

■ Learning ■ It, ■ Loving ■ It, ■ Passing ■ It On

In 1965, there was a guy in Minneapolis/St. Paul making silks jump out of a hat. This was Johnny Thompson's invention, which he used in his own act, so when Johnny heard about it he was so incensed that he took a plane to Minnesota, went to the club, and watched the show. The moment the magician did the jumping silks, John stormed up onto the stage, grabbed the prop, broke it, snatched up the mic and announced, "This is *my* trick and this guy stole it! I'm sorry to upset you during the show, but if he does it again, I'll be back, and it'll be more than this prop that I'll break!"



PHOTO: RICHARD FAVERY / BECKETT STUDIOS



The story of that incident went viral, so to speak — this was long before the Internet — and, for a while, people stopped “borrowing” material from Johnny Thompson. Today, he smiles wryly at the memory and he shakes his head. Those days are gone. Like a fine wine, he has mellowed with age. These days, we have a kinder, gentler Johnny. But, make no mistake, he is no less formidable.

In a scene from the old *Kung Fu* television series, the ancient temple master teaches the young students as they watch older martial artists spin and kick their way through a variety of impressive exercises. “There is the crane style, the snake style, the tiger, the monkey, and the preying mantis style,” the monk says. “Each one may take a lifetime to master.” One student asks, “What style are you the master of?” The old man looks the boy in the eye and answers quietly, “All of them.”

Johnny Thompson is the magic equivalent of that temple master. Karrell Fox dubbed him “The General Practitioner of Magic.” Teller says that term is too limiting. “He’s a renaissance man,” Lance Burton agrees. “He’s not just a magician, he’s an actor, performer, musician, arranger.” Penn Jillette sums it up by calling Thompson simply, “The best magical mind alive.”

And these guys should know — John Thompson has played a big part in their lives and careers.

Of course, in the world of magic, Johnny is best known for his comic persona of the Polish magician The Great Tomsoni. Anyone with even a modicum of interest and knowledge about the great masters of magic has seen this classic act, but few are aware that John Thompson is a consultant to some of the great

magicians of our time. The skills that make his act one of the most respected in show business include the same essential ingredients that make him an invaluable partner when creating new material or developing an act. He is not only a flawless practitioner of sleight of hand, but he’s also an expert in comedy, music, staging, and timing, all wrapped up in a walking encyclopedia of magic history — 77 years of show business experience.

Well technically, not 77. Although Johnny was born on July 27, 1934, he didn’t really get into showbiz until he was eight. It was a film about a riverboat gambler that sparked his interest, not in magic *per se*, but in cheating with cards. The two crafts are, of course, closely related, and his search for instruction resulted in the purchase of a 35-cent used book by S.W. Erdnase. A section in the back of the book guided him toward the more legit uses for these skills, and an interest in magic was born. His mother was a pianist who worked in a sister act, performing in speakeasies and bordellos. Whenever there was a magician featured in a venue she was working, she’d bring John down. One day, he saw Mexican magician Abe Cantu, the first magician to make doves appear. “That’s how I got hooked on birds,” he says. Two years later, he bought his first magic prop. Two years after that, he performed his debut show — but not doing magic.

“I tried to get a job as a magician at the Riverview Amusement Park, pretending to be sixteen years old, but they told me they didn’t need a magician, they needed a fire-eater and sword-swallower. So I ran to Abbott’s magic shop in Chicago and bought a book called *Thrilling Magic* that taught how to eat fire, light bulbs, swords, and other geek stuff.”

Using homemade torches constructed from shish-kebab skewers and a few pawnshop swords, he returned and landed the job. The gig didn’t last long, but his interest in magic expanded. He soon created his first bird act. “I opened by producing a couple

of doves from a top hat, then three goldfish bowls, which led into Aerial Fishing, silk productions, more doves, and finally an appearing stack of bowls.” His dove harnesses were made of socks. It wasn’t until later that he learned some better construction techniques, including using piano wire for his pick-up loops. “I learned from the same person Channing Pollock did, a pickpocket named Jimmy Ravel, who learned it from Abe Cantu, who learned it from Paul Fox.”

This honored tradition of passing knowledge from person to person impressed Johnny and planted a seed that would later become a metaphoric garden of delight for many magicians lucky enough to have him as a mentor.

Lance Burton talks about the first time Johnny “passed it on” to him. “I first met him in Wichita, Kansas, at Joe Stevens’ magic convention in 1980. I was twenty years old and really overwhelmed at meeting Johnny Thompson and seeing him work. He did stage magic, close-up, parlor magic — and it was all brilliant. You know how when you’re twenty years old, you think you know everything? Then you meet Johnny Thompson and realize how much there is you do *not* know about magic. It was a significant moment in my life.”

