

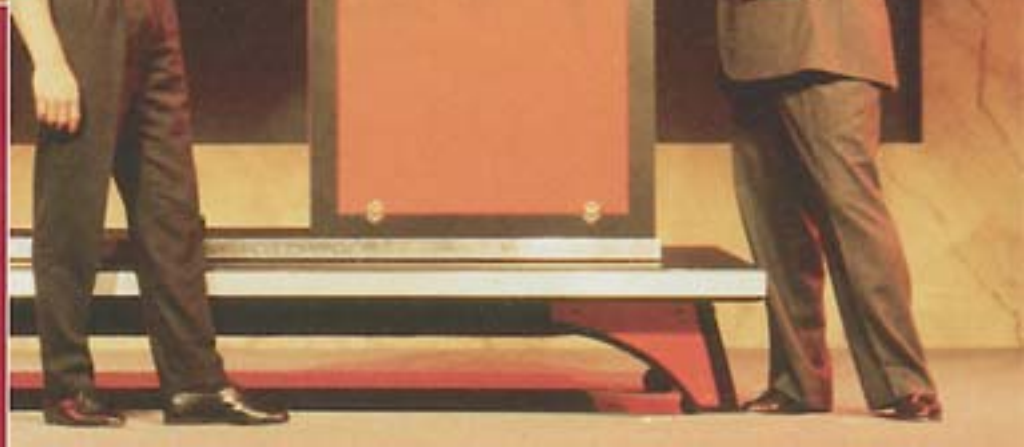
# THE *Wizard of* AAHS

**BY MARTIN GRAYSON**

AKIO MORITA, HEAD OF SONY, STEPS OUT OF A GIANT WALKMAN. THE LEADER OF AN IBM division waves his hand and an elephant disappears. A chief executive rises to address the annual sales meeting after a gourmet lunch at an expensive resort. She faces an audience that is loyal but inattentive. Daydreams of upcoming vacations, lease terms for the latest BMW or a new set of clubs that should lower a golf score glaze the heavy-lidded eyes of her sales force. Suddenly, she starts reading their minds — tells them what card has been picked from a deck, what numbers they are thinking of and what's in the right-hand pocket of a jacket. The daydreams evaporate; the attention she wants is hers. She calls one of her best salesmen to the front, puts him into a coffinlike box with his head and shoulders protruding at one end, legs and feet at the other, and an assistant proceeds to saw him in half while she explains what the illusion signifies: that a salesman cannot be in two places at once. She has made her point and has the audience in her hands. The Wizard of Aahs has done it again. Yes, Dorothy, there really is a magician behind the curtain and his name is Bill Herz, CEO of Magicorp Productions, headquartered right here in Riverside.



**BILL HERZ DEMONSTRATES** his Who's Who trick to a "backstage" audience. *L.-r. from top:* A female assistant hides behind a red box while Herz shows a "fake" audience (on screen) an empty yellow box; he closes the box's front panel and an assistant opens the back; the female assistant crawls unseen into yellow box; male assistant closes it, Herz shows fake audience empty red box; yellow box is put into red one; the woman disappears and out comes a CEO.





**HERZ PERFORMS A CARD TRICK** with Barbara Booth, wife of a Phoenix Home Life Insurance vice president, and Prince Albert of Monaco. The entertainment took place during an incentive trip that rewarded the company's top agents.

**I** GOT A MAGIC SET FOR CHRISTMAS WHEN I WAS EIGHT years old, and magic has been the love of my life ever since," says Bill. At fourteen, he was vacationing at a spot where a magic convention was being held and went to see the Italian magician Slydini perform. "I sat there in awe as he did trick after trick I couldn't figure out," he recalls. "I took lessons from him. I was really hooked." The celebrated magician David Copperfield, who has had his own show on Broadway, grew up with Herz in Larchmont. During their high school years, the two would catch the 8:33 to New York every Saturday morning and go to Flosso's Magic Shop ("it was *the* magic store") on 34th Street to select props. After Flosso's closed for the day, they went on to the back room of Reuben's Restaurant, where magicians exchanged ideas and entertained each other trying out new tricks. Herz continued practicing magic at Amherst, then at Cornell where he went for his MBA. "I worked at frat parties and so on. It was a great way to meet girls," he confesses.

