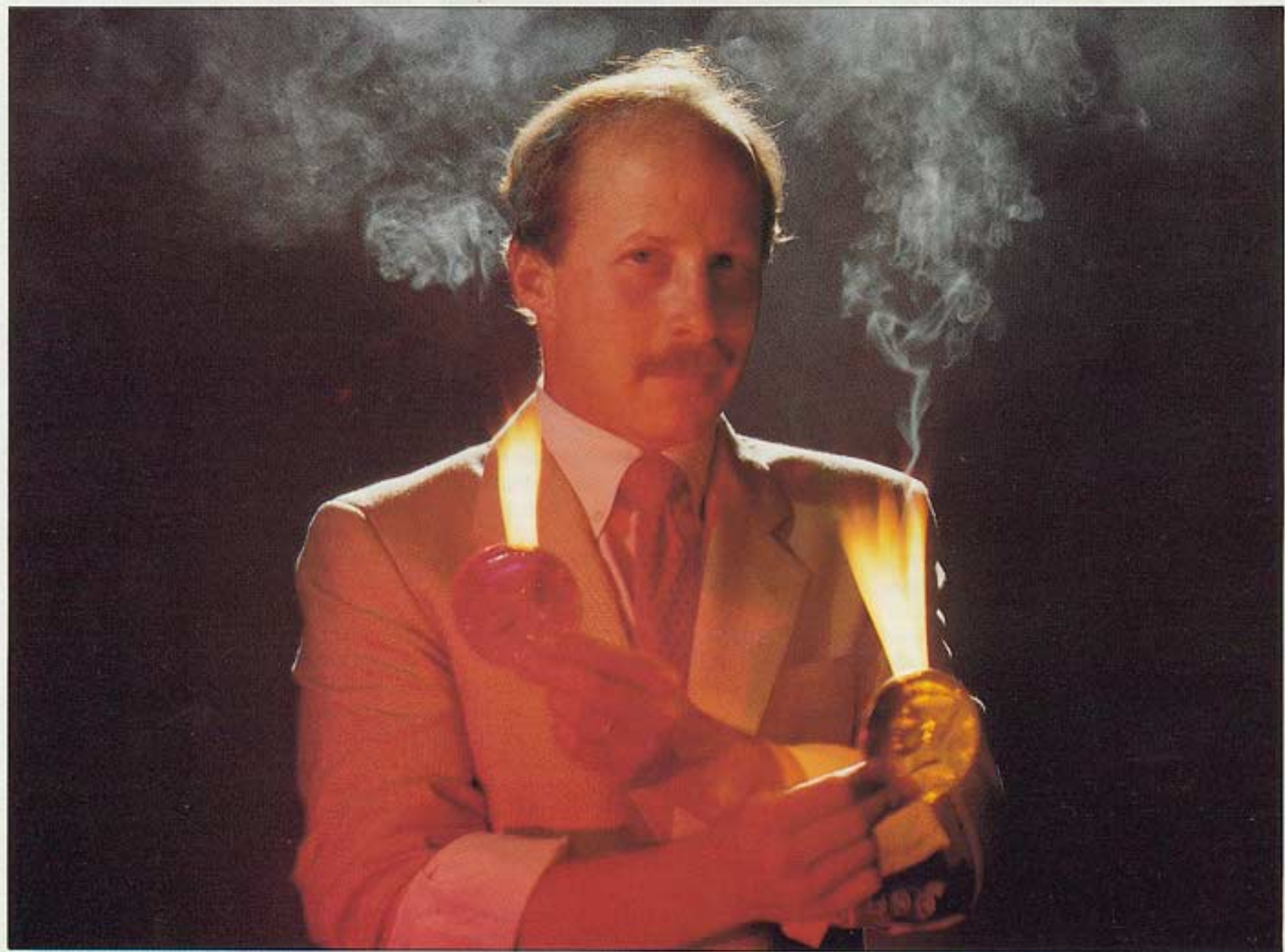


M&C
Closeup

BILL HERZ



TRICKS FOR THE TRADE

This magician specializes in corporate events, teaching sleight of hand to CEOs.

