

OCTOBER 2017 • \$6.50

Genii

THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE



Bébel



HOW MAGIC FOUND

Bébel

HE WAS ABOUT 10,
BUT AT THE TIME
THE YOUNGSTER
DIDN'T FULLY REALIZE
THE GIFTS WAITING
FOR HIM.

BY DUSTIN STINETT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARI HENDLER



THE FACT OF THE MATTER IS, I NEVER WENT LOOKING FOR MAGIC.
MAGIC CAME LOOKING FOR ME.

Born Belkhéir Djénane in November 1963 in Nanterre, France—on the outskirts of Paris—he describes his youth, and in particular his family life, as “too complicated.”

A high fever, a trip to the doctor, and later the discovery that there had been an error at the hospital in his vaccination records, resulted in a diagnosis of polio at age two. By the time he was three it was determined that he would require therapy as well as an environment that provided fresh air. He was sent to Hendaye, a seaside city in the French Basque Country on the Southwestern Spanish border. Essentially a ward of the state, he lived in a government-run rehabilitation facility where he was educated and received care for polio.

Part of his therapy for his hands, which were also affected by the disease, included some simple magic. “I did many things with my hands to exercise them, and these included simple magic with rope and rings. It was called ‘ErgoTherapy,’” he says.

He relocated to Nantes in Brittany when he was 16. There, he received training for a job that the government determined he would be able to perform, allowing him to make a living. He hated it. “It

years, magic would continue to work its way into his life. “Little by little. The fact of the matter is, I never went looking for magic. Magic came looking for me.” Though not certain where it would take him, his self-initiated reeducation in the field of magic had begun.

He was 14 or 15 when a friend, Joel Nekab, took him to Mayette Magie Moderne, the oldest magic shop in Paris. At 18 he met Gérard Majax at his show, and it was Majax who gave Bébel Gaëtan Bloom’s contact information, who in turn told the young man go to Paris Magic for lessons. Bébel took his first three lessons from Henry Mayol, but the process took too long because there were others in the class. “I bought several books,” he says, and they proved to be the source through which he would absorb the techniques that spurred his growth in sleight of hand magic. He had finally begun to grasp magic’s gifts to him. (Today he has a large personal library of magic books in French as well as English, including many rarities.)

“Even though I do not read English well, I can use the illustrations to learn the magic in them.”

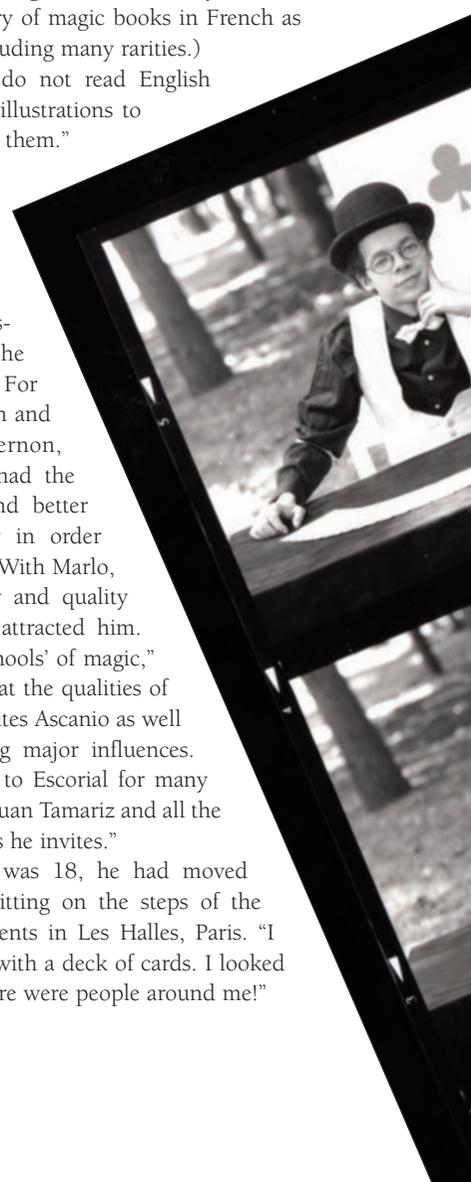
He was not attracted to any one particular school of magic, instead learning aspects of all schools he discovered within the pages of the books. For example, the Vernon and Marlo styles. “Vernon, it seemed to me, had the most experience and better applied psychology in order to do good magic.” With Marlo, it was the quantity and quality of his output that attracted him. “I like all of the ‘schools’ of magic,” he clarifies, “I look at the qualities of each of them.” He cites Ascanio as well as Tamariz as being major influences. “I have been going to Escorial for many years to work with Juan Tamariz and all the incredible magicians he invites.”

