



Paul Draper

MAKING HIS MARK

BY DAVID GOODSSELL

Holding a Navajo flute in one hand and carrying a scuffed, Indiana Jones–type leather briefcase in the other, Paul Draper steps through the curtains of the Magic Castle Close-up Gallery. In 1999, he spent time with the Navajo while doing advanced studies in anthropology. After introducing himself, Paul plays a few bars of a haunting tune you might hear at midnight in red rock country, home of the Navajo. He has established himself. He must be a magician — this is the Magic Castle. But he is something more. He is an anthropologist. This will be a bit different!

While seating himself and placing a small silver box on the table, Paul continues his theme. He relates an experience he had while wandering the reservation late one night in the company of an Apache shaman. They met two Navajo, well oiled with drink. Unemployment and alcoholism are commonly related problems on Indian reservations, Paul explains. The Navajo men asked for money and, removing four coins from the silver box, Paul tells how the wise old Apache shaman instructed the two Navajo on how to remain sober. While doing so, the coins penetrate the metal box and his hand and fall to the tabletop.

While Paul is quite capable of intricate sleight of hand, this was a basic, relatively easy Okito Coin Box routine. But the impact

on the audience was far more than one would expect of such a simple routine. Why?

Paul explains that in his study of anthropology he learned the power of the oral tradition, the story. Almost all of his magic is couched in story, for he has found that story gives meaning to magic. He is not alone in this thinking, of course. He cites Jeff McBride, Robert Neale, and Eugene Burger, among others, as leading exponents of this approach to magic. Paul's audience was caught up in the story of the Apache shaman. They recognized the truth in the wisdom shared. And they were startled and surprised by the magic when it happened.

“As Eugene Burger has often pointed out, too often we step on the moment of awe,” Paul says. “Growing up in magic we enjoy the startled looks of amazement, whether they be on the faces of schoolyard chums, a gathering in a church basement, or the local civic club. That is our reward, and it is heady stuff; so much so that it is easy to be satisfied with that. However, the moment of awe provides us the opportunity to do something very special for our audience. We can instruct them, we can give them a message, we can even serve as the catalyst for profound change. In the study of human interaction, I have come to recognize that magicians, shamans, through the ages have used this technique. It worked then, it can work now, and that is what I try to do with my magic.”

He is an anthropologist. He is a magician. He is something more.

“Corporations and universities hire me to help them build stronger teams, understand their clients better, and learn some of the secrets of the ancients,” explains Paul. He has combined his knowledge of anthropology, the science of man, with an emphasis on human history, popular culture, and consciousness — how the brain processes information — with his knowledge of mentalism and magic to create his show, *Mysteries of the Mind*.

“My stage show is a combination of lecture and performance,” says Paul. But the lecture is interwoven with performance, creating the fabric of the show, much like an intricate Navajo rug. As you watch the show — no, as you *participate* in the show, for one of Paul's goals is to cause each person in the audience to feel that he or she is a part of what is happening — you do not get a sense of being lectured to. He gives us information that we can use to better understand the mysteries that we see.

The room at the Suncoast Casino in Las Vegas is large and packed with several hundred people. Microphone in hand, spotlighted, Paul steps into the audience. He is of average height and is dressed in a well-tailored dark suit, blue shirt, and brocade cream tie. His beard and mustache are neatly trimmed. His dark hair is drawn back and tied, emphasizing his forehead and giving his

face an open and friendly look. His voice is compelling. As he talks, his eyebrows arch. His eyes, flecked with green and blue, open wide. He looks and sounds like an opera singer. The crowd likes this man who so enjoys sharing his knowledge with them.

