

Genii

THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE

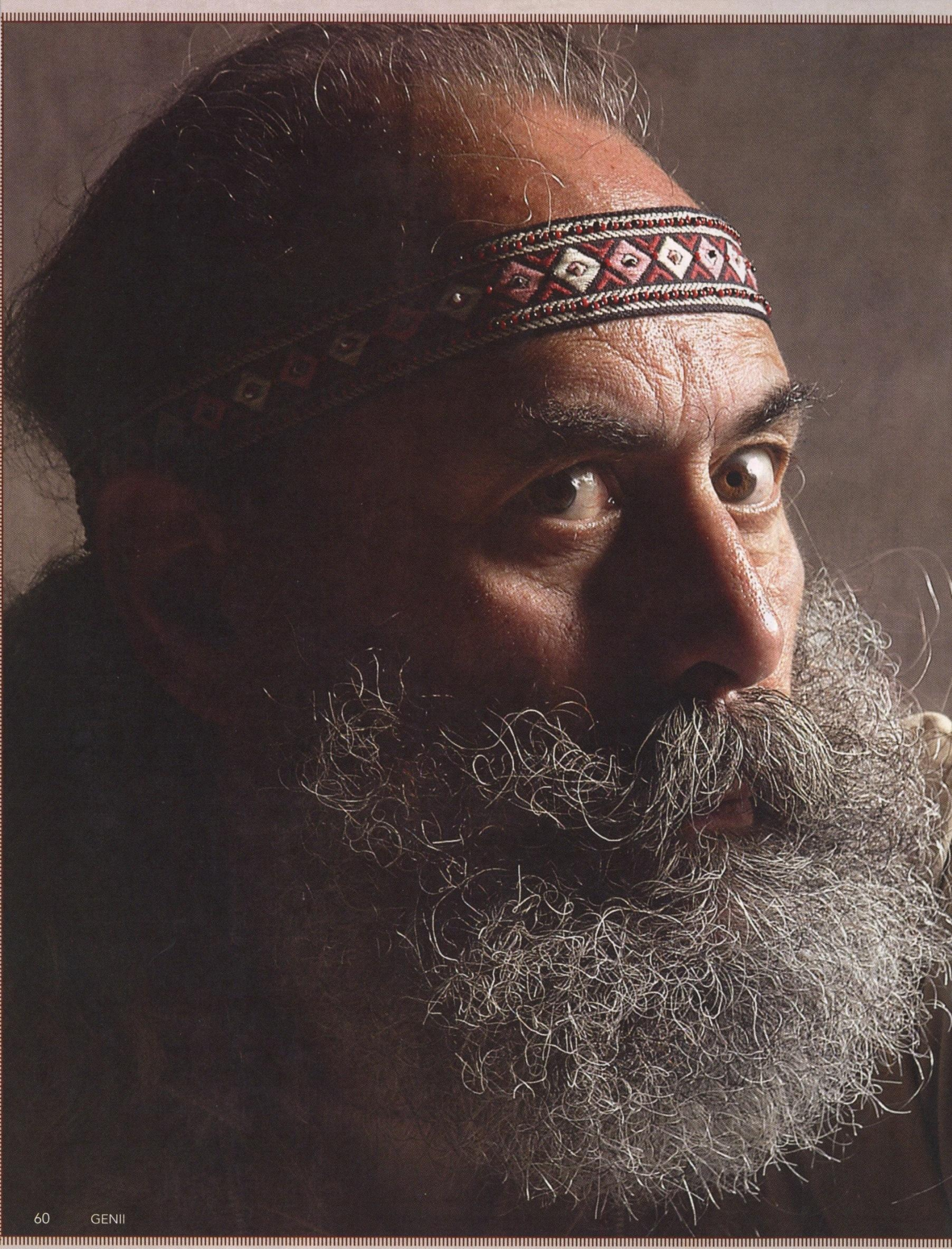
NOVEMBER 2006

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Free DVD this Month with Mark Mason
A Trip with Just Alan • Henderson
Tenyo, New for 2007 • Kaufman
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The cover of Genii magazine features a close-up photograph of a man with a thick, grey beard and a red turban. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His right hand is raised, with fingers curled, and a stream of red powder is falling from his palm. The background is a dark, textured surface with large, light-colored, fan-like shapes and small, colorful dots. The text "Just Alan" is printed in a bold, white, sans-serif font on the left side of the image.

Just Alan





Just Alan

An Unexpected Performer

By Brad Henderson

Photographs by Fredde Lieberman

I was mad enough as it was. Okay, not mad, but indignant. Why wasn't I invited to perform in the final evening show? After all, some of the other Mystery School attendees had been asked to perform. I'd heard that one guy who wasn't even attending had been asked to be in the upcoming event. What did they have that I didn't?

Apparently, the maturity to know when one was out of their league. Like many ignorant youths, I felt that I was as talented as my imagination and ego led me to believe. What I was about to experience that evening would be an important first step in realizing that there was more in magic than my own self-deluded illusions.

I begrudgingly entered the venue in which the show would be held. Laughter and spirited conversation filled the room. I sat alone and admired the "theater"—a Hindu ashram in upstate New York. Placed onstage was what appeared to be the sculpture of a yogi, complete with turban and red sash. Before the sculpture was a bowl of incense, a clear glass vessel, and a number of brass containers. I wondered how the opening act was going to work with this *tschotcke* on the stage.



Photo by Just Alan

The lights dimmed. A slide projector illuminated a scene from India behind the statue. A foreign yet familiar voice intoned "It is early morning and the sun is just coming up. Even though this is the coolest part of the day, it's hot. It's impossible to escape the heat of India, no matter what time of day or night." The statue, which had been motionless onstage for over 20 minutes, began to move.

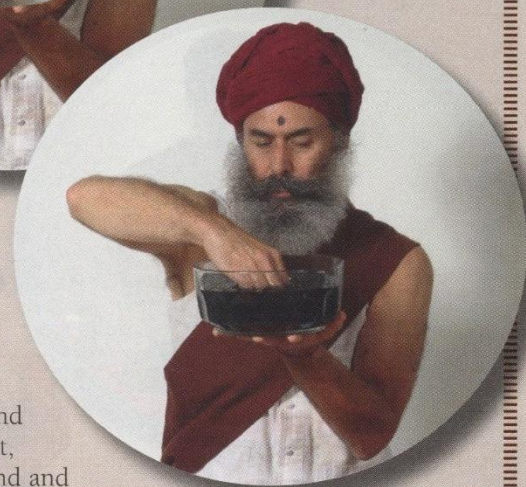
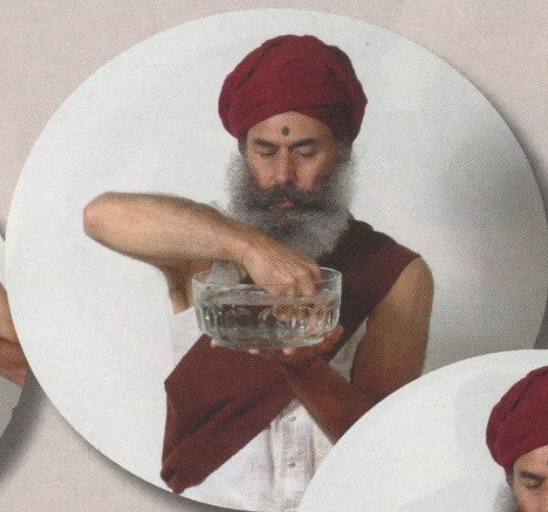
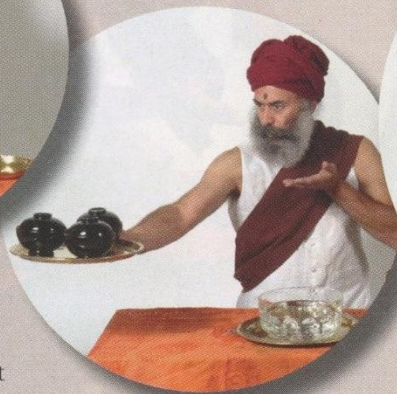
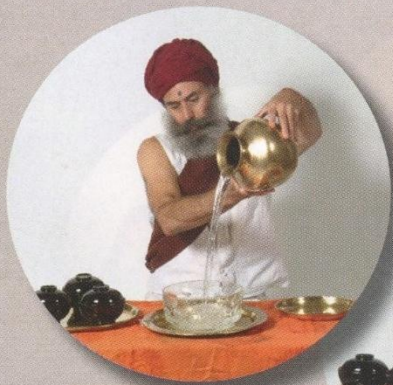
The voice continued.

"I write to you from my compartment on the train. It is a comfortable accommodation from which I've been taking in all of India's sights and smells.

"On this last leg of my last journey before leaving this mysterious land, I have been traveling from Bombay, up through Rajistan, toward the Himalayas.

"There are always crowds wherever you go in India, and the station we're now entering—Bikinir, a small town in Rajistan—is no exception. It's teeming already with activity—families trying to get onto the train, people unloading their animals, their sacks.

"I see many people with turbans, many without, but always a crowd. The hordes are relentless—the camel carts in the street, the snake charmers—and always, the beggars.



"The music coming from the next compartment is almost as relentless as the heat. Its sound is still foreign to my ears, alien to my European taste. I absorb the color and exotic charm that surrounds me and adds to the mystery of the moment.

"As the train pulls to a full stop, a middle-aged man, simply dressed, in a white vest and pajama pants, sits cross-legged right in front of my window. Upon his head rests a turban. He is surrounded by a crowd."

Each slide depicts the setting described by our narrator's hypnotic voice. The turbaned figure moves with a greater sense of deliberateness.

"In front of him, I see a bright yellow and orange prayer shawl inscribed with "OM," the universal sound, written in Sanskrit. At one end of the cloth, there is a beautiful brass jug.

"There is an empty glass bowl right in front of him, which he fills with clear water from the jug.

"At the other end of the prayer shawl is a beautiful brass tray, polished and gleaming in the sun. It holds three exquisite Japanese lacquer bowls, the likes of which I have only seen once before—in the museums of Japan."

Gently the statue directs our attention to these beautiful artifacts. Each gleams as though it had been polished for hours on end.

"Where would a Bikinir peasant get bowls like these? I know at once that this is no ordinary man. He's a most compelling character—a seer, fakir, magician ... what have you—and he's engaged in some-

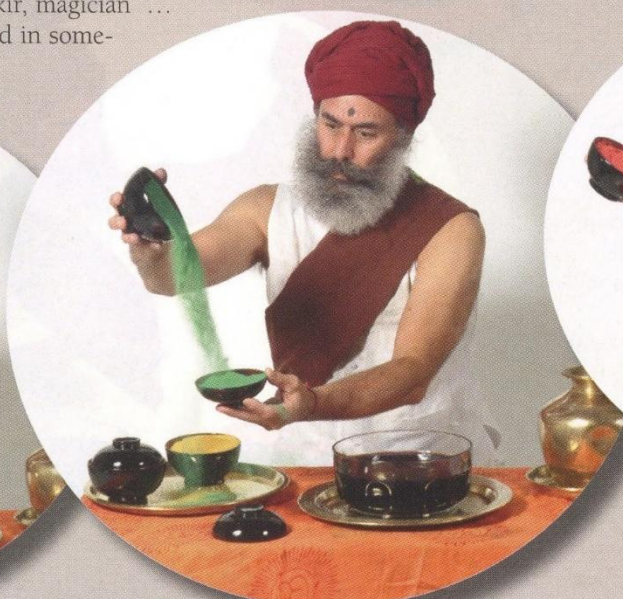
thing very curious. I cannot take my eyes from him.

