

# David Williamson

## THE WILLIAMSON YOU DON'T SEE

By Chris Cox

It's a magician's dream come true. No, I'm not talking about them finally releasing a Joshua Jay calendar, I'm talking about getting to work with David Williamson, or, as I call him, Mr Williamson Esq. And you thought Steve Cohen was king of formality. I've been lucky enough to spend way too much time with Williamson. As part of *The Illusionists*, we have toured South Africa together, worked an extended residency in Reno, and have just had our United States tour cut short due to Corona (which also became Rocky's name for a few shows.) So, what's it like touring with Dave? Well, I'm glad you asked. It's pretty good.

What? You need more to fill the word count? Fine. It's pretty, pretty, pretty good.

What? Still more? But that was a good bit, as it's a Larry David reference, and David Williamson likes watching episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* on the bus. In fact, Dave spends all the tour bus drives with his headphones on (he's got those fancy Bose noise-cancelling ones, that Racoon is making him dollar), eating unhealthy American snacks and watching things, which he then recommends. At the venue, he likes having a nap in his dressing room and eating bland food. His favourite food colour is beige. He likes to order a takeaway pizza after the shows (pepperoni, ideally from Dominos) and is a fan of iced tea. He always has a deck of cards with him and is always shuffling them.

He can't fit in tour bus bunks, so when we're not in hotels, he sleeps on the sofa. He's very long.

One of the joys of being with Willy is watching him do the same bit, night after night, and still managing to make everyone

backstage laugh. He has the ability to make us laugh at lines we've heard hundreds of times, and I don't really know how.

His genius lies in being in the moment with those kids, even though he trots out one of the many lines he's prepared for each situation (I don't think he's sat and

written them, he said them as an ad lib one time, and they've stuck in his head). He knows when to use the line, how to make it fresh, how to make the kids the stars whilst staying on the right side of the line of 'bullying' them, with such love, warmth, grace and charm. He's not afraid to experiment, to try, to do what feels right in the moment. He suffers through my act nightly and always gives notes to make me better. He loves magic. It's in his bones and he is magic. He's also long. Did I mention that?

Over two years of touring with him, the tiny changes that have happened in Rocky keep it going from strength to strength. For a Fourth of July show, he gave the kid being the goalposts small American flags and said: "wave these around, it makes it more exciting." It killed. It's stayed in the show ever since. We have conversations a lot about the changing perceptions of audiences, he stays on top of that, to make sure he continues to come across as a loveable goofy uncle. We were noticing that in the last six months or so, every time he tells the girls to protect the boys it gets a huge cheer. Audiences' perceptions have changed, and now a line he's done forever has new emotional and social resonance.

He also keeps creating new material, which, somehow, from day one, is pretty damn near perfect. Why? It's because he knows exactly who he is, who the audience see him as, and how to deal with audience members. He is a master, a better magician than anyone in the audience will ever know, and someone I feel very lucky to call a friend. He is also very long.

The most annoying thing about writing this, is that what I really wanted to do was to give you the inside scoop. To tell you what an arse he is, what a diva, what a terrible human, to sully the good name of Williamson. But, I can't. All I can really say is I love him. He's the best, and if you ever get the opportunity to work with him, take it. He'll make you a better performer, and a better human.



# mson HONORARY MEMBER OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE – PROFESSIONAL

## DAVID WILLIAMSON: A BLUE-COLLAR MAGICIAN

By William Spencer

**William Spencer:** Like the ringmaster you play, you are a true showman. Does it come naturally?

**David Williamson:** I was compelled. When I read *Amateur Magician's Handbook* by Henry Hay it spoke to me. I was 12. He said magic is not meant to be done in your bedroom. You've got to have an audience. You've got to get on stage.

I was an introvert. A true introvert. I still am. But I can turn it on, I've practised, I've learned how to do that. But I was a real shy kid who wouldn't speak to anybody, I was compelled to get up on stage, however.

I used to ask my mother to drive me to this country and western bar that had an open mic night. And in between the crooners I'd get up and do zombie or billiard balls, because I knew that you had to have an audience.

I told my mother when I was eight years old: "I'm going to be a professional magician. Leave me alone."

My teacher gave me a reader about Houdini. I read that, did the French Drop and did it pretty good. And my teacher said: "Wow, maybe you'll grow up and be a magician." That was the first time anyone had pointed at me and told me that I was going to be anything. And when a school magician came to town, my teacher very kindly asked if I could help the magician carry his props to the van. And I felt like I was in the club. It felt natural. I thought I could do this for a living.

