Perception and Imagination: Masters of Theatrical Illusion
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The Philoctetes Center

Levy:	**Francis Levy**
Nersessian:	**Edward Nersessian**
Mitton:	**Mark Mitton, moderator**
Fisher:	**Jules Fisher**
Maloney:	**Peter Maloney**
Meeh:	**Gregory Meeh**
Reynolds:	**Charles Reynolds**
Binder:	**Paul Binder**
A:	**Question from audience**

Levy: Good evening. I'm Francis Levy, co-director of the Philoctetes Center. Dr. Edward Nersessian is the other co-director, and welcome to *Perception and Imagination: Masters of Theatrical Illusion*. I'm now pleased to introduce Mark Mitton. Do I pronounce your name right after knowing you all this time?

Mitton: Sure.

Levy: Mark Mitton started doing magic tricks when he was nine years old and never stopped. He was the apprentice to legendary sleight of hand master and vaudevillian Slydini, and studied Commedia dell'Arte in Italy, physical comedy with David Shiner and ancient street performing arts in Japan. Mark is fascinated by using magic and crafts as a way to better understand how we all see the world. As a professional sleight of hand artist, he has performed for Benoit Mandelbrot, Roald Hoffman, Salman Rushdie, Greg Maddox, Sienna Miller, John Mayer, Sting and many others at festivals in Europe and Asia, at the Olympic games, in war-torn Liberia, and in hospital wards around New York City. He has made Will Smith appear in the middle of Times Square, directed a freak show opening circus for Aerosmith, and taught sleight of hand to Stanley Tucci and John Travolta for varying film projects. Last summer he created magic for the Public Theater production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Central Park. Mark Mitton will moderate tonight's panel and introduce our other distinguished guests. Take it away, Mark.

Mitton: Thank you Francis. Well thank you all for coming tonight. How this all happened was I met Francis on an astro-cosmology panel. I have a friend who's an astrophysicist and we would always talk about how we see the world. I would tell him about some of the lessons that I'd learned as an apprentice to this old magician. We had these wonderful discussions, but I realize that it was rare for a lot of craftspeople to get together to just talk about how our craft has changed the way that we see the world. The Philoctetes Center was nice enough to give us an opportunity to invite master craftsmen to discuss this subject.

I'd just like to open with a quote from E. M. Forester, from his book *Aspects of the Novel*. He says, "Indeed the more the arts develop, the more they depend on each other for definition. We will borrow from painting first and call it pattern; later we will borrow from music and call it

rhythm." Without further ado, I'd like to introduce our distinguished panelists. We have Charles Reynolds, Jules Fisher, Greg Meeh and Peter Maloney, and thank you so much for coming. If you could just tell everyone what you do and give an example of something that gets you excited about your craft. Would you like to start, Charles?

Reynolds: Sure. I'm a semi-retired magic consultant, which is a bit of a redundancy. But I've worked on a lot of television shows and quite a few Broadway shows with the strange job of supplying magic effects for the show. Quite different than special effects, which is the Meeh specialty, over here. I was the magic director of the Blackstone show when it played at the Majestic quite a few years ago. I worked for Doug Henning for about fifteen years, did all of his television specials and all of his tours and a couple of Broadway shows including *Merlin*. That's about it. In the last few years I've done thirty-something television specials devoted to various aspects of magic in London.

Mitton: Thank you very much. Jules?

Fisher: First of all, I'm here to learn how to pronounce Philoctetes.

Mitton: Aren't we all?

Fisher: I design lighting in the theater. My life is working in the theater and designing lighting for any kind of entertainment event: Broadway shows, off-Broadway, spectacles, puppet shows—anything that needs lighting that's entertainment based. I have worked many cities around the world, particularly in New York. I make my living here, but recently—asking what's exciting—I did a production of a spectacle in Las Vegas directed by Franco Dragone called "La Reve" at the Wynn hotel. It's a ninety-minute spectacle but it has no words in it. It's all lighting changes for ninety minutes to provide spectacle, energy, dynamism, color, just make the evening something that you won't forget visually. I've done plays and musicals on Broadway. Musicals are fascinating to me as a lighting designer because they involve rhythm and they involve changes that are based in the music and the emotion of the music as well as the percussive side of it. As we get deeper into it I realize that everything that I work on is an illusion, there's no reality. That's why I'm here.

Mitton: Thank you very much. And Greg Meeh?

Meeh: I do special effects, mostly in live theater. My specialty is the live effect as opposed to the post-production kind of effect that is often seen in movies. My job is very different in different types of production. Sometimes, for example, it will be a sense of movement, a sense of change of place. A sense of energy through atmospheric—at other times it is enhancing emotion. How a story moves in spectacle is very different than how it moves in a story-based theatrical piece, where your assignment becomes much more specific. Blowing up a stove when the guy shoots it with a shotgun, for example, as opposed to a very lyrical moment which can be just a wave of atmospheric fog moving across the stage and creating a breaker almost like a rolling wave in the ocean. The thing I like best about it is discovering the new thing, inventing the new idea, and working with very talented, inspirational people who are trying to bring something to a viewer and inspire some feeling, something that is bigger than any of us.