By the time he was 18, he had moved to Paris and was sitting on the steps of the Fontaine des Innocents in Les Halles, Paris. “I was just practicing with a deck of cards. I looked up and saw that there were people around me!”



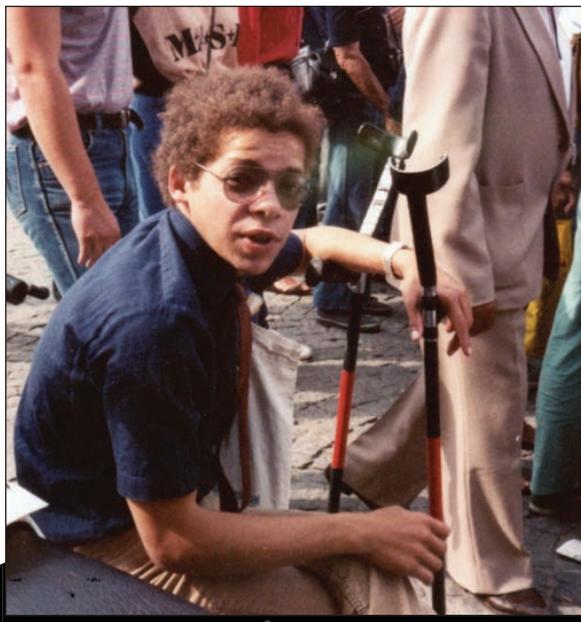
Bébel in “Ergo Therapy,” 1974

was soldering electrical components,” he explains. “It was interesting at the beginning, but later on, I was in a room welding and smelling tin powder all day. That was not very stimulating. That’s when I decided to stop.” Fortunately, over the next several



October 1983

The area was well known for its artists and street performers, but there were no magicians. "There were jugglers, poets, and fakirs. But unlike them, I had not made a choice—I will perform magic here—I was just practicing and suddenly I was performing." He kept manipulating the cards for his first audience. "I discovered that they were not as terrible as I thought they might be." He returned the next day, this time with a red cloth he could place on the ground so he could perform magic and keep his cards clean. Along with his new audiences, he gained the attention of the National Police.



PHOTOS BY SYLVIE BISCION





1982-83

“It turns out that having cards on the street in that area is not good. They thought I might be gambling, so they told me to get out.”

He didn't have to go far on Rue Berger to find a place where his magic would be welcome. “Just a few blocks away is Beaubourg and the Georges-Pompidou Centre. I sat down in the big square in front of the entrance to the center and began doing card tricks.”

The area was also popular with other street performers, and it was a group of tarot card readers who purchased a camping table for the young magician who was still sitting on the ground with his red cloth. “Because of my condition, I could not carry it home with me, so they asked the center if the table could just stay there overnight. It could, so I performed on that table.” He worked at the location until 1989.

It was in 1990 that he relocated to the Mabillon district at Saint-Germain-des-Prés. “At first I was in front of the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés,” says Bébel, “but there was not enough light there for close-up magic. So I moved across the Boulevard Saint-Germain to near the Mabillon metro station.” He still performs in the evening at this spot each summer.

In 1990, the area was so crowded with street performers that they all had to wait their turn to perform. “twenty minutes each,” recalls Bébel. After a year, many had left. For a time it was only Bébel and a fakir. Now, Bébel is alone at the once popular location. “I don't know why that is,” he says.

Over the years, many magicians would come to see Bébel perform. “I was on my own for many years, and then they started coming to watch me. I call it ‘Magic ogling,’” he jokes. “Some are professionals and others are amateurs. At first, for some reason, many would not introduce themselves. I would find out from them much later that they had seen me on the street well before they would talk with me. But as I became more known to magicians, they would introduce themselves.”



The list of “magic oglers” that has seen him over his many years performing on the streets of Paris is long and mostly European, and some became very important to his development. The first name on that list is Bernard Bilis. “Luckily for me,” says Bébel, “Beaubourg was on his way home. He invited me many times for drinks and lunches, and it was great for me, as a beginner, and I tried really hard to present my very best, latest work, to lead to interesting discussions. He was the perfect example of a great card magician. I consider Bernard to be



one of the best card magicians I've ever met. His strength, aside from his incredible technique, is the way he builds routines. His tricks always have a very sound, clever construction. He showed me lots of things from Marlo's work, and demonstrated a lot of his personal techniques and routines, which I didn't share with any other magicians out of respect for him. One exception was a routine he did, which was actually called 'Carte Generale' by Hofzinsler—'Anywhere and Nowhere' in English. He built his variation of that routine to work on some of



1982-83

Ascanio's concepts within the trick. It is thanks to Bernard that I got to meet Arturo de Ascanio. We were at a convention, and Bernard pointed out Ascanio, saying that he was brilliant and that I should pay attention to what he was saying. It was indeed a revelation for me."

