

RADNEVSKY'S REAL MAGIC

BY PRAKASH PURU





Photos by Darien Bates

THE SCENE IS A DESOLATE BENCH along a foggy, wet, cobblestoned street in an unknown foreign city. A man, silver-haired, tightly wrapped in a trench coat and armed with a newspaper, sits upon the bench. He opens the paper and begins scanning the day's headlines. "Penalty kick upsets the champ," he murmurs to himself and, as he does, a full-sized soccer ball springs from the pages of the newspaper and flies into the air. The audience's gasps are audible and the man, momentarily stunned, catches the ball and places it on the ground. He continues reading: "Civil war spills over border," and a small helicopter flies up from behind the edge of the paper and hovers there. As the man stares blankly at it, it fires a rocket that hits his sleeve and causes it to catch fire. The man screams and, in response, a fireman's ladder promptly emerges from the pages of the newspaper, complete with a fireman and an extinguisher that sprays the man in the face. After gingerly wiping his face, the man lowers the paper—the ladder, fireman, and extinguisher have disappeared. Apprehensive, the man

turns his attention to the obituaries; "there seem to be a lot of them," he notes, so much so that the paper begins to grow exponentially in size as he continues to unfold it, eventually threatening to envelope him. From behind this blanket of paper emerges another man—identically dressed and wearing a mask. The two men lunge at each other, and ...

The man is Peter Samelson, and the scene—a dream sequence based upon a surreal routine of Samelson's entitled "Getting Absorbed in The Sunday Times"—is one of several memorable moments in *Radnevsky's Real Magic*, which recently finished a 17-day run at the intimate First Floor Theatre at La MaMa ETC, in New York city. Starring Samelson as the title character and Dennis Kyriakos as his protégé, the show—neither straightforward play nor traditional magic show—is directed by Paul Zimet, the artistic director of the Talking Band—a long-time presence in New York's experimental theater scene. Samelson was first introduced to the Talking Band's work more than three decades ago, first as an audience member and, a few



years later, as a collaborator when he served as a consultant for their production of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. (He designed an illusion wherein a character in the play vanishes from center-stage.) Over the years, Zimet and Samelson would remain in contact—each a fan of the other's work—and Zimet would attend several of Samelson's public performances, both at New York's Monday Night Magic and elsewhere. "The thing that I especially admire about Peter's work is the way that he demythologizes magic, and lures you into what he's doing; he makes the audience complicit," notes Zimet. "And, at the same time, he gives his magic a sense of meaning, and makes it very personal to who he is." In the autumn of 2008, shortly after Samelson's one-man show at the Ancram Opera house in New York, Zimet asked Samelson if he would be interested in a collaboration. The latter's answer was as brief as it was enthusiastic: "You betcha."

At the time, neither man knew what their joint effort would comprise, nor did they envision the specific form that it would take. Nevertheless, they both maintained certain ideals: Zimet observes, "One of the things that I've

always loved about magic is the built-in engagement that an audience has; there's no 'fourth wall,' and so the audience is naturally drawn in—much more so than in a regular play. I love that relationship, and it seemed to me that if you found a way to add a specific narrative, you'd have a powerful combination." To which Samelson added a singular caveat: "I told Paul that at this stage in my life, a specific subject that I wanted to explore was that of death; of mortality, and of a man confronting his own mortality." As Zimet began work on a script, Samelson provided him with a list of reading materials, including: David Ben's biography of Dai Vernon, Karl Johnson's *The Magician and The Cardsharp*, Corinda's *Thirteen Steps to Mentalism*, Jamy Ian Swiss's *Shattering Illusions*, David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous*, and Adam Gopnik's essay titled "The Real Work" from *The New Yorker* magazine.

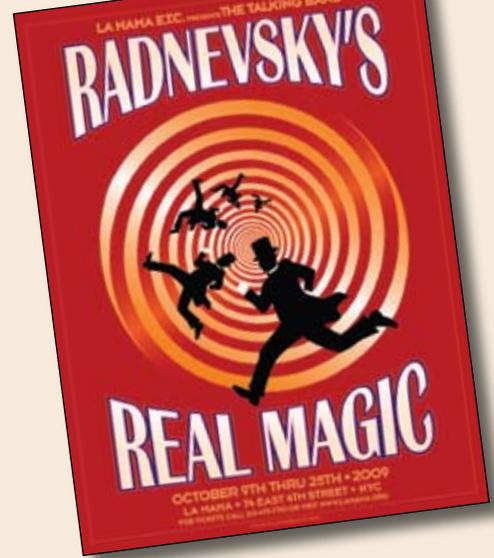
The latter, in particular, struck a chord with Zimet as he found himself "fascinated by the idea of a mentor and his mentee, and the type of relationship that they might have." The two men spent considerable time examining the nature of the teacher/student bond, and the notion that such a relationship needn't be—and very often isn't—as straightforward or as cordial as one might first be inclined to imagine; indeed, among other sources, they drew inspiration from Goya's portrait of Saturn Devouring His Son. Discussions furthered, and with the clear need for someone