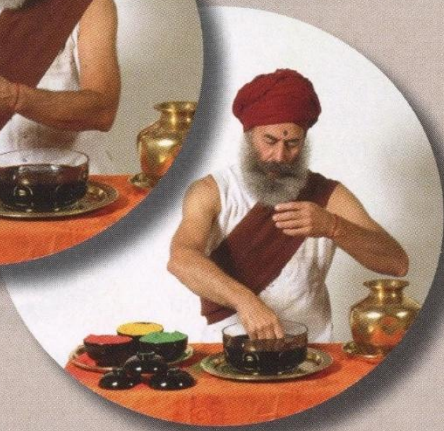
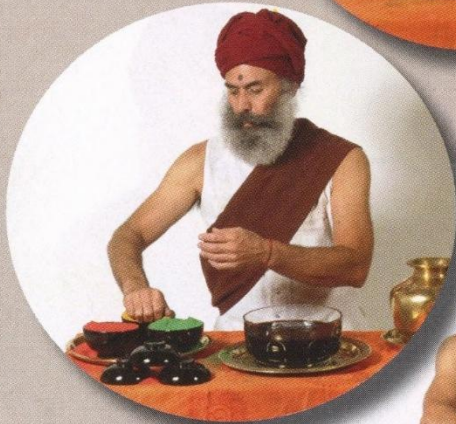
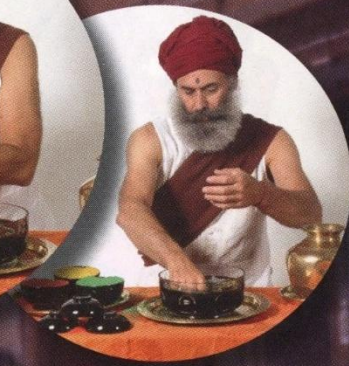
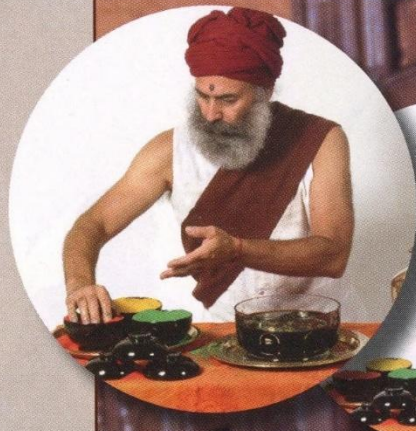
"Slowly, in no hurry, he lifts the glass bowl, and waves his hand around it, swishing the water around and around. All of a sudden, the clear water turns black as night. The crowd gasps."

Indeed the water did just as described. In the audience, a few people dramatically gasped half mockingly. The moving statue smiled and shook his head in a knowing sort of way.

"He picks up the first lacquer bowl in one hand, and takes off the lid with his other hand. He tilts the bowl and sand flows from it into the lid. Then he pours the sand back again to the bowl. Back and forth, bowl to lid, lid to bowl.

"He does the same with each of the bowls, which contain different colors of sand—and as he shows the colors, he says in Hindi: "Yellow is for the sun. Green is for the Earth. And Red is for all past strife and the blood of man."





"As he speaks, he takes a handful of each color of sand, places it in the water, and then stirs.

"The Fakir says to the crowd, 'Please, name a color. If I can pick it out, your wish will come true.' "

The turbaned figure places his hand against his ear and leans forward. The audience, unsure if they should respond, is relieved when the narrator continues.

"Someone in the crowd yells back, 'Yellow!'

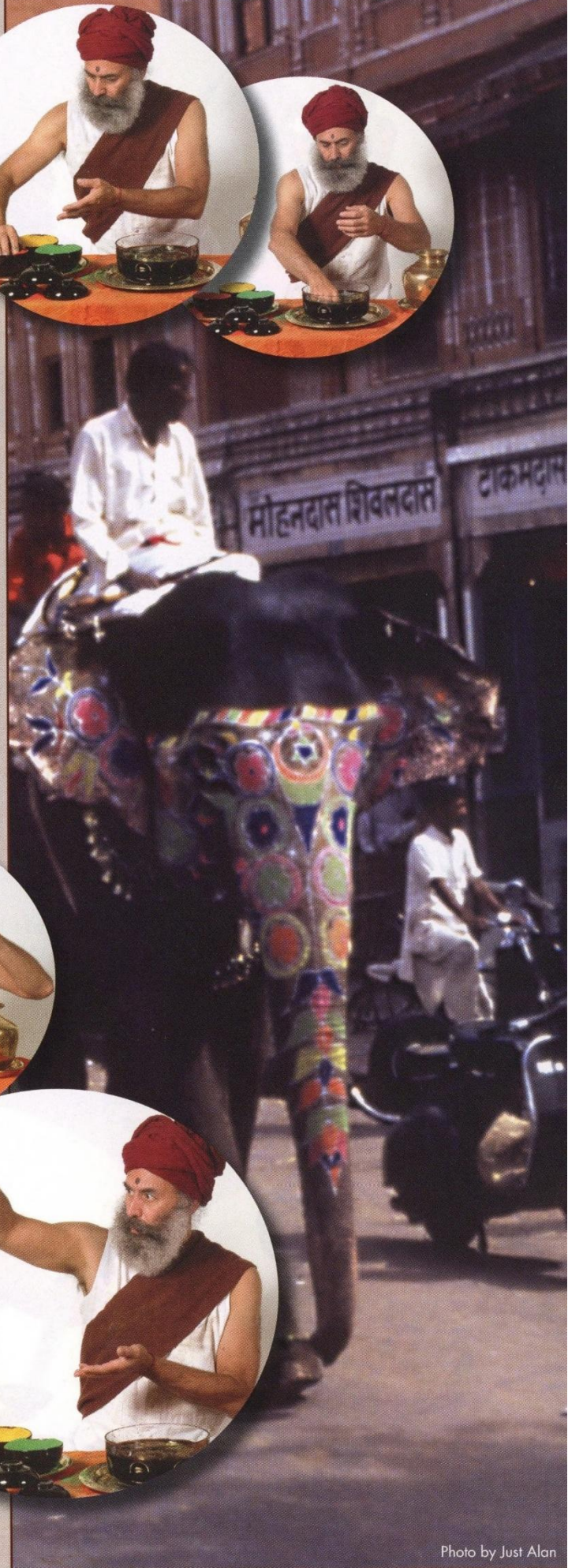
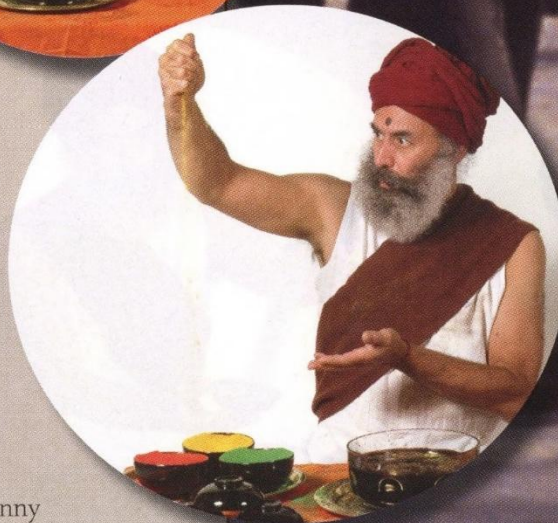
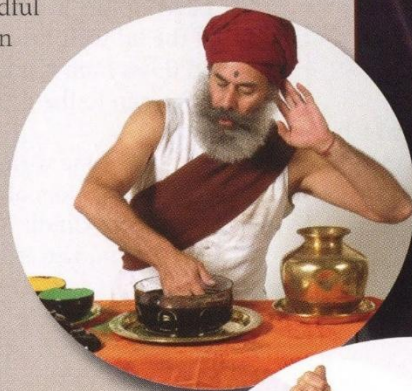
"The seer puts his hand in the water and pulls out some yellow sand. He lets it pour, dry as before, into the bowl from whence it came.

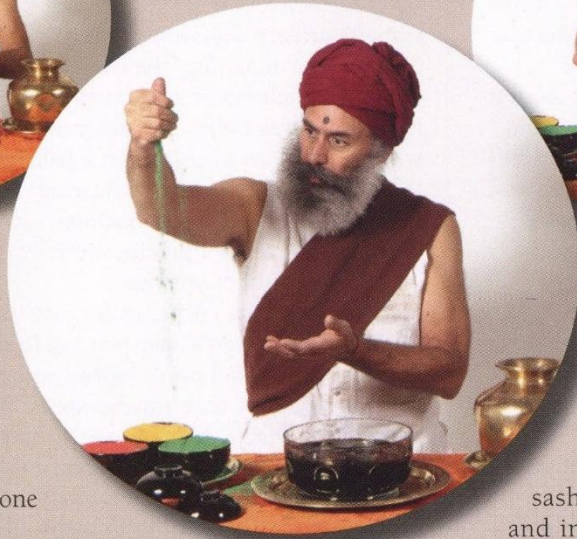
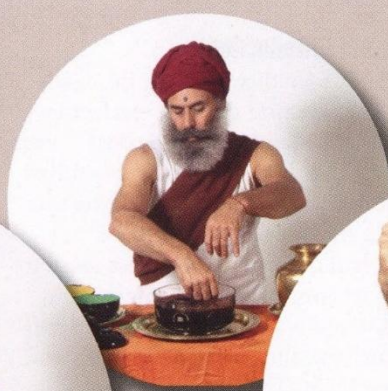
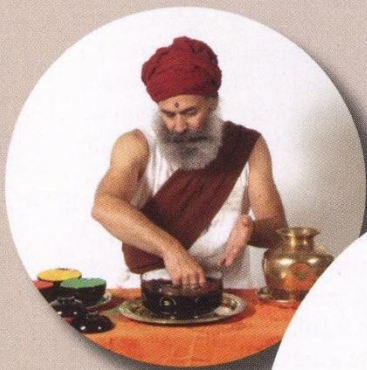
"Yellow is for the sun. It will warm your crops this year. You will have a good harvest'."

Our performer of wonders cleans his hands on his sash, showing them free from trickery.

"I am a farmer'," says the man. He is astonished at his good fortune ... as am I."

The figure nods, acknowledging the uncanny appropriateness of his selection.





"And now someone yells out, 'Green!'"

"The seer reaches into the bowl and pulls out green sand. As he lets the sand trickle from his hand back into the bowl, he says in Hindi, 'The Earth will always be green under your feet, wherever you travel. You have walked a long way, but you have much further to go'."

"The man says, 'Yes, I am a pilgrim on a long, long journey.'"

"Your travels will surely be safe, my friend', says the mystic."

Though not uttering a sound, the mystic communicates this message to us, the audience, with the perfect bow of the head.

"Red!" cries out another voice. The enlightened one reaches into the darkened water yet again and pulls out red sand. As it dribbles down from his fist through his fingers, he says, 'You shall never see the blood of any man again, thankfully so.'

'I have been a soldier in many wars, who longs to put down my gun.'

'At long last,' says the fortune teller."

The wise man dries his hands upon his

sash, the expression of peace and inner serenity not once having broken from his face.

"I look at the expressions on the people who have called out the colors and see in their faces, that this mystic has seen deep into their lives—at a glance, in a moment, with grains of sand. After seeing this, I wonder what deeper powers he holds.