At that time, Lance had what Johnny calls “a salad act,” a little bit of everything. Seeing the young man’s potential, he taught Lance a crash course in bird magic, including Channing’s Dove to Silk toss, and lessons on how to customize a standard tuxedo jacket. (“Buy a size larger, use a double set of shoulder pads to give yourself height and make room for the birds, and have it taken in an inch-and-a-half on the sides.”) He also passed on the little trick about making the loops out of piano wire. That was the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship.

Lance continues, “When I moved out west in 1981, I saw Johnny at the Magic Castle. I told him, ‘You know, Jay Marshall told me I needed to find something besides the Zombie

Ball to float.' Johnny said, 'Here's what you do; you produce a little white parakeet with his tail trimmed so it looks like a baby dove, then you put him inside a round cage and you do the Zombie with the bird in the cage.' I gasped. 'Holy cow! That's great! Why didn't I think of that?'"

It was an idea that had its origins many years before in an early incarnation of Johnny's act. Young Johnny got it from another mentor. "A comedy magician by the name of Howard Brooks used a white parakeet with its tail cut short, so it looked like a tiny dove. He'd produce two doves, saying 'This is the daddy, this is the mommy,' then he'd produce the parakeet and add, 'This is the baby from a previous marriage.' Great line! He gave me permission to use it when I was a kid, so I passed it on to Lance."

Lance continues, "I went to Johnny with a problem that I had, and he solved it in ten seconds! It only took him a couple of sentences

to give me the solution, but instantly I went, *Oh, that's the right answer.* I think that's why Johnny is a great consultant. He has a unique perspective and can just cut right to the chase and come up with the perfect solution. And when he tells it to you, you instantly recognize it, because it's usually simple and correct." That is what comes from decades of experience.

It was way back in 1947 when Johnny first started doing the white parakeet gag. During that time, however, he almost gave up magic altogether for another side of showbiz. One day, he and his assistant, Jerry Rogers, were performing at a show that also featured two harmonica players. The boys were both taken by the act and decided to learn to play the instrument. Along with another friend, Bob Miller, they formed a trio. Johnny, specializing in bass harmonica, soon became more proficient than his friends and outgrew the fledgling group, so he hooked up with two more experienced musicians and they formed a

trio called The Harp Hooligans — referencing the slang name for the instruments: the mouth harp. The group was successful, and even won a car on a talent show. "Yeah," says Johnny wryly, "they showed us a Ford Victoria at the contest. Then, when we picked it up, it was a stripped down six-cylinder. We sold it, split the cash, and I bought my folks their first TV."

Harmonica groups were, believe it or not, a hot commodity in 1948. The biggest of them was called The Harmonicats, with sales of over twenty million records from just one of their hits alone, "Peg O My Heart." One day, sixteen-year-old Johnny got a call asking him to temporarily replace the Harmonicats' bass player, whose father had passed away. They were impressed that he knew all their numbers, and a couple of years later called him to fill in again while the bass player was in the hospital. It was a very long recovery and Johnny ended up staying with the group until 1957. The association with the band, and almost his life, ended when the group was in an automobile crash while returning from a gig. Johnny went through the windshield, had to have plastic surgery, and ended up with traumatic epilepsy for about five years.

It was during this time that Johnny began an earnest study of show structure. At every gig, he'd stand in the wings and watch the other acts, learning about pacing, timing, emotional build, and so on. Today, he uses this knowledge extensively in his consulting work.

After recovering from the car accident, Johnny arranged music and played for his newly formed group, the Harmonica Jazz Quartet. The idea was, to put it gently, not a commercial hit. "The jazz musicians would see the word *harmonica* and not come in, and the harmonica fans would see the word *jazz...*" He shakes his head and shrugs, not needing to finish the sentence. So, he became an orchestrator/conductor for two comedian friends, Greg Lewis and Gus Christy.

Lewis & Christy soon started performing at the new and very popular Playboy Clubs. Johnny began working with them as a writer, and onstage as a stooge from the audience. Greg and Gus urged him to get back into magic, so he began to hang out at Jay Marshall's shop, working on the act once more. There, he rekindled a friendship with Marshall Brodien, who brought Johnny into the tradeshow industry.

