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**PAUL DRAPER: RENAISSANCE MAN**

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BY BOB GILL

Paul Draper: a man of many parts. All of them, I can exclusively report, in full working order.

Anthropologist, teacher, lecturer, magician, mentalist, family entertainer, film maker, actor, singer, writer, comedic performer, speaker, theatrical, online entrepreneur, Utahn, philanthropist, Jew, mensch. He is at once a true polymath and a mass of contradictions: an academic who can hog the camera and freewheel on the largest of stages or play it small and intimate in a close-up setting; as comfortable working with nervous young children as with rowdy adults at a rock concert; a rare Jewish oasis in the Mormon deserts of Utah; a well-established live performer who has made Zoom his own; a

performer with all the issues it entails of ego and 'look at me, ma!', yet with antennae that focus on the wellbeing of the individual spectator, putting their needs first.

At heart, though, Paul is a theatrical who uses his performance to move those watching by imparting meaning into his performances, referencing his rich life experiences. Given his profession as an anthropologist that's not surprising; anthropologists take a broad approach to understanding the many different aspects of the human experience; they consider the present in the context of the past, largely through archaeology, to see how human groups lived hundreds or thousands of years ago and what was important to them.

It's vital to understand Paul's professional life because it so informs his performances. He uses his background as a scene-setter for his shows, particularly when performing as a mentalist. He's solved the debate amongst mentalists as to how they should frame their stage persona. Should they bluff it out and portray actors playing the part of mind-readers? Issue a disclaimer up front that they are only portraying the illusion of mind-reading? Raise the issue but not address it? Or plough on regardless and let the audience make of it what they will?

Draper has it uniquely covered. He opens by explaining he is an anthropologist, getting great business out of exploring what that





means to the audience: he gets at least half a dozen different definitions out of the spectators. This being the science of observing human beings, he has been able to use the insights afforded him to read, and in some cases predict, how people think and behave: "By understanding how you think I can almost read your mind. In my work I would get dropped into tribal communities with nothing but what I stood in. I have to identify and negotiate how to be a 'professional stranger' in their domain, how to become them." This is not only adventurous but calls for him to be resourceful, a quick study, an insightful observer and listener, and above all engaging: each and every quality something he has brought to his theatrical undertakings, with enviable success. As a result, he has spent time on the Navajo Native American Reservation, where he learned about the power of oral tradition; the Bedaw in southern Iran, with their strong traditional culture with its marked clan structure and love of traditional music, oral poetry, dance and many other cultural practices; and The Cercle Harmonique group of Afro-Creoles in New Orleans who believe they speak with the spirits of the dead through several séances a week. If this is all starting to sound tinder-dry, it is anything but, helped along by the twinkle in his eye signalling an underlying sense of fun amidst some serious messaging.

As a result, his professorial side took him along a successful career in academia; Draper received his bachelor's degree in anthropology at Weber State University and attended the University of Nevada Las Vegas (who knew?) for a master's degree, becoming a fully-fledged anthropologist in 2002. He went on to work as a lecturer in Utah at Weber State University and later as an instructor of record at UNLV where he taught communication studies in the Department of Urban Affairs.

All the while he was performing whenever he could: at library and university shows, close-up at the Venetian and Casino in Las Vegas, indulging his love of stage (particularly musicals), making short films, and generally having a ball. In 2004 he faced that fork in the career path that forces the hands of so many in our profession: pursue a real job or live the dream. The roar of the greasepaint and the smell of the crowd won this contest outright, so he hung up his mortar board to follow "the passion that had enveloped me since I was eight years old" to have 'Magician and Mindreader' duly inscribed on his tax return.

Also, this polymath indulged his multi-disciplined love affair with the performing arts in all their forms. He freely acknowledges he is a cultural will o' the wisp: what he prefers to call a jack of all trades. That inevitably implies,



of course, he is 'master of none,' but that would be doing him a disservice. It seems our Paul is one of those annoying so-and-sos who manages to excel at everything they touch. If he wasn't so damn winning in his ways, you'd have to hate him for such versatility. He could easily have made a career in film; at 18 he won a Regional Emmy for a documentary. And, truth to tell, like anyone fortunate enough to have carved a successful career before his performing one, he is still able to lean on elements of his time as an educator and filmmaker, weaving them into his current work.

This combination of work ethic, drive and resourcefulness was drilled into him whilst still at elementary school. At eight years old he worked on the family farm and got a job in an ice-cream shop to earn pocket money for his burgeoning mania for magic; imagine his dismay when upon attending school in Salt

Lake City he discovered two things simultaneously; his arrival in a land devoted to the strictures of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and his presence as one of a mere handful of Jews: "There were so few of us there was no synagogue anywhere close: for a while there was not even a single rabbi within 400 miles." Added to which, his teachers inaccurately drummed it into him that, "Jews no longer existed – they'd all converted to Christianity."