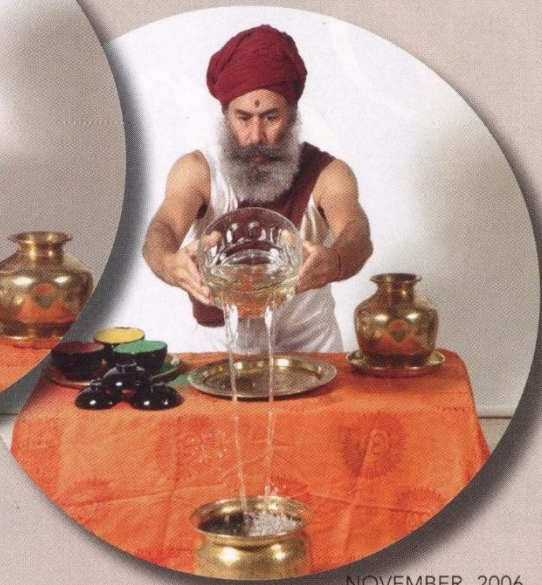
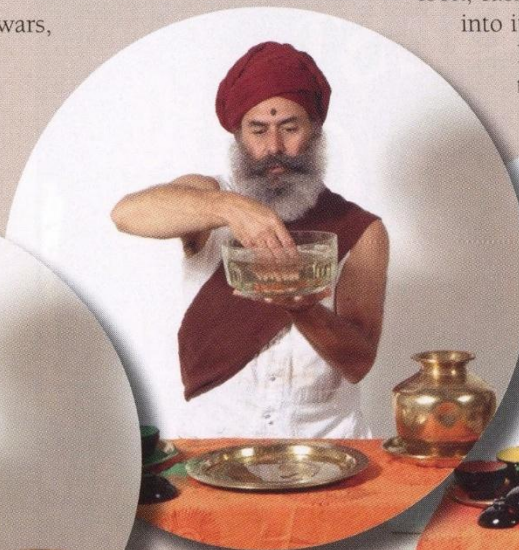
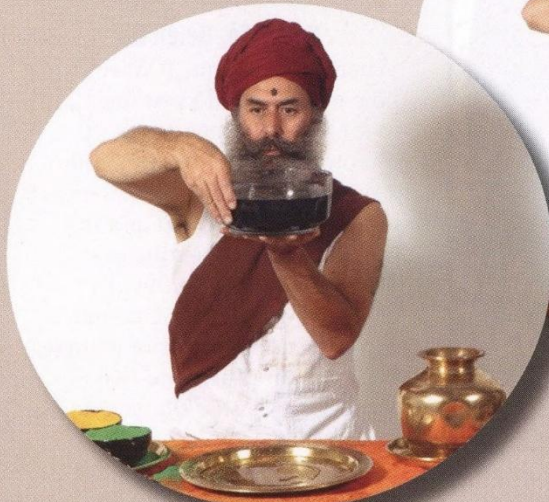
"The crowd is silent, with all eyes fixed on this simple but wise and powerful man, who puts his hand in the water one more time. As he stirs the water, it suddenly turns clear again.

"He holds the bowl of clear water above his head, and says, 'May the water in our children's lifetime, and in the days of our children's children, be as clear and pure as this.'

"As the train pulls away from the station, the mystic bows in my direction. As the last leg of my last journey begins, I have seen, again ... the wonders of India."

Every motion was perfectly choreographed. Each look, each gesture, each moment of magic fell into its perfect place.

I knew the trick. That was the first time I saw the magic.



A Formal Introduction

Immediately, I felt magician's jealousy welling up inside of me. While the knee-jerk reaction of many performers would be to say, "It's only the 'Sands of the Desert,'" even in my shallowness I knew that Just Alan had turned this classic into true art. I comforted myself knowing that, in real life, Alan had to be a mean person.

Later that evening we had a Works in Progress session and I shared an offering or two. After the presentation, the first person I encountered was Alan. My posture stiffened. He reached forward and the gentlest of voices said, "You are a wonderful magician. Thank you for sharing. What is your name again?"

Dammit. I had no recourse. There was nothing to fear, nothing to hate, nothing from which to protect myself. Sure, he was talented as hell, but I knew that you couldn't hate a guy for working harder than you did. So I told him my name and we started talking; this time, I actually listened, and I'm glad I did.

That moment was the beginning of a true friendship. Over the years, my respect for Alan has continued to grow. I have come to learn what a wonderfully kind person he is and what an exacting artist he strives to be. I have learned a great deal from becoming familiar with his work and outlook. I look forward to sharing some of those lessons with you.

The Perks Of Having An Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

At the time I met him, Alan Eisenson was proprietor of Just Alan's, a boutique gift store in Woodstock, New York. Just Alan's was truly a family affair. Together with his wife Juliette and his two daughters, Arianna and Ava, Alan created a meticulously beautiful space in the heart of the tie-dye section of hippie haven. Once Alan had the vision, he knew it would forever be a work in progress.

ress. He asked Juliette for input on naming the store. She replied, "What about just 'Alan's'?" The name stuck, with Alan's quirky twist. Most of his friends call him by the chosen moniker "Just Alan," and that is even how he signs his checks.

Alan's artistry was seen in every inch of the shop. Each night before departing, the cases were cleaned fastidiously and each out of place item was returned to its ideal location. It was rather like watching a master florist at work. There was a sense of true balance in each display. Whether it was the mouth-watering chocolates, sparkling estate jewelry, or naughty birthday cards, each item was treated as if it were a precious jewel to be displayed only in the most ideal of settings.

Tucked into one corner of his café was a magic counter. A large hand-carved finger pointed to the display case; Tenyo products had never looked so good.

Alan frequently took time to speak to those interested in the art of magic. Many times I heard him suggest a book to a mother seeking a gift for her child. Often he would discourage impetuous youths from spending all of their money on gadgets, imploring them to instead invest in one, practice, and come back after the trick was mastered.

With Alan, anything served to his customers was ritual. Just Alan's featured a lovely coffee shop, covered with photographs of Alan's magical friends. No one ever got just "a cup of joe" at Alan's. One was always presented with a pristine china cup and saucer, the perfect amount of foam atop a cappuccino that was garnished with a sprig of mint. Each detail was fussed and fretted over. If a dollop of whipped cream lost its perfect curve, Alan would ask his customers, with complete sincerity, if they wanted it remade.

This was the attention to detail that came through in that first performance I saw at Mystery School. Years later I had the opportunity to engage Alan for a couple of performances. Alan does not believe in packing flat. He hauled case after case into the theater hours before the show. Each piece was unpacked and hand polished as if it were the most important ingredient to the working of his material.

Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho

When you perform "B'Wave," how much time do you need to set up? Alan took about 20 minutes. Alan wanted to create a space in which the volunteer would feel transported and free to exercise his or her imagination. How did he do this? By bringing with him an Oriental rug, a couple of pieces of antique Victorian furniture, and two Mardi Gras masks. Oh, yes, and the card trick, too. (Just Alan's



routine for "B'Wave" appears in *Genii*, January, 2001.)

At one of the final Mystery School events, Alan took on the challenge of creating an installation—a small theatrical space—which gave participants the experience of walking into an old-time magic shop. It seemed to Alan that the best way of doing that was by bringing his shop to Mystery School. Glass cases, hand-carved wooden signs, perfectly placed lighting elements, piles of books, and cases of tricks filled his tiny room. When the participants entered, the gasps were audible, this time

with no hint of mockery. Alan offered his seven minute presentation about the power of real magic and, the next morning, he loaded his truck and drove home. I should have learned this from the women in my life, but it is true: Beauty requires work—and a lot of that work is not pretty. Rather than putting off the work, Alan embraces it. Every chore he performs he does with a sense of purpose, and even joy. Whether it's unclogging a drain or searching for the perfect box to hold a magic prop, Alan's willingness to work transforms effort into beauty.

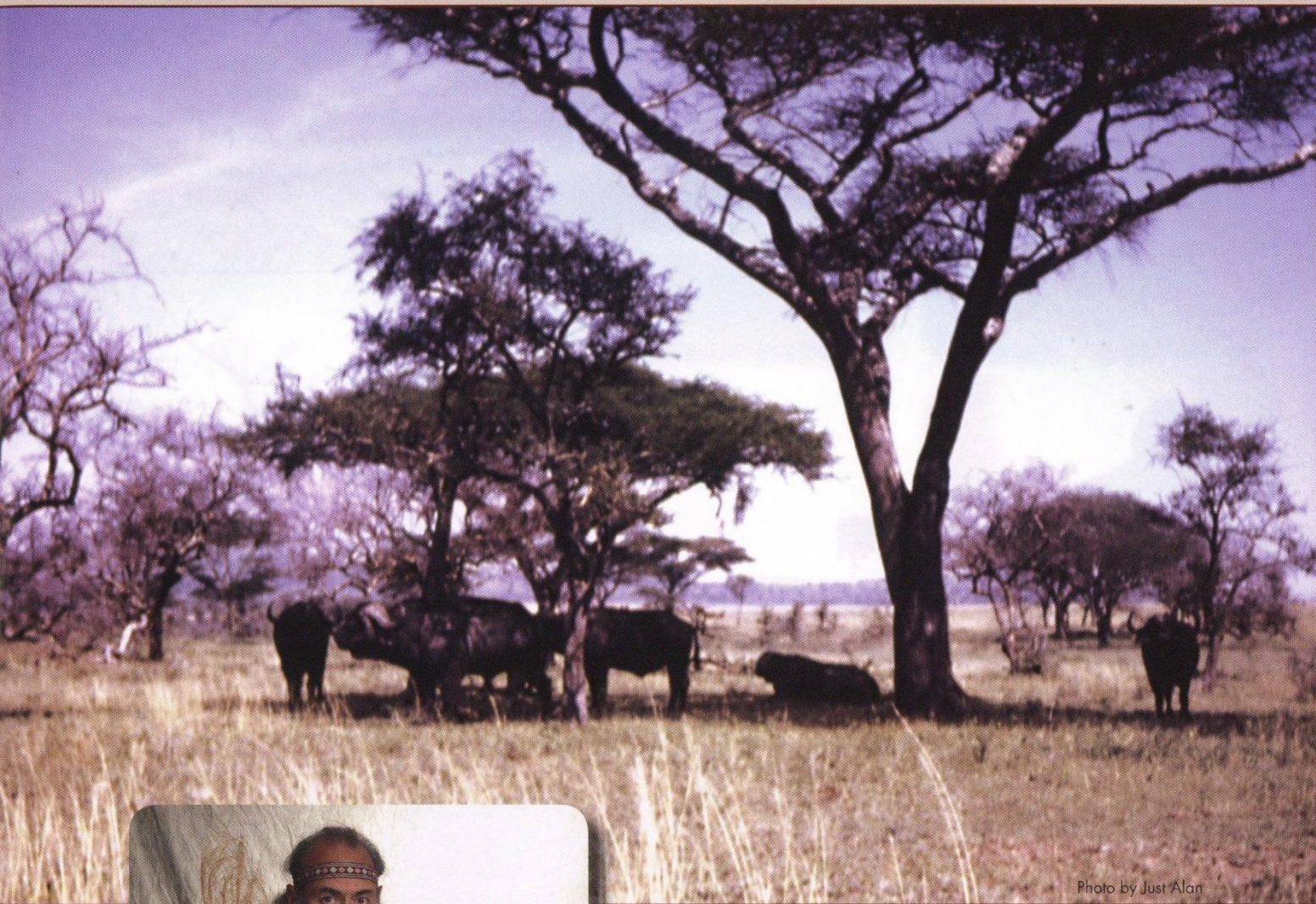
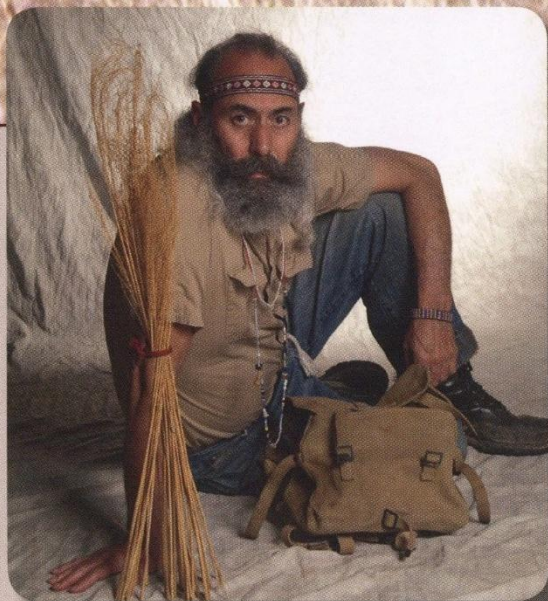


Photo by Just Alan



A Trip to Africa

I cannot remember when Alan first shared this story with me, but I do remember how I felt when I realized that this was to be the basis of a theatrical presentation. I never saw it coming. With Alan, it is not uncommon for a magician to become completely entranced with his story, and only when a familiar magic prop is displayed, realize that they are already in the middle of a performance.