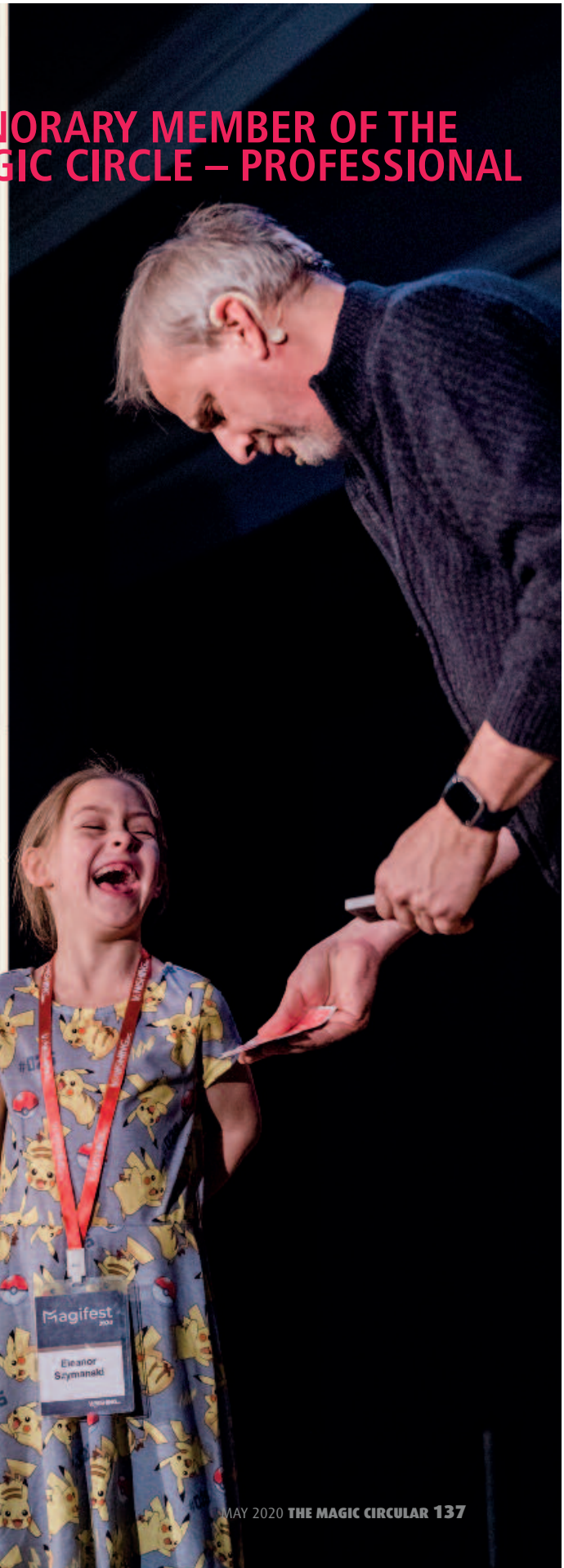
**William:** You are naturally funny?

**David:** Ah! But when I started magic, I was always very serious. I was a very serious student of the art. All the way up until I was 20, I was very serious, kind-of boring. On the inside I was a raging lunatic. My brothers cut up and laughed all the time. But magic was so important to me that I didn't think about comedy. And then I took a road trip to Atlanta and saw Tom Mullica behind the bar. He was a clown, a true clown, in the best sense of the word, and a magician. I never laughed so hard. I never saw such great magic combined with the laughs. It was like being in the ring with Mike Tyson. I was beat up with comedy and magic and I saw the light. I saw it could be done that way. It was a revelation to me. It changed my life.

**William:** So how can magicians learn to be funny?

**David:** Be yourself. Don't try to be a character. The closer you are to the truth, the funnier it is. People can smell phony. So, if you're trying to be a whacky character with whacky props or making people do whacky things for no good reason, it's always going to be a way away from the goal. Be honest, be yourself.

Everybody has a natural sense of humour. Be humorous and fun. Find the comedy in situations rather than in props or lines that are canned, and that people can read. Create funny situations and moments that feel real... that takes time. You can't sit down with a ►





pencil and paper and write funny. I can't. You've got to field test it. Get out in front of the audience and be a tough critic on yourself. If it doesn't get a laugh, get rid of it.