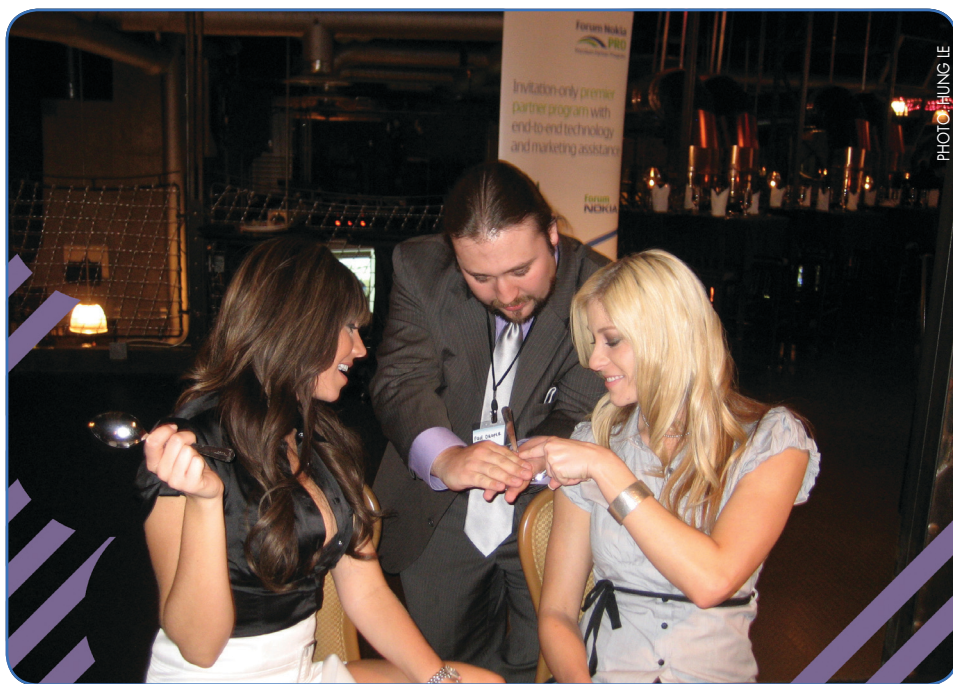
Addressing the audience, Paul explains, “I study myth and folklore across cultures as I try to understand what compels people to live the lives they live.” He stops and points at a woman. “Would you help me? Would you think of a fairytale, your favorite fairytale? And you? Think of one, too? Would the two of you come with me to the stage, please?”

They do and stand one on either side of him. Turning to the lady, Paul instructs her, “Concentrate on the name of your fairytale. Put it in front of your eyes. There are two people in your fairytale, is that correct? You are thinking of a romance, correct?” Turning to his other helper, Paul continues. “There’s a boy in your fairytale? Yes.” Back to the woman. “In yours, there’s a monster or a beast, correct?” She agrees. Back to the man, “And there’s a beast in yours as well, and... I sense... I see green, I see grass...” Back to the woman. “I have it. In yours, I see music, I see dancing, I have it.” Turning to the audience: “Hers is Beauty and the Beast, his is Jack and the Beanstalk!” The audience is delighted. To them, this was not a trick. Paul Draper is an anthropologist, a scientist who understands the workings of the human mind, and he was able to read minds!

Why is this routine so strong? Paul explains, “My original inspiration for this effect was a Banachek routine in which he instantly names the playing cards thought of by two spectators. It is very powerful. I spent a sleepless night thinking about how I could adapt the concept to my own style. What would an anthropologist expert in the paranormal, religion, and mythology have two people think of? Mythology is directly related to stories, and stories conjure up fairytales. That was it! One reason it is so powerful is because people identify with the mythology of their youth — in this case, fairytales. As I performed that exercise, I did not even know Banachek’s method. That wasn’t important; I knew I could come up with a method. The key was making the routine fit me. Another reason it is so powerful is because it seems impossible.”

Later, when Draper learned that Max Maven has an opening effect he calls Once Upon a Time, Paul immediately called him, explained his routine, and asked permission to use the theme. “Max graciously consented,” Paul says, “as did Banachek when I contacted him.”