How can he do this? I think it results from commitment to his work. Not only does this commitment manifest in an unrelenting pursuit of technical and artistic perfection, but in complete devotion to making his magic speak of who he is and what he believes.

While watching him, at last, present this moment of wonder, I was reminded of a quote from Robert Neale, "All stories are true, even if they never happened." You will know the trick, but allow yourself to experience the magic.

As a slide projector displays images from the African plains, the lights come up on Alan, dressed in jeans and a khaki safari shirt. He is wearing African beads and bracelet, and work boots. There is a backpack nearby and a cluster of reeds give the feeling of being in the African Plains. Motionless, Alan is standing, looking at his back-

pack. The exotic music of drums and birdcalls give way to a female voice which is clear and equally exotic. Alan plays the part of her father.

She speaks:

"It's 4 a.m. I'm on a connecting flight from Istanbul to Nairobi. As I fade in and out of a dream-filled sleep, I remember a story Father told me so many times, so many years ago, of his adventures in Africa.

"With only a small backpack and the fearless confidence of his youth, Father was hitchhiking some 3,000 miles across the equator through Kenya and Tanzania.

"As my father described it, I saw in my mind's eye the splendor of the African Plains, and the great herds that were still intact back then. Because of his long hair, which reminded them of a lion's mane, the East African tribe members he met called Father, 'Simba.'

"One day as he sat in the shade of an old and beautiful Baobab Tree, reaching into his pack for a midday snack of fresh fruit, Father noticed

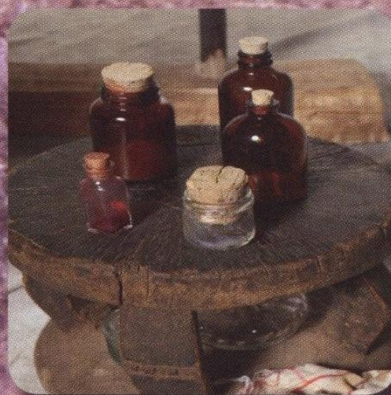
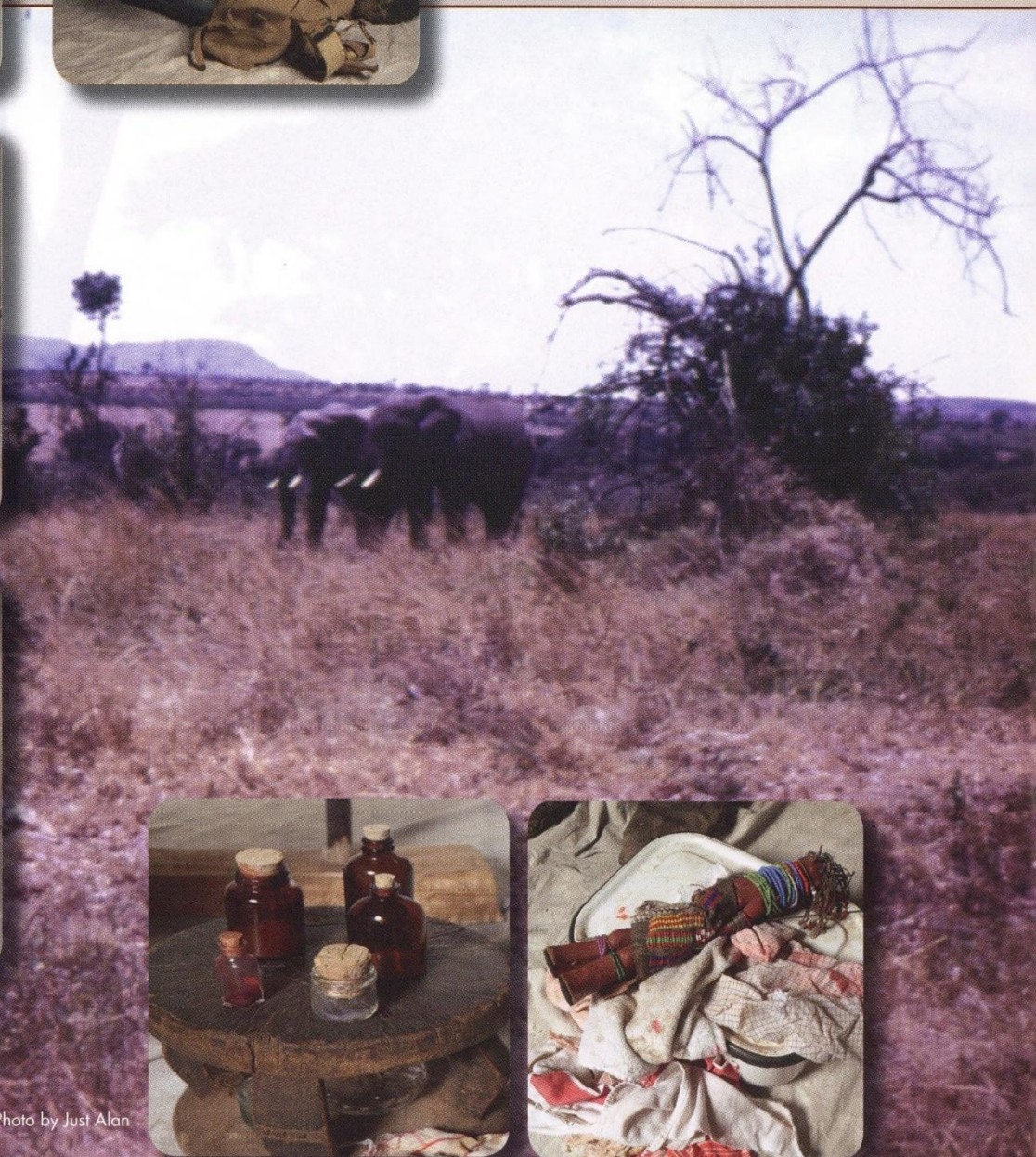
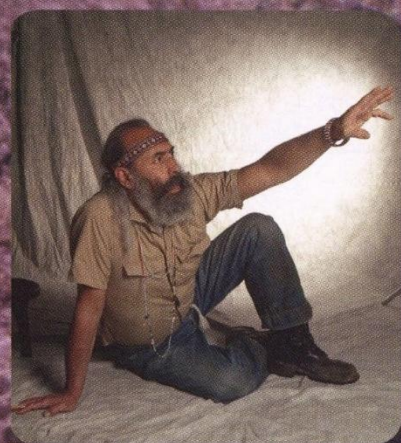
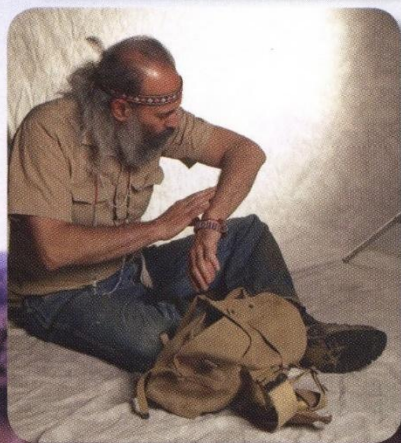
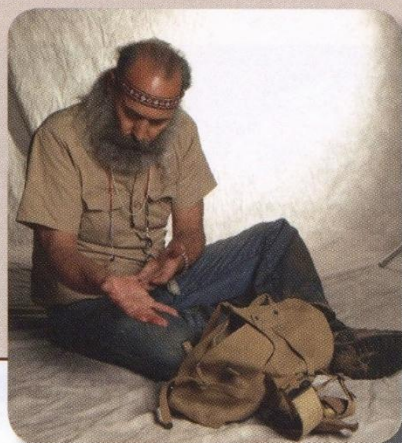
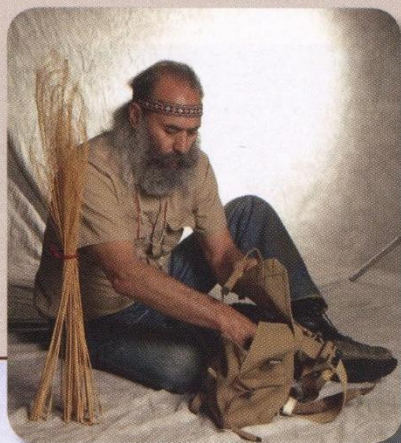
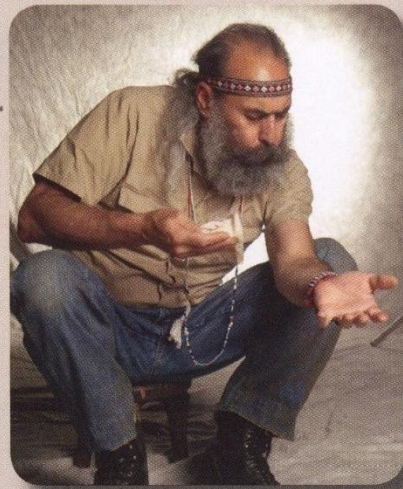
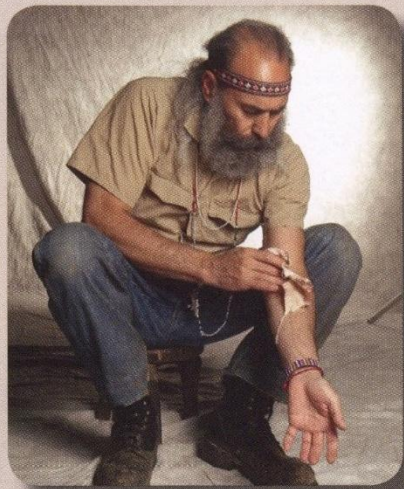
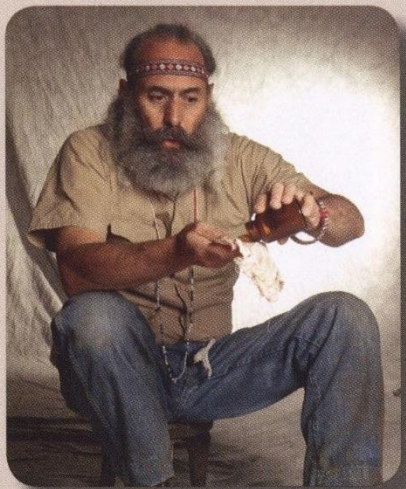


Photo by Just Alan



that his hands were suddenly swelling. As he wondered why, the swelling began to spread up his arms."

