

## The Muhlenberg College 2009 *Theory and Art of Magic* Conference: A Review

by George P. Hansen

For eleven years, Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, has offered a program titled *The Theory and Art of Magic*.<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Hass, a professor of philosophy and theatre, has been behind it from the beginning. He has taught courses on magic, brought leading magicians to campus as artists-in-residence, and co-edited the book *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (2008).<sup>2</sup> It's been a unique program; I know of nothing similar.

During March 19-21, 2009, Muhlenberg sponsored a conference on magic. It was notable for its diversity—with scholarly addresses, professional performances, tutorials, and some student presentations (I counted 24 individuals listed on the schedule). It included lectures on magic in relation to rhetoric, architecture, philosophy of Sartre, shamanism, humor, physical and recreational therapy, and others. It was neither a fully academic conference nor a typical magic convention, but rather an unusual hybrid. Likewise, this review will be partly traditional conference report and partly academic commentary. I will not attempt to be comprehensive but rather focus on aspects most pertinent to themes of the trickster and the paranormal. The readers of this review are likely to have a diverse background, so I shall include comments in endnotes for those who have specialized academic interests.

### *Some Presentations*

Harley Newman, a sideshow performer, spoke on shamanism and made several remarks on shamanic fraud. His multimedia presentation included an elaborate slide show with music. Newman's was perhaps the most unusual demonstration; he walked on swords and swallowed one. He lay on a bed of nails composed of only four spikes. His website reports that the stunt was too dangerous to be included in the *Guinness Book of Records*.<sup>3</sup>

Tom Meseroll discussed martial arts, magic, and Eastern philosophy. During his performance, he was blindfolded, took a sword, and sliced through a watermelon sitting on Lawrence Hass's abdomen. Meseroll is an astrophysicist who worked in systems engineering at The Boeing Company. He's also an ordained pastor and performs weddings.

Jeanette Andrews, a freshman undergraduate, lectured on "Sartre's theory of the imagination and the unreality of magic." During the question-and-answer period I asked whether Sartre directly addressed *mystery*. In the ensuing discussion, Marjorie Hass (of

the philosophy department at Muhlenberg College) suggested that Sartre's writings might not be too useful on that topic.

Eric Van Duzer, a professor of education at Humboldt State University in California, and his sister Leslie Van Duzer, a professor of architecture at the University of Minnesota, did a joint lecture on magic illusions and architecture. They described and illustrated commonalities in techniques used in the two. During an informal lunchtime presentation, they conducted a more in-depth discussion and showed additional slides.

Joseph Zompetti, a professor of communication at Illinois State University, spoke on rhetoric and magic. He's not a magician himself, but he has been interviewing magicians in order to learn how they persuade people that the impossible is possible.

Las Vegas magician and mentalist Paul Draper spoke on the Stanislavski method. He had been active in the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness, which was founded by anthropologists with an interest in parapsychology. Draper himself has special interests in spiritualism and in zombies.

Mark Zust, a professional speaker and facilitator (and author of *ESP for Everybody*), gave a talk accompanied by a demonstration of "paranormal" bending of a railroad spike (he later explained the trick).

Lawrence Hass reviewed and critiqued Robert Neale's book *The Magic Mirror*,<sup>4</sup> which presents theoretical ideas on magic. Hass indicated that the work was innovative and suggested points that needed further clarification. Hass discussed ideas from philosophy to explain his points. He's an excellent lecturer, and when I later spoke with several of his students, they all praised him. Hass earned his doctorate in 1991 at the University of Illinois with a dissertation titled "Merleau-Ponty and the Dialectic of Perception." After finishing his degree, he became interested in the perceptual and aesthetic experience of magic. Eventually he became an accomplished magician himself, and he has performed at the Magic Castle in Hollywood.

Late Friday afternoon there was a gallery exhibition of some of Marc DeSouza's posters, apparatus, and photographs. DeSouza is well known within the magic world for his extensive collection, which also includes books and videos. The exhibit was accompanied by a lavish reception with wine, hors d'oeuvres, and close-up magic performers.