Photo by Peter Samelson

to play the role of the protégé, Samelson turned to Dennis Kyriakos, an actor and fellow magician at Monday Night Magic. By happy coincidence, Kyriakos and Zimet had already known each other for several years by virtue of having trained at the same dojo. (Kyriakos is a third-degree aikido black belt.) Kyriakos recalls, “Peter mentioned that he and Paul were discussing working on something together, and that they were brainstorming ideas on what the show would be. All very preliminary stuff, mind you, but he said that another character was developing in their talks. Some time later, Paul asked if I would join the project and take on the role of the apprentice. There was no way I would turn this down; I knew it would be something special.”

A first, skeletal draft of the script began to emerge, and workshops for the show began in January of 2009. They consisted, in Kyriakos’s words, of “five days locked in a rehearsal room.” Both Samelson and Kyriakos brought in all the routines they were capable of doing, and performed them for Zimet and Ellen Maddow, the show’s musical director. In certain instances, Zimet would tailor his script to feature each magician’s familiarity with particular routines—Samelson’s trademark versions of “Snowstorm in China” and “Gypsy Thread,” for example, along with Kyriakos’s performance of the “Cups and Balls.” Concurrently, both magicians were made to learn new effects—some purely the result of Zimet’s imagination—with which they were previously unaccustomed. Yet, even with those routines that Samelson and Kyriakos were intimately at ease, Zimet insisted on pushing the magicians beyond their comfort level: “Peter’s character, in his own shows, is kind of a romantic. His thread trick, for



A Note On A Play

by Adam Gopnik

I should instantly “declare an interest” in Peter Samelson’s, Paul Zimet’s, and Dennis Kyriakos’s *Radnevsky’s Real Magic*, which played at La Mama this fall—my son, Luke Auden Gopnik, played a small role in it, and so paternal pride and critical detachment were therefore at war night after night in the little theater ... check that; paternal pride took a front seat over critical detachment in an instant, elbowing it right to the back of the theater, where it sulked for several happy weeks.

Yet the real virtues and promise of the piece were not opaque to me—or at least, not after the third or fourth button-popping performance—and spoke, even to an amateur of magic like myself, to some of the frontiers and

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example, is usually about love and relationships and I needed to get him away from that and make his character, in our show, a much harder person; a much more bitter person. And Dennis normally has a laid-back, cool air about him. We wanted him to be more energetic.” The alterations are noticeable—in the show, Samelson’s “Gypsy Thread” now deals with the subjects of fate and death, whilst Kyriakos performs the “Cups and Balls” not as an interactive presentational piece, but as a stripped-down, fast-paced effect done to music.



for the rich and famous ... has pulled a different kind of magic trick this time, making himself disappear, following the tragic death of an audience member at Tuesday’s preview performance.” Radnevsky, it seems, has been absent for the past 30 years, and tonight we are to see his comeback. As the curtain rises we meet Harry Telkhines (Kyriakos), who introduces himself and tells us of his pride at performing alongside the “man who has been his idol since he was 12 years old.” With a grand gesture, Telkhines introduces “The Great Radnevsky” and Samelson steps out from within an assembled tower of empty boxes. Radnevsky returns Telkhines’s compliment, calling him “his protégé, and a talented young man with a bright future.” Over the following 75 minutes, both men perform a variety of effects: A burnt bill reappears inside an envelope containing the evening’s proceeds, Telkhines swallows a handful of needles and regurgitates them strung together on a thread—a classic effect to which his physicality lends

Workshops and stage-readings continued throughout the summer, even as a definite ending for the script had yet to be settled upon. Zimet and Samelson began to realize, however, that a satisfactory conclusion—one that would serve to answer the audience’s questions while provoking new ones—would require the involvement of a third actor; specifically, someone who would play the part of a skill in the audience. Enter Luke Gopnik: A student of Jamy Ian Swiss, and a fine young magician and actor. As Gopnik met with the team, Zimet both crafted a role for him in the show and wrote the ending around him. With all the necessary elements in place, the men entered final rehearsals and the show opened on October 9, 2009.