Mitton: Thank you very much. And finally we have Peter Maloney.

Maloney: I'm an actor and my job is to create the illusion that I am someone else on stage. I've been doing this for forty-five years now professionally. Sometimes I portray myself. I've written a number of pieces, which I call autobiographical fictions. I use the word "fictions" because we all know the trouble that memoir has gotten into lately—false memory or false depiction of past life experiences. I just try to head off the trouble by calling them autobiographical fictions. But in most of the work that I do I play a character who is not myself, often very different from myself. I've always been interested in that creation, that illusion that the actor creates, not only of a character who is not himself, but the illusion, eight times a week, that what he or she is doing is being done for the first time ever. It's a different kind of illusion than the other gentlemen on the panel work on, but we all work together very often to try to achieve the same effect. At the moment, after less than a week rehearsal, I will open tomorrow night at 45 Bleecker in Ethan Cohen's play, *Almost an Evening*. I will play God. I've had less than a week rehearsal. I'm replacing a wonderful actor named F. Murray Abraham, and the illusion that I will create tomorrow night hopefully is that of a person who knows what he's doing and is perfectly calm about it. Which believe me, I am not.

Mitton: Speaking of the illusion of knowing what you're doing, let's jump right into the whole idea of how you create a lighting effect or a special effect or a magic trick and give the audience a sense of believability and reality. Do you have any principles or ideas that you use—let's take lighting first, for example.

Fisher: Since I work in a small niche area of the theater involving light, I am always looking for the properties of light that can make something believable. I get inspiration from nature. I look at the real thing, the way that real light in this room comes down into the space, or how the sun rises or sets. I'm trying to find the properties of light, by looking at it, that can evoke a feeling or express an emotion. I want to find the essence of the visual stimulus. I don't want to reproduce the real. The theater is all an illusion. We don't put anything on stage that's real. If we had to give it an "ism" it's not realism that we put on stage, it's naturalism. It's the essence of something. So I'm looking for what is it in that scenario that I see?

The scenario is a hospital and a baby is being born; or a blacksmith working at a forge and sparks are flying; or someone just staring at a sunset, at the ocean. I'm looking to find what are the properties of light that I can put on the stage that will communicate that to you. I'm overemphasizing this, but for a reason—it's not real, so I am not looking to find the properties of the reality, but when you watch it as an audience member you will be moved because it does something in your brain that allows you to say, ah, that's a sunset. But I don't put a real sunset up there. We could do that. We could take a camera, photograph a sunset, and project it in the theater, but it doesn't have any of the emotion or any of the qualities that an artist brings to the play. A play is done by a group of people, starting with the playwright and the director, and most importantly, the actors. We have to make those people, when they're behaving on stage, the behavior of the actor, seem believable. And believable is what allows us to have perception. Through our senses we believe something, we understand through the senses. One of the senses is light, probably the principle one. You can have a play without words; you can have a play without sound. But you can't have it without light. Or it's very hard to.

I'm always looking to find the essence of it visually that I can put on stage in picking light. Just to give you some quick examples of that, I'm looking to find out how bright the light is, what angle the light is coming from. If it's a sunset I know it should get low to the horizon. If I don't do that, if the light that I'm using to portray that sunset or a person standing in that sunset is coming from a high angle, it's not believable. It's all unconscious. You would look at it and you'd see there's an actor and he's saying the line, but something in the back of your mind is saying, I don't believe that because the angle's wrong. Or the color is wrong. Or the quality itself of the light—is it soft, is it hard edge? I'm looking for those elements that will communicate the story.

Mitton: That's fascinating. Greg, you've done some spectacular shows—I'm thinking of *Ka* in Las Vegas. Do you have any example of how you took an effect and made it more believable?

Meeh: I'm always trying to discover the vocabulary that the group is developing to tell the story, to make it believable, to share the emotion. The big effect at the end of *Ka* is a celebratory display—fireworks display, the discovery of fire and then the uses fire can be put to: to war, to cooking the fish, to the beauty of just creating something with fire. How we work that and shape that into the story is a collaborative effort. It becomes collaborative with the viewer as well as with your designers, your performers, your director, your author. Does that answer the question?

Mitton: It does. This afternoon actually we were talking on the phone, and you talked about how you see, in going from one production to another, the development of these different vocabularies.

Meeh: They can be totally different, highly stylized to—Jules, you were talking about naturalism. But I would think that naturalism can have many different forms. You're trying to convey emotion and story and it can be so stylized and still everyone can know exactly what the story is, exactly what the emotion is, even though it has nothing to do with reality.

