and do the tricks, then it's not magic anymore, it's just a, yeah you, you figuring it out and tricking people. So I, I, I lost the interest to kind of perform magic from a very young age, but I've always been fascinated in kind of the process and how people, and how people do it and what a trick

is, and what good magic kind of is, and I'm a big fan of the, the content and the way that it's made.

**HELEN**

Do you think it, that's what inspires you in your various Photoshop...

**MARTYN**

I think so. Yeah there's, there's that element of – because that's a lot – my career in tech is, is kind of, because it is that like you run a few commands or you change a few things on a screen – that is kind of like simple. And, and the low effort cut that I was looking for as a child to kind of get that kind of performance...

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

...is, technology's actually a much closer kind of parallel to that than real stage magic.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**MARTYN**

...so yes, I definitely agree that that, that's where that, that kind of stuff comes from.

**HELEN**

And of course with your various Photoshop adventures, what you do is you definitely show us things that we were not expecting.

**MARTYN**

That's exactly it, yeah.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Aaw, Martyn. Although I, I do disag – technology is incredibly complicated to me. I don't know how you do it.

**SEAN**

There's an Arthur C Clarke quote that, that might possibly fit this situation?

**MARTYN**

Oh yeah?

**HELEN**

Oh yeah?

**SEAN**

That any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. So in a way...

**HELEN**

Aaah!

**ALASDAIR**

...yep, absolutely.

**SEAN**

... Martyn is insightful here.

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

It's interesting isn't it?

**HELEN**

Shall we talk a bit about the actual like performance of magic? Like being on stage. I mean Martyn, I'm completely on your, on your wavelength here in that I can't do it, but I very much enjoy it. Although one time I was tricked into doing it...

**MARTYN**

Well that's the idea isn't it?

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

Sean, I think you were there? It was, a magician did like the five rings trick and had me like hold some rings...

**SEAN**

Oh yes.

**HELEN**

...and then made them like lock together while I was holding them, and I didn't know how it happened.

**ALASDAIR**

I love that.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

I still think you did genuinely do it though?

**HELEN**

I didn't, I was just holding the...

**(laughter)**

**MARTN**

See this is the, this is if we're going to get into like movies and The Prestige and things like that. This is it isn't it? You've, you know magic really deep down inside, you're just pretending not to?

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Right?

**HELEN**

Oh, Martyn that's very beautiful.

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

Anyway, anyway. Someone tell me why you enjoy magic so much. Someone tell me about something inspiring that makes you want to do it, or watch it.

**ALASDAIR**

For me, it became the cornerstone of basically all my training.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

Because I, I had a very similar experience to Martyn in that once I learnt how to do a trick you know, it was like the old John de Lancie interview about Next Gen and his time as Q. And he said I would have family members go, “Could I visit the set?” and every time I would sit them down and go, “You can, but you’ll never watch the show the same way again.”

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

Mmmmm.

**ALASDAIR**

Because the moment you see it from a different perspective you lose some of the magic.

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**ALASDAIR**

And I was incredibly lucky because due to the nature of what I ended up doing, that knowledge of how a trick is assembled actually became part of my critical approach, where I could tell – it’s the old thing, there are seven stories, there’s very little original stuff. And I mean you, you could get tremendously snooty about, well I mean this is just a load of tropes and this is high art and important. And that’s legit. But at the same time, if those tropes are well

executed, or if they're executed in a surprising way, there is joy and elegance and art in that.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**ALASDAIR**

And I find that I apply that in all the pop culture writing I do. Because if something is predictable – and a lot of things are predictable – that's fine. But if it throws curveballs at you within that predictability, that's wonderful.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

That, that is the most pleasant of surprises. And I learnt that through learning magic. I learnt that from learning how to see something side on so you see each stage of it. And I, my brain ended up welding that onto narrative theory.

**MARTYN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

So, I can look at a story now and go well, "That is, that isn't surprising, that's going to pay off here" and about 70% of the time, maybe 60% I'm right. And this I have no idea about because I've never seen anyone do that before. And I love that process and I love how that's how I've evolved my relationship with

it. And it's, that constant hunting for surprise is one of the things about the art I love the most, because even now – even though I've not practiced for I think a couple of decades at this point – I can still look at things and go, "I know how large that effect is. And you have hidden it inside a multimillion dollar action sequence and it is literally turning a card over."

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

Well done, you know. And it, it's like a different layer of the joke almost.

**HELEN**

I love that. And you've hit on something that I do believe, like firmly in my core, which is that a good story is absolutely a kind of magic.

**MARTYN**

Yes!