Jacques Tandreau, a friend of Dai Vernon's, was another regular visitor who became vital to what Bébel calls his "magician life." "He was a very sweet person, who always joked, with a big smile, and was good at everything in magic. He was the first one to tell me not to perform with only cards; to add maybe the Cups and Balls to my repertoire, which are the essence of magic. I decided to perform a Cups and Balls routine, which is a mix of Frank Garcia's and Dai Vernon's routines that I learned from Georges Naudet. (He, too, has been a great influence in my magician's life, but that story is too long to tell. He helped me in many ways.) I modified the routine, including some presentation ideas that help keep the audience's attention during what is a pretty complex trick. I also did the same on 'Gangster Aces,' a Dai Vernon routine, with a script from Jacques Tandreau and Jean Claude Pagès. I simply added my style, my rhythm, and my pauses to the script, along with a few funny sound effects, to personalize the routine over the years. Jacques Tandreau watched me perform on the street regularly and gave me a lot of advice. He really knew magic deeply, like how to place cards before, during, and after a routine to add clarity, and be natural. He helped me understand movement in a profound way."

While still in Beaubourg, Jean-Jacques Sanvert regularly visited him, as did Carmelo, and Michael Vadini, "who worked near the Cafe Les Deux Magots," recalls Bébel, "and there were other magicians who just liked to watch and get a free lesson," he laughs.

There have been many Americans as well as Japanese magicians who have made a point of watching the street magician at work. "Jeff McBride signed a card for me and said, 'people will talk about you



Performing at *MAGIC Live!*, 2016

in the future, big time.’ When I saw people who were passionate, I would sometimes have coffee with them at a nearby bar called the Old Navy.” Others who came to watch him include John Carney, James Swain, and, in 2003, Todd Lassen wrote on the Genii

Forum, “I just had the pleasure of seeing B ebel work in his environment ... awesome!”

After seeing his work, it was Bill Malone who helped get B ebel booked into the 2015 *MAGIC Live!* B ebel says, “He is an incredible character. I met him through my friend AM. There were tons of very skilled card men at *MAGIC Live!*, and I got to meet the one that I consider the best card handler in the world today: Steve Forte. Few

people know that his generosity, humility, and kindness even surpass his sleight of hand capabilities. He made a gift to me that I will never forget. That *MAGIC Live!* was quite an experience.” Later on, Forte, along with Bill Kalush and AM, would also visit B ebel at his spot near the Mabillon metro station.

In the mid-1990s, Shigeo Futagawa experienced B ebel’s magic in Paris and decided to bring the French magician to Japan on a lecture tour. The trip, which took place in 1996, included sightseeing around the country, with the primary stops being in Tokyo and Osaka. The language barrier was diffi-

cult, but B ebel was thankful for how well organized it was. “I could not understand anything they said, but it didn’t matter. Everything was organized and timed to perfection. I just had to follow people around.” Though he cannot recall precisely, that trip may have been the first one he had taken—for magic—outside Europe. Since that trip, he has been sharing his magic around the world. But it always started with being seen in Paris. His first visit to the United States was the result of being seen on the street, but not by the American who brought him to the U.S.

G erard Majax is a legend of French magic, known not just by France’s magic community, but as a legitimate star among the general public. In the late 1990s or early 2000, it was Majax who introduced B ebel to Rich Bloch. “Every time I saw Majax, he gave me great advice. He once said ‘When your presentation is as good as your technique, you will achieve your true potential,’ and he was right. I am very grateful to Majax for all the advice, and for introducing me to Rich Bloch,” he says.

“I was intrigued,” says Bloch, about his first time seeing B ebel perform in a formal setting. “Not only by what he was doing—which was wholly unlike anything that any other close-up worker that I had seen was doing—he was just unique. It was obvious that this guy just decided that *this* was how he wanted to make things happen; from his own sleights to his effects. I was delighted and immediately talked to him about coming over for the World Magic Seminar.”

In 2001, B ebel found himself in Las Vegas at the Rio Hotel and Casino performing at the World Magic Seminar. That first U.S. magic convention appear-



Japan, mid-1990s, with Shigeo Futagawa

ance led to his first of many invitations to the 4F convention in New York in 2003. And even though he would come to the U.S. many times over the next decade, and would be exposed to American magicians from across the nation, one thing kept eluding him: “I never could get out to The Magic Castle.”

At issue was a combination of the language barrier and the fact that Bébel has never chased money, fame, or favors. He simply would never presume to invite himself to the legendary venue. That situation would not be remedied until 2014.

By the time the second decade of the 21st century had begun, Bébel was looking to broaden his performing style and venue. He had in mind a small stage show and enlisted a playwright, Nathalie Papin for the purpose. Known for her work for children, she also has a circus background—she was trained at Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC)—as well as her interest in theater. Nathalie was the perfect writer for him.

