Noms de Theatre
- stage names for magicians.

presented by

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When magicians start out on their careers they all have one thing in common - the need to have a stage name to conjure with.

The reasons for choosing a stage name are many and varied, and can be, if you will pardon the pun, a tricky business, but get it right and it will prove to be one of the finest assets a performer can have. I wonder, would Slydini have been so successful if he had continued to use the stage name Tony Foolem, or Cardini if he had used his real name Richard Valentine Pitchford?

A perfect example of getting it right is Ehrich Weiss, adding the letter ‘i’ to his idol’s name (Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin) to become Houdini. Even today, years after his death in 1926, Houdini is still a household name that immediately conjures up the legend and exploits of this great artist.

One reason for choosing a stage name is that the performer’s real name may just seem too ordinary, as I thought mine was. To me, Paul Freeman just did not have that showbiz pizazz I was looking for. However, when I saw a performance by my namesake, who was the first performer to wear gloves whilst manipulating cards, I realized, with some surprise, that it did work as a stage name and looked fine on posters. Again, when I saw his name along with those of Lewis Davenport, Edward Victor and Linga Singh being represented by the Will Goldston theatrical agency I realized just how wrong my thinking had been.

Paul Freeman, The Veritable King of Cards, on the bill of The Magic Circle’s Festival of Magic held at the Scala Theatre, London, in 1951.
The inspiration for choosing a stage name can come when least expected and from unusual sources. For instance: a biblical painting, a foreign language, a character in a book for young people, an opera by Richard Wagner and even a hit stage musical of 1916.

It is said that a young David Wighton was walking around a London art gallery when suddenly a painting by a French artist caught his eye. The painting depicted a famous biblical scene – two mismatched adversaries about to do battle. On walking up to the painting the young magician saw that its title was ‘David Devant Goliath’. David Wighton apparently did not know that the French word *devant* meant *before* in English. However, he liked the sound of it, and as he continued to look at the first two words of the painting’s title, he suddenly realized that together they would be a perfect stage name for him. From that moment of inspiration, he became known professionally as David Devant. He is now recognized as the greatest English magician of his generation, with the added distinction of being elected the first President of The Magic Circle.

I’m sure most of you would have been aware of that story, but I needed to tell it as it has a strong link with my next subject, the American magician, Norm Nielsen. On a visit to Las Vegas several years ago, I recounted to Norm the story of David Wighton and the painting, and how he changed his name to David Devant. Norm then told me that something very similar happened to him when he was appearing in Paris in the late 1960s at the Casino de Paris with his signature trick - the floating violin.

A speciality act had dropped out of the show in mid-season. Norm Nielsen covered for this missing act for four months performing his comedy cigarette act using a completely different stage name: Dale Antes. Dale is Norm Nielsen’s middle name, and *antes* is Spanish for *before*. So like David Wighton, he too used a foreign word meaning ‘before’ as part of his new stage name.
Around 100 years ago, when Billy Robinson went to work on Saturday, 23rd March 1918, he could not have known that at approximately 10:50 pm that evening he would be shot and fatally wounded by one of his own employees. With the report of his death the following morning at the age of 57 in Wood Green Passmore General Hospital, one of the best kept secrets of the entertainment world was finally revealed to an astonished theatre-going public.

The secret? Billy Robinson (or to give him his full name William Ellsworth Robinson) was none other than the popular music hall magician known throughout the world as Chung Ling Soo. For 18 years Robinson masqueraded both on and off the stage as an oriental magician. This remarkable deception was only revealed when newspapers reported the death of Chung Ling Soo while performing one of his signature illusions ‘Defying the Bullets’ on the stage of The Wood Green Empire, London. The cause of this terrible accident was a malfunctioning trick gun fired at him by one of his stage assistants.

William Robinson, already a well-known American magician and former assistant to Kellar and Herrmann the Great, adopted the stage name Chung Ling Soo when he was engaged to present an oriental act at The Alhambra Theatre, Leicester Square, London, following an engagement at The Folies Bergère in Paris.