One of Draper’s favorite routines from his stage act is Divining for Sin, which Paul explains is loosely based on an Andrew Mayne effect, but with Paul’s method and patter. He explains to his audience, “Throughout time



From the ancient world to the modern: Paul Draper poses in front of some of the world's most famous monuments on a visit to Egypt in January 2008, and does some spoon bending in Las Vegas.

and across cultures, there have been otherwise ordinary people who have the uncanny ability to find water — diviners or water witches. Through my studies, I have learned how to do this and apply my skills in a very personal way.” As his back is turned, an audience helper fills four shot glasses with water and a fifth with vodka, positioning them so he does not know which holds the vodka. Paul turns around and quickly dashes the contents of the four water glasses into his mouth, having correctly divined the water and leaving the liquor untouched.

“My tongue-in-cheek take on this,” he says, “is that I try to escape from sin by avoiding the vodka. I even evoke a few ‘Hallelujahs’ from the audience as I do so. As I developed this routine, I consciously combined my studies of cross-culture water diviners with those of various religious movements that preach against strong drink, especially those that led to prohibition. It’s kind of like Salvation Army mentalism! It is what one would expect from an anthropologist turned magician.”

Audiences are taken by Paul’s easy confidence on stage. “I believe that, as a mentalist,

I must profoundly care about my audience,” he comments, “and about the things they care about. That is primary. If a performer does so, the audience will sense his or her sincerity and will respond in kind. It is a little like Thurston standing behind the curtain just before it goes up, saying over and over, ‘I love you. I love you.’ That is part of it.”

As Draper points out, as a mindreader he is as likely to meet an astronaut as he is to meet a bus driver, and he must be able to bond with each of them. “If we have the skill to read people’s thoughts, we should know a lot about a lot of different subjects and areas. I must know about astronauts and bus drivers; I must know something about the South if he is from Atlanta, or about Wisconsin if he is from Appleton, and hopefully something about those exact cities. We should know details about their

hobbies, interests, and ideas that we could only know if we were peering into their minds. That is, I must know a little about a lot of things, and the more depth to my knowledge, the better prepared I am. That gives me confidence.”

Early in Paul’s career, he met Max Maven at the first *Magic Live!* in 2001. Starting up a conversation with Max, Paul said, “I’m sure that a lot of people ask you for advice. So, what is your generic piece of advice that you give to all budding young mentalists that hope to grow up and one day be you?” Max replied, “Read everything.” Puzzled, Paul questioned, “Read everything old, read everything new, read everything red, read everything blue? What do you mean, *read everything?*” The reply was classic Max: “Had I felt it required more words, I would have utilized them.”

Paul Draper lives by Max’s advice. He consciously takes an interest in *everything*. By making *people* his primary object of study, he wants to know everything about them.

“I do not see how anyone can be truly successful in mentalism if they do not love learning,” Paul feels. “My iPhone today is filled with audio books; the CD changer in my car has two audio books in it; my laptop is loaded with media for long airline flights. My home library contains over a dozen six-foot bookcases filled with books, eighty percent of which I have read.”

In an unsolicited testimonial after watching an Internet video of Paul, the informal reviewer wrote, “What a unique, funny, and intelligent twist on magic. I love it.” This seems to catch Paul perfectly, but don’t think it is happenstance that Paul comes across that way.

What makes Draper unique? His past and his present. He brings a wealth of experience to his performances. Paul grew up spending the school year in Salt Lake City, Utah, and summers on a cattle ranch north of there. His interest in magic developed early when he and his mother discovered Showplace Magic in Salt Lake City. After a few years of acquiring simple tricks and fooling his friends, sixteen-year-old Paul happened to see Michael Skinner perform at the Golden Nugget in Las Vegas. Mike sent Paul to Houdini’s Magic Shop where the proprietor talked him into buying books in a clever way — he fooled Paul with the center tear. When Paul wanted to buy the trick, the proprietor told him it was in a book. Paul balked. He wanted tricks, not books. The proprietor closed the deal by promising to teach Paul the center tear if he would buy the book. The book was Corinda’s *13 Steps to Mentalism*. That led to Annemann and others.

At that time, magic was secondary to Paul’s interest in academics, speech and debate, and theater. He was a national debate champion in original oratory and a state drama champion in pantomime. He lettered in debate, choir, and drama. He carried these interests into college and worked as an actor in over a dozen theatrical productions and in stage management on several others. When he graduated, he had more credit hours in musical theater than in his anthropology major and marketing minor combined.