The two had met some years earlier while Bébel was working as a magic consultant on another play—he was providing card tricks that had a tarot theme (one of four monologues from her work, *The 120 Travels of the Madman*). The theme that Bébel had in mind for his show intrigued her, so she agreed to develop the script around his unusual idea.

It is important to understand that Bébel uses very little, if any, storytelling in his performances, instead allowing the magic speak for itself. Juan Tamariz once described Bébel’s style as being “very quiet. He just sets up his table and starts performing ... his presentations are very simple; no stories or things like that ... people gather around him and he keeps them there because they like him.”

That works for the streets, but not in a small theater setting. For the first time in his career, Bébel found himself creating a character, and it was one that all magicians know. “I was the Ace of Spades,” he admits. The show, titled *Une Carte Ne Vous Sauve Pas La Vie Pour Rien* (*A Card Does Not Save Your Life for Nothing*), has its plot coming from the point of view of the playing cards, with Bébel—the Ace of Spades—acting as the narrator of the story, which is described as a “fantastic journey through the secret life of the cards,” in the show’s printed materials. “I was providing the ‘voice over’ for the cards,” explains Bébel.

The show’s printed program offers a synopsis (translated from the French by Google):

After an accident, a man finds himself rushed into the world of cards. [He] becomes the ‘Master-card’ (the Ace of Spades), alone able to understand their murmur, he

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHE RAYNAUD DE LAGE/WIKISPECTACLE

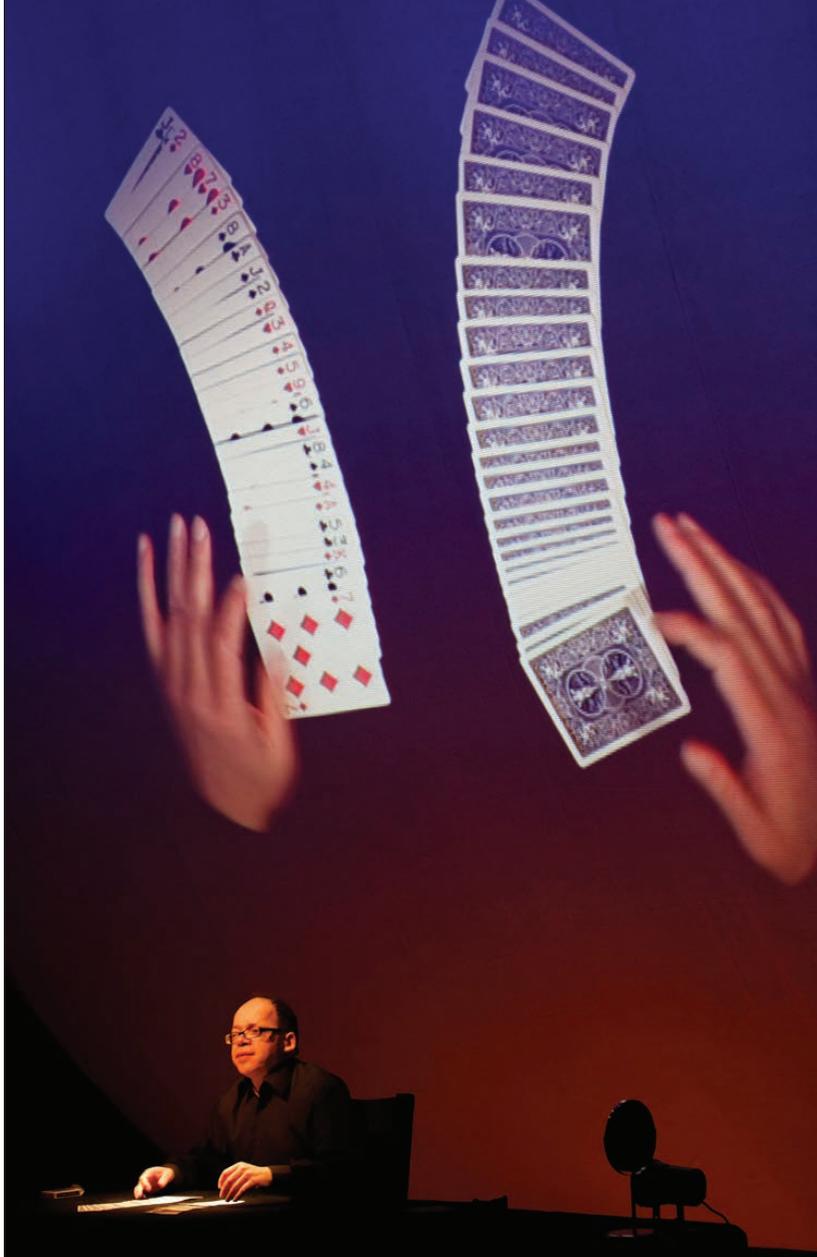


brings us into a fantastic universe where the cards come to life, ready to lift the veil on a part of their mystery. [The] central character of this amazing fable, the Ace of Spades, has terrible things to reveal.