Why did he choose the name of Chung Ling Soo for his very first appearance in an English theatre? The truth is he didn’t. It was a name suggested to him by close friends. In March 1900 he was performing at The Folies Bergère not as William Robinson - The Man of Mystery, which was the billing he used in America, but as Hop Ling Soo - The Chinese Wizard. Oriental magic had become very popular with music hall audiences both in America and Europe, and he was trying out a new act as an oriental magician. Robinson’s agent, Ike Rose, who did not like the name Hop Ling Soo, kept on insisting he found a more impressive oriental name.

T. Nelson Downs, the brilliant coin manipulator who was appearing in Paris at the same time, always claimed it was he who suggested the name of Chung Ling Soo to William Robinson and Ike Rose. Apparently Ike Rose liked this suggestion and when he was discussing with the Alhambra Theatre management the possibility of booking the oriental act of William Robinson, on the spur of the moment he gave his client’s name as Chung Ling Soo.

So whether it was Robinson himself, fellow American magician T. Nelson Downs, or Ike Rose who was responsible for the change of stage name, from the moment he stepped out on to the stage of the Alhambra Theatre on the 16th April 1900, the legend that was to become Chung Ling Soo was born.
On the night that Chung Ling Soo was shot a professional magician, currently serving in the British army, visited him in his dressing-room between the first and second houses. Just before the second show of the evening was due to start, Lance Corporal Cohen bid his friend farewell and went front of house to watch the show and witnessed the terrible accident that happened on the stage in full view of a packed theatre.

On returning to civilian life after the First World War, Cecil Lyle Cohen once again became known professionally as Cecil Lyle – The Magical Milliner. In January 1944, now as The Great Lyle, he brought his Cavalcade of Mystery show to one of my local theatres - The Chatham Empire.

As a young 17 year-old amateur magician, seeing for the first time a large scale illusion show, Cecil Lyle's Cavalcade of Mystery was to have a truly lasting effect on me. Remember that 1944 was towards the end of the Second World War and "D" Day was still six months away. I sat and watched the show in constant amazement as The Great Lyle presented one legendary illusion after another. On looking back to that evening of sheer enchantment, I can understand why Cecil Lyle was credited with prolonging the Golden Age of Magic.

That night, for me there was one illusion that stood out above all others. It was a three card monte routine using giant cards with Lucille Lefarge (Mrs. Lyle) as ‘The Queen of Hearts’.

It was Amac’s ‘Find the Lady’ which was advertised as ‘positively the most amazing illusion ever conceived’. Amac was the stage name of Robert William MacFarlane. I had always thought that he chose the name Amac as it was an acronym of "A Most, Amazing Conjurer":

| A  | Most  | Amazing  | Conjurer |

But according to Lucille Lyle he chose Amac because, as he said, "I am A MACFarlane".
Amac became the stage director for Lyle's *Cavalcade of Mystery* in the 1940s and it was always his responsibility to supervise the rigging up of his illusion, which would take up to four hours every time the show arrived at a new theatre.

A magician who will always be associated with Cecil Lyle, and in particular with Amac's illusion, is Granville Taylor who in 1953 had joined Cecil Lyle's *Mystery Box Revue* where he learned the running and organization of a big touring magic show.

After Lyle died in 1955, Granville Taylor began to fulfil a life-long ambition by starting to build up his own illusion show. He was able to use the experience gained with *The Mystery Box Revue* and also his time as a stage assistant to the Australian illusionist Murray.

In 1960, Lyle's widow Lucille sold Amac's illusion to Granville Taylor.

It was now time for Granville Taylor to adopt a suitable stage name for himself. In a letter to me he wrote “I do not like my own name as a stage name - it was much too long for bill matter and had no magic connection for the audience to remember me by”.