Johnny, in turn, helped Al Koran break into the tradeshow biz. Unfortunately, a year later, Al was diagnosed with cancer and

The Great Tomsoni & Company, the latter being Pam Thompson. [Top right] Johnny with a three-shell game on the set of Criss Angel's television show. [Below] John circa 2005 with a model of the effect that became the opening illusion in Lance Burton's show at the Monte Carlo.



needed a replacement act. He worked with Johnny to develop a mentalism routine and, after that, Johnny featured it in all his trade-show work. "I found it was a great hook," he says. "People buy it quicker than they do magic." Again, it was a case of benefiting from someone willing to pass on knowledge.

Johnny continued working on tradeshow floors until the late 1970s, usually performing 20 to 24 shows a day. "I remember the day I decided to quit," he says. "It was midday and I looked at my watch. At that moment, it struck me, *If you're looking at your watch now, it's time to get out.*" He decided to return to the stage.

In much the same way that Johnny gave concise observations to Lance many years later, Jay Marshall did the same for Johnny back then. Jay knew that Johnny was revamping his old act and he suggested that a stack of bowls wouldn't travel well. An act producing rabbits seemed appropriate, considering the Playboy venue, and Thompson developed one, but it didn't quite work out — the rabbits grew too fast, they defecated in his coat, and the simple idea became a logistical nightmare. Jay and Johnny went through a lot of other ideas, but eventually came back to doves. Lewis & Christy had just sold their new show to the Playboy circuit and wanted John to be in it.

But there was one caveat: he had to be funny. "I thought, *My god, what do I do?*"

Johnny says. The answer was obvious: seek out help. Tom Palmer, a comic magician, had recently stopped doing his act. John asked Tom if he could buy it. Tom worked with Johnny, teaching him the act. To this day, a few moments from Palmer's comedy act remain in the Tomsoni repertoire: closing the Genii Tube on his thumb, breaking an egg in the Egg Bag, and tearing the dress off Pam through the top hat. The tricks, however, were not the most important thing that John came away with. The most significant aspect was the *character*. Tom played a guy who kept screwing up, but his overblown arrogance got him through it. For anyone who has seen The Great Tomsoni, that sounds very familiar.

Johnny loved the character and developed it further, but found himself uncomfortable doing someone else's act. The breakthrough came by accident. "About the third day at the Playboy Club, I walked out and, for some reason, started getting laughs. Finally, the drummer leaned over and said, 'Pssst! Your fly's open!' and the audience fell apart laughing."

Could it be that this comic breakthrough — the genesis of one of the great comedy magic acts of all time — was an *accident*? The truth is, *many* of the Tomsoni gags were originally accidents. One day, a bird pooped on his coat. Laughs. It stayed in the show. Another day, he dressed in a hurry without realizing he was wearing one black shoe and one brown shoe. "I



got laughs before they even saw the open fly!" Johnny is the first to admit that the majority of gags in his act are not his ideas; they came from mistakes or suggestions from others. It was Lewis & Christy who came up with the idea that became magical history. "One night, the boys introduced me: 'Direct from Poland, Poland's finest magician, The Great Tomsoni!'" John smiles at the memory. "I kinda liked that."

Although Johnny feels very strongly about "borrowing" material from other acts, there have been many times when he was not the consultant, but the consultant. "It goes both ways. I was working for Channing Pollock, arranging his music, when he offered to let me do his act. I said, 'Why would I want to do your act? There are dozens of guys already doing it!' It was the most copied act in magic! But there were a few items from it that I asked permission to use: the opening, the double doves, and the dove to silk toss." Channing

also shared his dove steal technique, which was similar to the one Johnny had already developed and was using. In later years, Johnny noticed Lance Burton did the same technique. Lance told him, "Yeah, well — I was standing in the wings, watching you."

These days, Johnny rarely teaches beginners, unless as part of a consulting job in which he needs to coach actors. He has been a technical advisor on several television and film productions, including *Hart to Hart*, *Fantasy Island*, *One Day at a Time*, *Beyond Westworld*, *The Fantasticks*, *Bogus*, *Houdini Believe*, and *Siegfried & Roy's Magic Box*. Johnny had worked with Siegfried & Roy years earlier, writing comedy material for a German television special. For this project, he was hired to train the actors who portrayed Fischbacher and Horn at various ages. He was working with non-magicians but good actors, which Johnny actually prefers. "A lot of magi-

cians would come in with bad habits that needed breaking, but the actors will do what you tell them to do.” He trained them to do birds and illusions. “Some of the fun was giving them Siegfried and Roy’s mannerisms.”