Between college and graduate school, he spent a year as entertainment director for Club Med; and later, after a brief venture into a business career with a promotional firm, he returned to the world of magic, performing in a variety of night spots. "It was dues-paying time and great training," Bill

says. "I did rock concerts, some dives, Las Vegas. I learned that everything that could happen, did happen — from someone dying in the front row during an act to audiences doing drugs to get high when the rock star came on."

But nightclub life was not for him, and fifteen years ago Herz decided to seek out corporate audiences. Before long companies began hiring him to put on magic shows. Then came the day in London when a client asked Herz to teach him a few tricks that he could perform himself at an upcoming sales meeting. The program was such a hit and the client so pleased that Herz decided to teach other executives magic tricks, and Magicorp was born.

Today, his million-dollar business is all repeat clients and referrals, and Magicorp has become the largest booking agency in the industry, handling over fifty of the world's top magicians. Bill's wife Gwenn, former vice president of Comedy Central, took on full-time management of the financial aspects of the company when Magicorp's business grew too big to handle on the side.

"There are magic clubs now all over the world," says Bill. "I was in Dresden recently at a big international meeting, a kind of Olympics for magic, where I looked for new talent." He books other magicians when his own schedule is filled or when



**DURING AN INCENTIVE TRIP** for Transamerica Insurance on the Orient Express, Herz shows a wallet of cards to company president David Carpenter, who's chosen one that's not displayed. Herz will shake the wallet and all the cards will match the chosen one. Below: Herz tears up a \$1 bill and turns it into a \$20 bill, confounding Ted Forstmann, founding partner of Forstmann Little (left), and advisory board member George Shultz (seated, center) at a Forstmann Little annual meeting in Aspen.



he needs several more to perform at one of his functions.

"But the real magic," he says, "is teaching the CEO, VP of sales, whoever, the tricks and illusions they need to communicate a point, demonstrate a new product, stress a goal or simply enliven an otherwise pedestrian event. They become the stars of the meeting." They can learn his tricks in just a few minutes, and the tricks always work, so the chief executive's reputation is never at risk.

"Globalization is the byword right now," says Bill, who arranges international evenings of magic for companies who are bringing together their top salesmen from all over the map. Key here is to inspire contact and communication among the staff. Often, then, he'll include what he calls a "Close-Up Evening" — where magicians mingle with the group, each doing a short set in a different corner of the room so that people mix, talk and circulate, get to know one another. Magicorp magicians are also in great demand for incentive or awards banquets. "We do many of those to help maintain audience attention," Bill says. "It's a bit like the school play: Once your child has appeared, your interest flags. We liven it up."

Many of his clients are firms like BT Alex. Brown, Goldman Sachs, Salomon Brothers and Morgan Stanley who want to celebrate a successful merger or closing with a dinner for perhaps sixty people. Recently, Bear Stearns sold a division for Chrysler. At the closing dinner, Herz made a car vanish.

Bill Herz maintains that "the brighter you are, the easier you are to fool," because bright people try to come up with a rational explanation of the steps in a trick, while the trick itself is based on the fact that they are going to analyze it in a certain way. Although many may want to believe in magical or psychic powers, even little green men in flying saucers, he reminds us the magician is an entertainer who does not claim special powers or supernatural abilities.

He also feels that audience participation is important. "Magic died when vaudeville died," he comments, "and was brought back to life by Doug Henning in the seventies with television and Broadway shows. But magic is really interactive entertainment, so I don't think it works on TV."