The name he would have liked to use was Dante, but as you know it was the stage name of Harry August Jansen. Adolphe Neiman, Granville Taylor's publicity agent for his new illusion show, as well as his former employer Murray, had both suggested ‘Faust’, but they both held the copyright to this name.

Granville liked the suggestion made to him by Neiman and Murray, as he felt this name really had the magic connections he was looking for - Faust selling his soul to the devil for the love of a woman. Also, Granville had
been born and was living in Lancashire on the outskirts of Nelson, a former mill town in the North East of England, not far from Pendle Hill the location of the famous Pendle Witch trials of 1612. So the connection between Faust, the devil and witches seemed to sum up what he was looking for in a stage name.

After protracted negotiations it was finally agreed that the rights to ‘Faust, the Magician’ and ‘The Great Faust’ would be purchased by Granville Taylor, the fee being divided between Neiman and Murray. Granville Taylor was now Faust the Magician.

The success of Amac’s illusion ‘Find the Lady’ inevitably lead it to being pirated and copied. The German illusionist Kalanag was reported to have included his version of it in his show Sim Sala Bim as he toured post-war Europe.

I first met Kalanag in Germany in January 1948, when he was touring with his show Sim Sala Bim entertaining members of the British Army of the Rhine. It was in the lovely small Kurtheater in Bad Oeynhausen that I watched Kalanag’s illusion show.

Afterwards, I was invited to meet him in his dressing-room where he made me most welcome. I found him very easy to talk to and we spent quite a long time discussing our mutual love of magic.

There was one effect in the show that I had seen that night which I had liked very much: the vanish of an oil lamp. That evening as we talked, Kalanag revealed to me that the white tuxedo he wore when presenting this effect had the right-hand sleeve made wider in order to allow the lit oil lamp to vanish faster. He also told me that as he had been burned many times because the flame had not been extinguished when the vanish took place, he protected his arm with an asbestos bandage.
In 1951 Kalanag came to The Stoll Theatre in London with a company of 45, 40 scene changes and 85 tons of illusions, costumes and stage equipment - a much enlarged and improved show to the one I had seen three years earlier in Bad Oeynhausen. One of the new illusions he included that night was the vanish of a Hillman motor car. According to Claude Klingsor, Kalanag had the apparatus for the vanishing car built for him in Cologne at a cost of $10,000. In 1948 that was a lot of money!

Helmut Schreiber (Kalanag’s real name) first became interested in magic at quite an early age - like most of us I suspect. In 1901 when he was 8 years old an uncle gave him a book on magic to help him recover from an ear infection. He soon became obsessed with magic, probably to the detriment of his scholastic studies. His worried parents invited to their home the celebrated Austrian illusionist Ernst Thorn hoping he would cure Helmut of his obsession. Not surprisingly it had the opposite effect, inspiring his passion even further.

When Helmut Schreiber was 16, he was sponsored by Ernst Thorn and became member No. 62 of The German Magic Circle.

Why did Helmut Schreiber choose Kalanag, an elephant in one of Rudyard Kipling’s Jungle Book stories, as his professional stage name? The simple answer is he didn’t - it was chosen for him - and it happened like this.

In the winter of 1918, when he was 25 years old, he had been booked by the Red Cross to entertain German soldiers at a hospital in the Black Forest. When he arrived he found notices announcing the appearance of Kalanag - The Great Magician. Even though he explained to the Sergeant in charge of the concert that his name was Schreiber not Kalanag, he had to go on and do his act for the wounded soldiers. At
the end of his performance his audience were applauding wildly, shouting and stamping their feet, calling for more and yelling “Kalanag”, “bravo Kalanag”.

The reason why the hospital had advertised Helmut as Kalanag was because when the hospital’s Superintendent was asked what name should be used to advertise the young magician, the Superintendent was reading Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. The name of one of its characters – the elephant Kala Nag - just popped into his head.