Alan moves slowly and deliberately. It is clear that he is concerned and afraid of what is happening to him. His hands run over his arms. The drums begin to beat louder and faster. Clearly something is happening and the music echoes the growing anxiety. The audience feels slightly more on edge. The lights begin to brighten.

"Father was facing his greatest fear. He was out in the bush, alone, nowhere near help. Had he been bitten by a poisonous insect? Was he having an allergic reaction to a plant or something he had eaten? As time passed, and the swelling continued to spread, he became more and more frightened.

"By the time a lumber truck appeared, three and a half hours had passed. He managed to wave the truck down. The driver immediately saw Father's plight and, in a combination of Swahili and broken English, told Father that there was a doctor in his village, which was only 50 kilometers from where they were standing."

Alan waves his arms in the air as if to signal the driver. His limbs are visibly shaking.

"During what seemed like an eternity of drifting into and out of consciousness while the truck bumped and bounced along the road, Father's increasing pain became almost unbearable!"

The audience is moved by the forlorn look upon Alan's face. His body sways as if being carried by the native's truck.

"The sun was setting and the moon was rising as they arrived at the doctor's hut. The driver helped Father out of the truck and waited with him among the crying babies, goats, chickens, and clouds of biting flies.

"My father was trying to compose himself. It was not easy. His pain was great!

"Finally, he was led into a dark, dank tin roofed hut with dirt floors. When he looked around, he noticed a wooden stool, assorted bottles on a table, and a child's doll resting in a tree branch in the middle of the hut.

Alan walks over to a low table. His body trembles with each step. There is a tree branch on the ground with an African doll perched upon its bark. The doll has a menacingly long needle stuck into its belt. Next to the stool is an equally low table covered with dirty jars filled with

unknown substances. A pile of filthy rags lies beside a cold porcelain dish. Alan is clearly frightened and does not know what is about to happen.

"As a woman appeared from a corner of the room where no one had been just a moment before, it was not sufficient to simply say he was nervous.

"The driver introduced Father to a very old and leathery apparition. Picking her teeth with a hypodermic needle, she gestured to my father to come closer. By then, his shaking was uncontrollable. They exchanged no words as she motioned for him to take a jar and inhale its contents.

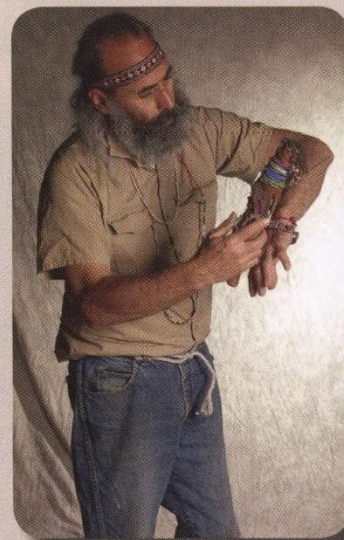
"The instant Father brought the jar to his nose, his body began to relax. She again gestured and, with a filthy rag, he rubbed the gelatin-like salve on his forearm.

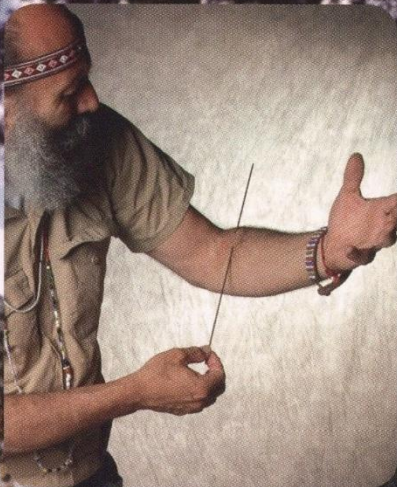
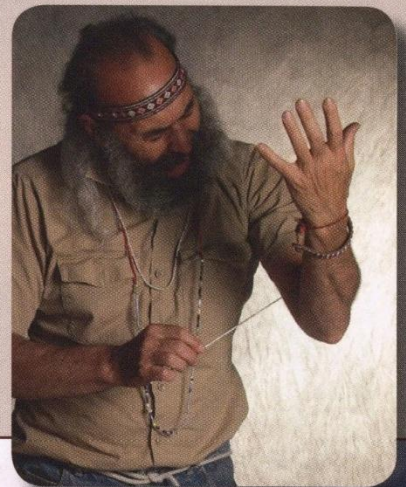
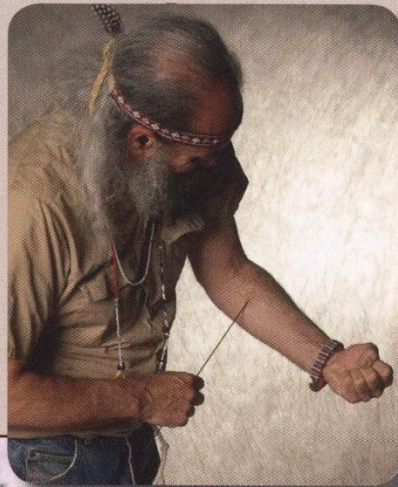
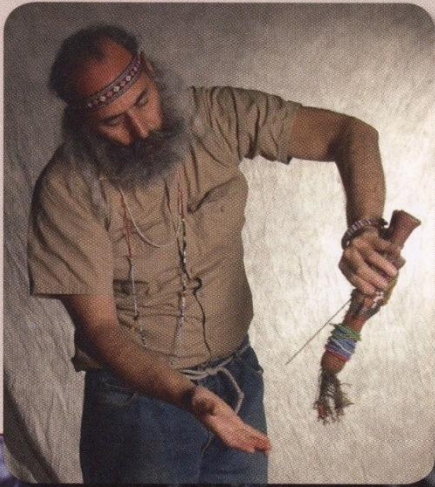
"My father's arm immediately began to sting, and he instinctively blew at his skin in an attempt to soothe the burn."

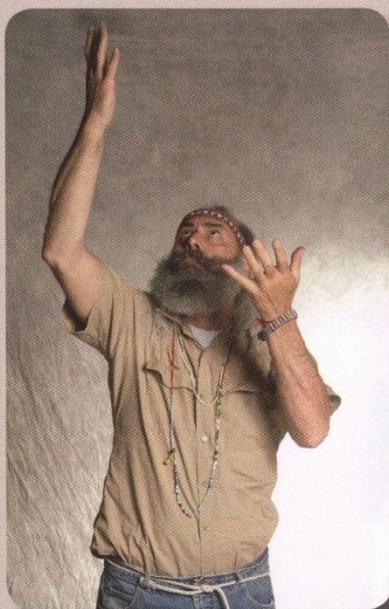
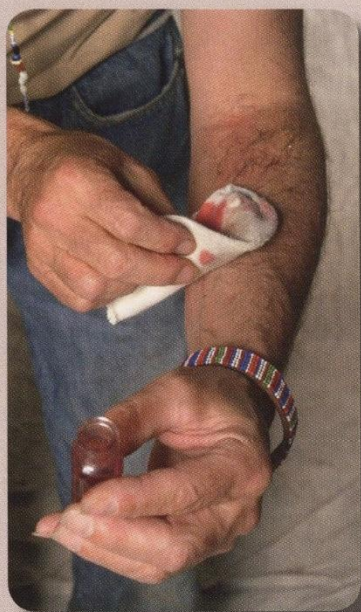
Alan reluctantly takes a seat upon the stool. He lifts the mysterious jar to his face and sniffs the contents. At first he recoils, then his body seems to relax. He picks up one of the filthy rags and pours the contents of the jar onto it, and then rubs the salve upon his forearm. As it stings his flesh, he blew upon the skin trying desperately to ease his pain. The rag falls into the porcelain bowl.

"Father entered a dreamlike state. He felt himself losing further control over what was happening to him. Nothing ... nothing in his life could have prepared him for this experience. He didn't know why, but his hand automatically moved to pick up the doll. He was compelled, for some unknown reason, to wave this strange doll over his arm. After many, many times, the doll seemed to steer his hand around his entire body ... over and over again.

"The doctor stood nearby. She did not communicate with him in any way that he could explain. But he knew that he







wiped the blood from his arms, all traces of the entry and exit wounds disappeared."

Alan takes another bottle from the table. He pours the contents onto the rag and cleans his arm. A sense of relaxation begins to come across his face. As his arm is cleaned, the audience sees no trace of a wound.

"All he was left with was a lasting memory of a great wisdom unknown in his world or mine."

Alan stands, his arms reaching toward the heavens. Voices joined in song are heard, clearly rejoicing.

The lights fade out.

Art and Craft

In this presentation we find two facets of Alan's magical personality: The Artist and The Craftsman.

Of course, magicians recognize this classic feat of magic as a variation of Bruce Spangler's "You-Do-Voodoo," where a thin coating of rubber cement is wiped on the arm in advance and adheres around a long needle, giving the illusion that the needle penetrates the arm. Interestingly, Alan performs this piece without the use of a gimmicked needle. Instead, he substitutes careful choreography and masterful acting.

As a craftsman, Alan wanted to solve the problem of reliably applying the rubber cement in performance. He needed to be sure it would dry before squeezing the skin together around the needle. So, he tells of the stinging sensation Father felt after the audience sees him wipe his arm with the cloth—and secretly apply the rubber cement in the process (photo 1). While the audience sees Father blowing upon his arm to relieve the pain, Alan blows upon his arm to dry the cement (photo 2).

You will also notice the use of the porcelain bowl as a receptacle for all properties. Rather than leaving the stage untidy, Alan ensures that there is a place for everything and every-

was in the presence of a healer, whose skills and competence he would never understand.

"No longer were gestures and instructions needed. He knew exactly what he was supposed to do. As he returned the doll to her branch, he withdrew a long needle from the doll's belt."

As if in a trance, Alan picks up the doll and begins moving it ceremoniously over his body. He returns the doll to the branch, and as his hand comes away, the gleaming needle is seen between his fingers.

"At that moment, the driver parted the tattered rags that served as curtains. Through the veil of his trance-like state, Father heard a fragment of conversation. 'Mama Docta, he okay?'

"Mama Docta replied, 'Don't you worry none; White Simba Boy be okay'."

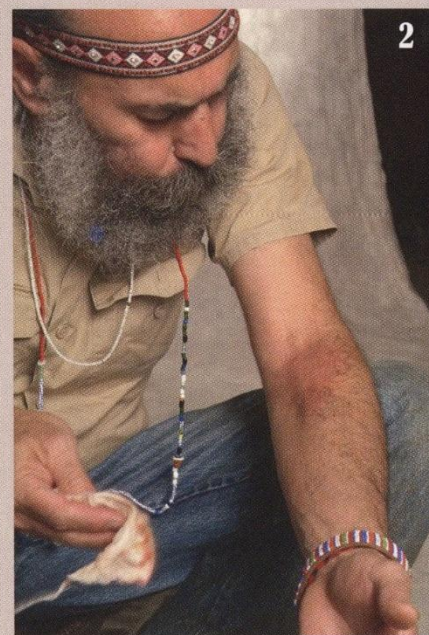
"Still in a trancelike state, Father took the needle and slowly—very, very slowly—pushed the needle completely through his arm. As the needle entered my father's body, he saw blood but he felt no pain.

