



Movie Magic An Interview with Larry Fong

A few months ago I had the pleasure of interviewing magician and filmmaker Chase Goforth. In our Sit Down, we discussed the fascinating similarities between the art of magic and the art of film. This month I dive deeper into that conversation with magician and renowned cinematographer, **Larry Fong**.

Larry's filmography includes major Hollywood blockbusters such as the Zach Snyder films *300*, and *Watchmen*, as well as several episodes of the smash-hit television series, *LOST*. His latest work, also with Snyder, is the reality-bending technothriller *Sucker Punch*, which opened in March to rave reviews. Later this year you can see even more of Larry's camera wizardry in *Super 8*, which was written and directed by *LOST* creator J.J. Abrams, and produced by Steven Spielberg.

I sat down with Larry to discuss his history with magic, and how the paths of film and magic cross.

Cliff: Many people know of your film career, but don't know much about your magic. How did you get interested in the art?

Larry: Like many others, I got a magic set for Christmas. Sadly, the instructions weren't in English, which made learning the tricks really hard. As a teen I read a lot of magic books from the library, and my father took me on occasional trips to Hollywood Magic, which was about an hour's drive away, so I've been pretty immersed in the literature. I probably work with cards the most, and do a little coin stuff.

Recently I've gotten more into mentalism – one of the benefits of growing older.



It just fits better as an adult than as a teenager!

Over the years, through the strangest circumstances, I've been lucky enough to meet and befriend some of the best minds in magic. Although I'm not a great magician, I do feel a commonality being around them. And we don't even have to talk about magic; in fact, we seldom do.

C: Magic and film are both entertainment art forms centered around creating an experience for an audience. What tools, traits, and aspects do you think the two have in common in trying to create this experience?

L: Well, they are both audio/visual experiences, obviously. They entertain; they transport you; hopefully they make you think and make you feel something. An interesting difference I've found is that while practice makes perfect in the magic world, filmmaking is almost the opposite. While you need to be highly trained and skilled, you only have a short time after seeing the rehearsal to finalize your approach on how to shoot and light the scene, and by the end of the day whatever you just did is immortalized forever on a DVD or Blu-Ray, warts and all. Hope you did a good job! No pressure! Maybe that's why I love the discipline of learning a move or constructing a magic routine. I can practice and hone and perfect.

C: How has magic affected the way you think about film?

L: Over time I think I've learned to appreciate subtlety. I'm not talking about my work, specifically, which is not always so subtle, but about what I like to see. My favorite films have smooth, understated, simple themes and execution. They exhibit confidence and naturalness. I appreciate the same thing with magic.

C: What do you think magicians could learn from filmmakers?

L: Film is a collaborative art; there are so many people and departments required to get the job done. The biggest problem I see in magic is that too many performers work in a vacuum and can't, or don't, get input from others. Unless you're a total

genius in performance, writing, directing, staging, wardrobe, music, and grooming, you need the help of others. It's not just about how good your chops are. Your performance and persona need to be spot on if you want to make a difference.

C: In his Sit Down, Chase Goforth said he believes a film is just a two-hour magic trick. What are your thoughts on that? Do you agree?

L: That's a great way of looking at it. Don't know many people who would sit still for a two-hour magic show, though! Luckily for magicians, there aren't hundreds of critics who are going to pick apart every piece of your act in print, on TV, and on the Internet.

C: Over the past few years, the film industry has seemed very interested in magicians, especially with films like *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*. Why do you feel there has been such an interest in stories about magicians?

L: It seems to me to be seasonal, just as zombie, vampire, and war movies get recycled over and over. Strangely, they seem to always portray the image of what audiences "think" magicians are, and not what you and I know magicians to really be.

C: When it all boils down, magic and film are simply about entertaining an audience. What does being an entertainer, in any form, mean to you?

L: To me, good entertainment straddles that fine line of giving an audience what they want, while also challenging them with the unexpected, and, sometimes, even the uncomfortable. Personally, I'd rather go too *far* than be too *safe*.

To see Larry's complete filmography and read about his work, search for his name on: www.IMDB.com

You surely know this by now, but you can always e-mail me with questions, comments, and ideas through the contact form at www.CliffBumgardner.com. And while you're there, follow me on Twitter too for updates about all things related to this column.