The show’s plot begins with its back story: An excerpt from a 1976 news article—provided in our program—tells us that “popular underground magician Anton Radnevsky ... who has quietly made a name for himself in New York by performing at exclusive parties



a sense of legitimacy—and, in a pleasingly startling moment, a feather leaps from Radnevsky's grasp and flies into the wings. Telkhines also performs an excellent cigars and purse routine, and Radnevsky divines a passage randomly chosen from a hefty copy of *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare*. Along the way, they are joined by a young volunteer from the audience, Robert (Gopnik), with whom they perform Jim Steinmeyer's "Origami" and Imam's Knife Illusion.

As the show progresses, however, cracks emerge in the relationship between the two men and we begin to suspect that Telkhines—with his sly mocking of his mentor's outdated routines and approach to magic—holds far less reverence for The Great Radnevsky than his introduction would have us believe. Tensions between the two magicians heighten, and Radnevsky challenges

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promises of magic-as-art form. Here, in double order, are my reflections:

1. Radnevsky's *Real Magic* worked on several levels—the one that excited me most as an ignorant outsider in love with magic-performance was its attempt to use some classic (and some new) stage illusions to illustrate a story about the workings of the mind and heart rather than simply as an element to illuminate the workings of a box; it told a fable of warring generations of magicians that was essentially dark and even tragic, and told it through magical means.

In this effort, it seemed to show a possible "way forward," a new direction.

(Doubtless more expert viewers will here assert that the new direction is an old one with lots of precedents; they almost always are.) The basic question that haunts all modern magic performance is, simply, Why magic at all? Why, in an age of CGI and spectacular escapes, should we want stage illusions, even high quality stage illusions—why not consign them to a lost past of lost pleasures?

Let me add instantly that this is not a problem left to magic alone, but one, as I tried to outline in the essay I wrote about observing magicians in *The New Yorker* two years ago, that is held in common by all the pre-media crafts, painting and essay writing as much as sleight-of-hand. Once the ecological niche is drained, it is hard to keep cultivating the produce. People don't need portrait-paintings when a single snap can do the job; and people don't need stage illusions when a dumb double-exposure can knock you sideways—so why go on with it? Why should it not just be moved back to the nostalgia shelf? And, to be sure, that is one of the ways that magic stays alive in our world now: as a form of nostalgic entertainment, with a belligerent, implicit follow-up punch: The world (and particularly show-business) was better back then, dammit, more varied and more lovable, less homogenized and more human-sized. Doing Three Card Monte, or card tricks, or stage illusions, involves at once a degree of difficulty, and a direct involvement with the audience, that passive viewing of unchanging effects does not.

That kind of belligerent nostalgia is certainly an emotion not alien to those of us who write medium-length satirical-sentimental essays for a living—and yet it seems to me that Samelson, Zimet, and Kyriakos wanted to do something more than that, and something braver. Radnevsky was marked by at least the intimation of another view worth pursuing—that is, that the future of stage illu-

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Telkhines to wow the audience with his much bragged-about act, an underwater endurance stunt. Telkhines accepts, and with Robert's aid, stops his own pulse and submerges himself in water. With Telkhines underwater, Radnevsky abruptly suffers a heart attack and is carried off-stage; moments later, the glass tank shatters and Telkhines, spluttering and dazed, runs after his mentor. Now alone on stage, Robert turns to the audience, smiles, and reveals the truth: His own name isn't Robert, it's Stefan. He isn't a volunteer, he's a stooge and he met Radnevsky years ago at a state fair. "He was in bad shape, drinking lots of booze," the boy scoffs. "They let him pass the hat between the other acts." And Telkhines isn't an aspiring magician, he's a monte hustler who realized the potential value of Radnevsky's reputation and formed a plan: "He would resurrect Anton's act; The Great Radnevsky would be the draw, but Harry would run the show. He would play the humble protégé or ambitious rival—it didn't matter—as long as he kept the money. So that's what Harry did. That's what he's been doing."

A brief word about Luke Gopnik: It is inarguably true that Gopnik is the source of the show's most pivotal event—he is, after all responsible for its "Keyser Söze" moment—and that he is given some of the show's most

memorable lines—"I'm an orphan. By choice." He is also, however, the author of its most pleasing illusion: The boy to whom we are first introduced is a shy, soft-spoken naif, while the boy who addresses us at the end of the show, post-denouement, does so with glint of scorn in his eye and a sneer upon his lips. His transformation from innocent volunteer to contemptuous leech is genuinely thrilling, and a pleasure to watch.