### *Eugene Burger and A Magical Vision*

For me, one of the highlights of the program was the screening of *A Magical Vision*, a documentary focused on the life and magic of Eugene Burger. The film was produced by Michael Caplan, a longtime friend of Burger and a professor of film and video at Columbia College Chicago. Burger is one of the most profound thinkers in magic today,

and his writings are vital for anyone interested in the relationship between magic and the paranormal.

Burger has been an important figure in the Muhlenberg program since the beginning. Lawrence Hass wrote: “When I began conceiving this program some years ago the first thing I did was call Eugene to see if he would come to inaugurate it. He enthusiastically agreed, and provided sage counsel throughout the entire production process. Eugene and Margaret Steele opened the program with a performance-lecture entitled *An Introduction to the Art of Magic*.”<sup>5</sup>

*A Magical Vision* covered not only magic, but also religion. Burger graduated from Yale University’s Divinity School in 1964 and then worked at a Lutheran church in Chicago. In the late 1960s he taught comparative religion at the University of Illinois in Urbana.<sup>6</sup> Religious themes and imagery are prominent in Burger’s performances. In fact, at the conference Burger asserted that he felt *called* to magic. He often dresses in black, like a priest or rabbi. Two of his signature tricks are the Gypsy Thread and Card Warp, with patter lines involving Brahma and Shiva, and Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition, respectively.

In the discussion following the screening, Burger mentioned prominent liberal Christian religious scholars Paul Tillich and John Dominic Crossan, as well as Gabriel Marcel. During the question-and-answer period I asked Burger how he saw the connection between magic and religion. He seemed reticent, in fact strikingly so. He did admit that the two were not altogether distinct but said little more than that.

Given his reticence, and the salience of religious themes in his personal and professional lives, one might suspect that Burger has some ambivalence about the connection of magic and religion. It can be noted that he has thought about issues of religion, magic, and the supernatural/paranormal not just for years, but for decades. Burger has performed many séances, and his book *Spirit Theater* includes an extensive discussion of the religion of Spiritualism. During his coursework at Yale Divinity School, he was undoubtedly exposed to demythologizing, which has little place for miracle or supernatural events in the world today.<sup>7,8</sup> With such a background, some might expect Burger to be hostile to psychic and miraculous claims, but I have not encountered that in his writings. He seems to have written little about his views regarding the existence of paranormal/supernatural phenomena.<sup>9</sup>

Burger is one of several magicians who have written on religion, magic, and the supernatural.<sup>10,11</sup> The interrelationships among the three are problematic because the boundaries separating them are blurred.<sup>12</sup> Some see them as entirely distinct areas, whereas others perceive extensive overlap.<sup>13-15</sup> The conjunction of religion, magic, and the supernatural is a liminal, ambiguous, nonrational domain. Robert Neale’s book *In Praise of Play* (1969) describes and explains the ambivalence that these topics provoke.<sup>16,17</sup> Thus any ambivalence Burger may have about the relationship between magic and religion might suggest a certain appreciation of the problematic nature of the matter. In regard to that relationship, Burger has pondered the notion of *mystery*,<sup>18</sup> a

topic central to the religion/magic overlap. He has written a defense of the nonrational aspect of mystery. He commented favorably on the writings on wonder by magician S. H. Sharpe, and Burger challenged the position of “the typical magician-skeptic-debunker.”<sup>19,20</sup> Burger himself cannot be labeled a debunker.

### *Other Attendees*

As with many conferences, non-presenter attendees were frequently as interesting, informative, and entertaining as the formal presentations. And the size of the gathering was conducive to informal discussion during breaks and before and after sessions (the conference website reported that it was sold out at 100 people). In the audience were neuro-biologists Susana Martinez-Conde and Stephen Macknik. Their article “Magic and the Brain,” in the December 2008 issue of *Scientific American*, discussed the neuroscience of magic tricks. Their work has been supported by the Mind Science Foundation, which in years past was a major funder of parapsychological research.