Mitton: Can you give an example of a specific effect?

Meeh: Well this wave that I was speaking of earlier, totally out of context with the moment of the show. In terms of realism, in terms of the space where you are, but totally in the spirit of the emotion, carrying the emotion. And then being a tool to move us to a climax of that emotion and moving on into the next scene.

Mitton: Sorry?

Maloney: Given your question about the effect being tailored for the situation, I once directed a play, one of the greatest plays ever written, *The Plow and the Stars* by Sean O'Casey. It's a difficult play; it's four acts. The third act is especially difficult because it's an exterior in the middle of three interiors. So the demands of lighting and a kind of creation of a sense of reality and the exterior is very different from what's in all the other acts. I had a wonderful actress playing Bessie Burgess. She was an older woman, perhaps older than the character as described by O'Casey, but she was such a great actress and she looked so great that I cast her and I was very happy to have done so.

In the fourth act she is killed by a bullet coming in through a window during the rebellion in the streets of Dublin. She goes to the window to look out and she is hit by a sniper's bullet. I loaded this poor lady down with blood packs. I had her get hit—I wanted a real bloody effect, so I wanted her to be hit three times by bullets. I loaded this poor woman down with blood packs and in dress rehearsal and technical rehearsals, she was having a terrible time coping with this. Because she had to pull the thing that started the blood pouring that soaked through her dress as she turned around and we see this vision of carnage. She was incapable with dealing with the technical demands which I was imposing on her. So we had to rethink it.

I think all directing is largely problem solving. Day by day you have different problems, you have to solve them. We solved this one by eliminating the blood packs and on the windowsill putting a pan of blood on the other side, the backstage side, so that when she went to the window, she put her hand in the blood, heard the sound of the shot, she goes like this to her breast. She put her hand in the pan of blood, clapped it to her breast, turned around, and when she took her hand away there was the wound, there was the blood. It was much better than what I'd originally envisioned. It was much better an effect than the original thought of the packs of blood that had to be—wires pulled or however we arranged it, I don't remember. It all has to be tailored to the situation, and very often to the actor, the performer. You can try imposing, but often you are unable to insist.

Meeh: The simplest way we can create the emotion with the least amount of technical stuff is what we're always looking for.

Reynolds: I think the more of what you see happens in the audience's mind rather than as a literal thing on stage, the more effective it is. That's true of a lot of magic. It's based on things that the spectators bring themselves to the theater and the magicians don't have to prove it, that it's real. For example, you might be doing an effect that uses a glass. You put a silk handkerchief in the glass and the silk handkerchief disappears. The more the audience assumes that that is a real glass, the more effective the trick will be. The audience brings all that assumption with them. If the magician had picked up the glass—let us say it's a bottomless glass, and said, "Here I have an ordinary glass," immediately the people in the audience will assume that it is not an ordinary glass. If you just pick up a glass and put the silk handkerchief in it and put it down, the assumptions they bring to it is what makes it effective when the silk handkerchief finally disappears. This is true across the board. This is true with big stage illusions and small card tricks and coin tricks and so on. They've got to create it and the job of the magician is to suggest.

Mitton: I should point out that the panel has a bit of a secret in that four of us are magicians. Greg, have you done a little bit?

Meeh: Not since I was very young and passed out of heat prostration in the attic.

Mitton: But there's still a connection, that's very interesting. It makes sense because of what we all do. Jules is a terrific magician and an amazing—how has magic affected your lighting?

Fisher: What I said earlier—to me all the theater is an illusion, so I'm always creating, if magic is to get people to believe something and then they find out that's not what they believed to begin with. They thought the animal was here and now it's over here. Perception has been changed.

I'm doing that all the time in the theater, making you believe something out of things that aren't really there. We don't bring the sun into the theater to make a sunset, or the moon. I think that each effect, and I do each cue, is a magic trick, is in some way getting you to believe something with information that's not true.

Everyone knows a quote that Picasso said: "All art is a lie to serve a greater truth." And in the theater, it is. We are lying to you all the time. The very fact that it takes place in a theater is an illusion. It's happening in a place that you shouldn't expect reality. The same speech given in town hall has a different believability than at the Schubert Theater. You're walking into a space that says, what I'm going to see is an illusion. I like to think that I'm doing magic tricks all night, that each light cue as it changes is some little magic. Similar to how the methods might be concealed in magic, I don't want you to see the light. I think this in an interesting point because I think it's probably true in what you do. We don't want you to see it as special effect or as a light cue. We just want you to believe what you're looking at. It is magical to do that. That is magical in the theater.

Mitton: That reminds me—I overheard you tell a story about something that you did in *Ricky Jay and his 52 Assistants* about a very subtle lighting change. Do you know what I'm referring to?

Fisher: Give me a hint?

Mitton: It was at the moment of a revelation that the audience was focused.