John is comfortable with actors because he is one. In fact, it was through acting that he met his wife, Pam. In 1975, he was acting in a play called *Who Was That Lady?* The star was his friend Bob Crane from *Hogan’s Heroes*, and the leading lady was a beautiful young actress named Pamela Hayes. Johnny and his first wife were by then estranged, so he and Pam started dating. Within a year, they got married. Two years later, at a Magic Castle banquet, Johnny was asked to do a last-minute spot, but his usual assistant wasn’t available. “I told Pam, ‘Honey you have to play the part; I don’t have anyone else!’” On the drive from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, they talked about the subtext of the characters, actor to actor. When they arrived, Pam had to wear the old assistant’s costume and shoes, which were too small, and an awful wig.

“I forgot to take out my chewing gum,” Pam says, “and my first entrance got laughs.”

“We were getting laughs in places I never got laughs before,” Johnny interjects. “Suddenly, I wasn’t carrying the whole ball of wax, we were a team.”

“Somehow, we made it through the show, and ‘and Company’ was born!” Pam finishes.

That was 36 years ago, and they’ve been working together ever since. And by *working*, I mean *a lot* — practically nonstop. Tomsoni & Company has been featured from Atlantic City to Los Angeles, and all around the world.

In 1980, Johnny decided to make good use of his many years of varied experience in showbiz and create his own Las Vegas-style revue show in Lake Tahoe. He called it *Sorcery*, but the property wanted a French show, so he renamed it *Les Sorcery*. The goth-themed production featured The Great Tomsoni & Company, Max Maven, and a vampire dancer fronting the illusions. The production won “best show of the year” but lost money. “I took a bath with that one,” says Johnny. “That and the MGM show.”

He is referring to *Kaleidoscope*, a black-light show he created and produced at the MGM casino theme park in 1993. The park

itself seemed doomed from its inception. The grand idea was to make Las Vegas a family destination. Of course, no one seemed to consider that kids weren’t allowed in the casinos, and if the kids went to the theme park, the parents had to be with them, so the *parents* wouldn’t be in the casinos. In hindsight, it seems obvious.

It’s exactly that kind of hard-knocks experience, not only as a performer but as a producer, that makes Johnny a valuable consultant.

Teller says, “There are so many magic people who know nothing but magic. They’re not interested in the rest of the world. They know their card sleights very well, but they can’t talk to another human being. If you say Bach or Jefferson, they don’t know who that is. Because Johnny has lived, has read, has done, so far as I can tell, every job in and out of show business, he has a very wide perspective on things.”

Penn adds, “I don’t know what we’d do without him. He covers angles, pacing, comedy, patter, music, lighting, set design and, most importantly, a sense of the audience.”

Johnny’s foray into consulting began, for the most part, with Lance Burton in those early

10 Things You Might Not Know About Tomsoni & Co.

- 1 Johnny’s high school teacher was fellow cardician Brother John Hammond.
- 2 Charlie Miller was John and Pam’s houseguest for ten years.
- 3 John appeared for three years as a clown on the WGN production of *Bozo’s Circus*.
- 4 Pam uses three different types of chewing gum during their act. One is for chewing, one is for blowing bubbles, and one is for John to stretch between his hands during the gum routine.
- 5 The first magician who took John “under his wing” and personally taught him some actual magic effects was J.B. Bobo.
- 6 In addition to orchestrating the music for his Wizard of Warsaw act, John also arranged scores for Channing Pollock, Norm Neilsen, Jay Marshall, and Ricki Dunn.
- 7 Pam got her start in magic when she was hired by Mark Wilson to work as an assistant to Kamar — later billed as “The Discount Magician” — at the New York World’s Fair.

- 8 For tradeshow, John developed a version of the Blue Room illusion that could be viewed from any angle, even completely surrounded.
- 9 John and Pam have performed together as a team for over 35 years.
- 10 The first actual magic trick John bought was the Hindu Prayer Vase in the early 1940s. It turned out to be a salad oil bottle painted red, with black Chinese characters. John says, “It would be many years before I would buy another magic prop from a magic shop!”



days. When Lance got his own Vegas show, Johnny continued helping out, making suggestions and working with the new illusions.

"Back when I was at the Hacienda hotel," Lance says, "Johnny suggested that we change the ballerina into the evil sword-fighting guy by using the hoop with the cloth in it. Up until that time, I was doing the Wrap Around — which worked fine, but Johnny said, 'You know, you've got a trap in this floor; why don't you ask Johnathan Pendragon if you can use his old Sub Trunk switch?' And I had the same moment I'd had when he'd suggested the floating birdcage years before: *Of course! Why didn't I think of that?*"

Lance found Johnny's contributions so valuable that when he moved to the Monte Carlo and began to do television specials, he put Johnny on retainer.