Since many Mormons believe you will most likely marry whoever you spend time with, they tended to behave with a breathtaking clannishness and xenophobia; as a result, he found himself a social outcast. As a lonely kid Paul would spend much time in the local lending library – undoubtedly a big reason he subsequently went into research and academia – and the kindly librarian, determined to find the young Draper a hobby, herded him towards the section on magic tricks. "All of a sudden I found the key to engaging the interest and attention of the other kids at school: they were able to overlook our cultural differences because magic, it seemed, was actually a cool gift to have. Having found myself to be a social pariah when it came to attending birthday parties, I was not only invited to all their houses but paid to turn up!"

He remembers with fondness those library books: the Nick Einhorn book of magic for beginners ("the best magic teaching you could hope to start off with"), Jon Tremaine's volumes, and the excellent Fulves/Dover self-working series of paperbacks. His heroes growing up weren't all magicians – although he remembers Blackstone Junior, Paul Daniels and Banachek as standouts – but also Hal Holbrook, Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka, ►



Indiana Jones (naturally enough) and Santa Claus.

"Paul Daniels had a big impact on me – and not just because we shared the same initials. Over here we were only vaguely aware of the reach of his television career in the UK, we just saw him as a highly experienced performer and lecturer visiting the States. He brought over a lecture on the business side of magic, which was an eye-opener for me as a trick monkey. I sat down with him, he generously gave me his time, he was very kind to someone he had no need to be nice to. I was interested in mentalism, but still liked good magic and comedy, so I guess I was more John Archer than Kreskin. I was aware of the unwritten rule that you never mix magic with mentalism; people like Cassidy and Banachek were purists who believed you got into character and never deviated from that. I used to do mentalism in the comedy clubs, mixing comedy and sight gags with the mindreading. I asked Daniels if it was in order to break the rules in this way. His reply was liberating: 'What rules? Who writes these rules anyway? Just find out what the audience likes – then do that.'"

So, in 2004 off went newly-unemployed Paul to an audition for a Vegas show, taking a fellow magician with him for a share in the action. They realised the powers-that-be were sending magicians away because they'd

already filled their quota. "I thought, 'I've just given up a promising career in academia for this.' So we reinvented ourselves: I told him he was an escape artist, and I turned into a mentalist, and we snuck in under the radar." See what I mean by resourceful? That gig turned into a regular variety show at the Bourbon Street casino in Las Vegas until he landed another opportunity that led to a seven-year stint as house magician at the Venetian. He became their go-to guy when they needed a stage, MC or close-up strolling slot. He would be called upon to present family shows for international dignitaries, celebrities, and their guests, and he found he had a real empathy with that type of audience. "In preference to most of the adult shows, sure thing. In Vegas you play for drunks who have no shortage of entertainment options. I used to consider on their behalf: 'Is this show any better if you're drunk?' In most cases with a stand-up solo magic or mentalist act: no they weren't. Showgirls and white tigers? – definitely!"

This penchant for family shows eventually led to the last few years pre-pandemic working for Disney: "Desperately hard to break into, but they treat you like family once you've made it inside." He would do four shows a day in the park, "...but I became a victim of my own success. Kids would stay for all four shows and miss the rides. I would ask

them, don't you have a pass to the parks? But they wanted to stay for show after show because they enjoyed the personalised character experience. I became a bit like a visit with sorcerer Mickey." By this stage he had homes in Utah, Las Vegas, and a flat near Disneyland. The switch from academia started to look a shrewd one.

Then early stories began to gain momentum about Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2, which started to be kind of a big deal. Disney moved quicker than Pluto after a bone; all employees were given 24 hours' notice to pack their stuff and return home. All of a sudden, the lengthy queues at the gates were visitors and staff alike, in line to exit the Park. For a few days there were still thousands of people staying in the Disney hotels, but the parks were closed so they had him stand outside the gates and for a few days Paul was the Magic of Disney... a tough crowd, but in the event, a grateful one.

### INSTANT KARMA

After all this high-mindedness, it's revealing that the first time I encountered Prof Draper was a film he put together with Jason Andrews called, winningly, *Hack Lines* Magicians Say. It was a brilliant conceit: a wall-to-wall succession of those lines that have become standard rim-shot rejoinders of hack magicians the world over; 'Hold your





hand out – no, the clean one', that sort of thing. "The sad thing is that many magicians who saw those two films would have regarded them as a source of great lines for them to use," he reflects ruefully. Apart from the acuity behind the concept, what struck this viewer was the engaging relationship Paul enjoys with the camera. With all due respect to Mr Andrews, Draper steals every scene, demonstrating his unerring ability to break through the screen: he woos the watcher in that knowing way good television presenters carry with them.