Phenomenology is an interest of several people who attended the convention.<sup>21</sup> In addition to Professor Hass, I met three other magicians who had a strong interest in phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty was one of the leading philosophers of phenomenology and was the subject of Hass’s doctoral dissertation). I had extended discussions with a couple of them, one of whom is pursuing graduate work focusing on Western esoteric traditions. These interactions made me wonder if there is a wider interest in phenomenology among magician-academics. For instance, David Abram, a philosopher of ecology, was influenced by phenomenology.<sup>22</sup>

And as is typical with magic conventions, there were numerous opportunities to watch some very skillful close-up performers between lectures, during meals, and in the hallways.

### *The Venue*

Muhlenberg College can be proud of its facilities and hospitality. A superb buffet breakfast was served all three days, and the cafeteria across the hall from the meeting room offered an excellent all-you-can-eat lunch for \$6.75. The conference banquet was excellent. Parking was no problem at all. Campus personnel were friendly, and one of Dr. Hass’s students spontaneously invited some of us conference-goers to a short a cappella performance.

### *Some Final Remarks*

This was the final year at Muhlenberg College for *The Theory and Art of Magic* program. Professor Hass and his wife will be moving to Sherman, Texas (approximately

60 miles north of Dallas), where she will become President of Austin College on July 1 of this year. The program will be moving with Professor Hass.

Despite the exceptional support from Muhlenberg College, no department of magic was created, and it seems unlikely that anything like *The Theory and Art of Magic* will continue at Muhlenberg. This unique program did not “institutionalize” within the College—its viability depended primarily on an individual, rather than on an institution. This outcome should be expected and not lamented; it illustrates the anthropological concept of *anti-structure* as it applies to magic. Magic is a very marginal topic within academe.<sup>23</sup> There are no departments devoted to it, and it is rare to find even non-credit courses on magic offered by colleges or universities.<sup>24</sup>

The academic marginality of magic does have advantages. It allows fewer limits on the acceptability of topics and fewer restrictions on formal credentials of invited speakers. The conference brought together a wide range of ideas and disciplines to be shared—far wider than in traditional academic meetings. The blurring and merging of categories made the conference somewhat liminal. It erased boundaries between disciplines. New connections and different ways of thinking were encouraged, resulting in a unique, intellectually stimulating program.

A listing of the program is available online at—

<http://www.muhlenberg.edu/cultural/magic/schedule.html>

Photos of presenters can be seen at—

<http://www.dexterlane.com/Muhlenberg/>

### *Acknowledgement*

I wish to thank William V. Rauscher for use of his library on magic and psychical research.

### **Major References**

Burger, Eugene; Neale, Robert E. (1995). *Magic & Meaning*. Seattle, WA: Hermetic Press, Inc.

Coppa, Francesca; Hass, Lawrence; Peck, James (editors). *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Hansen, George P. (2001). *The Trickster and the Paranormal*. Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris.