**HELEN**

It's a kind of teleportation. It can be time travel, it can be so many different things.

**ALASDAIR**

Absolutely.

**HELEN**

That was really touching, Alasdair.

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

Aah, thank you.

**HELEN**

Martyn, bring us down again.

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

I like tricking and I like how people lie to people. I like it...

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

I like how they just get on stage and then they tell, they say, "Look at this thing, look at this. Look, look. This is real, this is a real thing that I've got. Bam!" No it's not, it's not a real thing, I lied to you...

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

...it's this, it's a bird. It's a this, it's a that. Yeah, it's that, that performance in a, in a truer sense. Because they're, they're essentially....

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**MARTYN**

...they're not just magicians; they're comedians, they're actors, they're...

**HELEN**

Yes.

**MARTYN**

...contortionists, charlatans as well, like..

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

...a lot of the time.

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

...a lot of the time the magician is the least talented person on stage. And it will be his, his assistants and things, and everyone else is involved in the performance that actually kind of have to do something difficult, or have to do

Rusty Quill Enthusiasgasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

something hard. So for, the classic kind of like chopping someone in half is usually done with either one or two contortionists fitting inside a space that you can't quite, sorry spoiler warning for people who want to think that magic is magic. But..

**HELEN**

No this, this is a, we all, well...

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

...we all think we know this one.

**MARTYN**

Yeah, exactly.

**SEAN**

This is a, looking at how the sausage is made, kind of thing, isn't it?

**MARTYN**

Exactly, yeah. Because I think one of my favourite shows growing up was, I think it's the, called the Secret of the Magician's Code? Which was done by this guy called a masked magician...

**ALASDAIR**

I remember that.

**MARTYN**

...who basically revealed a bunch of secrets that were like trade secrets about...

**HELEN**

He didn't?

**MARTYN**

Yeah, no he did. Like there was a, it was a, it was a massive show and it was, it was so fascinating to just see the, a lot of magic is literally just like, "Look at this beautiful person while I just quickly undo all of these things behind my back" and just like do this other thing. And it, yeah it was just really nice to see that like reveal of what a lot of magic is, which is just misdirection...

**HELEN**

Hmm.

**MARTYN**

...the audience focusing on the wrong thing, mirrors like just and, and, and just clever stage design and clever sets and things like that. So it's just a whole craft that I, I like to, I like to watch the, the content and then also think; how would you do that? Is there a secret compartment there, you're only showing me this? You're, you're showing me these three sides of this object at one time, but you're holding back one side so is there something that is like connected? So I'm constantly just trying to pick apart tricks, and then

Rusty Quill Enthusiasgasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

occasionally I'm just like, "I have no idea how he did that." That's magic to me, so like that's, that's how I like to enjoy magic.

**HELEN**

That's always such a lovely feeling, where you're like, "Hah, I don't know what happened!"

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Yeah, exactly.

**ALASDAIR**

You sir are a wizard. Well done.

**HELEN**

Yeah. Can we go back a bit to the Masked Magician? I didn't, what happened, did he... what happened to him?

**MARTYN**

So he did actually, so the, the show, the fact that he was masked meant that we didn't actually know for, throughout the season who he was.

**HELEN**

Uh-huh.

**MARTYN**

So he was kind of protected from the kind of magicians circle, which is a real thing, as far as I'm aware.

**ALASDAIR**

It really is.

**MARTYN**

Yeah. But then at the end he did reveal who he was. Except the trouble is, is that I can't actually remember the magician's name.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

That's good. We'll protect him from their wrath.

**MARTYN**

I think he was removed from the magician's circle after that...

**HELEN**

Well yeah.

**MARTYN**

...because of revealing magical secrets as well as I think, Dom or Dick from Dick and Dom – whichever one was a magician – I think they did the same thing, and they're also not allowed in the magician's circle...

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah.

**MARTYN**

...for revealing magic tricks.

**ALASDAIR**

I've actually just looked it up and brilliantly the Masked Magician's real name is Val Valentino.

**SEAN**

Oh, of course.

**MARTYN**

Born to be a magician weren't they?

**HELEN**

Absolutely.

**SEAN**

Right, but I think, I think I remember there being a massive thing in like the last episode when it was like, "And finally we'll reveal the identity of the Masked Magician. It's Valentino."

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

And everyone in Britain was like, "Who?"

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

And I, like I imagine he's probably actually quite a significant like act in Vegas probably. But if it wasn't, wasn't Siegfried or wasn't Roy we didn't, we didn't know him.

**ALASDAIR**

It wasn't any of the tigers.

**(Group laughter)**

**SEAN**

Now we don't know that for certain.