BY DAVID GHITELMAN

Riding in a cab to the World Yacht Club, a New York marina at which Malcolm Forbes often moors his yacht, Bill Herz talks about how he'd love to meet the billionaire business-magazine publisher. This should be no surprise. The 32-year-old Herz has been working in the corporate world for the past seven years and last year ventured to start his own firm.

However, unlike the hordes of other aspiring entrepreneurs longing for the ear of Liz Taylor's sometime beau, Herz would rather wow him with card tricks than woo him with profit margins.

Herz is a magician, albeit one who functions in a corporate context. ►

Although he doesn't yet have money to burn, the young prestidigitator hopes someday to grace the covers of America's leading business magazines.

Most of his several hundred annual performances—99 percent, he estimates—are at business events. “I really enjoy the corporate audiences,” he says. “They’re sophisticated. I don’t care what corporation you’ve got. At a nightclub, people are out getting drunk. But when I do a corporate event, no matter how big the audience, I’m not fighting for their attention. I can really get into what I want to do. I don’t have to come out and make fire appear so everybody goes, ‘Ooo, what’s going on?’”

Herz is booked for occasions ranging from incentive trips to sales meetings, from trade shows to ribbon-cuttings, from awards banquets to parties themed around magic. At the latter, he will perform along with as many as a dozen other top magicians.

“When I bring in other magicians to work with me,” he says, “I’m very selective. Each magician will have a different personality, a different specialty. I want people to come away saying, ‘Boy, I’ve never seen anything like that.’ Because they haven’t. There aren’t that many good magicians.”

A good magician, Herz would tell you, is in the business of selling illusion. And that’s exactly what Herz’s new company, Magicorp Productions, does. The company, which is based in Herz’s apartment in New York City’s East Village, employs Herz, his wife, Gwenn Sheuer who “directs the financial aspects of the company,” and one other full-time employee. Magicorp books Herz and other illusionists—and sells instruction as well. For a fee, Herz will undertake to coach a corporate speaker in magic; he won’t provide a full bag of tricks, but he will teach someone to bring an audience under his or her spell.

SOME ENCHANTED EVENING

Tonight, as usual, Herz will be performing for the people whom *Forbes* writes for and about. The client, the Whitney Group, an executive recruitment firm specializing in the investment banking field, is entertaining roughly 200 customers. In the course of a three-hour cruise around New York harbor, the invitees will dine on freshly-carved breast of veal, listen to some of the city’s top studio musicians—and see a slight man in a gray business suit manipulate a deck of cards with the same aplomb Fred



Herz teaches Charles Berman, a divisional partner at Trammel Crow Co., a trick to highlight a talk on profitability at a recent sales meeting.

Astaire used to dance with Ginger Rogers.

As the Wall Street stalwarts file on board, typical conversations turn on the comparative virtues of Connecticut prep schools and how the weakened dollar has forced cutbacks on weekend shopping trips to London. Herz, however, is unintimidated. “This is going to be an easy crowd,” he says. “The people I perform for are pretty much the same as the people I hang out with. All my friends are in corporations.”

Nor is this ease with the upscale surprising. Herz grew up in the affluent New York suburb of Larchmont, where, at a tender age, he became fascinated by sleight of hand. “It sounds so typical,” he says, “but I got a magic set as a birthday present when I was eight years old. I said, ‘Hey, this is the greatest thing ever,’ and just loved it. I also admit I was short. All of a sudden, I had something that got me attention.

“Then I just kept doing it. You sort of go through a routine where you do the church dinners, the temple dinners, the community service type of affairs, and from there, it builds. And every magician starts by performing at children’s birthday parties. Believe it or not, it’s a good training ground because kids are sometimes tougher to fool than adults.”

After finishing Amherst College and

spending a year booking entertainment for Club Med, Herz enrolled at the Cornell University School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration. “At the time,” he says, “I wanted to open a magic nightclub, and I thought I damn well better know the restaurant business. But soon after I got to Cornell, I realized the hours involved in running your own place. You’re there at 5 in the morning, and if you take a day off, everybody’s stealing you blind.”