Then begins a journey through time through the secret history of the cards. From the Middle Ages to the Vietnam War, we go through the cultures and eras, discover unknown facts of the past of mankind that arise from the appearance of the depths: curse, myths, depravity, impossible love, propaganda

Another note tackled the show’s surrealism: “This poetic adventure, full of humor and fantasy where dreams and reality are intimately nested ... [is a] surreal epic, close to Gulliver or [The Adventures of] Baron Munchausen (by) Terry Gilliam.”

The one hour show ran from 2012 through



2013 in the mini theaters—venues with about 250 seats—throughout France. Directed by Anne Artigau and produced under the auspices of Cirque-Théâtre Elbeuf, the tour was a success, receiving many enthusiastic reviews from the general public. (Some magicians, used to Bébél's persona on the streets, were less excited in their social media comments, but the show was not written for the magic community.)

It also fulfilled Bébél's expectations. "I learned so much," he says. "I have never planned anything in my life until this show. I never did publicity or conducted this kind of business before this." He still doesn't in his regular day to day work, whether on the streets or private or corporate work. "It's so different from close-up," he continues. "For the first time, I felt like I was doing my trade. I was an actor with 52 other actors. And the relationship between the audience and me [made me realize that] I didn't want to just recite something. It's a dialogue with the cards. It's something that happens *with* me, not something I'm telling the story of."

Of course card magic is central to the story, and the audience could see it clearly because of an enormous video screen above and behind Bébél's table. The video design created by Bernard Pavelek allowed for extreme close-ups of Bébél's hands and the cards while virtually eliminating unnecessary background views. At times the much larger than life images of the hands and cards appear to be floating above him; a part of the staging versus a static video screen.

The show's printed program also offered a section titled, "What Bébél says about the cards, and what the cards say about themselves." It offers more insight into both the show and the relationship that Bébél has with playing cards as well as magic:

The cards were invented by the Hiérophantes to save a knowledge that was going to disappear. All the knowledge that gathers the history of the universe, the world, man, and the sciences, have been condensed into a deck of cards. All these seemingly innocent images seem to make no sense. But each one of them represents the pages of a book, every time different, according to their arrangement.

It is enough to have the keys to rediscover this knowledge and to have access to knowledge. No need to be rich or erudite, cultivated or ignorant. Everyone can have access to it, the rich, the poor, the old, the young, it is enough simply to be inspired. Tarots know the past, the present, and the future. These are mystical cards. Digital cards have a life very close to that of men, they live in community, [and] they also have stories of love. They can get lost, find each other. The cards feed on the game. They need man to exist, otherwise they die.

Cards need to be touched, they don't like to be virtual in computers. They do not like to be left behind in the drawers where they mix and get lost. There are cards that do not like to be locked in because they are claustrophobic. There are jealous cards.

The cards have followed the fashion of each era and have very different clothes. There are cards of all the countries, the Spanish, the Germans, the Italians, the French, the Chinese, etc.

The effects produced by the cards are real magic.

Part of the publicity for the show was this fanciful transcript of a conversation between Bébél and several different playing cards. Like the passage above, it, too, is revelatory on several levels:

Bébél: *For me the world changed forever the day when one of you came out of the deck to tell me "hello." My life was then completely rattled.*

Ace of Spades: *You know us by heart.*

Bébél: *I caressed you, I reversed you.*



Aces: *You manhandled us!*

Bébel: *I kissed you.*

Aces: *You shuffled us, we got lost ...*

Bébel: *I found you.*

Aces: *You tore us.*

Bébel: *Oh, not that much. You are still there. The most important thing is not what you **are** but what you **mean** to me, my loyal fragile paper friends.*

Ace of Spades: *During those long years of complicity we kept talking to you but you did not hear us.*

Bébel: *Thank you for lifting part of the veil on your world for me.*

Ace of Spades: *You thought you knew everything about us! You discovered we can be transformed, teleported ... that we can sneak in and out anywhere.*

King of Hearts: *You also discovered the hard times we sometimes have, when we are separated from our siblings; forgotten in a drawer, abandoned by men.*

Queen of Spades: *We feed on games ... We fear we might disappear from the human world ...*

King of Hearts: *The day when man does not play cards anymore, we won't mean anything anymore.*

Bébel: *Why do you love games? When men give in to chance, you are free to do what you want. It is more difficult to feel free when you have to obey the laws of probability or mathematics: you then have a very short margin of error. Besides the hardcore logic does not leave you any chance of liberty.*