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Underneath Val Valentino is a tiger.

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

Sean, tell me what you enjoy about performing or watching magic.

**SEAN**

So, what I really like about it is the whole sense that it almost crystallises a moment, in the same way that like good poetry does. In that I don't remember the last time that I looked so intently at a like, a single coin...

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

...or like genuinely looked at a pack of cards and thought actually like, what can I really tell about the physicality of this thing? Because it just ties everything right down to the point at which everyone's looking. It's not – as much as there is a like, often a really powerful story that goes along – especially with a lot of like large stage illusions. So there's sort of things like huge boxes and various like flashy coloured flags and the like. Although there's often a narrative that kind of underpins that as well, you've also still got a point where you are looking incredibly precisely and closely at one direct thing, which is almost meditative in a sense. Because it puts you directly in here in the moment, looking at this thing altogether. And that part of like, the same reason that I enjoy watching like anything on a stage, is because you can feel

the audience are all in the same audience, versus talking with your friends about something that you've each watched separately. And I think that whole, we are here now as one thing, is – I don't think anything does it quite as well as magic does? Because it takes in your previous assumptions and just like pulls back down to it. It's like, you've seen coins, you don't think about them but I'm going to make you think very hard about them right now by proceeding to pull 20 to 80 of them randomly out of the air, and then throw them into a box, where they turn into fish.

**HELEN**

Sean, I want to ask you a little bit – because you, you've been talking about sort of illusion magic, and coins and cards...

**SEAN**

MmM.

**HELEN**

I actually, no I'll open this to the floor. And the question is, what about mindreading?

**ALASDAIR**

I have a really embarrassing confession...

**HELEN**

Ah !

**ALASDAIR**

...which speaks to this. I am a very good hypnotism subject. I have been told this. I used to have a colossal fear of the dentist because I am lantern-jawed so I can't be properly anaesthetised on my bottom jaw.

**HELEN**

Oooooow.

**ALASDAIR**

And I was actually sent to a hypnotherapist to deal with this, and I still have the trigger for that, it still works to this day. But I had no memory of any time passing, I thought I just laid down and closed my eyes and they talked to me for a couple of minutes. And when I woke up they went, "Yeah, you're one of the best subjects I've ever had." It took about half the usual time. And I was like, "T-h-a-n-k-s..?"

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

...and I'm still waiting for the trigger to murder Abraham Lincoln.

**(Group laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

This relates to magic because a few years ago Marguerite took me to a Derren Brown show for my birthday...

**HELEN**

Oow.

**ALASDAIR**

...and she knows this, and years ahead of time. So we showed up 5 minutes before the show started, not 25 minutes. And we had the conversation about we're not going to hang around in the lobby; you're not going to answer any questions; it's all going to be fine. So he comes on stage and starts talking, and he starts selecting – he starts off with this kind of icebreaker – where he's like, gives you three questions and depending on what your answer is you sit down. And at the end of, of these three questions, like 4 or 5 people were left standing up, and Marguerite was one of them. And he – at this stage show at least – he selected volunteers from the audience by throwing Aerobies into the audience, and the person who caught it came up on stage.

**HELEN**

Throwing what, sorry?

**ALASDAIR**

Aerobies, you know those kind of circular boomerangs that don't come back? They just...

**HELEN**

Oooow !

**ALASDAIR**

...like frisbee looking things.

**HELEN**

I thought those were called quoits?

**ALASDAIR**

They may also be called quoits.

**HELEN**

Okay.

**SEAN**

I heard “pierogies” and thought that you were throwing out potato dumplings.

**(Group laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

Oh I’m hungry now. Aw, I want, I want pierogies now. But it was only after the show had finished that we realised he had not thrown these into the audience sections where the people had been left standing up, after these three questions, because they were designed to pick out people who couldn’t be manipulated.

**MARTYN**

Aaah !

**ALASDAIR**

And, like I say, Marguerite was one of the three people left standing at the end of these questions and I was the first person to sit down. So that is why Derren Brown does not have me as a you know, useful hypnotised patsy, basically.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Wow. I've been hypnotised too before, when I was at university.

**ALASDAIR**

How did it go?

**HELEN**

It was v-e-r-y strange.

**ALASDAIR**

Isn't it?

**HELEN**

Yeah. I mean it sounds like you don't remember it at all, but I remember it. And I just remember just feeling extremely – I don't know if you, if it is possible to feel suggestable – but just, I just was like, "Yeah, I'll do that."

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

Why not?

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

Chicken noises. Fucking A, let's go.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**ALASDAIR**

Pardon me.