Next came an unsatisfying year working for a promotion firm. “I used all my free time—two weeks vacation, five personal days and two sick days—to go do magic shows,” Herz recalls.

But the performing was not so satisfying either. “I had played a few nightclubs and found it boring to do the same show night after night,” says Herz. “Once I went on tour with a rock singer, and I realized that the audiences were timing their drugs so that they were peaking when she came out. It wasn’t my type of crowd. Clubs can be fun if they’re nice, but you also end up playing a lot of dives.”

So, Herz began to look for alternatives. The fact that he had some work experience in the business world, a graduate degree in the hospitality field and a demeanor more suited to the boardroom than the circus tent helped send him in the right direction.

“I started literally knocking on the doors of corporations. At first people would just ask me whom I’d worked for. Although I had some good entertainment credits, I hadn’t done much corporate work. Finally, one or two corporations gave me a shot. I started doing it, and it got better and better.

“The first year I probably did 20 corporations, some big, some small. Now, it’s up to about 200 a year, all different sizes, all over the world. I’ve performed in Europe, India, China, Mexico and all over the U.S.”

THAT MAGIC MOMENT

The cruise now underway, Herz begins walking around the yacht’s two-story dining room, stopping when he finds a pair of couples whose conversation seems to have run aground. He shows them a card trick or two, then he asks one of the women for her wedding ring. Reluctantly, she hands it over. “Say ‘Go,’” he instructs her. When she does, he reveals an empty palm. “It’s gone,” he says.

"Don't worry," he goes on, removing a quarter from his pocket, "I have a magic coin. Do you believe in magic coins?"

"Yes," she mutters.

"You'd better. I still have your ring."

The few minutes it takes to perform the rest of the trick are the emotional equivalent of hours in the life of Herz's victim. Then, when he finally produces the band, it's attached to a key ring he's just pulled from the back pocket of his pants.

"Do it again. Do it again, please," pleads the formerly distraught woman.

The magician refuses. "Once a trick," he says, "twice a lesson."

Not that Herz never shares his secrets. In fact, teaching his tricks has become one of the most successful parts of his business.

"I wish I could say I woke up one morning and had the idea of teaching magic to executives," he says. "But the way it came about was I was doing a show for a company in England, and the CEO asked me if I could teach him a few tricks. I said, 'Sure.' Then he asked if he could do the whole show. 'Sure,' I said, 'We can design plenty of stuff for you to do.' He did it, and it was a raging success. The audience loved it."

Enter the meeting managers. When Herz came back from England, he told a planner about the CEO's show, and, he says, "He thought it was the greatest idea he'd ever heard. He asked if I could do it for his company, and I said, 'Sure.'" But Herz still thought the thing was a fluke. It wasn't until he got the same reaction from a second planner that he at last realized, "Hey, we've got something here."

Steven Solomon agrees that the idea is "something." A division manager for Fuji Photo Film U.S.A., Elmsford, N.Y., Solomon is one of Herz's many appreciative students. "We were doing a sales meeting about a year ago, and he taught all of the presenters a couple of tricks to highlight our theme, 'Fuji Makes Magic.' I did a mind-reading trick and a very elaborate-looking card trick that, in reality, was simple to do," he says. "It dazzled the audience and people are still talking about it."

Herz wants all his students to be dazzlers. "We don't take a chance when we design the tricks that our clients can mess up," he says. "They

"When you say 'magic,' most people imagine a guy in top hat and tails, but I always wear a business suit."

can't. People tell me, 'I can't do this. I'm all thumbs.' It doesn't matter. The other week I had someone who was so uncomfortable onstage he was nearly hyperventilating. He stole the show.

"The other thing people will say is, 'I really don't have much time to practice.' It doesn't matter. A trick takes 10 minutes to learn."