Penn & Teller tell a story about showing Johnny an effect they'd been working on. When they asked his opinion, he said, "This isn't very good." Penn started laughing. Johnny asked, "Why are you laughing?" Penn answered, "Because nobody's ever said that to us before!"

Johnny continues the story. "So we worked on it and I felt I cleaned it up and made it work a lot better. Then they came back and wanted to do a Spirit Cabinet. We came up with a unique one, and it kept going from there. Of all the people I work with, they are the most challenging and exciting because it's always an original premise. Even if it's a classic, we turn it into something original that fits them. We just did that with Corinda's Powers of Darkness, making it a two-person routine that is a little more enjoyable to watch, because with two people there's more going on."

The first thing John Thompson the magic consultant does is to see what the magician is doing. "Penn & Teller and Lance I know; with Criss [Angel], I had to see what he did. Then I get into the head of each individual act. Lance is classical — I understand what to do with that. With Penn & Teller, I feel I steered them away from the 'bad boys of magic' perception." While Thompson's work as a consultant is "absolutely different" with each person and situation, he says, "In a great many cases, they come to me with an idea that needs to come to fruition." The Powers of Darkness routine serves as an example of what he does.

In a meeting with Penn & Teller, the duo came in with the basic concept of what they wanted to do — a version of the classic Corinda routine. "Due to the nature of their show, we had to turn it into a two-person routine." As soon as the suggestion was made, "we all started brainstorming ideas, right off the bat. We started knocking it around, discussing what props to use. We



went back to the original ring, rather than coat hangers, then thought of an oversized ring; it evolved.

"Sometimes you spend four or five hours each week on an idea. You don't have an answer, but you do have a starting point; you get a direction, then play with the prop. Powers of Darkness came together pretty quickly, in a matter of eight to ten weeks."

As the consultation process changes for each client, so does Johnny's role. With some, he provides ideas and basic knowhow; for others, he becomes a writer, director, line producer, and occasionally a teacher. He can wear all those hats. "I'm a developer," John says. "I may be developing the individual, or I may be developing his material. I enjoy it all, but I really enjoy developing the basics of where we're going. I enjoy the process."

The ideas that Johnny comes up with belong to the person who performs them. "I'm basically a worker for hire," he says. "What I develop for them is theirs; I don't retain any rights."

When John was on retainer with Lance, "for about twelve years," he did not charge Burton for anything he developed for him. "Whenever he needed something, I was there for him." Thompson adds, "I've never had a contract with anyone I've worked for; just a verbal agreement. And I've never been stiffed." He has only sent out an invoice once. With Penn & Teller, John never even established any kind fee, "and they have always paid more than I would have asked."

Despite the money, it may be the thrill of the exploration that keeps Johnny returning to new projects.

"Sometimes you enhance the initial idea and it works, and sometimes it takes you somewhere completely different. You can't be afraid to go into areas that have not been touched before." And he feels no regrets when an idea has to be scrapped, or when Penn & Teller, for example, come in and suggest a whole new approach. "I'm working for them; I have to make it work for them. I always enjoy the collaboration and seeing the project to fruition. It's a team effort; no one is keeping score. It's fine to go in a new direction. And sometimes an idea or solution comes out of left field when you are not even thinking about it."

Teller says, "As you can imagine, Penn and I often come at a problem from diametrically opposite directions. In those situations, Johnny is a catalyst, helping us to use both those perspectives to solve the problem at hand. There's no one way Johnny makes this magic happen. Sometimes he offers a point of view that contradicts *both* Penn's and my position. Sometimes he teaches us a technical trick that inspires a solution. Sometimes he just breaks the logjam with an anecdote that lets us take a fresh breath. He'll never, ever, push an answer on you. He'll never say 'Do it like this.' He'll just open the doors."

"He never gets in our way," says Penn. "From beginning to end, his artistic sensibility is perfect."

Teller continues, "If you just bring Johnny into a room, a project gets good. It's hard for me to pin down exactly why. You could say, yes, of course, it's because he has all this historical background."

"He amazes me," says Penn, "at the lack of pause before pulling tremendous data out of his head. He has close to total recall."

"But, that's not the entire story," says Teller. "A larger portion of the story may be that he's so adventurous that, being around him, he embraces any new direction you might take and helps you solve it. He helps you bring your thoughts to reality and he also comes in with great ideas of his own."

John works with them on just about everything they come up with — about 75 percent of their current material, he estimates. "My favorite is a Miser's Dream where the coins change to goldfish, and the fish change to pennies."