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

Yeah I was like, "This will be great". Martyn, what do you think about mindreading and hypnotism and things like that?

**MARTYN**

I'm really glad you've brought up Derren Brown because I think that he is kind of where, like the escalation of modern magic and where we're at with the stage performance. It's not enough to kind of just have trick objects and, and sleight of hand and have objects appearing and disappearing.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

Mmm.

**MARTYN**

We, we like to think that we're in control of our minds and we're in control of, of our thoughts and things like that. And...

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**MARTYN**

...he is very good at, not only the hypnotism stuff, but also at just kind of convincing you that what he's doing isn't just magic. That he's somehow also controlling you in a way, and manipulating you in a way that you're not completely in agreement with. Watching his shows and doing that same trick of like – you, you can't just be like, "Oh he's holding an object in a weird way" – it's more like, he's saying all of this stuff in, in, in a way that is very convincing but you, if you kind of follow his logic to the letter, and there are occasional sort of flaws to the things that he seems to predict. So he might say like, "Oh, think of a number" and you'll say, "Oh what was it?" and he'll say like, "16" and then, like "Oh well I had 19 written." And then later on it'll be like, "Oh it was 3 away." But he got the information kind of after in the timings of things. Is, is, so he might have it was 3 away written down somewhere. And then someone says 16 and then he can say 19, and then the order in that seems

predictive and magical, but actually the, the way in which the information is given in that particular order is not. So it's not an actual prediction. Same thing when he kind of predicted the lottery numbers. Was the, the lottery numbers came out and then he showed us them in a very, very quickly. Which I, I don't know how he did it or, or what, what was used you know. It's a magic trick basically. But at the same time, I don't believe he can predict the lottery, and things like that.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

No.

**HELEN**

There's a podcast called the ParaPod. And one of the hosts said something like, Derren Brown is the closest thing we have to the devil.

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Yeah, totally!

**HELEN**

And I was like, "Barry, no!"

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Sean, how about you, as a currently practising magician?

**SEAN**

Indeed. Well I think before I go into that I want to say one, my, of my favourite things about Derren Brown specifically is he will pepper his script with the answers...

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

...in such a way that he will directly make reference to the exact way in which he has done the thing he is doing, without actually telling you...

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**SEAN**

...like without necessarily revealing it. So I remember at one point he was talking about an event that took place on Lysander Street, and during the story

that he was giving, a very, very specific line that seemed as if it could be a throw away, was actually the answer to here's how this works.

**HELEN**

Aaah.

**SEAN**

And I think from a conceptual point that's really clever as well. Because it means if you're the smug bastard whose going to sit there going, "Ah, I bet I know how he does this." And then he says, "I did it this way."

**(Group laughter)**

**SEAN**

You've now got this tiny little in joke, and you're probably then not going to tell everyone. Because it almost like creates this like internal little structure. I don't know if he's doubly done that, to the point where he's said a thing where people expect him to do that and actually he's used something separate? It's more likely he would have done that when he was working with Andy Nyman, because Andy Nyman is the fan of that sort of, "I'm going to trip you over three times at once." But yeah, there's something absolutely fascinating about just how – and actually yeah, I think what Martyn said about him like elevating modern magic – I think definitely really works. I'm a big fan of mindreading. My stage show is primarily a mindreading stage show, just with a more bookish bent...

**MARTYN**

Oooh wow!

**SEAN**

...to the point where I did a show a few years ago called Mind What you Read...

**(Group laughter)**

**SEAN**

...and the purpose of it is the book you read on the Tube actually reveals everything I need to know about you, and I can use that to do stuff.

**HELEN**

Ooooooh!

**SEAN**

Which did mean that I got to reveal the world's most psychically charged word. Which, which is the word 'doormat'. So if you think back to the very first Ghostbusters film, at the beginning of it Bill Murray's character is testing the psychic capacities of his students by getting them to focus on different ideas from different cards. And the symbols which he's getting them to focus on are genuine symbols that were used for psychic research back in the '30's. Then there in there's like Zena symbols or Rhine symbols. And they work because they are visually as distinct from each other as possible. So it's unlikely that you're going to get confusion between the two. Pretty much in the same way that the like, eye charts in an optician's are quite close to each other, it almost works on the opposite way instead.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**SEAN**

And the added benefit of those symbols as well is that they are entirely free of like cultural significance as such. So although there is a cross, which looks essentially like a plus sign, it doesn't look like the Christian cross for instance. And because of this that was designed as such to be as free as possible from any sort of like primed belief, or the sort of thoughts that someone may come to instead. And what you can also do with them then is, take each of the symbols and almost represent them as a letter. So, like the circle already looks like an O. The cross looks a little bit like a lower case 't'.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**SEAN**

If you take the star, that's pretty much the world's most excitable 'a'. You can take the three wavy lines, turn them on their side, they look a bit like an 'm'. And if you shave the, the corners off the edge of the square then it looks a lot like a 'd'. So, if you take all of those and put them in a single word, then you get the word that the most psychics in the world are focusing on at any one time. And that word is doormat. Which does then prove quite useful for trying to get people to focus on particular different ideas, if you're then trying to read their minds.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

So that was...