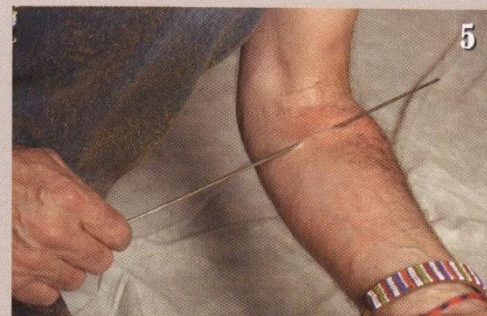
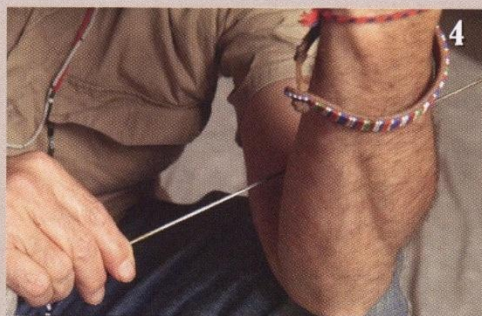
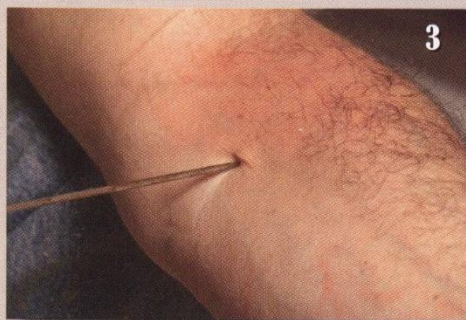
"Compelled by a force he couldn't control or understand, Father moved the needle back and forth several times."

The music suddenly changes. It is strange, foreign, and frightening. Alan's arm extends straight in front of him. The light shines down upon his bare forearm. The tip of the needle is placed upon his skin and we see the needle begin to enter the flesh. For better leverage, Alan raises his hand. From behind his arm we see the needle emerge from the other side.

Alan picks up a towel from the floor and wipes away the blood that is oozing from the wound. Then, in his trance, he pushes the needle back and forth. The audience is both compelled and stunned.

"As Father finally withdrew the needle, his body's swelling began to fade. With a trace of a smile upon her worn and wrinkled face, Mama Docta directed Father to take another bottle and rag, and apply the liquid to clean his wounds of dirt and blood. As he





thing is in its place. This is typically Alan. This also helps maintain the condition of the other props, as they will not become soiled by contact with the rubber cement, blood, or solvent.

Note also that the illusion of actually penetrating the flesh can be very strong. The needle is not run through the skin with the back of the arm to the audience, as is commonly done. Instead, the tip of the needle is seen pressing into the flesh (photo 3) before the arm moves upward to conceal the dirty work (photo 4). This is one example of how Alan's thoughtful physical blocking serves to enhance the impact of an already strong piece of magic.

The same is true of his "blood delivery system." After the rubber cement has been closed around the needle (photo 5), Alan looks at his skin and reacts to blood which is not there. The audience understands what is happening.



Alan then picks up a rag which has a rubber ear syringe filled with stage blood sewn into its corner. As he is pretending to stop the blood from dripping, he squeezes a tremendous amount of blood from the rubber bulb (photo 6). The volume of blood flow is much greater than possible with gimmicked needle versions.

As he lowers his arm, the audience sees the needle penetrating the flesh for the first time; to get rid of the load, all he has to do is drop the rag into the porcelain bowl at his feet.

Alan is a craftsman. The pieces of his vision mesh together perfectly. He is also an artist. Alan possessed the vision before he created the masterpiece. He has given

this "trick" a powerful context. By imbuing it with powerful and occasionally disturbing imagery, he has made it about people, their fears, and triumphs.

Just Alan on Creativity

If you are genuine about who you are, and your magic has some connection to you, you'll be halfway home. The next half requires committing yourself to a long, deliberate process. It is commonly thought that after spending an hour or so learning the method, practicing the moves, and making sure that all the angles are covered, then, like magic, the magician is ready to go out on stage. Wrong!

Real magic requires a much more contemplative process.

Creativity and innovation take time and thrive on failure before whatever mechanisms that actually inspire creativity can take over. What transforms a mediocre effect into something great is your dedication and motivation to really work all the bugs out.

So take your time. Hold the props. Carry them with you to and from the office. Get the feel of them. Fool with them, but don't even think about doing a trick. You may find that by immersing yourself in their look and feel, you will be inspired to tell a story about/with them.



The Magic of Life

Many times Alan has offered me wise counsel on matters other than magic. His advice is always carefully considered and is rooted in years of life experience. Two of the many lessons Alan has shared have always stuck with me.

The first came at a time when I was very troubled over a romantic relationship. I spoke to Alan about my problems and he summed everything up in two words: "Track record."

He suggested taking a step back and looking at this person's past behaviors and how she had handled similar situations. While people do change, he noted, for the most part someone's track record will speak volumes about that which you can expect from them in the future.

To this day, no matter what type of interpersonal chaos I find myself in, I always try to remember to take a step back and consider those two words of advice: "Track record."

The second lesson was less profound, but just as practical. I was considering buying a car and contemplating a new one. Alan pointed out that no matter how careful you are, that new car that you will pamper and care for will inevitably get dented. That first dent is, for many, a traumatic moment. Consequently, Alan prefers to buy his cars pre-dented, i.e., used, so when that inevitable moment arrives it isn't quite so distressing.

I will confess, I did buy a new car. But the value of this lesson still held true and I embraced the inevitable. When the first dent occurred, it was not a big deal. Nor was the second, third ... okay, I need to learn to drive.

A Final Example

My favorite moments with Alan are those in which we deconstruct a magical performance or consider in great depth that which we as artists are trying to do.

Alan believes that magic should be about life. It should be a reflection of the performer, striving to inspire, engage, and even instruct. Most important, it should transcend. Alan pulls from his unique abilities, interests, and experiences to add nuance to his work.

According to Alan, transcendence means going beyond the limits of mere surprise and visual appeal. Not that these elements are unimportant; but magic can say far more. People who watch magic want to transcend their day to day experiences and encounter something more than just another trick. They want to leave their seats without ever standing up.

Perhaps the most transcendent piece I have seen Alan perform occurred at Dai bu satsu Zendo, a Buddhist monastery in Livingston, New York. The piece, called "The Three Treasures," was a perfect example of symbolism succeeding in an artistic context. Religious scholar Paul Tillich enumerated the qualities possessed by a symbol.

First, it points beyond itself to a larger meaning. Of course, so do signs. But unlike signs, a symbol's "meaning" cannot be redefined at will. While one day we as a culture could decide that a purple hexagon on the side of the road represents "stop," that which people feel when they see their country's flag cannot be so readily altered. This exact meaning is conveyed by the symbol and only

Just Alan on Credibility

Magic is not about the trick; it's about you. So my first advice is to forget about the trick and think about who you are. What are your interests? What do you like to do? What do you want to share with others? What really moves you? Your magic begins when your trick is woven around you. Am I interested in art, or movies, or sports?

But if you do a trick with baseballs, and you don't like baseball, you won't be believable. You won't get the words right. Your timing will be off. Your effect will sound forced. And despite trying to feign interest, your spectator will be thinking, "Why is he showing me something so stupid?"

that symbol; no other object is capable of conveying the exact same meaning.

Secondly, the symbol participates in the reality of that to which it points. To use Tillich's example, a flag participates in the power and dignity of the nation for which it stands. An attack on the flag is felt as an attack on the nation.

Finally, and most important artistically, the symbol opens up levels of reality not available to us otherwise. Art reveals elements of reality that cannot be reached scientifically. This reality can only be reached through the specific symbol. Other symbols, such as mere words, will fail to convey the experience to the viewer.

It is this experience which art delivers. Artistic symbols not only offer up levels of reality unavailable to us, but they also unlock dimensions and elements of our own soul which correspond to those levels of reality.

In other words, art has meaning, but not a definable meaning that can be put into words, a meaning which can only be felt when experienced.

Alan's "The Three Treasures" is framed as a lesson in the Three Pillars of Zen. However, in the teaching, the analogies offered gradually become that to which they portend to point. And by the conclusion, the audience experiences what the lessons mean. To attempt description of the lesson would be an exercise in futility. I know. I have tried on many occasions to share with my friends the tale of this wonderful performance. Each attempt regretfully concluded with the hoary phrase, "You just had to be there." Those who were, experienced first hand a lesson in Zen.

JUST ALAN, continued on page 78

The Clay

The trick is nothing more than Bob Carver's "Professor's Nightmare" with a surprise restoration of the ropes for a finish. Yet with this trick as his clay, Alan has managed to sculpt a beautiful piece of art. It was Michelangelo who said trifles make perfection, yet perfection is no trifle. Accordingly, Alan has given careful consideration to each facet of the working of this piece.

The scene set is simple, though well chosen. To the rear of the stage, slightly off to the performer's right, is a screen for the projection of slide images. Alan covers the edges of the screen in fabric, taking away from the sterility of this piece of equipment.

Hidden on the back of the screen are a small hook and servante. Strong wire is fashioned into a hook on which a piece of rope will remain secretly coiled throughout the performance. Beneath that rope is a small servante into which pieces from a cut rope will be secretly dropped. For the right-handed performer, with the screen to his right, the system should be nearer the stage left edge of the screen.

In front and to the left of the screen are two small cushions. The larger cushion is square and rests directly on the floor. The smaller cushion is round and sits upon the first. Both are black. These cushions, called zafu and zabuton, respectively, are commonly used in meditation. They will be used as a stool during performance.

In front of the stool is a small square of cloth, on which is seen a sharpening stone and straight-edged razor. Both should be within easy reach of the seated performer. The razor will be used to cut the rope; consequently it must be very sharp. Use care when handling the razor.

The lighting should be subdued with just enough intensity for the performer and his actions to be illuminated. The image on the screen should be clear and crisp; avoid backlighting.

Playing in the background are Japanese flutes and bells. The bells will figure prominently in the story; an offstage assistant controls the tape player. The words of the Monk are prerecorded. The Monk's voice should convey a gentle, caring tone. Alan suggests a voice emulating that of a loving parent or teacher, someone trying to explain a difficult concept to a child without condescension. Likewise, when taking on the role of the Monk during performance, Alan warns against behaving somberly. Instead, he smiles and enjoys the effects these magical occurrences would have on a Seeker who came to him for guidance.

The voice of Seeker is your own. During the course of the performance, Alan dons a monk's vest. Any

robe or vest which can be held closed with a sash will suffice.

The sash will become the rope used for the "Professor's Nightmare" portion of the presentation, thus its preparation is critical.

The sash itself is magician's rope dyed bright yellow. Over several performances Alan tested different colors. Yellow was determined to "read" best at a distance.

Cutting the rope to the proper length during performance may prove challenging. In an effort to make things flawless, Alan prepares his sash ahead of time. Placing a visible mark on the rope would require the performer to look, focusing on what should appear to be a mundane action. Instead, Alan created a "tactile" means for marking.

Alan begins with a length of rope 141 inches long. Twenty-six inches from the right end of the rope, clear nail polish is applied for a length of approximately a half-inch (photo 1) and allowed to dry. A second band of clear nail polish is applied 48 inches from the first mark. During performance, he merely runs his fingers along the length of the sash to easily locate the change in texture, marking the spot where the rope will be cut.

A second duplicate sash is hidden behind the screen (photo 2). While it need not be prepared, Alan does so anyway. In this manner, the rope for the next performance is already set to go.

The final requirement is a pair of bells, attached to opposite ends of a small piece of leather or braided cord. Tibetan tingshas work well. The cord should be of a length to allow the performer to hold a bell in each hand, arms extended over his head, at about 12 inches beyond each shoulder.