At the moment Herz has two magicians doing a forty-city tour for HBO to provide an informational magic-and-game show for their telemarketers — and in this case, he can measure the result of his work. HBO sales have risen



**BILL HERZ'S ITINERARY** makes one think of "now you see him, now you don't." From top: with the Smothers Brothers at Opryland in Nashville for Revco Drugs; on stage with Sir David Frost on St. John Island in the American Virgins for Schering-Plough; with Jay Leno at the Waldorf-Astoria for the 24 Karat Club's annual convention; doing a card trick for Colin Powell at a Morgan Stanley gathering at Pebble Beach, California

twenty percent since the tour began and are still going up.

The tricks that Herz devises are tailored to a client's specific goals — such as exciting salesmen about a new product. Recently, Schering-Plough asked him to help introduce their asthma drug Clarinin at a meeting of their sales group. "We had a special detail bag from which endless materials were drawn — far too many to have been in there in the first place — to show how the sales people were going to be supported with a great deal of information," he says, then chuckles. "Finally they were told they could even call on the services of company doctors, and two doctors emerged from the bag! It brought down the house."

One of Herz's more unusual assignments came during the savings and loan crisis when the Resolution Trust Corporation asked him to teach their instructors a trick to use when training investigators to spot fraud, collusion and any illegal accounting devices employed by banks. He suggested that each instructor hold up an envelope and ask five inspectors in his group to shout out a number between one and one hundred. The five numbers were then totaled, and when the envelope was opened, the same total appeared inside. The point, Bill says, "was to show them that just because the numbers add up, they shouldn't believe that there was no trickery involved."

Ideas for illusion can also come from the client. Campbell's Soup in Canada, for example, wanted to show its sales force that a new product contained more chicken than an earlier one and asked Herz to make chickens appear in a very large can of the new soup. "So we had a miniature farm with chickens on one side of the stage," he explains. "Then a Campbell's Soup truck picked the chickens up and, presto, dropped its sides a minute later to show it was empty. No chickens. But the can of soup, which had been sitting empty on the other side of the stage, now had the chickens squawking and clucking in it. Message received."

The magicians often have to sign secrecy agreements to



GWENN AND BILL HERZ at home  
in Riverside with Zack, 2, and Dana, 7

keep a company's competition from learning about a new drug, computer program or market plan. Likewise, Herz asks corporate clients not to reveal how they accomplish the tricks he has taught them.

What does it cost to hire Houdini to transform you into King Arthur and make your meeting seem like Camelot? On average \$5,000, including an assessment of the client's needs, teaching or performing tricks and providing materials. A few magicians walking around at a Close-Up Evening might cost \$2,500. Specifically created devices can run to \$20,000. Three or four times a year, Herz arranges a complete evening of shows for \$100,000.

"Magic goes back a long way," he notes. "There are drawings of William Shakespeare doing something called the cap-and-balls trick. Perhaps we can say that he was the first magician, if you don't count sorcerers and wizards like Merlin. A contemporary version of the sword-in-the-stone trick was the 'mighty cheese,' an illusion invented by P. T. Selbit, who performed in the twenties. He had this big wheel of cheese that would be wheeled out on stage and nobody but he could move."

Hanging in the Herzes' living room is a huge poster of Selbit and cheese, near a large library of books on magic. Bill wrote one of them, *Secrets of the Astonishing Executive*, with co-author Paul Harris in 1991.

Somewhere in St. Louis there is a warehouse and a Magicorp employee who sees to the busy traffic of props that must constantly be in motion worldwide to mesh with Herz's tight schedule and the 250 to 300 shows that Magicorp puts on every year. In a typical week, he might go to Orlando for a Deloitte & Touche meeting, dash to Hilton Head and Nashville for programs for Nationwide Insurance, then head overseas to Monte Carlo on an assignment for Phoenix Home Life — a challenge for even a magician to pull off.

As to his ambitions for the future — Bill Herz says he would like to open a Magic Restaurant in Greenwich. One wonders if rabbit would be on the menu. □