"Johnny and I got together, week after week in my shop," Teller says, "and developed the mechanics, then we went through every move meticulously, with Johnny never allowing me to go for second best. He would not let me to do a move that only looked good if it was done fast, it had to look perfect done slowly. That also typifies his handling of any trick. You never see him do that sort of desperate motion, where all of a sudden all the mus-

cles tense up and a rapid movement happens. If I could absorb just that one thing from him, that would be a lifetime worth of value."

In 2000, Johnny and Pam were working in Atlantic City at the Tropicana when their friend Tony Spina suggested they see a new act in New York, Criss Angel. "I made a call," says Johnny, "and Criss very graciously invited us to the show." The following December, Criss went to see Lance's show, and Johnny happened to be there. Afterward, Criss turned to Lance and said, "I hope you don't mind, I'd like your permission to use your magic consultant."

"I was taken aback," Johnny says. "He hadn't said a word to me."

Thompson was hired to work on a new television series called *Mindfreak*. Criss also brought in Banachek, Luke Jermay, and Brian Poindexter, forming a solid magic team. It was a new challenge for John: stage magic in street conditions. "It was an exciting time. We had deadlines and did a lot of magic, at least seven effects per show, including a major stunt. We worked ten- and twelve-hour days, especially that first year."

Johnny did three years with *Mindfreak*. As the series continued, however, Criss wanted Johnny in front of the camera but not involved with the magic team anymore. "I declined the offer," John said. "It wasn't a disgruntled situation, I just didn't want to be involved only as an actor. I wanted to be involved, knowing what it took to get where we were, so I could make honest statements; but the idea of having them just hand me a script with what I was supposed to say didn't appeal." He adds, "We stay in touch. I don't see him as much as I used to, but he does call if he needs something."

John also feels that working without the pressure of intense deadlines has great appeal. "The difference between working with Penn & Teller and anyone else is that there's no timeline. The red ball, for example, was a two-year project. Two full years before it went on the stage! The routine we're working on right now has been over a year in the making. They want to do it right."

One of the projects Teller brought Johnny into during its very early stages was *Play Dead*, the theatrical séance play. Todd Robbins and Teller wrote the show, an old-fashioned spook show updated for the *Criminal Minds/Dexter* audience and centered on serial killers throughout history.

"Teller called and said they needed a way to bring a person out of someone's stomach during



“IF YOU JUST BRING JOHNNY INTO A ROOM, A PROJECT GETS GOOD. HE’S SO ADVENTUROUS THAT, BEING AROUND HIM, HE EMBRACES ANY NEW DIRECTION YOU MIGHT TAKE AND HELPS YOU SOLVE IT.”



a psychic surgery bit. I told them, ‘I know how to do that!’ We rigged a few benches in the Rio theater lobby, recruited Apollo Robbins’ girlfriend, and tried it out. It looked great!” Johnny was hired as a consultant on the show.

“Johnny was my right hand on *Play Dead*,” Teller says, “but golly, he and I had such intense disagreements. He throws his heart into it. He’s not the kind to sit back and say ‘Well, if that’s the way you think it should be, that’s fine with me.’ He cares profoundly about the underlying ideas. At one point during the creation of *Play Dead*, Todd and I got worried that we were getting too heavy in talking about the real dead, too violative, personal, and in dubious taste. Johnny said, ‘You take that out, you lose what’s really creepy about the material. And it’s that creepiness that’s your real subject here.’ He saved us from losing the idea of our own show.”

In the play, there is a startling transformation of a naked young woman into a naked old woman. Although it was originally going to be a reverse DeKolta chair, John remembered a wrap-around switch from the Dante show in the 1940s. “That trick was so startling, it got screams,” says Teller.

“In the beginning,” Johnny says proudly, “a lot of people thought we were using stooges, but there wasn’t a single one in the show. John Gaughan sent an email that said, ‘You fooled me with the vat and the girl com-

ing out of the guy’s stomach.’ To me that was wonderful, because it’s based on two things that John has sold in the past.”

The off-Broadway show had a nine-month run, then moved to Mexico City, and is scheduled to go to London later this year. Currently, Teller, Johnny, and illusion builder Thom Rubino are recreating several props because they want to tour with the show without depending on the complex set to make it happen.

“It’s interesting to take something that works well and revamp it with a different method to give the same impression,” Johnny says. “I think we’ve done it. It all comes down to having a good team.”

Teller concurs that good relationships are a key to success. “When you’re working with Johnny, you’re working with a tremendously well-informed, entertaining, delightful friend, whose ego is tied up only in the question of whether the product is the best, not whether it’s his idea or yours that moves you forward.”

