



The Delicate Art of Shock Value An Interview with Dan Sperry

“David Copperfield meets Marilyn Manson.”

“Rocky Horror...brand of illusion.”

“Like I’m stuck in a Tim Burton movie.”

“Disgustingly Talented!”

These are just a few of the ways people have described my interviewee this month, **Dan Sperry**. A recipient of many major awards, including “International Magic Champion” by the World Magic Seminar, and “Most Original Magic” by the World Magic Awards, Dan is one of the most talked-about guys in magic today. Known for his dark, twisted style of magic and a matching sense of humor, Dan has made a name for himself with one of the most original acts you’ll find anywhere. From his mind-numbingly amazing bird act to his trademark performance of “Lifesaver,” Dan’s magic is fresh, amazing, and all his own.

In 2010, Dan made waves on NBC’s *America’s Got Talent* when his performance sent judge Howie Mandel running into the stands. The ensuing YouTube video has currently amassed over 500,000 views. Earlier this year Dan began his very first headlining tour with a show that promises a wild and crazy ride that will leave audiences disturbed, stunned, and most definitely amazed.

This month Dan and I sat down to talk about his unique approach to magic, and how he’s gotten to where he is today.

Cliff: Your trademark macabre-like style of magic is one that breaks down all of the traditional images of a magician. How did you create and evolve your approach to the art?

Dan: This is a very long story, so I will try to break it down and be as to-the-point as possible.

If I had to answer your question with just one phrase it would be: **be yourself**. There are plenty of judgmental amateur and professional magicians on the Internet (let alone at the local magic clubs, conventions, and certain club houses) who are quick to say that I try to be something I’m not, when in reality they don’t know who I am, my background or existence, let alone my magic. They just need to cut down fellow performers in order to make themselves believe in their own minds that they have the justification to do so. It is very much like high school, when the preppy kids would pick on the nerdy kids because they were insecure with themselves. This was due to the fact that they knew their girlfriends secretly wanted the nerds, and they were jealous of other students’ confidence to be who they are, so the only way they could ease their frustration was to pick on fellow students. It’s very sad.

I was a victim of this myself because for a long time I tried to be somebody I was not. I really idolized guys like Joseph Gabriel, Shimada, and Cardini, so I’d try to



be like those guys. Yet I had all these holes in my face from piercings that I'd taken out for performances; my hair was clearly dyed different colors, but I would attempt to cover that by slicking it back, and so on. I did this because that's what I was told I had to be in order to achieve success in magic. It wasn't until my mid-to-late teens that I said . . . I'm going to be myself – the person I was off stage – and see where it goes. I've never looked back.

Well, I do look back from time to time at videotapes from that period, and I could see in my face and performance that it was not me. I was clearly faking it. I looked miserable. I had no connection with the audience. I can see this same look in many videos of kids on YouTube or in contests. They're trying to be the jeans-sporting, hoodie-wearing magician because that's what guys like Blaine and Angel have made popular, and it's become the norm of magic. But in most cases it's clear that's not who these kids – heck, even some

adults – really are inside. Can you imagine Jason Andrews trying to be like that? Gag me with a steak knife. Look at how counter-culture to magic Jason is right now with his look; even though it's a classical look, he stands out and people will remember that, but it's also who he really is. Why else do you think he won the I.B.M. stage contest last year?

CB: Being out-of-the-box always comes with challenges. What obstacles have you had to overcome, being such a unique act?

D: Refer to answer above! [laughs] I've also had people call or e-mail venues complaining because what they thought they saw on stage was not at all what I did in the show. I remember a few years ago I was doing my version of "Interlude," and some high school kid went home all freaked out because somehow he got it in his head that I reenacted a crucifixion on stage. So his mom called the venue, complaining in an outrage that they would bring in an act like

that. Another time I was almost 86'd from an event in Iowa because, according to them, I was spitting on the crowd. If anything, I encourage this kind of stuff. I also find it hilarious.

The truth of the matter is that there's nothing in my show that kids can't already see on TV if they really wanted to. It is up to the parents to clarify that I'm doing magic tricks, especially if they decide to bring their five-year-old to my show. This has made it difficult for promoters to bring my show into some venues – for example, the Bible belt or some places in the Deep South. But that's okay with me; I knew that was a risk going into this career. Just like I wouldn't hire David Ginn to be my opening act – you have to know your audience and find your niche. The saying “People are always afraid of what they don't understand” basically sums up my career.

CB: Your act plays with the delicate art of shock value. Where do you feel the line is between being entertaining and just being over the top? How do you try to keep that balance?

D: You're very right on this; it is extremely delicate because not everybody has that same line. It is different for each person, and finding that line really comes from working and doing lots of shows and being able to read your audience. There have been plenty of times where I've been brought in to do shows for what is not my usual audience, and I have to be able to adapt.