In fact, the ease of learning combined with the thrill of accomplishment can be a problem. "Frequently, someone will learn a trick quickly and ask if he can have another one to close his speech," says Herz. "I usually don't give him one. I say, 'This is not a magic show. It's a meeting.'"

"When someone makes a lion appear onstage, the lion's the only thing people are going to remember, and not the point of the meeting." Which is not to say that Herz—who mostly avoids working with animals because of complications going through customs—hasn't ever taught a top executive to make the king of the jungle materialize on command.

IT'S MY PARTY

Sedate couples, who stayed off the dance floor for the band's Rolling Stones numbers, now swing to the sophisticated melodies of Ellington. The cruise is winding down, and Herz, who neither drinks on the job nor allows any of the magicians who work for him to do so, retreats to the bar for a hearty swig of diet cola.

"For many people, magic has a negative image," he says. "There's nothing greater than good magic, but there's nothing worse than bad magic. Most people, when you say 'magic,' imagine a guy with slicked back hair in a top hat and tails. I always perform in a conser-

vative business suit. The comment I get most frequently is, 'You look like a guy in our office.'

"And I'll never swear onstage or say anything racial or ethnic. The only embarrassing things that happen onstage happen to me."

While his close-up magic, the sort of things he's been doing on ship tonight, is fast and furious, Herz's stage magic is paced slower and relies as much on humor as on sleight of hand.

One of his signature tricks involves an "invisible" deck of cards—a pack of thin air. He tosses it to a member of the audience and asks him to pick a card, show it around and tell his neighbors what it is. He then asks if the audience saw it. When—as they invariably do—they say yes, Herz stares at them and, indicating their fellow victim, announces, "You're as crazy as he is."

Maybe crazy, certainly mystified: For in the end, Herz produces a real deck and from it picks the card the audience member had only imagined.

"I hate the attitude of magicians who seem to tell the crowd, 'I know this and you don't,'" says Herz. "I think audience involvement is the key, and almost everything I do has the audience involved."

In the course of involving his audiences, Herz, like the savviest of meeting planners, has developed a strong sense of group dynamics. "Most of my tricks are developed around the corporate audience, but corporate audiences can be completely different," he says. "I just did a show for 500 truck drivers for A&W Beverages, and I've done shows for the 300 top executives of a Fortune 500 company. From experience, I know which material is going to work for what group."

"Top executives, they're at fancy dinners all the time, so they're used to it, and they're used to entertainment. Because the truck drivers are a rowdier crowd, I know the first thing I do is going to have to grab them. While the execs know that if I'm there, someone has screened me pretty well. They know they can sit back, relax and have a good time."

Herz's business background also enables him to understand the situations and stresses his audiences face.

"I'm used a lot by companies to help ease the transition during a corporate takeover," he says. "When two compa-

nies merge, a lot of people go around wondering, 'Am I going to be canned?' I help them relax at this first meeting. I get people talking with each other instead of standing around thinking, 'Our group is over here, and their group is over there.'

"I always adapt my act to the event. At a cocktail party, instead of walking around the room, I prefer to be situated at one place, at a table near the bar, let's say. At every party, you have some people who are socially awkward. This gives them a place to go. Then they can turn to the person next to them and say, 'This is amazing. How

does he do it?' Boom, they've met and started talking.

"And frequently at these cocktail parties there's business going on under the guise of socializing. The last thing you want when you're making a product pitch is a guy walking up to you saying, 'Hey, take a card.'"

Herz has also found enthusiastic audiences at trade shows. "Recently I got a really nice compliment at a trade show," he says. "A security person came up to my client and said, 'The magician is going to have to stop.'

" 'Why?' my client asked.

" 'Because the crowd he's attracting

is blocking the aisles.'"

"And my client said, 'That's exactly why we've got him here.'"

And Herz plays well, too, with head honchos. "CEOs love my work," he says. "Frequently, I'll meet with the planners putting the affair together and they'll say to me, 'Don't worry if the CEO doesn't pay much attention.'

"I wouldn't care anyway. I'm there for the group. But almost every single time, the CEO drags me around from person to person.

"They love it. They're the biggest kids of them all." ■