**MARTYN**

So cool.

**SEAN**

...particularly amusing for me I suppose.

**HELEN**

Excellent.

**ALASDAIR**

Wow. I love that.

**HELEN**

That is very, very cool. I've forgotten what we were talking about now. Did you do this to me, Sean?

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

I was, we were wondering what you enjoyed about magic, I think was the question.

**ALASDAIR**

Mindreading.

**HELEN**

Mindreading ! That's what we were talking about. In which case, is there anything else you would like to add about it?

**SEAN**

I like that it makes people really uncomfortable.

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Yes. Yes!

**SEAN ?**

So there's a real fear and I mean, Alasdair kind of hinted at it when he spoke about the fact that he can be very easily hypnotised. That...

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**SEAN ?**

...this is a situation that is different from something else. You're not just watching a video; you're not just seeing a strange optical illusion. But instead the impossibility is taking place within your own head, within your own skull.

Rusty Quill Enthusiasgasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

And there's a certain discomfort and a certain like frisson that comes from that.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

And yeah, it's the same reason I like horror movies.

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

Absolutely.

**SEAN**

It's the, like the nightmare sticks in, and like you've got that there now.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Excellent. And I think, on that we're going to take a little break.

**BREAK**

**HELEN**

I want to ask about favourite styles, in terms of like to what or to perform. Because I went to see – I think it was called The Illusionists – in the London West End. And it was someone doing mindreading; it was someone sticking, sticking his hand in a box with a scorpion in it; it was someone chaining himself up and getting out of like a fiery box. They all had like these different disciplines that they specialised in. And I don't know if any of you have a favourite one that you'd like to engage with or, Sean I think you said you liked mindreading best?

**SEAN**

So, my favourite to perform is mindreading. But I don't really enjoy watching it that much.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

An exception would be Derren Brown, because often when I'm watching it I'm not trying to work out how it's done, I'm just following. But also that...

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

...the people with which he's worked with. So, some of his consultants like Andy Nyman and Luke Jermay, really shift the sort of tone and mechanics of the actual performance.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

But often, with a stage magician – with a stage mentalist – they're doing the exact same tricks that I do, and that we're all referring back pretty much to the same iconic texts. So there's, there's a thing called 13 Steps to Mentalism by Tony Corinda that's essentially the bible of mindreading. And so everyone knows it. And so it's, it's quite interesting. Because I'll sit there and go, "Oh, I really liked how you did this thing" that we all do. So yeah, someone needs to be remarkably different for me to really enjoy watching it. But my favourite things to watch instead is, well, what at the time would have been called parlour magic...

**HELEN**

Ooh.

**SEAN**

...where if you imagine like a, a long, a long room in a house that's kind of like almost like between like a dining room and a living room, sort of like bisected by an arch. And so like, that arch would almost form like the natural wings of a, of a small stage.

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

So you see all these sorts of like brilliant manipulations routines, where like someone will take a billiard ball and polish it with a silk cloth, and the ball's just not there.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

And in fact my particular favourite is Guy Hollingworth, who has a routine of this and it's perfectly period. He's wearing like period appropriate attire, he's got genuine vintage billiard balls and he just cleans them, and they're gone.

**HELEN**

Aah.

**SEAN**

And it, it is the single most beautiful piece of magic I have ever seen. It's absolutely incredible. And I think some of the thing that I like about it is that it's so intricately choreographed, in almost in the same way as like a dance, or in the way that like a very good mime show would be that intricately placed.

**HELEN**

That's, it's interesting you bring up mime because mime is, often to lots of people such an odd concept. I actually did go and see a mime show once.

**MARTYN**

Oh cool.

**HELEN**

It really was like watching some kind of ballet or something. It was so weird and so intense, but also really beautiful. Interesting comparison, yeah.

Martyn, what about you? What's your favourite one to watch?

**MARTYN**

I like it when magic is kind of self-acknowledging...

