



The Millionaires' Magician

An Interview with Steve Cohen, Chamber Magic

EDITORS' NOTE Steve Cohen, *The Millionaires' Magician*, has the long-running show at *The Waldorf Towers*, which has been described by *Forbes* magazine as "the world's greatest magic act." Most recently, Cohen was the star attraction at a private party in Omaha for Warren Buffett. Other notable fans include Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Jack Welch, and U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer. Cohen has been featured on *CNN*, *CBS Evening News*, and the *History Channel*, and has appeared in *The New York Times*, *the Financial Times*, *The London Sunday Times*, and *the London Evening Standard*. He has performed at venues including *Lincoln Center*, *the New York Stock Exchange*, *the United Nations*, and *Wynn Las Vegas*. He began his career performing at family gatherings and gradually made his way onto the public stage. He earned a degree in psychology from *Cornell University* and spent a year abroad studying at *Waseda University* in Tokyo. He has native-level proficiency in Japanese and has worked as an interpreter for the Japanese government. Cohen is the author of *Win the Crowd*, and holds the esteemed rank of *MIMC (Member of the Inner Magic Circle)* with *Gold Star*, awarded by *The Magic Circle* in London.

Can you give us the background on the evolution and development of Chamber Magic?

I started this show in 1999 at my friend's Victorian-style apartment in the West Village, and was bringing in personal clients for about three weeks before I got kicked out – my friend's wife didn't want so many strangers in her living room.

I then became a member of *The National Arts Club* in Gramercy Park, a beautiful townhouse with a lovely Victorian-style drawing room, which reminded me of the venues where 19th century magicians held their performances. I'm a historian of magic, and one of my heroes is magician Johann Hofzinsler, who had done drawing room entertainment in Vienna, Austria. So I decided to recreate the Victorian salon in New York and do it on a long-term basis – I wanted to make it a 20-year run even before I started.

The management at *National Arts Club* allowed me to work there for three months before they closed for summer. I decided to find another place, and fortunately, at one of the last shows I did there, I was introduced to Tracey Brown, Director of Catering at the

Waldorf=Astoria. They weren't doing magic shows there but a mutual friend suggested they give me a shot.

Over the course of time, *The Waldorf* saw they were gaining revenues from food and beverage sales, because guests were coming into the hotel having dinner at the restaurants and bars before and after my show – I was bringing in 200 to 300 people every weekend who were becoming customers of the hotel. People were also sometimes buying out my whole show and were beforehand renting out the private dining room and having \$150/plate dinners with 50 or 60 people at a time.

Additionally, I was bringing in publicity for the hotel because of television and newspaper appearances. So after awhile, they realized it was working.

Initially, I was losing money because I was renting the room, paying for a publicist, and begging my friends to come to the show. Then my manager introduced me to *theatermania.com*, a site that sends e-mail blasts to people interested in theater. We sent out one e-mail and suddenly I was booked for two or three months.

Another site called *dailycandy.com* posted one dedicated e-mail about me and, suddenly, I was sold out for about a year. All my audience members were young attractive women with their boyfriends – the site post brought in an entirely different demographic.

Then the international media started to cover me from China, Germany, and England. I did the show in London at the *Langham Hotel* for a month; I was on TV there and that generated an entirely sold-out run for 40 shows.

I came back to the U.S. and was covered on *CBS Sunday Morning*, and that ended up selling the show out again for many months. They re-aired the piece and it sold out for another year, and I had to start adding Saturday afternoons and evenings because I used to only do Friday nights.

How critical is audience engagement for you, and is that something which early on you were intrigued by and sought out?

Absolutely. This type of magic performance



is entirely interactive. I never know who is going to be in the crowd or what their response will be so I have to be quick and come up with responses to unpredictable interjections.

Do you know beforehand that the show is going to go a certain way? Are you surprised anymore?

Not really. I wrote a book called *Win the Crowd*, and one of the tenets in the book is to "expect success." If you expect success, then you won't be surprised when you achieve it. If you go in worried that maybe something will happen, then you probably won't perform at your peak.

When you look back to those days in the late '90s at your friend's apartment, could you ever have imagined that, a little over 10 years later, you would have had this type of success?

I envisioned this 10 to 12 years ago, and I'm following out my mental plan. Other people have tried to imitate me, and they all failed because they didn't create the thought to begin with. The person who creates the thought is the one who can follow through, because it's the inspiration factor. The reason I'm able to charge money for what I do is because I have dedicated my life to it. It's not a matter of saying casually, I'm going to set up a show and imitate that guy in New York.

Has this become more of a business for you over time? Is it difficult to differentiate the passion you have for it?

I'm a showman. I love what I do more than anything. But in order to enable that passion to exist, I need to have a business acumen and sense.

I don't have to market my show anymore because it kind of markets itself by word of mouth and media. But I do need to focus on the business or I'm not going to be working next week.

The thrill of performing for me is seeing grown adults who are really worldly melt into children, on the edge of their seats with the wide open eyes of a child. It's what keeps me engaged. ●

Steve Cohen entertains Warren Buffett and friends, Omaha, Nebraska