“I felt the same relational dynamic with Criss Angel’s team,” John says. “David Blaine, too. Working as a team, we get more accomplished.”

The Blaine project was a most unusual challenge: an underwater magic show. One might think an area had finally been discovered where Johnny had no prior experience, but that would be a false conclusion. Because

John had worked on the television special *Penn & Teller: Off the Deep End*, he realized how difficult this could be. “I remember we did a Sawing in that show. We put the prop underwater, but then the director decided to get some other shots. By the time we got back to it, the prop had warped and it was a nightmare to get through it. So underwater magic is not the easiest thing.”

A number of ideas were tried and rejected. “I taught David to produce fish like doves,” Johnny says. “Just working out what kind of harness to use is tricky! They have to be porous, you have to load up underwater. It’s hard.”

The collaboration was successful, as was the show, created and performed one time for Sprint. Future projects with Blaine are on the boards, but no one’s talking at the moment.

One project Johnny *will* talk about is a second season of *Fool Us* with Penn & Teller. The television magic variety show was quite a success last year in the UK. If you’ve not had a chance to see it, Teller sums it up like this: “Its premise is that while the magicians are entertaining the audience, they’re also trying to fool Penn & Teller. Some of the best acts on *Fool Us* were the ones that didn’t. Everybody who appeared on that show won. Why? Because Johnny Thompson selected them.”

It all began with Thompson studying two or three hundred videos that had been submitted from potential contestants. He selected

the acts he thought had the most potential, then worked with the producers so they all agreed which were the most television-friendly acts. Next, Johnny flew to England two weeks before taping and worked with the magicians one by one, often shaping a “blob” into a concise, solid act. Because he knows a lot of what Penn and Teller know about magic, he did his level best to make sure that the contestants wouldn’t do anything the team was familiar with. “He is the heartbeat of that show,” says Teller. “It would not have happened without him.”

The show’s first season consisted of a two-hour pilot and seven one-hour shows. That meant Johnny worked with about fifty magicians. Win or lose, all performers were treated with respect.

Teller also appreciates Johnny’s sense of proprietary value. “He’s the integrity watchdog of the magic world. Because Johnny’s been involved in so many original creative things, and because he knows these things don’t just spring forth full blown, he’s very aggressive about making sure that someone who’s being a copyist knows that that’s the wrong thing to do. Recently, there is a Swede who managed to look at the Letterman performance of my Goldfish trick, reconstruct it, and do a performance of it that was televised. Steam was coming out of Johnny’s ears!”

“His opening line was, ‘Here’s a trick stolen directly from Las Vegas from Teller!’” Johnny cries. “He didn’t think there was anything wrong with that! I told Teller, ‘Well, I guess I could get on a plane and settle this for you my old way!’”

An email from Teller took care of the problem. The magician apologized, graciously sent the prop to him, and pulled any YouTube footage, but this brings us full circle to the opening paragraph of this story. When reminded of his reputation as an angry young man, Johnny grows contrite. “I guess I should have known better, but it always infuriated me so much that I would take the only path I knew. I was a street kid in Chicago and I got in a fight every other day. The first time, my father came up and just watched the kid beat me pretty badly. Then he kicked me in the butt and said, ‘If you’re gonna fight, you better win!’ From that point on, I was fighting for my life every time. So my answer to solving those problems was to be physical, and I got a bad reputation over it.”

But, as was stated earlier, we have a kinder, gentler, Johnny today. “I remember when it ended,” he says. “It was 1976, and I was in the Tropicana show. One night, I realized I only heard the rhythm section and one horn working, and I looked over to see the rest of the band smoking cigarettes. That was it! After the show, I went right up to them — not knowing that the bandleader



was the mob’s bandleader — and I screamed, ‘How could you do this? I’m the headliner!’ I went on awhile, then the trombone player threw a line back at me and the next thing ya know, I’ve got this guy up in the air and I’m about to throw him thirty feet down into the showroom. The band and security pulled me off. Pam said, ‘This has got to end. You can’t settle things physically. If you walk out of the spotlight because the operator is drifting off, you have to remember that the reason you are down here and he is up there is because he can’t be down here. It’s just a day job for him. It’s not a career, it’s not something he loves to do.’ She was right.”