Ace of Hearts: *But magic can set us free from logic, Mr. Bébel!*

Bébel: *Then why did you take this mysterious friend as a partner? Some call him "coincidence," others prefer "fate."*

Jack of Diamonds: *With him we do or undo people's fortunes.*

Jack of Spades: *For us, cards, death has no reality. It is only a different form of existence. Hence, if you talk to the blade of the unnamed card, it will tell you that death is not so terrible.*

Jack of Diamonds: *What you perceive of it during your life is only the reflection of what you imagine of death: a rebirth, a final point, a temporary ending.*

The Magician (tarot): *We can read all your thoughts far before they occur to your conscience.*

Bébel: *You, tarot cards, despite your age-old foresight, aren't you a bit sensitive?*

The Magician: *Sensitive! We keep sending you messages, our symbols work as runes in your unconscious.*

Bébel: *Do you have anything terrible to reveal to us?*

Cards: ...

Bébel: *I feel you haven't told me everything ...*

Cards: *Remember, Bébel, as you rightly say, never clear up the mystery [they disappear].*

Bébel: *Never clear up the mystery. Thank you my friends, you gently took me by the hands and guided me towards people to show me that they are not so dreadful. Thanks to you, I earned my living. The height of it all is whilst I was trying to understand you, **you** revealed me to myself. Thank you so much my friends. See you later, my friends, see you very soon.*

THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF MAGIC IS ENORMOUS,
BUT WE TEND TO LEARN TO DO TRICKS
BEFORE WE LEARN TO DO MAGIC.

He is planning another show that will also be unusual in its subject matter with, again, magic being its subtext. He is currently developing the material. When that is done, they will create mini-sketches (scenes), showcase those, and from those they can offer a complete show.

He is reticent when it comes to divulging the concept of the new production. He notes that some magicians have reputations as followers and he wouldn't want them to jump on the idea. "I believe that suffocates magic. The creative potential of magic is enormous, but we tend to learn to do tricks before we learn to do magic."

Until 2014, the furthest west B ebel had been in the States was Las Vegas. But then he was invited to Dan and Dave Buck's 2014 Magic-Con in San Diego. B ebel credits this event as the moment things began to take off for him. Besides the buzz generated by his appearance there, it was at this convention that he would meet in person someone he'd only been "friends" with via Facebook: Patricia Magicia.

Patricia, originally from France and now living in the Los Angeles area, is a volunteer, entrepreneur, and magician. ("I'm not the best magician," she quips, "but my clients love my accent and my passion for magic; I truly love magic!") A more recent sideline has her helping to arrange performance trips and tours for other French magicians. She was at Magic-Con and, being rather gregarious, simply walked right up to B ebel and asked if he thought he might need a translator for his planned performance. "He was surprised at first," she says, "I thought maybe he was thinking that I was just some kind of groupie."

Later the same day, while watching another talk, B ebel sat next to her and began asking what was being said, so that's when Patricia decided to play a little hard to get. She shushed him. "I had no expectations," she notes, "I just knew that, for some reason, I could translate what was being said very quickly and thought perhaps that I could be helpful to him." Her play of coyness paid off, and B ebel stayed close to her. "I am very happy to have met Patricia," he says. "She has been very helpful to me over these years."

That afternoon, Bill Goodwin asked Patricia if she would introduce him to B ebel, so she arranged a lunch where the two card men could meet. It was during the meal that B ebel finally asked Patricia to translate his Magic-Con performance. And it was Bill Goodwin's presence that led to B ebel thinking about visiting The Magic Castle during that trip.

The Magic-Con performance went well, but

Patricia's translation job turned out to be more difficult than she expected. She admits, "I was so stunned by his magic!" Bill Goodwin recalls it as well. "She would be translating, then he would do something amazing—which happened a lot—and she would go, 'Oh!' each time. It was pretty funny."

Afterward, B ebel turned his thoughts to The Magic Castle. The logistics of getting from San Diego to Los Angeles became problematic. His nonrefundable flight home needed fixing, he needed hotel accommodations, as well as transportation up to L.A.—all within less than a day. B ebel asked Patricia if she could help him, but she had planned for some business in San Diego. So B ebel did something he usually tries not to do: he asked for a personal favor. "I cannot resist those puppy dog eyes of his," she says, flashing her own irresistible smile. It helped that Max Maven said that he could provide two tickets to the Academy of Magical Arts Awards Show that was happening the next night if B ebel could make it. Patricia reorganized her schedule, was able to reschedule his return flight to Paris, arranged for a place for him to stay, and drove B ebel up to the Awards Show, and then to The Castle for the post-show party. Finally, B ebel had his very first visit to the place he'd only read about for so many years.