Fisher: Oh yes, yes. That's a major element of cuing light or manipulating light in the theater, which was to focus attention. An actor has hundreds of means of doing that: in gesture, modulating of the voice. In lighting, we have a very simple way to focus attention. If you're looking at something, if I make it brighter you will see it. Or if you're looking at something and I take the light away elsewhere, the negative space is as important in lighting as the positive space. I gave an example with Ricky Jay where he did a show at the Second Stage uptown on Broadway and 76th Street or something. It was just Ricky, a magician alone with a table doing card tricks for most of the evening. It took place in what looked like a library, a room with bookshelves. It was natural. It could have been his personal library. And a table covered in green cloth that he performed these effects on. In the beginning of the evening, the whole room was lit and the table was lit and Ricky was lit, meaning light was on all these objects.

As this one magic trick became more intense—as he wanted you to be more focused on what was happening, to look at a certain spot or see a card, surprise you and be something you didn't know—I took the light down in the rest of the room. So it's not just making him brighter that worked, it was taking the light away elsewhere. The room got darker. The same light stayed on him at that time, and he did a lot of tricks seated at this table with two other guests, two people from the audience, one on his left, one on his right, as witnesses. So what they saw, you as the audience could believe you were seeing too. There was light on them. As the trick progressed, there was less light on them. And then less and less. I was just pulling down the light everywhere else. And what the result was, he looked brighter. His hands looked brighter. The focus got more dynamic. You're looking there because of removing other light. It's a technique; it's one of the lighting techniques to focus attention.

Reynolds: And when you do that, you as the performer, you don't have to be the person to focus the attention. I think magicians should never lie. To bring a box out and say, "This is an empty box." This is big trouble to begin with. First of all, it might not be an empty box or you might later have an occasion that it would have to be an empty box. But if the audience assumes something, it has infinitely more effect. I think that there's all too much of this thing of showing things that the audience first of all doesn't believe in because of the way you're handling it, and secondly the things are gaffed. You can't blame them for suspecting that because you're a magician.

Fisher: In the same way, if you can get the audience to come to that conclusion on their own, they feel they own the idea and therefore they'll believe it more than if you were trying to convince them of it.

Meeh: I think this is applicable in theater of any type. Your viewer is a willing participant, and rather than give it to them on a plate of all of the parts defined as realism would be, the hints are much more powerful. The viewer wants to participate and can create a more believable story in their head than you can ever give them.

Reynolds: This applies a lot to your profession of acting, because an audience is much more likely to react to a magician as being really good if the magician himself believes in what he's doing. I worked for about fifteen years for a magician named Doug Henning, and we did a number of tours and a lot of television specials and a few Broadway shows. I think one of the reasons that Doug was a success as a magician is that he believed in magic. He really did. His heart of hearts. What he was doing was utterly believable to himself, and consequently it was believable to the audience. That also is why he didn't become a threat to the audience. Because magic can be very annoying to audiences. You've made a fool of them. People don't particularly enjoy being made fools of. The idea of going around and deceiving people has had a bad press since the Garden of Eden, I guess.

Fisher: I'm just questioning—at the same time we also knew that it was a trick in many instances. I'm not saying there weren't. But he knew when he was pulling a lever that no one saw. He was doing something mechanical let's say. So we had to know that part wasn't real.

Reynolds: Oh, absolutely. There are two things going on at all times. One is the mechanics, which the magician has to be on top of. But also, the acting side of it, which has to convey to the audience that what the magician is doing is real. Jules is a very good close-up coin magician, a good close-up magician. The key to it is naturalness. If you do things naturally, and if you do them also in a way that the audience doesn't suspect you, the effect is going to be much, much more powerful. Of course Doug at the end of his career gave up magic and became part of the Maharishi's TM movement, and I think at that point his belief in magic crossed the line just a bit. But I think it was also there in the beginning. It was in his personality.

Mitton: Well Peter, how would you compare? You've been on stage as an actor and you've been on stage as a magician. How would you compare working with the believability in both instances of the audience?

Maloney: For me I think it's mostly being an actor. I love magic but as I used to say in my act, it's only one of many loves in my life. Unlike so many of the magicians I know, I'm not a top sleight of hand man. I devoted my life to perfecting those skills and sleights, you know. So with me it truly was fooling them by pretending to be a magician. I guess if I did succeed in fooling them then it was some reflection of my ability to act. But you know what, Charles, when Jules called up here about the duality of knowing, of believing in the magic, as Charles said Doug did, and at the same time knowing what he was doing technically, because he had to know when he was pulling the lever whatever he was doing, the secret stuff. This is true of actors too. People don't know too much about acting, and perhaps that's the best. We don't want to know how the guy walks across the tight wire. Actors do not become the characters that they're playing on the stage. Some people think they do. Some people perpetuate the myth over years that the actor becomes the character and lives the character. It's just not true. There's a duality there. Yes, through technique, if you have to do it eight times a week, sometimes for more than a year, then it's your technique, your craft, which enables you to pretend to be that other person successfully each time. Each time it's new, each time it's different, because the audience is different. And because you feel different every day when you come on the stage.