**William:** In your act, how much is improvised, how much is scripted?

**David:** These days it's mostly scripted but I scripted it through improvisation. So now, everything I do has been streamlined and honed through the years. There's not much that surprises me on stage anymore. And I have about ten different things I can say or do according to whatever happens. Every once in a while something happens that's new though, and you've got to go with it.

The key is to give yourself permission to go off script and look for opportunities. Always be on the surf for opportunities to go off script. Build that into your routines, and your act. Give yourself the freedom. Sometimes you're mining for gold and you hit nothing. Get out, dig another hole. But no risk, no reward.

If you can be real with people. More than: "What's your name?" "What do you do for a living?" That's just the beginning. Dig deeper into what their hopes and dreams are, what they care about... and what they had for breakfast. I like to be provocative and see if I can get something out of people, because people are interesting, and people are funny and situations are funny. Be open to experiences that pop up organically.



**William:** You used to wear a shirt saying 'Magician For Hire.' Did that crazy marketing work?

**David:** It wasn't that crazy, was it? I used to work at a county fair when I had 'Magician for Hire' and my phone number printed on my shirt. I never got one single job and I wore that for four years.

**William:** If it's not the marketing, it must be your work ethic?

**David:** It is the work ethic, I'll give you that. I don't give up. For a whole year after I won the Gold Cups, in 1981 at the IBM convention, I washed dishes in a Greek restaurant every

afternoon to pay my way. I did magic at night at a dinner theatre. I didn't understand how to get tips. But I knew I had to perform. I had a supportive girlfriend, who I eventually married. She had a good job. I never gave up. I did have a good work ethic. I spent money on marketing materials and took it seriously.

Show business is two words. You've got to have the 'show' part, but you've also got to be smart about the business part. It was Darwin Ortiz who took me aside at a magic convention. He could see I was up and coming, in magazines, the flavour of the month. He said: "You owe it to your parents and the people that care about you to figure out how you're going to make a living and a career out of this. You can't just hop from convention to convention for the rest of your life. You've got to get serious about this and make a plan. And think down the road."

At first, I was taken aback. Why is he talking to me like this? But it was the most caring wonderful conversation I had had at that point in my life. I needed a reality check. And I thank him for that.

**William:** How do you deal with negativity amongst magicians or the public?

**David:** That's only in England. But I love it. That's why I sit with all my snarky friends at the conventions... It's too much fun. That's the sport of it, isn't it? The bubble of magic and magicians and conventions. Sometimes we get too much of each other and that's going to come out. There's such a wit in the UK that it's natural. And I learned that if anybody puts their head above the parapet there's plenty of people ready to knock it off.

You've got to take a chance. You can't listen to other people. Paul Gertner gave me a dose of reality when I was young. He told me that people would say and write things about you your entire career. Good and bad. Ignore all of it. I follow that. Don't listen to the good. And don't listen to the bad. Keep moving forward, like a shark. If you stop swimming, you'll sink. Just keep moving forward.

Don't search your name on Google. Don't worry about what people say, especially other magicians and other performers. The more you can get away from magicians, the better. Camaraderie is great, and I value all my friends. I have lifelong friends in magic. But, every once in a while, you have to go out and live a real life. That's where you find material. That's where you find situations and inspiration to bring back into your magic from the real world. You probably won't find too much in the world of magic to inspire you. Or you will become a copycat. And that's what you want to avoid.



**William:** Any tips for readers...?

**David:** Always chase originality. And that is even though I've said in the past that originality is overrated. I don't think I do anything that's original. I don't. I do things that are inspired. I do conventional material and twist it to make it my own. There's tonnes of material in the old books that nobody's looking at. I used to play a game, I'd grab *Tarbell* or *Greater Magic*, flick the pages, stick my finger in, and make myself actually read every word of whatever routine I had found. It may look like some kind of Hofzinger candle, with a shell under a table and a velour flap with a bit of string, something I would never do, but within it I would find a phrase, patter, or a principle I'd find amusing. That's a fun thing to do, and a good exercise.

**William:** In *Circus 1903* you performed Card on Elephant foot, wow. And shoe in box. And coin under shoe. Why are you obsessed with shoes?