The mechanics of the trick are simple. The performer, in character of the Monk, removes the sash from his robe. Both thumbs are hooked beneath the rope at its middle. The hands are raised and separated until about 10 inches of rope hang over the back of each hand. This cleanly displays the rope.



The rope is allowed to fall from the right hand, but the left hand maintains hold. The right hand moves to the left and he begins drawing the rope through his fingers until the first section of nail polish is felt. With the razor, the rope is cut (photo 3).

Repeating this drawing action locates the second tactile mark. The sash is again cut (photo 4).

The performer sets the razor on the mat. The first piece is taken along with the second, medium length of rope. There are now two pieces in one hand, the longest in the other.

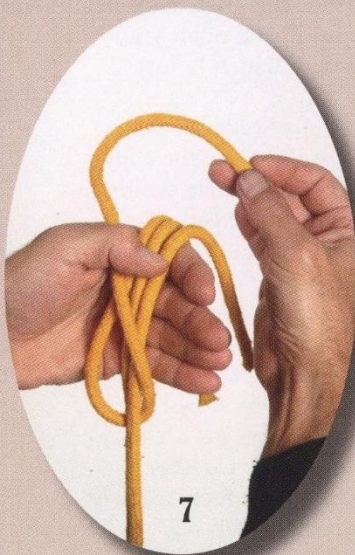
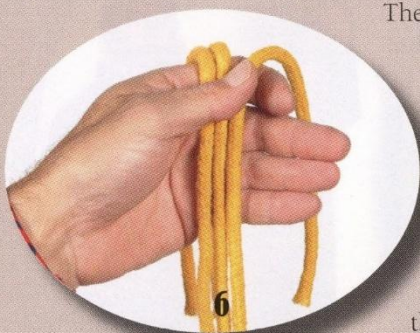
As part of the script, the performer loosely ties the three together in a knot (photo 5). They are untied and shown separately moving them from one hand to the other.

During this transfer, the ropes are prepared for the "Professor's Nightmare" stretch. (The standard handling is used, however I will describe it here for those who may be unfamiliar with it.) The pieces are transferred to the left hand, clipped between the left thumb and the upper side of the first finger (photo 6).

The short piece should be farthest to the left. The right hand grasps the lower end of the short piece and raises it, circling it around the short and middle pieces before nipping it with the left thumb (photo 7). The end of

the short piece held by the right hand is draped over the left hand so it rests against the

backs of the left fingers. Next, the lower end of the long piece is grasped by the right hand and raised until it can be draped over the left first finger to the right of the other ends (photo 8). Finally, the right hand grasps the lower end of the medium piece, raises it, and drapes it over the left fingers—again on the right end (photo 9). Now your right hand grasps all the ends and raises the ropes in your left hand until the lower end of the short loop moves upward just enough so that it's out of audience view inside the left hand.

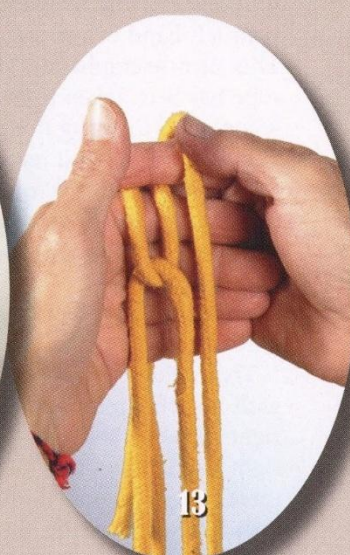
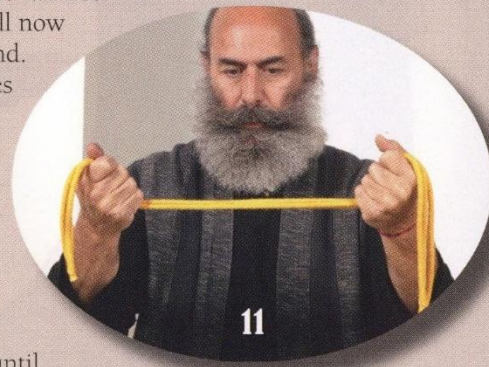


To stretch the ropes, your right hand grasps the three ends farthest to the right between the thumb and first finger, while your left thumb and first finger continue to hold the three ends farthest to the left (photo 10). As you pull your hands apart (to the right and left), the lengths of rope will magically equalize (photo 11). Open your right hand and allow its ends to fall free. The three equal ropes will now dangle from your left hand.

The three "equal" ropes are now counted from hand to hand. Your right hand moves to your left hand and grasps the upper end of the medium rope between the thumb and first finger. It is pulled to the right (photo 12) until it clears your left hand and swings

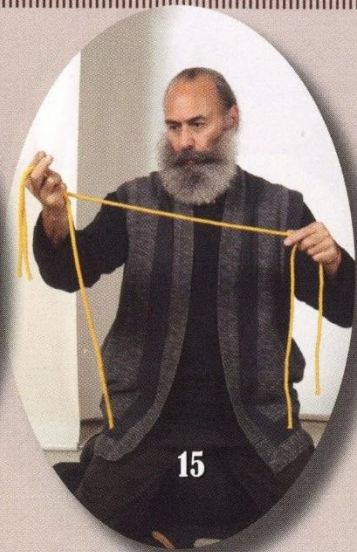
freely. The hands move together so the upper end of the two ropes which remain in the left hand can be clipped between the right first and second finger (photo 13).

The end of the medium rope, which has been between the right thumb and first finger, is now rolled to the left, where it can be grasped between the left thumb and the

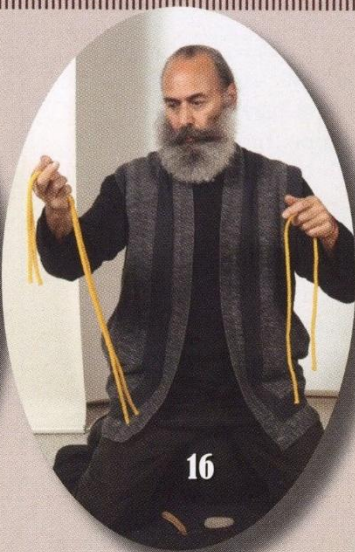




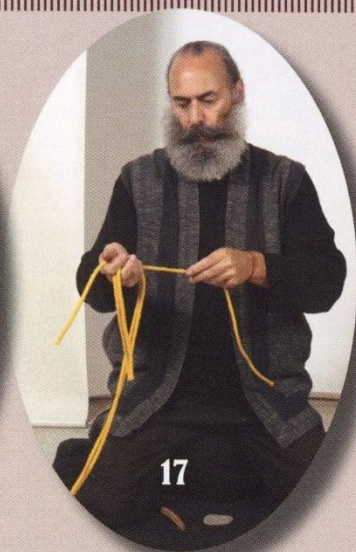
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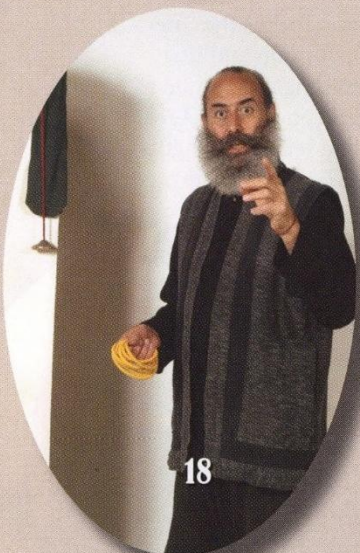
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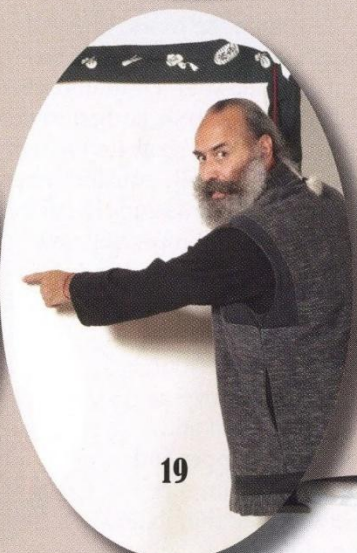
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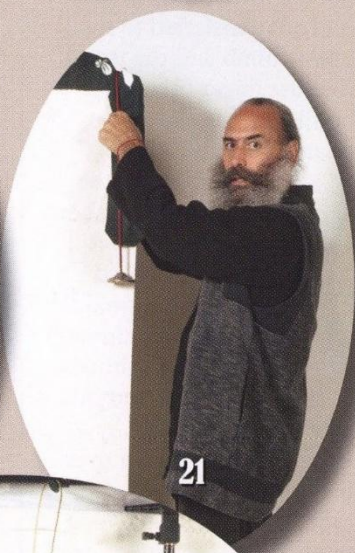
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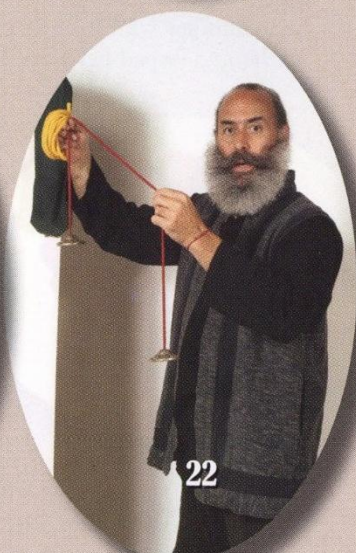
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upper side of the first finger (photo 14). Your right hand moves to the right with two ropes dangling from it—this appears to be the first rope and a second one you've just taken beside it. Allow one end to swing free from your left hand before the other (photo 15). This silently emphasizes that supposedly only a single rope has been taken from the left hand. Then, allow the second end to swing free (photo 16). Once the ends are free, your right hand returns to your left hand and pulls the remaining (third) rope from it (photo 17). The left hand retains the bottom of the third rope as the right hand moves away, then allows the end to swing to the right hand.

After counting, the "equal" ropes are coiled loosely around the right hand.

The performer walks to the screen (photo 18) and, with his left hand points to a location in the upper stage right corner of the image (photo 19). In doing so, the right hand moves naturally behind the screen. The coil of three ropes is dropped into the servante and the restored sash is taken from the hook (photo 20). Both hands

immediately rise and grasp the bells (photo 21), before removing them from the screen (photo 22)—and the rope is switched.

Sculpture

The method has been laid bare. Now, let go. Forget what you know. Relax, open your mind, and try to envision the artistry which is Just Alan's "The Three Treasures."

Alan enters the stage in the dress of a Seeker. Around his neck is the pair of bells. He bows deeply to the audience, hands together in a prayer-like fashion. He stands in front and to the left of a screen. On the screen is a picture of a Buddhist Zendo. It seems tranquil, serene. Japanese music wafts in the background.

Alan stands in profile, facing the screen. He slowly removes the two bells from around his neck. The music fades as he rings them together. As the chime sounds, he raises his hands, separating his arms. As the sound dies away, he turns one quarter turn to his right, his back now facing the audience. Again, his hands come together and the sound of bells resonates throughout the room. Slowly it fades as his hands are raised toward the sky.

Again he turns, his left side in profile. The sound of the bells echoes again. Finally he turns to face the audience and rings the bells one last time. Alan smiles as silence overtakes the stage.

"In my quest for self-discovery," Alan speaks, "I have traveled the world, seen much natural beauty, and had many wondrous and enlightening experiences. One such experience occurred on a crisp, clear fall day in 1971.