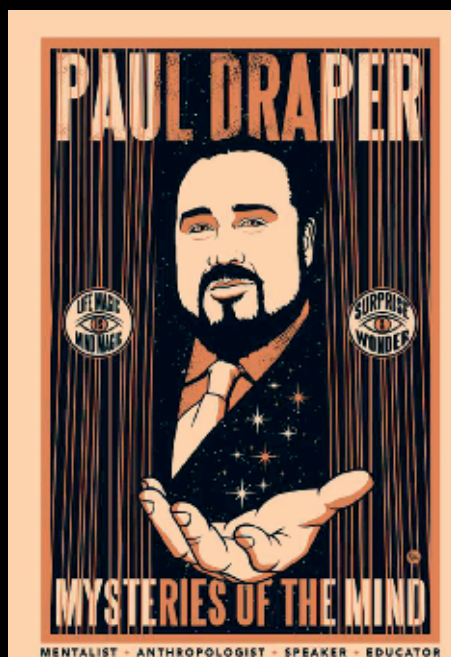
It's a skill that was to serve him well when the performing sector suddenly hit a wall, not of bricks but of virus, finding themselves at a loose end. "It was a shock, initially just from the contrast between the frenetic pace of working in the Park and sitting in your robe and slippers before a computer screen just days later. Then reality started to take hold, that you are stuck at home, out of work for an indefinite period."

Those polymathic attributes cut in, and Paul summoned his breadth of skills to his situation. He was restricted to his four walls, a performer in the spheres of acting, singing, theatre, film, magic and mentalism who needed to find an audience. He began by 'doing the math:' under-14s in the US: 80 million; birthdays daily: 200,000.

"My immediate realisation was that this represented a six-figure number of children who were not going to have a birthday party, every single day, day after day. I thought of the only child of a single mom, missing out on the best time of their year. It was crushing that that kid wasn't even gaining access to their wider family, let alone an entertainer. My first thought was that I'd at least offer a kids' show a day, every day, for nothing to whoever cared to log on. I had the basic wherewithal: a \$40 camera, a laptop, a desk, a cheapo mic; for lights I'd place angle poises around my study room draped with paper towels. And I had a lot of magic effects, along with a lot of magic experience."

"I gave no thought to monetising it, I just wanted to get something going. I figured maybe some parents might leave tips, and didn't look beyond that. The first time I'd embarked on an enterprise with no trace of a business plan whatsoever, and twelve months later I've had the best financial year of my life!"

And possibly the most personally fulfilling year? "Without doubt. And not just because of the kids. I started to offer evening corporate shows. The American Board of Neurology dipped a toe in the water, booking a show for 20 delegates. Some time later they booked me for a conference in front of 15,000



neurologists. What if I charged them a dollar a head? That's some payday, and I was unlikely to have got their traditional conference."

"All of sudden people were accessing my online shows to satisfy their curiosity. Penn, Copperfield, Vegas headliners. When movie and music stars starting to log on, I realised I was on to something. I still wasn't sure quite what."

"The first thing I did was ditch my normal acts and begin from scratch. The image I had in my mind was a sort of mid-morning TV show, but done from home with no shoes on. My model was the TV kids' shows of the '50s – single-camera shows beamed directly into a child's heart. I remembered when Johnny Carson was asked whether he got nervous before a show he replied he did not because he didn't regard it as working for millions: just for one family on their sofa. That really resonated with me."

He kept the logistics as simple as possible. He opted for the 'build it and they will come' truism. He'd schedule six shows during the day, on the hour, each running for half an hour. He avoided the admin nightmare of bookings, tickets and payments. In true Zoom manner he built the artefacts of the show around the laptop; in his study (sorry, studio) he accumulated 70 effects and routines, costumes, props, sight gags covering the whole gamut of potential audiences: pre-school, primary and secondary schools, family groups, young adults, grown-ups, on TV sets in 100 hospitals at a time, homeless shelters, disadvantaged kids, family refugees, senior citizens.

He would wait to see who turned up and fashion a 30-minute show for the demographic that presented itself. It was a beautiful sort of disarray, calling on all his

experience and versatility. He found he revelled in the chaos, and the demands on his resources and creativity. In the process he felt more fulfilled than he could ever remember, in some way he did not even miss the crackling atmosphere that comes from engaging with a live audience.

When the bookings started to come in from corporates, adult get-togethers and the increasing traffic from around the globe, and around the time zones across Africa, India, Europe, and across the States, he moved his bed into his neighbouring kitchen so he could fit eating and sleeping into his relentless schedule. It quickly turned into the ultimate in improv. Every show was fresh, different, and the spectators intuited that as part of the charm of the whole enterprise. Paul's previous work ethic helped in this regard; in Planet Hollywood Vegas he would get in behind as the previous act was performing, and they would leave with the audience and his show would take over; it was a non-stop entertainment conveyor belt.