I get lots of e-mails from young magicians saying they want to do stuff like me, and they just bought Wayne Houchin's *THREAD* or *Needle Thru Arm*. What they don't understand is it isn't fair to your audience to just come out and be weird or shocking for the sake of being different or shocking. Imagine seeing a show where everything is one trick after another of *Needle Thru Arm*, *THREAD*, and other so called “bizarre” magic effects all in a row. I don't care who your audience is, they'll be

bored, hate it, and won't get it. I know because I've been one of those audience members when helping critique videos of people who ask me to review their shows. You have to have the personality for each effect, and know how to present it in a way that audiences will be accepting of it. Kozak is a great example. Kozak has been a best friend and mentor for a number of years. He's the original shock magician . . . But that shock was balanced with comedy, and even though he was slaughtering his audience with this shocking style of comedy and magic, by the end of the show the audience loved him. You see a lot of guys since Kozak try to copy that style and fail miserably.

CB: So far in your career you've had the opportunity to work with many fantastic magicians such as Rudy Coby, Jeff Hobson, and Losander, just to name a few. If you could pick any magician, alive or dead, to perform a show with, who would it be, and why?

D: I am really blessed to have these people who I looked up to when I was young now being some of my best friends. But if I had to choose one – that's hard. I suppose it's a tie between Guy Jarrett and Jay Marshall. I really respect both of these guys. I'd mostly want to sit down and have a coffee with Jarrett, and pick his brain and listen to his stories. I've always really loved Jay Marshall. I'm honored that I met and hung out with him a few times when I lived in Chicago, and have plenty of bootleg tapes I'd make of him by sneaking my video camera into magic convention shows. But I never got to know him as a person. I really like his humor and style, and would also love to hear his stories. I've been meaning to get the biography of him by Sandy; it looks awesome.

CB: You started gaining notoriety for your magic at a young age. What led to this and opened the doors for you to have the career we see today?

D: I'm not really sure what led to it. I did

lots of competitions. I'd compete anywhere I could, just to get my act out there and listen to critiques from pros. I was doing stuff nobody was doing with birds. I was doing classical bird productions (the dove split, dove on cane, that kind of thing), but doing them differently, using different hook ups, methods, and what-not. I applied that same thinking to other material as I grew with my show. I'm no genius inventor, but I do take a long time adapting something to fit my style, and there's plenty of magic I'd like to do but I know wouldn't fit me, or if I did try it would actually look like I was trying too hard.

CB: What advice would you give to young magicians who are now standing where you were not too very long ago, and want to have a career in magic?

D: Read a lot. Not just magic books, but books about anything and everything you're interested in. If you like sci-fi stuff, keep reading sci-fi books. Just read everything you can. You never know what might inspire you.

Get a second hobby. If magic takes up too much of your life it will poison you. You should really have another creative outlet, so when magic becomes frustrating you can take an hour and go work on your model airplane or play some golf to clear your head. Do **not** mix the two. Keep them separate.

Take home economics classes at school so you know how to be domestic. If you really want to do magic as a career, times will become hard. There will be highs and lows and you will need to know how to sew your own clothes, costumes, and props as well as bake a batch of corn bread to keep you fed for a week.

Get out there and do shows—anything and everything you can. Do kids' parties, nursing homes, restaurants, everything. Learn to entertain. There are so many guys who buy the DVDs, downloads, etc., who are skilled technically but can't do a show for longer than two min-

utes – what's cool to us isn't cool to laymen. There are lots of highly respected guys who would argue that with me, but trust me, those guys are not your friends, and Dan Sperry is your friend. I've seen guys doing street magic here in Vegas with a simple Chicago Opener that blows away a lay audience, and then follow with some kind of mad skill XCM'd ambitious card routine that totally loses the audience. It is card juggling, and nobody cares. Jeff McBride is a perfect example of how to do it right. He can do all that crazy stuff, but when it comes to performing his act he leaves that stuff out and makes it simple to understand, easy to follow, and visually comprehensive.

Learn the business side. It is show **business**, and business is the bigger word, as Blackstone used to say. You need to learn how to answer a phone and talk to people professionally on the other end. Learn Word, Excel, Quickbooks, and similar business programs so you can run your business like a professional. And never take a "no" from someone who isn't in the position to say "yes."

CB: Your career is fast-paced and ever changing, so what's next for Dan Sperry?

D: After this article, probably not much in the magic world. I'm the type of person who never counts their chicks before they hatch. I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing, and if people like it, perfect. I've been really blessed to have what I have, and to be going where I'm going. So let's just say I won't drop the ball on what's coming next from Dan Sperry.

If you'd like to see videos of Dan's show or get in touch with him, go to: www.DanSperry.com.

Want to shoot me an email or follow me on a social stalking – err, networking – site? You can do all of that and more at: www.CliffBumgardner.com.