You have certain things that are the same. Your work, your homework, your biography, everything you bring to it. If you're a Stanislavsky, then you work on emotional memory. But it's a question of craft. It's never losing yourself in the fantasy which you're presenting. Never. You couldn't do it.

Reynolds: If you, during the period that you're doing your character on the stage, don't believe in the character, the audience is not going to believe in you. If as a magician you don't believe in what you're doing in terms of the magic, the audience will get it like that.

Maloney: I agree.

Levy: I think in Bergman's *Persona*, wasn't it true that the actress withdraws into psychosis—

Maloney: She had a lot that was bothering her. If I remember—the war, Buddhists burning themselves in protest, bad family situations. She was in a lot of trouble.

Levy: Ang Lee did that again in *Lust, Caution* where the actor—it's very unclear—the woman is playing the part of an actress, the actress in the movie, and she becomes so absorbed in her role as the lover, you know, the Japanese collaborator, that it's unclear whether she is merely playing the role anymore or she's become the lover.

Maloney: Then it becomes psychosis, then it becomes a medical problem, a psychological problem, and it has nothing to do with art whatsoever. So you know, makes for interesting movies.

Reynolds: I think the people in magic, by the way, to whom that happens are most often mentalists or mind readers. Nobody can read anybody's mind. You can read somebody's thoughts, but those thoughts have to exist. They have to be written down on a piece of paper or in some other way manifest so that the person playing the mentalist believes it. But there are an awful lot of people in mentalism who—it begins to make them very nervous because they begin

having hits on thinking. It starts out as a trick, but there comes a point when I think there's a real confusion in their minds as to whether they're really doing it or not.

Mitton: We should explain that a hit is when you guess something accurately. I guess we all know enough, from the nature of magicians being everywhere.

Fisher: That takes place in the movie *Leap of Faith*, where Steve Martin is fooling you but maybe he's not, maybe he really believes it at one point. Same with *Elmore Gantry*.

Mitton: We need to take a question early because Paul Binder has to leave. He's over here. This is Paul Binder, the founder of the Big Apple Circus. Can you go to the mike? We're going to have more questions for the rest of the audience but—

Binder: Mark was saying that I work in a branch of the theater, and I take exception with my esteemed colleague, Mr. Fisherman: "all art is a lie." We work in the branch of the theater that everything we do is reality. We do not create characters. The guy is actually walking on the wire. Indeed, the metaphor is created by the audience. We use light in a different way than creating illusion, and look what's happening here. This person is really doing that. I also propose—and I don't want to disagree with you—

Mitton: No, but I'd like to disagree.

Binder: Our audiences responded with enormous emotion—you know, Graham talking about the essence of the emotion when he's working on an illusion. Our audiences respond with enormous excitement: they cheer and they scream and sometimes they have tears in their eyes. It's a very powerful medium. You know, when it's done by artists. The performers are artists and the people who create the music are artists and where we're working with that kind of collaboration and the people who light. But we start with reality.

Fisher: The separation I would have thought was—I'm involved in theater that has drama. It may happen to be entertainment but it's not only entertainment and I think what you're involved with is pure entertainment.

Binder: Well, I wouldn't say that. I would say that we're the closest form of modern theater that harkens back to the roots of the original rituals out of which all performing arts grew. The emotional content of what we create, like creating the reality, lets the audience have their response much in the way that the primal rituals of pre-theatrical, you know, pre-art—when tribes met in circles like this and acted out the hopes and fears and aspirations of their culture, of their society. The major issues, the big ones: birth, death and harvest and hunt and all that kind of stuff. They met in the circle and they acted out those hopes, fears and aspirations.

Fisher: But now, I think becoming actors in a drama as opposed to performers who are presenting skill and prowess and amazing technical ability. But are they expressing a communication based on drama?

Binder: Yes, the answer is you started by saying all theater starts with playwrights, and I say theater preceded playwrights. There was theater before there were any playwrights or play bills or directors. We're artists, we create theater. But what I'm saying is the pre-artistic forms were

where people acted out their hopes and fears and aspirations for the benefit of the community's survival. I think that our branch of the theater, the creative circus, comes the closest to that in the modern culture. But in any case, I'm in the same business you are, Mr. Fisher. We've been colleagues for a long time, with Mark and Greg and others, but we approach it with a completely different perspective. This is not an actor pretending to walk on a tightrope.

Mitton: Although—

Binder: He is a guy walking on a tightrope.

Mitton: It's funny, I'm thinking of my wife Suzanna. We were at a circus last spring that was directed by a friend, and the first time that she saw one of the high wire walkers fall she screamed. It's funny, she lives with a magician, right? We went back the next night, and right on cue the high wire actor—he fell. And caught the rope just in time and pulled himself up dramatically and then she was all resentful and like, "Honey, it's a show!"