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**MARTYN**

...and you kind of have this sort of meta plot. So Derren Brown does this I think very well, where he'll, he'll explain how people in the past used to do, used to perform a trick in a particular type of way. And then he'll explain how he's using psychological tricks or, or his own knowledge or his own you know, cleverness in order to, to reimagine it for a new generation. I think also kind of Penn & Teller do it as well? Where they, they will take...

**HELEN**

Yes.

**MARTYN**

...tricks that have been done in the past and they'll ramp them up in a kind of a more a kind of like rock and roll way, I like to think.

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Yeah, I think it's just that. The idea that we've seen magic before; we're aware of it; we know some beats in certain ways in which tricks are performed and magicians are aware of that as well, and then they, they elevate it to some other level in some other way. Either by making it more extreme, providing a different perspective or giving it that extra level on top of also doing tricks, I guess. So, yeah...

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**MARTYN**

I, I think that...

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

So you like it when it's something where they tell you what they're about to do and then they do it, but not like you expected.

**MARTYN**

Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

**SEAN**

I actually think Penn & Teller's version of the bullet catch is a really good example of that. So you see how the standard traditional version of the bullet catch works in The Prestige.

**MARTYN**

Oh yeah.

**SEAN**

But the thing that makes Penn & Teller's so good is that they are performing it for an American audience but particularly for people who are gun enthusiasts.

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

So the sort of people that will go to a range, that will practice, that will spend a lot of time cleaning their guns.

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**SEAN**

And will have such immediate recognition of things in the same way that I can look at a role-playing game supplement and immediately tell you what line it's come from, just because of my like familiarity with that sphere.

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

Mmm. I hadn't even thought of that. Alasdair?

**ALASDAIR**

The type of magic I used to love doing was lazy.

**MARTYN**

(laughing) Yes.

**ALASDAIR**

That was literally how it was described. The, the guy that taught me drilled one truism into us. And I mean we were a room of like 14, ten 14 to 15 year

olds. It's amazing that he didn't throw us in a van and drive us around the island solving mysteries.

**(Group laughter)**

**MARTYN**

Did you have a dog?

**ALASDAIR**

Right, you know. The one thing that he drilled into us over and over again was avoid card tricks. And the, to this day I can hear him going, "There are 51 ways they can go wrong, and only one way they can go right."

**(Group laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

And his idol was an American magician who seems to have largely fallen off the annals of history, and it's a real shame, called Karrell Fox. And Fox was literally referred, had the stage name The Lazy Magician. And his, his thinking was, "My job is to entertain people. And to do that I need to talk to them and need to engage them physically. And if I'm running 30, 20 item checklists for how long, for whether my tricks are working, I'm going to mess that up." So Fox's party piece was he would walk on stage with every trick preloaded. And all he had to do was present it. And, I was even gobbier as a kid than I am now, to the extent that my last year with Young Magicians of Man before I went off to university, they basically went, "You can't put an act together because you've

Rusty Quill Enthusiasgasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

got A levels, so do you want to just script-write the show?" To which I went, "Yes, thank you!"

**HELEN**

Aah!

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

So I used to love tricks which weren't tricks. I mean the, the one which I was, the one which is still my favourite is, I used to put a needle through a balloon. And I've told you how I've done it by saying, "I put a needle through a balloon."

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

And it was a foot long knitting needle with a piece of red thread on the end and transparent balloons that I'm fairly certain were knock-off condom rubber...

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

...that had been sold cheap to a magic supply store. They smelled foul.

**HELEN**

Oh no!

**MARTYN**

Wonderful.

**ALASDAIR**

But the, the image of this red thread running through the middle of this opaque balloon always gets a response from an audience. Because they're like, "How did you do that?" And it was the only trick I was ever asked how I did it. And every time I said, "Well what did you see? I put a needle through a balloon." You, you put a needle through a balloon. "Yeah, that's how I did it." And stuff like that that invites the audience into this benevolent conspiracy of, "Yes, I want you to fool me."

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

Especially if I'm not fooling them at all. Is stuff that I get a huge kick out of as a magician. And I get even more of a kick out of, as an audience member. And not just with magic either. Professional wrestling, strangely hits very similar marks a lot of the time. As do heist movies.

**HELEN**

Aah, I love a heist movie.

**MARTYN**

Yes!

**ALASDAIR**

One of my, my favourite TV shows is Leverage which has just come back as Leverage Redemption. And every damn episode of that show is a magic trick, every single one.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**ALASDAIR**

And it, it just perfectly summed up by the idea of, of The Prestige being, “Or did I?”

**MARTYN**

Yeah.

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

You know? And I love stuff like that. I love things which set out and go, “I’m going to fool you” and do it in such a charming way that you go, “I’m going to let you.” And then it goes, “By the way, these are your trousers.” And you’re like, “I’m sorry, what?”