The show's flavor is undeniably cynical, and with greasy, jet-black hair and chiseled features, Kyriakos plays Telkhines with a mixture of false servility and brash arrogance; a camp salesman—complete with a pink-lapelled polyester suit—who, though undeniably talented, possesses little artistic aim beyond the collection of a day's ticket sales. Indeed, his climactic, grand act—his underwater endurance stunt, the supposed work of many years—is neither a chained escape from a 500-gallon tank nor the striking image of

a man trapped in a globe of water; rather, Telkhines simply dunks his head into a fish tank and holds his breath. “Promise them everything and give them anything” might very well be his motto. Or, more plainly, “Get their f••king money.” And his relationship with Radnevsky, thus, is less that of a student and his teacher and more that of a handler and his puppet—a situation all the more bereft for the puppet being content to be toyed with if it allows him minutes in the spotlight. Forlorn and without option, Samelson’s Radnevsky is a man whose despondence is paralleled by his desperation for renewed glory—a portrait of the artist as an old drunk. (A situation mirrored in the show’s poster of a well-dressed man spiraling into oblivion, a nod to Saul Bass’s classic artwork.) One cannot help but be reminded of the final scenes of Edmund Goulding’s *Nightmare Alley*, in which Stanton Carlisle (Tyrone Power)—once The Great Stanton, the town’s most celebrated entertainer, and now a picayune drunk whose trembling hands can barely clutch their empty bottle—begs a carnival owner for a job, any job. Recognizing Stanton’s weakness, the owner tosses him the lowly job of a geek—with the whispered promise of “a bottle a day and a place to sleep it off.” “How can a guy get so low?” one of the operators wonders, as he watches Stanton stumble into the night. “You reach too high,” replies the owner, without a thought. •

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sion, or at East one rich path for it, lies in merging magic with conceptual theater, performance art, cabaret—and particularly allowing it to escape the ever-present emotional tone of puckish entertainment to explore darker areas of experience. In Radnevsky, of all that was impressive, the most impressive element was the idea of using illusions not merely to decorate but to dramatize a story of jealousy, violence, envy, exploitation, and resentment. The illusions in Radnevsky were used to explore a world essentially dark and psychologically forbidding: Samelson’s famous “living snow globe” piece, which I have admired many times before, seemed to me uniquely touching, and newly double-edged, when placed within an “earned” narrative of innocence and loss, and there were many other illusions in the piece of similar poetry. (My own favorite was the episode of the “living newspaper,” which came right out of a kind of dream of the Central European past, with the claustrophobic twentieth century news of border skirmishes and soccer matches all running together in nightmarish continuity.)

The attempt, in other words, on the part of Zimet and Samelson and Kyriakos, was to take magic from something merely “wondrous” to something surreal and even, in its explorations, capable of illuminating the psychotic mind. The urge in short, exciting and significant, was to add meaning to magic. (Not that magic has in the past lacked meaning; but it has, surely, tended to work in a narrower range of emotion than this new piece proposed for it.) Even as a Dad not liking the idea of seeing his kid having swords plunged into him, even theatrically, I recognize that this is, as I say, a way ahead.

2. This leads to the second question: Can it work? The truth, having watched, is that some element of innocence resides in even the most perfectly worked illusion—the tropism of magic toward children, which wearies and baffles and causes so much (on the whole good-natured) resentment among magicians, seems to this outsider somehow intrinsic to the art form. A successfully worked illusion, no matter how shadowy its psychological premise, produces, willy-nilly, a feeling of well-being and happiness in an audience, and in a strange way works against the enterprise of darkening and deepening the themes. To put it another way; magic is, and remains, in large part and at heart, play—play of the highest kind, play of the noblest order, play of the sort that includes things as unlike Cubist picture making and *The Magic Flute*. Its roots in play make it, so to speak, hard to play in a minor key, or at least in a tragic one. It is not just an entry into another world, but one we recognize as partial and willed and as made. The urge to break the conventional frontiers of what magic can do in order to show us a new and darker side seems to this fond critic necessary, right, significant, the way forward. But the darkness of the surrealist mind will always be undercut by the ludic lightness of the magician’s contriving skill as he has his way with a conniving audience—the way forward will be set in darkness, perhaps, but somehow necessarily remain light. How both can happen at once in the next piece it would require a conjurer to show us—but what else are conjurers for? •