“It was a whirlwind,” he says, but the visit was a highlight for him, and he fell in love with The Magic Castle. From that point, it didn’t take long for Jack Goldfinger, the Castle’s Director of Entertainment, to book him, and in August of 2014, Bébel performed a week in the Close-Up Gallery and lectured for the membership as well. He has returned every year since. He became a member of the Academy of Magical Arts, with his sponsors being Bill Goodwin, Armando Lucero, and Max Maven.

Even though he has become a favorite of the membership, always creating buzz at the Castle and on its social media, remarkably he has never been nominated for an award from the Academy. One member, who wishes to remain anonymous, says, “It’s unbelievable to me that we cannot even get him nominated, even though it seems like everyone agrees that he should actually *win* an award. That’s how good he is—and how messed up the nomination process here [at the Academy of Magical Arts] is. I think it’s because he only gets here for one week a year, so people just forget he was there and vote for the names they recognize.”

Bébel is unassuming about it. He does not perform magic for accolades and awards. “I am an artist who wants to share my art,” he says, shrugging off the question about any perceived lack of recognition.

After decades of hard work, it seems that Bébel has become an overnight success. In the fall of 2016, he journeyed to London where he visited The

Magic Circle, performed in *Conjuring at the Court* (a show that runs at the Drayton Court Hotel), and performed and held a workshop at the Fez Club. He is preparing, with Patricia—who is now Bébel’s agent—a performance and lecture tour of China and Japan that will commence this fall.

It is in the fall, winter, and spring that Bébel does his traveling and gives performances other than those on the street. “I only perform on the street during the summer,” he says. His other performances are given at private and business parties, sometimes in the mini theaters when he is workshopping material for his stage shows, and occasionally in cabarets. He has also done some television, with his first appearance being in 1994 on an episode of *La Fièvre de L’après-midi* (*The Fever of the Afternoon*). In 2002 he was on *Vivement Dimanche* (*Vivid [or Hot] Sunday*), Michel Drucker’s popular program. This was followed by a special starring the late conjuror Pierre Edernac titled, *Edernac, un Magicien = Edernac, der Magier* (*Edernac, a Magician = Edernac the Mage*) in 2004. In 2007 he appeared on a program hosted by print, radio, and television journalist Patrice Carmouze titled *Magie à Paris* (*Magic in Paris*). He made an appearance on the U.K. television program, *The Secret World of Magic* in 2005, during which Pete Firman and Alistair Cook visit Paris and several of the magicians who call the city home.

In 2010, he made a brief appearance in Olivier Włodarczyk and Jean-François Méplon’s television

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PHOTOS BY KARI HENDER



documentary, *Magie, rêve et illusion (Magic, Dream and Illusion)*, a film celebrating the new influx and popularity of magic, illusion, and mentalism in the theaters and cabarets of France, as well as its popularity among amateurs. It features the Fédération Française des Artistes Prestidigitateurs (including a workshop being held by the organization, where Bébel makes his appearance in the movie), a visit to a magic convention, and a trip to a magic shop. Also seen in the film are illusionist Dani Lary, Xavier Mortimer, Eric Antoine, and Raphael Navarro among several others. (The Film, under its French name, can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8aTSVgEUkE>.)

When time allows, Bébel also does private teaching, something he loves to do, but he only has a few students at any given time. He has also taught in classrooms, working with CNAC. "I taught basic card magic techniques there, so they could use them immediately. It was a well-rounded school, with lots of different specialties and arts, including close-up magic, presentation, as well as other classic circus disciplines. It is very traditional," he says.

Occasionally, during his off season, he'll take a break from magic. "Sometimes I need that," he says.

"Normally I think about magic all the time. But when I need a break, I'll read, listen to music, and just visit with friends."

While there is not a book of his work yet, there are some lecture notes (those in English were prepared specifically for *The Magic Castle*), and there are two DVDs that feature his magic. *Bébel, Finally the DVD!* (directed by Frédéric Albeau, and produced by Fabrice Delauré) was released in 2008. He teamed with J.P. Vallarino in 2010 in *Bébel Vallarino: Inspiration* (produced by ArtecoProduction), and Ellusionist offers a couple short downloads of his magic. Slowly but surely, students of card magic are being attracted to the name Bébel.

When asked about the name change from Belkhéir to Bébel, he laughs. "Even the French have difficulty pronouncing Belkhéir!" It has nothing to do with the well-known French actor Jean-Paul Belmondo, who also went by Bébel (as do other actors and musicians). It began in 1982, when he first started performing on the streets. People had trouble saying his name, and someone said that they would just call him Bébel. "It's just a common thing that the French do, shortening names." The stage show's advertising had his billing as "Belkhéir



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Djénane, Bébel the Magician,” and his first billing at The Magic Castle listed him as Bébel Belkhéir.