### Endnotes

1. The first program of “The Theory and Art of Magic” was held September 8 to October 15, 1999, and it resulted in a series of articles published in *The Linking Ring* from September 2000 to May 2001.
2. Coppa, Francesca; Hass, Lawrence; Peck, James (editors). (2008). *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. The Introduction describes the Muhlenberg College program.
3. <http://www.bladewalker.com/Performance/Stunts.html>. Accessed May 13, 2008.
4. Neale, Robert E.; with Parr, David. (2002). *The Magic Mirror: Reflections on the Nature and Relevance of Magic*. Seattle, WA: Hermetic Press, Inc.
5. Hass, Lawrence. (2000). The Theory and Art of Magic. *The Linking Ring*. Vol. 80, No. 10, October, p. 47.
6. Burger, Eugene. (1986). *Spirit Theater: Reflections on the History and Performance of Seances*. Published by Richard Kaufman and Alan Greenberg. See page 26.
7. Advocates of demythologizing are likely to be found in liberal Protestant seminaries. The writings of Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann illustrate attitudes of those who advocate a demythologized Christianity. For instance, in his 1941 classic essay “New Testament and Mythology” he wrote: “Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in *spirits, whether good or evil*...It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles” (In Hans Werner Bartsch [editor], *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1961, pp. 1-44. See pages 4-5 for quotation.). Of course, many highly educated people today do believe in the reality of spirits and miracles. But Bultmann’s opinions are widely shared among those who identify themselves with cultural and academic elites. Demythologization is apparent in writings of Robert E. Neale, Burger’s frequent collaborator—for instance, see Neale’s 2001 article “Illusions About Illusions” (*The Linking Ring*, Vol. 81, No. 5, May, pp. 47-56.). Neale was a professor of religion for 24 years at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.
8. Demythologization is an instance of what Max Weber called the rationalization and disenchantment of the world. For an explanation of those topics, see Chapter 8 of George P. Hansen’s *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 2001). Demythologizing contributes to secularization. For a discussion of the denial

of the miraculous in the process of secularization see Bryan R. Wilson's article "Secularization" (In Mircea Eliade [editor], *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 13, pp. 159-165, New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987.).

9. Burger has described a case of trusting his intuition that led him to avoid a frightening situation. James Randi dismissed the instance as a coincidence, but it seemed to puzzle Burger. See Burger's 2002 article "A Halloween Tale" (*Genii: The Conjurors' Magazine*. October, Vol. 65, No. 10, pp. 70-71. Also available at: <http://www.lanceburton.com/learn/oView.php?id=28>. Accessed May 14, 2009.).
10. Some of the very earliest literature on magic also covered religion and the supernatural. Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) explained magic tricks, attacked Roman Catholicism, and debunked supernatural superstitions. However, Scot did not reject all supernatural phenomena; he accepted the reality of the miracles of Moses, Jesus, and the apostles.
11. Contemporary magicians who have written on all three of these topics include William V. Rauscher (e.g., *Religion, Magic, and the Supernatural: The Autobiography, Reflections and Essays of an Episcopal Priest*. Woodbury, NJ: Mystic Light Press, 2006), Robert E. Neale (e.g., see endnote 7, above), and Martin Gardner (e.g., for his comments on religion see *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*, New York: Quill, 1983). Also, some conservative Protestant magicians have written on the dangers of the occult. Examples include Andre Kolé and Al Janssen's *Miracles or Magic?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1987 [Originally published as *From Illusion to Reality* in 1984]); Andre Kole with Jerry MacGregor's *Mind Games* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998); Danny Korem *Powers: Testing the Psychic & Supernatural* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988); Danny Korem and Paul Meier's *The Fakers: Exploding the Myths of the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1981 [revised edition]); and Toby Travis's *Paranormal Lies & Wonders* (Chanhassen, MN: Faith Studies International, 1995).
12. An illustration of this confusion and blurring can be seen in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass, James Peck (editors). The Library of Congress classification given in the book, BF1595.P47 2008, places it in the occult sciences section, near magic, hermetics, and necromancy. On the other hand, the Dewey Decimal classification in the book, 793.809—dc22, puts it with magic tricks, and near chess and card games.
13. Members of the Fellowship of Christian Magicians typically make a clear separation between magic and the supernatural. For instance, see Robert H. Hill's 1988 article "Should a Christian Do Magic?" Available at: [http://fcm.org/usa/should\\_a\\_christian\\_do\\_magic.php](http://fcm.org/usa/should_a_christian_do_magic.php). Accessed May 14, 2009.
14. An overt blurring of magic and occult practice can be seen in the writings of Tony "Doc" Shiels, who has been called "the high priest of bizarre magic" (see page 27 of

Eugene Burger's *Strange Ceremonies: Bizarre Magick for the Modern Conjuror* [Published by Richard Kaufman and Alan Greenberg, 1991]). For instance Shiels wrote: "Performing, writing, and thinking about trickery, illusion, legerdemain, hocus-pocus, and all such stuff, actually seems to make the genuine thing happen...To perform a 'trick' is, in effect, to act out a piece of sympathetic magic" (see page 48 of Tony 'Doc' Shiels's *The Cantrip Codex* ([Chicago, IL]: Tony Andruzzi, 1989). I suspect that statement is more than just a patter line and that Shiels actually takes it seriously.