So now how does he handle people using his material? “Now I call them up and try to explain ethics and originality. Like Teller did with the Swede. Sometimes I have to throw my hands up and accept it, because there’s nothing I can do about it. There were instances where I thought people were doing

similar characters and I got upset, but I’ve realized that I was getting angry for nothing. My wife said, ‘They’re not really doing what we do.’ It wasn’t that that character wasn’t around before Pam, it’s just that Pam does it better than anyone. I realize I was wrong for getting offended.”

Ah, yes — Pam. Everyone needs a sane, calming influence in his or her life and, for John Thompson, that person is his wife. He calls her “the one who keeps pushing me back on track.” From the moment she came into his life, everything changed. “She was so great, the biggest asset to the act. She elevated the level of comedy and we became a team, not a magician and his assistant. She had a great deal in the development of the act, many of the ideas were hers. I wouldn’t have the act I have without her.” He pauses, then adds sincerely, “The proudest thing I ever felt about her is that she was only the second woman to get a Performing Fellowship from the Academy of Magical Arts,

because they didn't consider her an assistant, she was half of an act. I've seen her work in play after play and she's really a brilliant actress, and how she ended up with me is beyond my comprehension."

It takes a very strong relationship to do all that, working together 24/7 as these two do. Theirs has lasted 39 years. "She's my best friend, the best onstage partner, the best person to be my partner in life. I couldn't have gotten luckier."

These days, Tomsoni & Company only do fifteen or so shows a year, mostly magic conventions and a few corporate dates. John still loves performing, but is busy enough working on other projects, including an independent film and a music video.

The film is called *Billy Topit Master Magician*. Written by Lance Burton and Michael Goudeau, and directed by Burton, the family comedy features an old-school gangster played by Johnny. Pam, who studied with Lee Strasberg, has also returned to her acting roots by playing the role of a gum-snapping, cynical waitress. "It's been a blast," says Johnny.

The video will be the visualization of a recording John did earlier this year. The song was written by Artie Schroeck, who wrote "Here's To The Band" for Sinatra. The match-up came by coincidence when Artie went to see Lance's show one night, and Johnny just happened to be there. Afterward, Johnny started entertaining them with a takeoff on Boris Karloff. Coincidentally, they were looking for someone who could do Karloff for a sort of "Monster Mash" tune called "This Time I've Got It."

Next winter, Teller hopes to have John as his right-hand man in creating the supernatural effects for the Broadway production of *The Exorcist*. They'll be working with respected director John Doyle, who did both *Sweeney Todd* and *Company* on Broadway.

Can just anyone hire Johnny as a consultant? Well, in spite of Penn Jillette's opinion that "Johnny could take someone with no talent whatsoever and put them onstage with a decent show," Thompson says no. "I can only work with people who are advanced and skilled in the profession. I don't really have time to teach. It's always been wonderful; I started with Lance and said, 'Do this or that' and he was always capable of doing it. Same with Penn & Teller. I need to work with people who are competent, especially when bringing a new idea to fruition."

Teller backs up that statement. "The other day, I was sitting with him and I was trying to resurrect a trick that we had done years ago. At one point I said, 'Let's use a corner short to locate the card.' Johnny said, 'That's a good idea.' I riffled the corner, took the break

and held it there. Johnny said, 'Well, you can do that, but why don't you just do this?' With that, he took the cards and softly and invisibly riffled with his left little finger behind the deck, where it couldn't possibly be seen, making a perfect break. I said, 'Johnny, you're using the word *just* again. You always use the word *just* right before you do something that I could never do.'

So what's next for the Wizard of Warsaw?

In 2012, Johnny plans to release a book: *G.P. — The Life and Magic of John Thompson (General Practitioner)*. The instructional manual, co-written by Jamy Ian Swiss, will contain, as John puts it, "basically all my material: birds, close-up, stage, illusions — everything I feel is original with me, and stuff I made my living with most of my career."

"And I'll continue working with Penn & Teller until I can't do it anymore," he says. "They're always working on new material. This last year is probably the longest they've

gone without adding new pieces. We're currently working on two."

"You bet we'll continue working together," says Teller. "There's nothing we do that isn't touched and inspired by his courage, taste, and expertise."

"There's a reason why," adds Penn. "He's the best."

Teller concludes with, "He's the guy I want to be. I want to grow up to be Johnny."

Johnny smiles, a man who looks happy. "I'm really enjoying what's happening at this point in my life and I look forward to whatever's coming down the line. I can't say I know what's going to happen, but I'm ready and willing to do whatever's available. I'm always looking for the newest challenge. Consulting is such a joy for me. It's not work; it's being able to utilize my experience and knowledge I garnered from great people like Dai Vernon and Charlie Miller and other great performers."

Learning it, loving it, passing it on. **M**