**David:** There's something about shoes. Shoes are funny to me. Feet are funny. I just think shoes are funny.

**William:** You're 58. What's next?

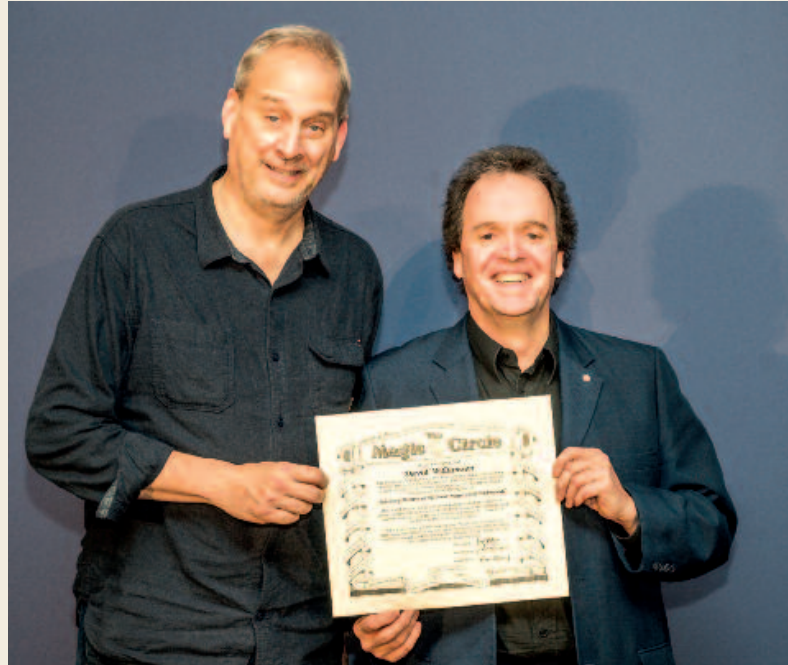
**David:** 59.

I'm going to work on a US tour of *The Illusionists*. After April I have no work. My calendar is empty. Hopefully something will come along.

My plan is to keep going. I would love to put together my own little show that I could travel around with. I've been saying that for 30 years,



[www.TheMagicCircle.co.uk](http://www.TheMagicCircle.co.uk)



**David receives his Circle Membership from President Noel Britten**

but I've never had the opportunity. I've had so much work and I've got a family. You have to make choices to support your family and not go off on these flights of fancy that cost money and don't bring in money. I have lots of ideas for my show. But I enjoy being in these large productions with lots of people. Because for years I would work solo at corporates, on cruise ships... It gets lonely.

**William:** Any plans to retire Rocky?

**David:** So long as people want to see it, I'll still do it. It's just a tool to interact with the kids and create fun. Kids are very sweet. People ask me how I make the kids do things. You can't make a four-year-old do anything.

**William:** Why do you call yourself a comic sleight of hand entertainer, not a magician?

**David:** Good catch. I avoid the word magician. It has a connotation, at least it did in the '90s, it may have changed. I just wanted to throw as many words at the wall as possible to catch their attention. 'Comic,' people like to laugh, and 'sleight of hand' is intriguing for people.

**William:** You get a lot of awards. Do they make you smug or proud?

**David:** Smug, [laughter]. Why didn't they come sooner? Why didn't they recognise my genius?

In our little world of magic, we pass these titles around. Everybody gets a turn. You reach a certain age, you look around, there's not too many of us left. They say: "Let's give him an

award." The other scam is having a big banquet dinner but not paying performers. "Let's give him an award so he'll show up."

Success for me is not that simple. It is having a life and career and raising a family with magic. I watched my dad, as a farmer and factory worker, working really hard to keep bread on the table. I work really hard too. I consider myself a blue-collar magician. If you can travel the world with card tricks, make a living and have a life, more power to you.

I talk to magicians at shows and they say: "Well I just do these birthday parties." To my mind they are succeeding... Any performer who is out there doing it is, there is no shame.

#### **WILLIAMSON ON SLYDINI**

Slydini was at a magic convention in Texas and we were working close-up. He didn't like the table they provided. They said, Mr Slydini, what table do you want?

And he walked around the hotel and he found the heaviest marble table in the atrium that had the giant bouquet of flowers on. And he said, This One.

So every room he went to there were five big Texans carrying this very heavy table with little Slydini walking behind.

He walked past me and winked at me. He was putting them on. I loved that about him.

For me that just said everything about him and the people in magic. You can't take it too seriously.

You've got to have fun all the time no matter what you're doing. ●