15. Robert E. Neale's demythologized perspective perhaps gives magic an important place in at least some religions, though I am not sure if everyone would view it that way.
16. Neale, Robert E. (1969). *In Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers. See Chapter 4.
17. Neale's book was published during a period that saw much innovative academic work on ritual, myth, and the sacred. During that time, the concepts of liminality and anti-structure were developed and elaborated. Chapter 4 of *In Praise of Play* is relevant to performance magic, but I have not encountered the central ideas from that chapter in any of Neale's writings for magicians. The ideas substantially illuminate the first sentence of Chapter 1 of *Magic & Meaning*: "Are magicians afraid of magic?"—a profound question asked by Max Maven. Chapter 4 is also relevant to the phenomenology of magic as well as to the notion of the fear of psi.
18. Burger, Eugene; Neale, Robert E. (1995). *Magic & Meaning*. Seattle, WA: Hermetic Press, Inc. See page 19.
19. Burger, Eugene; Neale, Robert E. (1995). *Magic & Meaning*. Seattle, WA: Hermetic Press, Inc. See page 19.
20. Some think that most magicians are skeptical debunkers. In reality, many famous magicians in history have endorsed the reality of psychic phenomena. See George P. Hansen's 1990 article "Magicians Who Endorsed Psychic Phenomena" (*The Linking Ring*. Vol. 70, No. 8, August, pp. 52-54; No. 9, September, pp. 63-65, 109. Available at: <http://www.tricksterbook.com/ArticlesOnline/MagiciansWhoEndorsedPsychicPhenom.pdf>. Accessed May 14, 2009.). For results of polls on magicians' beliefs regarding the paranormal, see Marcello Truzzi's paper "Reflections on the Sociology and Social Psychology of Conjurors and Their Relations with Psychical Research" (In Stanley Krippner [editor], *Advances in Parapsychological Research* 8, pp. 221-271. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997.).
21. The term *phenomenology* is used here as in academic departments of philosophy, and not as employed (occasionally) in government intelligence circles involved with the paranormal.

22. Abram's early career had been as a professional magician. He had the opportunity to study, and swap tricks with, shamans on several continents. The first chapter of his book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996) describes his experience of participatory consciousness. Much of that first chapter also appeared later in Eugene Burger and Jeff McBride's *Mystery School: An Adventure Into the Deeper Meaning of Magic* (Seattle, WA: The Miracle Factory, 2003, pp. 161-174.).
23. The term *marginality* is widely used in the social sciences. The term *anti-structure* is much less known. It was developed from the study of ritual, but it has much wider applicability and can be applied to certain circumstances involving social relationships, social structures, and institutions. It is highly pertinent to both magic and paranormal/supernatural phenomena. See *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, pages 132-133, for a discussion of the marginality and anti-structure of magic.
24. It should be noted that there has been a slowly growing academic interest in magic from a variety of perspectives. Some examples include: Michael Mangan's *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring* (Bristol, U.K.: Intellect, 2007); Simon During's *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Fred Nadis's *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); and Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Also worth mentioning are the works of Richard Wiseman and Peter Lamont, who have been associated with the parapsychology program at the University of Edinburgh. Some of those include Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman's *Magic in Theory: An Introduction to the Theoretical and Psychological Elements of Conjuring* (Hatfield, U.K.: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999) and Peter Lamont's *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick: The Biography of a Legend* (London, U.K.: Little, Brown, 2004).

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