Binder: I did work in a theater when we created the circus effects for Barnum on Broadway. We took actors and we pretended they were circus performers, and they pretended they were circus performers. So we had a woman walk across the high wire at the back of the stage and indeed she fell, and we created a safety device so she could fall and then she floated down. There is a very big distinction in how we approach the audience.

Reynolds: I think illusion first of all mixes very poorly with circus. It's a different thing. Theater and drama are both very, very close in that they're both entertainments that are forms of illusion. But a circus isn't a form of illusion. A circus is involved with the reality. When the Wallendas do their seven-person-high pyramid, that's real. That could be faked. It could be faked with invisible wires and you wouldn't see the wires, particularly if Jules lit them. But I honestly don't think magic and circus have ever mixed terribly comfortably.

Binder: In the next couple of years we're going to try. We have some magicians coming back to work—it's incredible.

Reynolds: Now there are a lot of people who are thinking of them—

Binder: I see Charlie every year. He comes to the circus every year.

Reynolds: I never miss your show. Really, I'm one of the biggest fans.

Mitton: Being tricksters of a kind and being able to heighten reality, we all do work in a wide variety of mediums. In the theater you've done amazing films. You lit *Chicago*, the movie, and these grand spectacles—what was the lighting at the World Trade Center called?

Fisher: My partner, Paul Marantz, technically designed the twin towers, the light that happens in memorial every 9/11. It's a series of spotlights that come out of the ground. It's very cleverly done; it's an illusion too. I'll tell you just a little bit about it. The beam of light that comes out on 9/11—now I think it's the fifth year, sixth year we did it. It is a series of individual spotlights that are shooting straight up vertically to make what looks like two columns of light. There's a trick involved in making it look like two columns, because it's made out of eighty beams of

light, forty for each one of the beams. My office developed how to do that and we're proud of it and we do it every year for one night. It's about half a million dollars spent to—

Binder: How do you do it?

Fisher: I would like to have this conversation in greater depth because I would like to ask, are you creating an illusion?

Binder: Well, we are artists working in a craft, but we are starting with the reality and then the audience takes their own metaphor, what we leave them very often. We work with lighting designers, scene designers, and we work with other artists, but I don't know that we're creating illusion so much as heightening the reality. That's very different from creating the illusion, like the character in *The Man of La Mancha*: I will create a man. He starts by saying, "I will create a man." We started saying, we are a man and this is what we're going to do. We're ordinary guys and this is what we're going to do. Then all of a sudden we heighten that reality and that's where the emotion comes in. Greg talks about the emotional moment that happens in the theatrical—that's where we can do it. And Doug Henning's idea that he believed in magic, and isn't it interesting that he went off into a spiritual quest when it was all over? So I think it all converges—that we approach emotional reality from different perspectives.

Meeh: We're seeing the convergence of the circus arts with the thematic journey and the Cirque du Soleil type spectacle, and it's a real convergence of the reality, maybe a tempered reality to serve the thematic story, the thematic journey that's proposed to the audience.

Binder: My apologies to jump in like this and then run.

Mitton: Thanks Paul. Okay, good luck.

Binder: Thanks, good to see you.

Mitton: Paul Binder, from the Big Apple Circus.

Fisher: I think mentioning the Cirque du Soleil is interesting because I've seen a lot of them and I really enjoy them. Carrying out a narrative or building an illusion fits perfectly in your idea of letting the audience figure out what is it, because if you try to say what that Cirque du Soleil story was really about, it just falls apart. But if the audience can leave thinking, oh, I know it's about a dream, I had this dream, I think the audience has to supply—particularly for Cirque du Soleil.

Reynolds: One of the big things in magic is transcending the puzzle. It's like a continuum. At one end you've got a fairy tale and at the other end you've got a detective story. There are a lot of people who were there just for the detective story because they want to figure out how the trick works. There's also another proportion of the audience who can watch magic and throw themselves into the experience and not make it a puzzle all the time, you know? That's much more difficult to do and it takes a lot more skill on the part of the magician, on the part of the performers than trick boxes.

Maloney: If you've studied theater history and especially the history of design, you can see David Belasco and his productions where everything was absolutely real and there was real gas in the stove and the water really—you really smelled the food cooking. Talk about a man who didn't trust an audience for a minute. But this business of letting the audience be the partner with the artist—I was extremely fortunate when I first came to New York as a young man.