The name Bébel seems inexorably linked to playing cards. The passage taken from his show’s print program about cards needing to be touched and not just placed in a drawer is not merely hyperbole when it comes to Bébel and the pasteboards. When asked what it was about playing cards that attracted him, he does two things: he becomes philosophical and he corrects the questioner. “Like magic, the cards found me,” he says, but he does explain their mutual attraction. “I love the feeling of them as they escape on the tips of my fingers. I listen. The cards do not speak, they rustle; a purr. I started with rope and rings, but cards are much more interesting. There is more stimulation with cards. They make me think and improve. They offer utility and variation; improvisation. I do not use prepared or gimmicked cards. My idea of magic is to be ready at any time.”

Improvisation is a large part of his work, even when not using cards. For example, his Cups and Balls routine is a staple of his street work, but he will often change the routine, in particular the ending, to keep it interesting. “Magic is a language to be

constructed as you go along,” he explains. “Much like Vernon’s ‘Trick That Cannot Be Explained,’ we know the end result, but we invent how we get there based on what we know as well as the situation.”

His friend AM, who has known Bébel for over 20 years and has watched him evolve notes that, “Improvisation plays a big role in Bébel’s performances. He will react to any unexpected event, or to a spectator’s comment, and will go out from the planned trick to create something unique on the spot. The audience then feels they have interacted directly with the act, so they exist within the experience of a real magical moment.”

AM imparts an example: “One day, a woman picked two cards instead of one, while Bébel had his head turned, and supposedly couldn’t see it—of course he felt that she took two. She showed both cards to the audience and put them back in the deck. Bébel had his head turned away the whole time and pretended he didn’t know what happened. He wrapped a rubber band around the deck, did a magic pass, the rubber band disappeared and was found around one card only: the selected Eight of Hearts!

“He showed it, and put it face down on the



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LITTLE CRAZY.

table, with the rubber band still around it. Now the woman giggled, and screamed, 'Hey I actually picked *two* cards! Haha! There is a second one!' Bébel pretended surprise and asked for the name of the second card. 'The Ace of Spades.' Bébel waved his hand over the tabled card wrapped with the rubber band, turned it over, it had turned into the Ace of Spades! The audience was stunned. They witnessed a real, improvised, miracle."

Moments like that are the reason Bébel still works the streets. "I want to continue going in that direction," he says. "I like to improvise. I know the mechanics. I play with them. I have invented tricks because of that." Even routines that he knows by heart will be changed, usually through technique. The reactions of his audiences reassures him that he is going in the right direction. In a blog entry from April 2016 he says, "The slightest reaction of the public can be for me a second life, [a] new inspiration, to respond to the present moment." Bébel also becomes somewhat philosophical when regarding direction, mingling it with improvisation: "Sometimes life puts you at a crossroads where you can go left or right. But usually we are going straight. So when I find myself just going in a straight line, I turn left instead."

Another aspect of Bébel's personality that becomes apparent when spending any time with him is his humility, and once recognized, it comes through in his magic as well. "Most magicians want to prove that they have power. I *remove* that power to eliminate the confrontation with the audience. There is no challenge. Instead of trying to show what we are capable of, we create a situation and then react to it. The magician takes a step back and lets the cards express themselves, because they are alive and magical. I'm not showing my power.

I never liked that relationship with the audience, so I changed it." His friend AM adds, "I've had the pleasure of bringing many friends to watch Bébel perform over the years. Invariably, the comments are unanimous: 'This guy is incredible. There is an aura around him: a vibe of goodness, generosity, and kindness.'"

"Playing cards communicate with me," continues Bébel. "I just relay what's happening to the audience. I'm just responding to what the cards are telling me. Any subconscious conflict is avoided this way. When I translate the murmur of cards, or when I react to their miracles, the audience doesn't know if they're dreaming, if I'm telling the truth, or if I'm just a little crazy. This way, the magic goes beyond the climax. There's sometimes a beginning, sometimes I improvise in the middle, and then there's the end. It goes further than simple tricks."

In basic terms, the magic is happening through Bébel, but it is not because of Bébel. It all returns to his years of study, which will never end. He has learned countless techniques. He has invented them, and he continues to search them out from others. He has dedicated himself to the study of what magic is, and it is as much a part of him as his hands and fingers. "If we learn its concepts and principles, it will open the imagination and then we can start thinking differently about magic."

The author would like to thank Todd Karr for some insightful questions and additional translation work. Very special thanks go out to Patricia Magicia for her translation of the original interview with Bébel, as well as her tireless post-interview work that made this article possible. Bébel would also like to thank Patricia as well as AM, Chantal Cruaud, and Étienne Laurenceau for their help with translating for him.