

Recognizing The Human Condition

An Interview with Steve Cohen, Chamber Magic



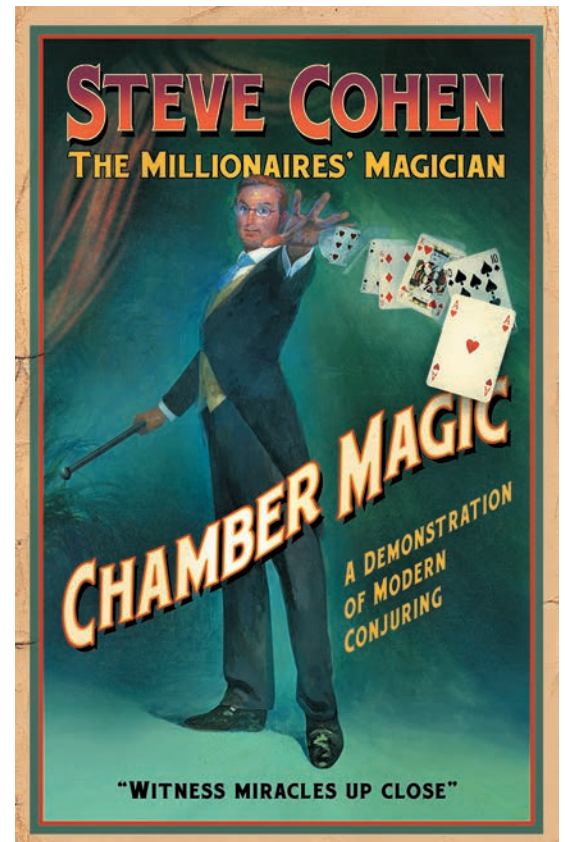
Steve Cohen

EDITORS' NOTE Steve Cohen is a New York City-based magician whose show, Chamber Magic (chambermagic.com), has been running Off-Broadway for 25 years. Cohen previously held a residency at the legendary Waldorf Astoria hotel and currently performs in an exclusive salon in the Lotte New York Palace. Heads of state, stage and screen celebrities, business magnates, and leaders in the arts and sciences have been transfixed by his conjuring. Over half a million people have attended Chamber Magic. On the occasion of Cohen's 5,000th performance, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio issued a proclamation naming October 6 "Chamber Magic Day" in the city of New York. In 2012, Cohen presented a sold-out solo show at Carnegie Hall, and in the same year starred in Lost Magic Decoded, a two-hour special on the History Channel. His magic has been featured on CBS Sunday Morning, CNN, and Late Night with David Letterman and in numerous publications including The New York Times and Forbes. Cohen earned a psychology degree from Cornell University and studied at Waseda University in Tokyo. He has achieved the highest certification, N1 level, in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Since 1997, he has worked as the official Japanese language translator for all Tenyo magic trick instructions. He has been awarded a Performing Fellowship from the Academy of Magical Arts at The Magic Castle in Hollywood,

California; the medal of the Inner Magic Circle with Gold Star from The Magic Circle in London; the Allan Slaight "Sharing Wonder" award from the Canadian media mogul and philanthropist; and the Masters Award from the Milbourne Christopher Foundation. Cohen is an avid long-distance runner, and has completed the Tokyo Marathon, Berlin Marathon, and the New York City Marathon six times. His book, Win the Crowd, in which he explores the power of suggestion and how it can help people in their everyday lives, has been published in seven languages. Confronting Magic, his coffee table book from luxury publisher Assouline, was released to celebrate the show's 20th anniversary. Max Malini: King of Magicians, Magician of Kings is his latest book, an in-depth study of one of the greatest characters in the history of magic.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I graduated from Cornell University in 1993, receiving a psychology degree with a concentrated study in the Japanese language. After graduation I moved to Tokyo where I landed a job performing magic at the most



luxurious hotel in Asia; the Park Hyatt Tokyo. Since much of my performance relies on spontaneity it required a solid command of Japanese to ad-lib in a foreign language. As a result of meeting a steady stream of high-level clients at the hotel, I was invited to entertain at private events all around Tokyo. That was my initial business model, and, in fact, I continued with that format when I moved back to New York. The problem with one-night contracts is that you are always unemployed until your next



Steve Cohen Chamber Magic poster (top) and performances (this and following pages)

show. It is a nomadic existence – I remember waking up in a different hotel room around the country every week, staring at the ceiling and wondering, “Where am I?” In 1999, I decided to change that. The following year I launched a one-man residency in Manhattan that allowed me to stay close to home, and more importantly, sleep in my own bed each night. My wife and I were planning a family and I wanted to be a hands-on father. Life on the road did not seem like a realistic choice. Our son was born in 2000; I performed my first *Chamber Magic* show that same year.

Starting any business in New York City is hard, and mine was no different. I had to find a venue, create a show, market the show, sell tickets, and also perform in it. Fortunately, I was able to bring in friends early on who believed in me, and together we took a risk on creating what has become an institution. From the start I planned on making the show last for 20 years. I was 29 at the time and foolishly thought that 49 was “old.” Since then, I have performed the show over 6,500 times, for over 500,000 people. Looking back on those numbers it seems almost impossible. It certainly was not easy at the start, but since I was committed to a 20-year run, I was willing to put in the work and accept that there would be some slow seasons along the way.