My first show in New York was with Jules, and we did a play called *Telemachus Clay*, which had twelve actors on the stage. The back wall was black velvet, the floor was black velvet, the walls were black velvet, there were twelve black stools, the actors were all dressed in black and they never looked at each other. They looked straight forward. The writer's theory was that the actor would speak his lines, the intention in the line would go through the audience, come around, and go to the actor sitting over here. It was quite a hit for off-Broadway. And this is what makes the theater different from a movie. A movie, you would go to Hollywood, you would start in a small town, you would go to the hospital where the woman was having the baby. We went to all those places, but we went there because Jules did the lighting. There were hundreds, hundreds of lighting cues and I, up in the booth, operated the sound tape which accompanied the different scenes. But we took the audience on this trip. For that two-hour time in the theater that the writers staged, I think we believed that they were where we told them they were. Without sense, without projections, with nothing but Jules's lights and the appropriate sound and the actors talking directly to the audience. The theater was a great thing because it does involve the audience as a partner when it's working on its highest level. We don't just sit there watching the water boil on the stove and say, Oh, that's really boiling. Our imaginations get to be exercised.

Fisher: Thank you for saying that Peter, very much. Two thoughts—in the Belasco case, I think it was because the play wasn't there. He felt necessary to provide some other entertainment, like, can you smell the bacon? As opposed to figure out what the story was.

Maloney: Absolutely.

Fisher: And in *Telemachus Clay*, I think like a lot of good pieces of theater, again you come back to getting the audience to feel. It's storytelling. Steven Spielberg is a great storyteller. When you tell a story around a campfire, how do you do you get people to believe? How do you get them to listen? It's building these illusions. One illusion on top of each other. I'm providing one that makes you think the sunset may be real. You're providing one that makes the tale itself seem real. We add costumes and we add special effects, we add all the other illusions so that that audience will believe it. I think that's the essence of perception. To be aware through the senses, to understand something.

Reynolds: They do believe it for the period of the play. Everybody's into this willing suspension of disbelief thing. But magic doesn't involve really a willing suspension of disbelief until it's over. When people go out to the theater they say, "You know, he didn't really saw that woman in half. Or that woman who was floating in the air, she wasn't really floating in the air." But if the audience, while they're seeing it—that's why magic is so much less effective on television than it is in the theater. You've got to be there in the room. It's got to be live. You've got to be live. And then if we could get the audience into that state of mind, they've experienced real magic. They may go home and say later, "I know the girl was floating in the air because there were a lot of wires attached to her or something." But it can't happen at the moment they're watching it and

that's the skill of the performer, to keep that from happening. Because it's got to transcend the puzzle.

Fisher: If I may add—this may or may not be on the same topic—one of the essences of theater is paradox, is conflict. To get the audience to believe two separate things, you're making the audience work. If you believe that King Lear was noble, you also can believe the tragic-ness of his life. But if you can get the audience first to believe one illusion and then present the second, the audience has to now work. The brain has to fight itself to come to its own conclusion. The audience is now saying, is this the case or is that the case or how does it relate to me, do I have that. It's the dual nature of the theater—either one we're using illusions to make you believe it.

Reynolds: Completely agree.

Meeh: Without that it's not a satisfying experience.

Fisher: Luckily Paul's not here, so I can say he's wrong.

Mitton: And exactly why is he wrong? Well, it is interesting that he was defining one kind of circus and of course, as you brought up, Greg, there's such a wide variety of circus arts now, all of the spectacle. And your show, *La Reve* is certainly a theatrical production.

Fisher: I'm really interested in talking more to Paul, by the way, because my mind is saying, wait a minute, he's not building illusions, and I think that's the essence, one of the essences of theater. To make you believe something that's not really true. As you say, you're not that character.

Reynolds: The only two things in theater, if you really think about it, that involve illusions—one is drama, where it is an illusion that this is not really the king of Denmark; and magic. Everything else is a different thing. The parades are shows, but they're show of celebration. A circus is a show, but the circus has to be real. If you go to a circus and they're faking everything—and you see that more and more in the world of the circus now. If somebody is going to do a seven-person high from a springboard—

Maloney: Safety wires, you mean?

Reynolds: Yeah, all that. I think it's better if they did a six-person high and risk their lives a little. I don't want this to sound like the Roman arena. But I do think that edge of danger and reality is very, very important in the circus. It's not at all the same as what you get from drama and what you get from magic.

Meeh: I'd like to disagree with you about the safety wire. I think there's some difference between danger of life and limb and danger of failure. It's very exciting to see these acts attempt fabulous, fabulous feats and to be able to know they're not going to kill themselves.

Reynolds: Or at least hope they aren't.

Meeh: No, they miss and they tumble and they—If we go back to the trapeze without the net, it was the Brooklyn Academy of Music that the first triple somersault guy—the, oh damn, what's the—they were out of Massachusetts, a fabulous acrobatic team.

Fisher: Brothers?

Meeh: The brothers, yeah.

Fisher: A fellow from Ohio wrote and published that book.

Reynolds: The Hamlins? It was the Hamlin Brothers.

Fisher: That was at the Academy of Music in Brooklyn.