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

And just, I really dig that.

**HELEN**

So do I. Like I do, the thing that I really love about going to see magic shows is that I know there's no point in me even trying to think about it. I can just enjoy the thing. Whereas everything else I go to see – even if I try my best not to – there's a part of me that's like, "Ah, I see that this narrative beat is happening" or...

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

"Ooh, they should have a consultant on that one." But a magic show, I'm just like, I've got no idea what's going on. I get to just sit, and enjoy. And I absolutely, I'm like, "Fool me. Absolutely. Show me ridiculous things."

**ALASDAIR**

Hooray, I am witnessing wizardry. Continue.

**HELEN**

Exactly.

**ALASDAIR**

Yes.

**HELEN**

Exactly, exactly. You're totally right about how heist movies being like magic as well.

**MARTYN**

Mmm.

**HELEN**

If you haven't seen it, Oceans 8 is one of the best Oceans films.

**ALASDAIR**

Oh my god, love that flick.

**HELEN**

Okay. We are starting to come towards the end of the episode, I think. But we have time for one more question. And I'm just going to dig down into what we've just been discussing, which is like, let's go down into like what is the favourite trick that you've ever seen, or performed? I know that's a very difficult question, but I'm not going to go first because I can't think. So someone, one of you is going to have to sacrifice yourselves.

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

I, I do have one actually. And it's, it's someone we haven't talked about and it's also technically not stage magic. It's, it was from a period when street magic was cool, by David Blaine.

**HELEN**

Street magic is still cool.

**ALASDAIR**

Always will be cool.

**MARTYN**

Yes, yeah. And it was, a deck of cards, let me find your card trick except he, he made a motion and it was on a car that was just travelling past the, the person's, on the street. And it's, you know that there's probably, like he probably you know gave it to someone, the car wasn't necessarily like you know. There could have been any number of ways that it, that it could have, it could have been done.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**MARTYN**

But just to, just because you're on the street and it's not a stage, so it feels like he can't be prepared, and it feels like he's, he's literally there being a magical person doing this trick in front of you using objects that he has no access to, or he can't do anything with. That trick always stands out to me as one that I'm

just like, “Wow!” He’s, he’s taken, he’s taken the magic show out of an environment that is, he is in complete control of and moved it somewhere else where’s he’s not in complete control of. And that feels very magical.

**HELEN**

Aah, that’s super cool and that totally counts.

**ALASDAIR**

It does.

**HELEN**

Any other takers?

**SEAN**

So, I have already described the single most beautiful trick that I have ever seen, which is Guy Hollingworth’s billiard balls routine, which I don’t think has been recorded? So I think if you want to see it you’ll have to see it live. Lovely man, very tall. He’s functionally magic’s answer to Hugh Grant.

**HELEN**

Oh!

**SEAN**

He’s a working barista – no, no – he’s a working barrister.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Very different things.

**MARTYN**

He likes coffee.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

No my favourite trick I've ever performed, is one called The Grand Illusion. Where, I mean it's partially for the pun in it's name. But I invite someone on to stage, they write a swear word on a doily and then I hypnotise them into thinking that they are their own grandmother.

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

So it's, it's only something I've done 3 or 4 times. But, but I love it because it's just so absurd. And so it's, it's not even quite cruel to the person on stage. It's not just kind of like, "Ah, you think you're a chicken and we know you're not a chicken. Silly, silly human." But instead there's this just like strange shared laughter together at the end.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Oh that's very good.

**ALASDAIR**

That is.

**HELEN**

What about you, Alasdair?

**ALASDAIR**

The best trick I've ever seen performed was actually at that Derren Brown live show. And it was, it was the moment you realise the entire show was actually a heist. Because the first...

**HELEN**

What?

**ALASDAIR**

...person he had on stage, he asked them to name a famous person. And they named Jason Sudeikis. And this is pre-Ted Lasso. So like 25 people know who Jason Sudeikis is in the country. And he's like, "Who? Oh well never mind, pick another one." And then the final trick finishes and it spells out the name Jason Sudeikis. And then he shows you the end of the final three tricks, all of which spell out the name Jason Sudeikis.

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

And then a pre-recorded song and dance number by Jason Sudeikis plays, on video screens which weren't there a second before. And then he just comes out with this massive sheet, shit-eating grin on his face, "Sorry."

**(laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

And takes a bow. And it was, I've never seen so many completely isolated tricks recontextualised before. And it's the benign conspiracy thing that I was talking about earlier, where he basically comes out and goes, "I have played you on levels you haven't noticed for two hours."