But soon he had to rein in the chaos and just months in he was employing three part-time stage managers to help him cope and retain his dwindling sanity – they would deal with admin, scheduling, logistics and pull the props together for the shows Paul was creating on the hoof, and most importantly giving him notes immediately after every performance: all so that never once would he lose eye contact with the camera, or the engagement, the avuncular persona, "where you the audience make the magic and I am honoured to be involved."

We all know you need somewhere to learn to be good; in this sphere Paul was learning on the job as he went, not sitting around writing and polishing the show. This turned out to be one of the exhilarating aspects of the enterprise. He began to employ out-of-work pros from the TV, voice-over, stage and theatre worlds. He'd pay for cameos from recognised faces to use in advertising and as links within the shows. As his operation



consumed all of his time, he began offering work to a variety of people – a gardener, extras for film spots and marketing help. “It was one of the satisfying by-products of the shows’ success that I could start paying people who were otherwise made jobless by the effects of the pandemic.” He started to organise the shows into themes and nudge his 25,000 (and rising exponentially) online and social media prospects into suitable groups to suit the themes, whether it be science, pirates, musical theatre plots, wizards, or mad scientists. He did some traditional marketing but found that his social media presence and online word-of-mouth quickly grew interest in his offer.

But the most satisfying impact of this unique enterprise was on Paul’s own sense of wellbeing. “Before Covid my life was sell, sell, sell; on the road, living in hotels and cars to and from gigs. Now my online life is still hectic, but I’m living at my lovely home in Utah with my girlfriend, my family nearby and my dogs. It’s made me softer, happier, with greater togetherness with my loved ones than ever before. I’ve performed for more individuals and made more money than any time in my life – and all from home, doing what I love doing. I feel blessed.”

All of us who perform have a neediness that requires feeding. Paul acknowledges that need to feed his own ego. His stage manager takes screen shots of the audience, he does a Q&A at the end of his show, he gets reactions from spectators sent on social media to his manager. Most of all he pulls off photos of laughing people to remind him why he does this in the first place. “When I look at the audience, I’m being selfish, I get at least as much out of the experience as they do. And I



can savour the emotions generated, the energy we impart to each other; just as any performer seeks to. I’m also excited that I can offer free entertainment to foster kids, victims of domestic violence and disadvantaged kids around the world, not just in Utah. That feels amazing. I’ve been able to donate large sums to charity as well. So, it’s an undertaking that benefits so many, and I’m proud of that.”

Where does the show go from here? “I’ll keep doing it as long as there’s an audience for it. One task one of my stage managers is undertaking is to research trends in live performance so we can stay ahead of the curve. But the experience has made me

reconsider my attitude to performance. I have grown to relish the efficiency of finding ways to perform for a larger number of people at a time. Rather than do an indoor gig I could book an outdoor rodeo arena and perform on a flatbed truck and have it beamed onto the monitors around the venue. Online bookings are still alive and well – eBay and Apple have booked remote gigs for their employees, Florida State have booked 24 virtual shows for all the retirement homes in their area.” He’s clearly driven by variety. He has a giant map in his bedroom, which he looks at and asks himself, “Where have I not yet been?” It’s a testament to his inner drive that he will visit that town, see its museums, zoo, galleries and from that to deduce how best to help people learn through magic and mentalism.

You’d assume that performing such a variety of magic genres must have changed his preferred disciplines. In fact, his first love is still mentalism. “I love it because of the close engagement with the spectators, and the emotions it can generate. My character onstage is of someone who believes he is the smartest, most interesting person you ever met. The Siri founder Adam Cheyer said of my performance, ‘He looked into my very soul,’ which is not your normal reaction from a piece of mentalism.”

“But I remain at heart a teacher, that’s my core skill. I connect learning styles. And I make sure there is an element of that in my online performances.” Indeed: the President of SAM has described Paul Draper as “the pre-eminent teacher of virtual magic shows in the world today.” He is keeping his teaching chops honed. He has been running a series of teach-ins for 40 to 50 magicians at a time, in areas such as Creating a Zoom Show, Comedy Writing, Performing at Festivals, Family Shows and Bar Magic, as well as two VT’s on Penguin Magic on doing Zoom shows. He also appears as a senior faculty member with Jeff McBride’s Mystery School. “I have the privilege of seeking out areas not yet covered by the expertise of the other senior faculty. It’s a stimulating exercise to be a part of, I love it. Jeff has done a fine job in creating a centre of excellence within magic-related theory and performance.”

“My personal goal every day is to educate, entertain and make enough money to not be in want; and to continue to develop healthy relationships with everyone I come into contact with. I accept a booking for one of three reasons: to build my CV, make money, or to feed my soul. And to do things my grandmothers (who are from Birmingham and Weston-Super-Mare in the UK) would be proud of. I try to behave as if they are looking down on me every day.”

**TMC**