After his show to the soldiers, Helmut reflected on the warm reception he had received from them and how they had kept shouting the name Kalanag, so he decided there and then to adopt the name Kalanag as his stage name.

Helmut Schreiber died from a heart attack on 24th December 1963.

Over the next three years, Schreiber’s widow (Gloria de Vos) tried to sell the Kalanag Show to Fred Kaps, Richiardi Jr, and Peter Reveen. It was eventually purchased in 1967 by the Belgian magic dealer and collector Claude Klingsor.

Claude Klingsor - real name Claude Isbecque - for 30 years had a magic shop in the heart of Brussels. He held the position of President of FISM (Federation Internationale des Societes Magiques) from 1976 to 1979. He is also an Honorary Member of The Academy of Magic Arts in the USA, and held the Presidency of The Royal Club of Magicians of Brussels for 12 years.

The character ‘Klingsor’ in Richard Wagner’s last opera, *Parsifal*, is an evil magician who uses his powers to corrupt the Knights of The Holy Grail. I was intrigued to know just why Claude Isbecque had chosen the name of this character from the opera as his stage name. In a letter to me he wrote that when he built up a magic act he tried to find a suitable name for himself. His first choice was ‘Presto’, but he considered
this to be meaningless. His letter goes on to say that in his father’s library there was a copy of the libretto of Wagner’s *Parsifal* which he had read and that he was familiar with the character Klingsor. To Claude Isbecque the name Klingsor sounded just as well in French, German or English. He adopted it for his stage appearances and used it on all of his tours of USA, Japan, Germany and Italy. And that is the name he is known by today.

In 1909, although some researchers put it two years later, a 34 year old Dutch magician whilst minding a New York magic shop, found himself toying with a small round pill box. Having an inventive mind, he realized its potential as a unique magic prop. The outcome of his lateral thinking was the ‘Okito Coin Box’, which those of you who perform close-up magic probably use in your coin routines. Okito was the stage name used by Tobias Bamberg when he performed his oriental magic show. An ice skating accident when a young boy left Tobias almost completely deaf, so he opted to perform a silent act, for which an oriental theme was ideally suited.

It was in 1893 that he first created his Japanese-style magic act performing as Okito. Even when he replaced his Japanese costumes for Chinese ones, he still retained the name Okito. Tobias Bamberg chose the name Okito by simply rearranging the letters making up the name of the Japanese Imperial Capital Kioto. It was around 1868 that Tokyo became Japan’s capital city.

It is interesting to note that, unlike William Ellsworth Robinson (Chung Ling Soo), Tobias Bamberg made no attempt to hide his European identity.

But it was not only stage magicians that found success by looking to the eastern world for inspiration in their work.

On the 3rd August 1916 a stage musical opened at His Majesty’s Theatre, London and immediately became an outstanding success and a great favourite with soldiers on leave from the Western Front. *Chu Chin Chow* was based on the legend of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.

In 1936 a seven year old William Oliver Wallace was taken to see a film version of this stage show and he was greatly impressed, even at his young age, by the Arabian settings and costumes. He was particularly impressed by the costumes which were to play an important part in his development as a stage magician.
Years later when William Wallace was living in Kent, he took part in an amateur pantomime set in the mythical land called ‘Pongoland’. William was asked to write a song about the character he was playing (Ali) and he needed a name to rhyme with ‘Pongoland’. The name he chose was ‘Bongo’.

No prizes for guessing who my last subject is - he is the much loved and now sadly missed Ali Bongo. After the pantomime William did a magic show as Ali Bongo in the costume he wore in the pantomime. It went well - he got laughs - so he decided to keep the character, costume and name which were to bring him richly deserved international fame. And, of course, we all know him as The Shreik of Araby - the perfect magician’s magician.

Today I have only been able to mention a few of the performers who, by adopting a stage name to conjure with and "getting it right", created a stage persona that was undoubtedly a major factor contributing to their international success.

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