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**ALASDAIR**

"And it is all to get to this ridiculous pseudo dad joke punchline, which is just here to make me laugh, and I hope it makes you laugh too. Thank you for your time." And it's such a lovely kind of moment of psychological judo you know. Where he just picks you up, dumps you on your back and you're like, "That was awesome, do it again" but maybe not. And the, the favourite trick I ever performed was a thing called the Houdini séances. Because Houdini genuinely gave his team of investigators a code word. And he said you know, "When I die carry on the work, and if you're ever at a séance and you hear someone says you know, 'they're talking to me', ask for my code word. And if they get it, it's me." Officially they never received it. But for years there was a séance held

attempting to contact Houdini. And this was a set of tricks which were told this story and which finished with a pair of slates. And I show both sides of both slates and of course I don't show both sides of both slates. And they're blank. And the payoff to the trick at the end is that his message is left on there. And looking back – and I didn't realise this when I was a terrified 16 year old about to be hit by 13 different kinds of trauma at the same time – it's a really beautiful trick because it, it embodies the absolute edge of theatrical magic and the absolute edge of parapsychology. And it dances along that line, and tells you a story. And it tells you a story through surprise. And a story which is ultimately hopeful. And I really dug it. And I, it's that and the balloon are the two tricks I still think about, even now.

**HELEN**

Alasdair, almost everything you've said has been so deep. I can't compete with this.

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Oh my gosh, we've got to get you on more episodes.

**ALASDAIR**

Aaw, thank you.

**SEAN**

I think we need to get him on a stage, putting a, a needle through a balloon...

**(laughter)**

**SEAN**

...where the thread then spells out Houdini's code word.

**(Group laughter)**

**ALASDAIR**

I would love that, oh my. Aah.

**MARTYN**

Magic's definitely one of those things that doesn't translate in, in an audio format really does it? So like...

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**MARTYN**

...you can, you can perform a trick and then it just like no one, no one would notice would they? If, if everyone was...

**(raucous laughter)**

**MARTYN**

...if everyone was, if everyone was just listening to it. That would be, that would be such a strange and unnecessary thing to do wouldn't it?

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

(laughter)

**ALASDAIR**

Is this your card that no one can see? Yeah. Hooray!

**HELEN**

Aahhhhh, I love a visual joke in an audio medium.

**MARTYN**

Exactly.

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

I truly do. Listener, will you ever know what it is? Possible not.

**MARTYN**

What do you mean? I am just, that was just off the cuff.

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

Okay.

**SEAN**

You, you haven't said what, what your favourite one is.

**ALASDAIR**

Yeah, what's yours?

**HELEN**

I think it is the one that, where the guy tricked me into doing it. Where he said, "Oh, just hold these two rings" and then suddenly they were interlocked. And I was like, "How did you do this?"

**(laughter)**

**HELEN**

Just because I cannot, I cannot describe the absolute shock. Like I don't think I've ever been so utterly surprised by anything in my life. Because I was also nervous. I was like, "Oh God, what if I hold it wrong?" and like his trick fails because I'm a bad audience member...

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

But I wasn't.

**MARTYN**

Yeah. So your favourite trick was because you were in it?

**HELEN**

Yes, basically. Yes.

**ALASDAIR**

Obviously.

**HELEN**

I must be at the centre of attention at all times, Martyn. You should know that.

**(laughter)**

**MARTYN**

I just wanted to pinpoint that fact.

**(Group laughter)**

**HELEN**

Well on that, it's time to say goodbye. Listener, thank you so much for listening. And, and for listening all the other times that you may or may not have listened. This has been fun. Thank you so much all of you for coming on. This has been a really lovely couple of hours.

**ALASDAIR**

Thank you.

**SEAN**

Thank you.

**HELEN**

I'll see you on the next episode, but for now it's goodbye from me. Goodbye. And it's goodbye from my lovely guests. Do you want to say goodbye everybody?

**ALL**

Goodbye, goodbye everybody.

**[Show Theme - Outro]**

Enthusigasm is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial share alike 4.0 international license. It is directed by Helen Gould, produced by Lowri Ann Davies, with executive producers Alexander J Newall and April Sumner, and edited by Marisa Ewing, Tessa Vroom and Catherine Rinella. Thanks for listening.

**[Show Theme – Outro Ends]**

Hosted and Directed by Helen Gould

Producer by Lowri Ann Davies

Executive Producers: Alexander J. Newall & April Sumner

Editing by Tessa Vroom and Cathy Rinella

Music by Samuel D.F. Jones

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm - EGSM - Stage Magic

Art by Anika Khan