"I had walked many hours, high into the hills outside Kyoto, Japan. Fascinating shrines with marvelous sculptures dotted the way to my destination—Ten Dai, the temple home of a Zen Buddhist sect known for its mystical and magical ways. As I came over the rise, I had my first view of the ancient stone and wood monastery you see pictured behind me. As I approached the main gate, I came upon a monk ringing two bells. Such a unique sound. I had never before heard anything like it."

Alan strikes the bells. His head tilts, listening intensely.

"The sound combined with the strange chants droning out at me from the monastery's shadow reinforced the growing feeling that I had transcended time and space. I was drawn toward the monk hoping for the opportunity to ask him questions about Zen Buddhism.

"When I finally reached the monk, he was seated and still, except for the small circular motions made by his hands. As I approached, he looked in my direction, smiling, and bowed his head in a welcoming gesture. I could see that he was sharpening his straight razor. I begged the holy man's indulgence to ask him some questions. I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the three treasures of Buddhism. To my surprise and delight, the monk responded in English."

Alan walks to the screen and hangs the bells on its upper right corner. He dons the Monk's robe and ties it closed with the sash.

"You are about to hear his exact words, recorded that very day more than three decades ago. For me it's as though it was only yesterday and now it gives me great pleasure to invite you to join me at Tendai."

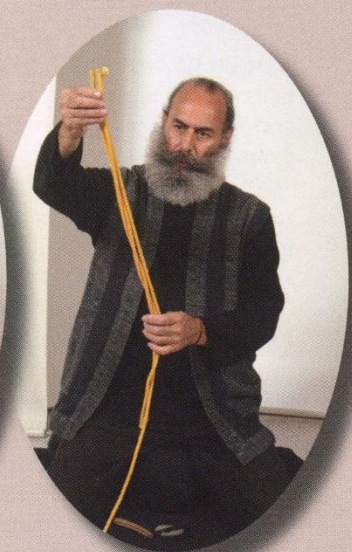
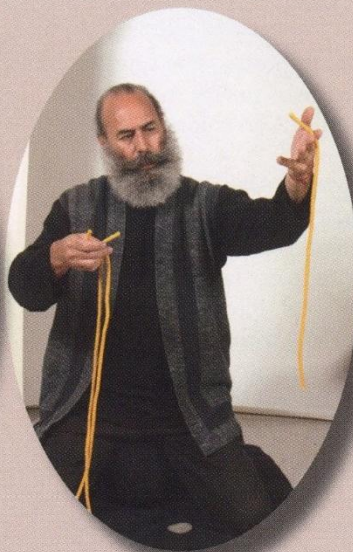
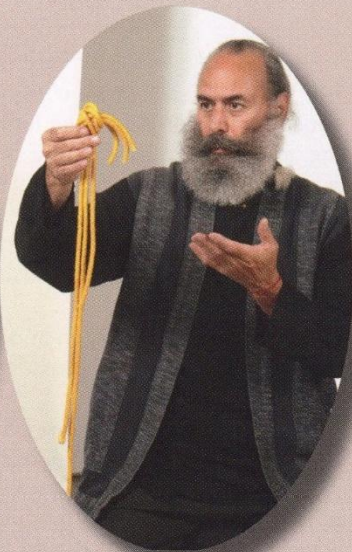
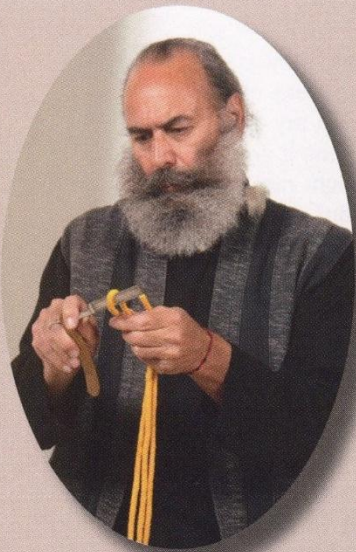
During the introductory silence, Alan takes the Monk's place upon the cushions. He picks up the razor and pretends for a moment to sharpen it on a rock.

From an offstage tape player, the monk's voice is heard:

"My friends, I know a little English and will try my best to explain Buddhism's three treasures for you."

As the monk speaks, Alan removes the sash and, hook-





ing both thumbs beneath its middle, spreads his arms wide, displaying it to the audience. He draws the rope through his hands and folds it into a small loop.

"The first is the Buddha. Shakyamuni ... the enlightened one. Buddha is more than one teacher. Buddha is all teachers ... all the beings of the universe."

The sash is cut and a small piece is separated.

"We Japanese have a saying, 'the ordinary person is the Buddha.' Yes, we are all the Buddha. We are nothing ... and at the same time full. We have in each of us, all possibilities."

The monk draws the sash once again through his hands. It is folded. His eyes focus upon each member of the audience, they are now the Seeker.

"My second treasure is the Dharma. Dharma is truth and teachings that explain the spirit of enlightenment."

The rope is again cut. The monk takes both the small and medium length pieces into his right hand.

As the longest piece is held up for display, the monk continues, "The third treasure is Sangha. It means brotherhood.

"Yes, brotherhood, but not only brotherhood between disciples of the Buddha. It is the tying together of all the universe ... from the earliest beginnings to the endless future."

With these words the three pieces are twisted around each other into a knot. The monk pauses, and smiles. Slowly he unties the pieces.

"Novices wonder, 'Is one treasure more important than another?' For us, is the Buddha—the enlightened One—the most important?"

This small piece is taken into his left hand.

"Or the Dharma—our treasured truths?"

The second, medium piece is taken.

"Or the Sangha ... the oneness of all that is, was, or will be?"

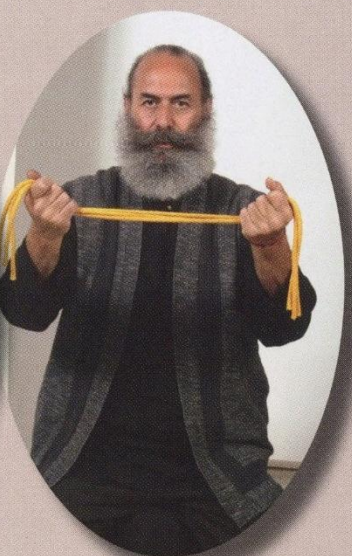
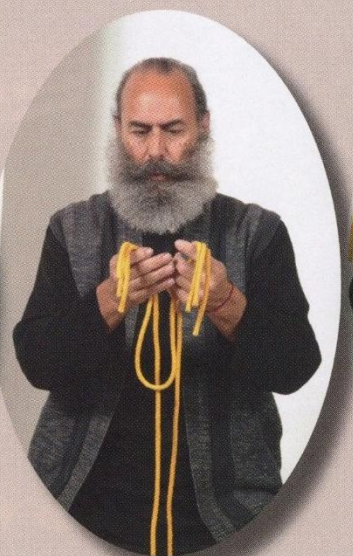
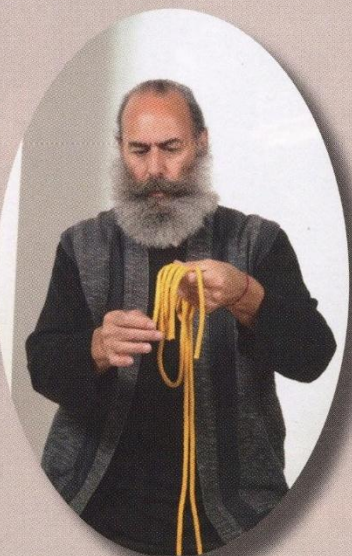
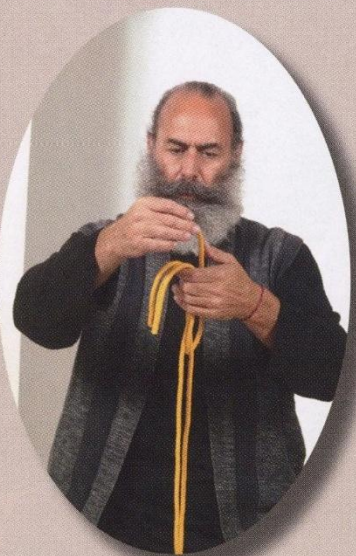
The longest piece is held high.

"It may appear that one treasure is more important than another ... that they are unequal, like the pieces of my sash. But as we enter into our practice, we learn to accept that what appears to be different ... is not different at all ... unequal becomes equal."

As these lines are spoken, the monk's hands move together. Gently he tugs on the ropes' ends, and during his last utterances, the ropes slowly stretch to three equal lengths.

Cautiously, the monk adds, "Please, never let yourself be fooled ... for life can be filled with delusion."

The monk counts the three pieces of rope from hand to hand, then serenely curls them into a loose coil around his right hand. He looks at the audience, and smiles.



Slowly, Alan stands. He moves toward the screen, standing to its left and careful not to block the view of the audience. His left hand reaches in front of the screen, pointing at a spot in the upper stage right corner of the image. Alan says, "This is the exact location I was standing when I met the monk." He takes the bells from the screen and steps forward. As he walks, he speaks, "It was here that I thanked the monk for his patience and wisdom. I told him how taken I had been with his bells ... how beautiful and pure of sound they were."

Alan strikes them together. As he speaks, he extends his hands to the audience.

"In response, the holy man reached out to me with the bells in hand gesturing to me to take them.

"I was deeply touched and told him so. I went on to say that I couldn't accept such a valuable gift. With the warmest of smiles he responded with words I will never forget.

"Please,' he said, 'you take the bells ... I will have their ring within my heart forever'."

tiques, and been elated from his compliments.

Allow me to try and convey one final sense of who Alan is with yet another anecdote. Perhaps, like his "Three Treasures," this will say more about Alan—in essence—than any words could hope to convey.

For several years I have performed at a summer retreat outside of Woodstock, New York. One year I found myself with a day off and elected to drop into Woodstock. I entered Alan's shop and was welcomed as family. This was my first visit to Alan's store.

After the end of day's chores were finished, Alan took me to his house for dinner. Juliette, who makes the best peanut sauce in the world, graciously prepared a fabulous meal, going well out of her way to accommodate my infamous dietary quirks.

After the meal, Alan asked if I wouldn't mind sharing some of my performance material with his family. I then presented a handful of pieces, all of which were met with the most supportive of



Alan bows gently as he accepts this offer. He drapes them around his neck.

"What a wonderful experience and little did I know that it was not yet over, for as the monk was preparing to leave he offered me these final words:

"Remember my friends, that everything is one and each ... is ... all'."

Alan taps his temple with his left forefinger. On his final word, the right hands snaps forward, the coiled pieces of sash unfurl. He smiles as he ties the restored sash around his robe.

The lesson is ended.

All Done With Kindness

Alan and I began our conversation over 15 years ago. In that time I have seen his dedication to the art manifest into unique performance pieces that break the modern conception of what magic is and considers what it can be. I have learned from his insights, grown from his cri-

responses for which one could hope. There was no competition from Alan or his family. It was one of the most pleasant demonstrations I have given.

At the end of my show, I began putting my props away. I had a hand-painted wand that I used in my performances. I placed it into my tattered magic bag, which was actually an old, threadbare camera case.

Alan eyed the case and asked, "Why do you use that?" I replied, "Well, because the wand fits in it."

Alan thought for a moment and asked, with the greatest of respect, if he could see the wand for a moment. As I removed it from the bag, he reached behind his chair and brought forth a beautiful, antique travel case.

Quietly he opened the lid and set the wand into the upper compartment. It fit perfectly.

"I guess this means it was meant to be yours."

I hope you enjoy the gift of Alan's art as much as I have enjoyed the gift of his friendship. •