Fast forward to 2004. With a master’s degree in Anthropology from The University of Utah in hand, Paul was hired as an instructor at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, where he taught for a year. While pursuing his master’s, and later honing his presentation skills before the captive audiences of the classroom, Paul found his interest in mentalism growing to match his love for anthropology. Like many 24-year-olds interested in magic, Paul decided that he simply had to pursue it as a career. Maybe there was some

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PHOTO: RICHARD FAVERY / BECKETT STUDIOS

way he could tie his two passions together — magic, especially mentalism, and anthropology. At the end of a year, he left the world of academia in pursuit of the dream.

The past five years have not been easy ones. It has taken hard work, dedication, and perseverance. Today, his venues are corporate keynotes and workshops, university and college audiences, television commercials, community theaters, seminars, and luncheons. He has been a presenter at Jeff McBride's Magic & Meaning seminar and at The Theory and Art of Magic conference at Muhlenberg College. He is fast establishing himself as an expert consultant on the supernatural and paranormal. You may have caught him on the History Channel giving background information on Houdini and Conan Doyle. He was a commentator for one of Criss Angel's *Mindfreak* episodes in season three and on a documentary accompanying Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist*. He was a performer on the HBO Comedy Fest taped at Caesars Palace. He has worked for the Venetian Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas since 2004, where they have used him in many capacities: as a Venice street performer, as an Asian wizard in the Tao Nightclub, presenting the Keys to Venice to the casino's most important clients, and often performing a forty-minute mentalism show for the same clients. He juggles, performs magic, and sings — he does have an operatic voice — for the Venetian in many venues. He continues to be their go-to magician for special occasions.

Paul approaches his growth as a performer with the same zeal required to successfully defend a master's thesis. When he works on a new piece, whether for the close-up show at the Castle or for *Mysteries of the Mind*, he approaches it like theater. He writes out an outline of the emotions and messages he hopes to convey. He decides on how his character will fit the piece and what his inspirations are. By taping off the floor, he creates a rehearsal space and fills it with set pieces and costumes if they are required. Then, with music in the background, he sits, walks, talks, and plays in that space. Paul's methods go on and are more complex than have been indicated here. If you get the idea that Paul uses every skill he has developed over his lifetime and takes the development of the simplest routine very seriously, you are right.

When he has the routine down, he seeks the advice of a select group of friends — his "team," as he refers to them — who critique his work mercilessly. He wouldn't think of performing in a play without direction; he feels the same about performing mentalism and magic. After their input, after changes and adjustments and rehearsals, he takes it on the road.

"Mentalism must be practiced in front of a live audience," he explains. "It is not like performing a billiard-ball routine, which



[Facing page] Performing at Jeff McBride's Wonderground in Las Vegas last year. [Above] A lecture demonstration for the 2009 Theory and Art of Magic conference at Muhlenberg College.

can be polished in front of a mirror or video cameras. Mentalism is fluid; it is interactive by nature. The mentalist must be aware in the moment and be capable of making instant choices. This can only be learned under fire."

Paul performs at open-mic nights, at burlesque shows, and poetry slams in whatever town he is in — Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Denver. Wherever he is performing, he finds the local free performance venues and works to get booked on the lineup.

As Paul says, "There is no better way to learn to perform than by forcing ourselves to get up in front of live audiences and allowing them to polish us. I have acted in murder mysteries, performed shows in concert and play readings, joined improv troupes, and acted in community theaters. I have been the

emcee for charity events, performed between slam poets, freaks, and fire eaters. From coffee shops to large auditoriums, I never turn down a chance to work on my craft."

Paul Draper works hard at being who he is, and his performances are unique, funny, and intelligent *by design*, not by chance. For Paul, it turned out not to be a choice of pursuing a career in anthropology or a career in magic, but rather combining them in a unique way to make his mark. ♦

David Goodsell is a recipient of a Literary Fellowship from The Academy of Magical Arts, Past National President and Honorary Life Member of the SAM, and Editor Emeritus of M-U-M magazine, which he edited for nearly thirty years.