When I performed at the Waldorf Astoria hotel, they provided me with a suite in the Towers that I used as a showroom. It was a 3,000 square foot suite that had a massive living room. The best part (for me) was that there was an adjacent bedroom. After the audience left each night, I took off my tuxedo, put on my pajamas, and went to bed – the best commute in show business. In 2017, the Waldorf closed for a long-term construction project so I moved *Chamber Magic* to the Lotte New York Palace. I



thought I might lose some of my customer base because they knew me only as the “magician at the Waldorf Astoria.” What I didn’t realize is that I had built up enough of a following that it didn’t matter that I was moving – they would move with me. That turned out to be the case, and there was no loss of business after moving to The Palace. On the contrary, business improved because the overall guest experience in my new venue is better. The showroom is gorgeous, a restaurant and bar is located right outside the showroom door, and it’s located on the ground floor. My Waldorf Towers suite was on the 35th floor, and trying to transport

hundreds of guests up and down each night was a genuine challenge.

Many celebrities have visited *Chamber Magic* over the years, and have in turn invited me to their homes and private islands to perform at private events. I still travel a bit, but now I only agree to the best offers.

How do you describe the *Chamber Magic* experience?

Chamber Magic is a throwback to the parlor magic shows popular in the 19th century. I wanted to recreate an intimate environment in a classical setting. The sole purpose of the show is to showcase time-proven magic tricks, but presented in a way that feels modern and fun. It is not meant to be like a renaissance festival where the performers speak in olde English: “Hear ye, hear ye!” The showroom and the dress code all feel like a step back in time, but the manner in which I interact with the audience is respectful to their intelligence and modern sensibilities. We do have a cocktail attire dress code, which is an important element of the experience. Guests know they are going to see something special even before they arrive. This is because they had to spend time deciding what to wear, maybe even days before attending. It helps raise the social value of the event, and also puts everyone on their best behavior. After all, when you are surrounded by people in gorgeous dresses and well-tailored suits, you also become a member of the group and feel included right from the start.

My goal is to create a show that people will talk about to their friends and family. The magic needs to be easily explainable, with simple plot lines, so there is no confusion in what they saw. The venerated magician Dai Vernon once advised that all magic tricks should be able to be described in a single sentence. I have taken that to heart. All of the magic in *Chamber Magic* is powerful and direct because the effects are simple in concept. The most well-known part





of the show is an astonishing trick called “Think-a-Drink.” From a single teakettle, I pour multiple drinks for people all around the room. Whatever they ask for, they get. It is wish-fulfillment at its finest, and I feel like Harry Potter – a real wizard – when performing. In the past people have requested cocktails, juices, wine, beer, coffee, and even smoothies. I pour these drinks, one by one from the same spout. This one trick has brought more notoriety than all the rest combined.

I want people to walk away feeling like they met a real magician. It’s not enough to be simply entertaining. I want my magic to blow a hole through audiences’ sense of reality. Comedy can make you laugh, and music can make you tap your toe. But only magic makes you wonder.

How important is it that the show maintains an intimate feel?

I’ve performed in larger spaces, including opera houses. One notable show was a sold-out

performance at Carnegie Hall. As much as I love appearing in these world-renowned venues, I prefer the intimacy of my own residency shows. *Chamber Magic* is limited to 64 tickets per show, four rows with 16 seats per row. People are only a few feet away from me, and we feed off each other. Sometimes I’m as entertained by the audience as they are by me. That’s because it is a shared experience, different every night. This allows for more genuine interaction that feels authentic. People want to be able to say, “It happened to me” and an intimate show like mine not only allows that but was created with that as its main parameter.

***Chamber Magic* just celebrated its 25th anniversary. Are you able to take moments to reflect on what you have achieved and the impact that you have made over more than two decades?**

I am pleased that magic, as a category, has become more visible in New York City thanks to the success of *Chamber Magic*. When I began in 2000, there were only two magic shows in Manhattan. Now there are over a dozen. The concept of going to a magic show as a luxury experience did not exist before my show, so it is rewarding that my pioneering efforts have helped many other magicians create careers of their own. Magicians from around the world have come to visit *Chamber Magic*, and have been inspired to open up similar-format shows in their own countries. Due to demand, I even wrote a book titled *Evergreen* that teaches magicians how I went about creating an institution in my own hometown. That book has served as a blueprint for dozens of successful magic shows around the world.

Last year I was awarded a Performing Fellowship by the Magic Castle in Hollywood. This award is presented annually to a magician who has made an outstanding contribution, through performance and a lifetime of dedication, to the art of magic. In May 2024 I accepted this award at the United Theatre in downtown Los Angeles in front of 1,600 people at a black-tie award ceremony, considered the Academy Awards of magic. Receiving such recognition from my peers was a true honor.

What has made being a magician so special to you?

One of my best clients in Boca Raton gave me the following quote: “A master in the art of living leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always seems to be doing both.” That sums up how I’m living my life right now. I’m making an enjoyable living for my family, by playing.

What advice do you offer to young magicians beginning their careers?

Magicians need to recognize the human condition – our need to laugh, our need to be amazed, our need to feel included. The powers of a magician may seem trivial on the surface, but the implications of those powers are mighty. Audiences genuinely hope there is real magic. Even the jaded ones among us. Magic’s appeal lies in its eternally optimistic view of the world. You know the woman will be put back together after she was sawed in half. ●