Meeh: The Academy of Music from the stage all the way out into the house. And missed the somersault and the guy went and ruined the act, ruined the lives of the people.

Fisher: I think it is an interesting question.

Reynolds: It's still there. It's still an element there. They invented the net after that incident.

Fisher: Oh, after that. But the question—it's an intellectual question—but should circuses have danger? You're saying you can enjoy the same feat of someone doing something if they had a support wire as well. That the wire was not aiding their effect. The support wire is not making them able to perform the Wallendas multiple tower.

Reynolds: I think it's better with the element of danger.

Mitton: A traditionalist.

Meeh: Suppose it's an animal act and the trainer is putting his head inside of a lion's mouth, do you want to know that there's not the risk of danger? The lion can't eat; it has no teeth. Big Apple Circus.

Reynolds: And very bad breath! Lions have bad breath.

Mitton: Always a risk.

Maloney: Well, Cirque has no animals.

Reynolds: Oh yes, isn't that sad.

Maloney: In my younger days, I was part of a theater group, the Open Theater, which was the child of Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater and our inspiration came in large part from Grotowski, who had started his studies of a particular kind of acting in Poland in the early '60s. And I have to put a vote in favor of danger. We were young, we were strong, our desire was to be actors, heroic actors. Almost like—what do they call them—the Marvel super heroes. We worked, we worked, we worked, we worked. And we rehearsed and there was a danger involved and I think the audience was very aware of the danger. It would have been really dangerous if anybody but us tried to do it. You know what I'm saying. We were skilled. The audience sensed that there was some kind of tightrope being walked. There were times when people got hurt and I think it's bloody exciting if the play supports such heroics.

Reynolds: Now compare that to magic and cutting a leg in half with a buzz saw. It's an entirely different thing. It has to do with the audience being able to project itself into what is essentially a theatrical scene, just as they do in a play. But in a circus, when people take the edge off everything they do that's dangerous, suddenly you don't have a circus anymore.

Fisher: There's another view of danger—"danger" is not the right word, but one of the powers of theater is that it's mortal. It's not true on television, it's not true in motion pictures. But when you watch a play, that actor might not live out the rest of the act. There is a chance. I'm not wishing that, but that sense of mortality every time we watch a live actor do something—it's the opposite extreme of danger of a high wire act, but that's one of the powers of theater. It's that you know it's a human who is alive is doing it for you.

Nersessian: It's a little bit related to something I realized about myself, and maybe other people feel the same way. When I watch you do your magic tricks, I worry and become anxious that you're going to fail. I have a feeling you work on that a little bit. So I think part of what happens in theater, at least for me—I don't want things to go wrong. I want things to work out. I want the sunset to make me think like it's a sunset, even though I know that it's not a sunset. I don't want to see the lights. It's not that I'm looking to see where you are pulling—I don't want to see. I am always trying to collaborate with whoever is doing the illusion rather than fight it.

Reynolds: We need more like you.

Nersessian: Well look, if there wasn't a tendency to want to believe in magic and to want to believe in illusion, you wouldn't have religion. You wouldn't have all the interest in magic. We want to.

Fisher: That's your willingness to suspend your disbelief. You're bringing that willingness to the theater.

Nersessian: I think it's more the anxiety of it not working out, than the willing suspension of disbelief. I think it's the other way around. When I watch Mark, I don't want him to fail. I would feel terrible if he's having dinner with me and he's showing me a card trick—if he fails I feel terrible!

Reynolds: I want him to fail once in a while. He's much too clever. You've got to knock it down a peg.

Mitton: But are you worried because it would be embarrassing?

Nersessian: No, I think we have anxiety about our beliefs not being correct, not being true. I think that's an anxiety that humans have. At least I have.

Fisher: You want to believe in success.

Nersessian: I want things to work out.

Mitton: On this area of willing suspension of disbelief, I do think that's kind of the role of the magician, is to in some way allow his audience to believe that it might fail. A great example is

when I was first learning to escape from a straightjacket, I learned from this old pro, and he said, "The first thing you got to do, kid, convince them you can't get out." I've never forgotten that. It's so simple it's often forgotten. That the first responsibility of the person that's doing something amazing is to remind the audience that they're doing something amazing. That's actually where I disagree with Paul as well, I could say openly now that he's gone

Reynolds: There's somebody here taking notes.

Mitton: Exactly. I'll tell him myself tomorrow. I think he might not be seeing the talent of all the people working in his tent. And that is the ability to sell this idea that even though they've done it eight times that week, that just this time I might fall off this wire that I've got on. I've got onto this little tightrope every day since I was five—

Nersessian: But you know, they do play the drums and they do make music to make people anxious. It's not that it's without the illusion.

Fisher: That false falling as you said earlier. You go to see it twice and you realize, oh, that same mistake is made every night.

Mitton: Yeah, and in a way it's almost—

Fisher: It's show business.

Mitton: In a way it's more impressive.

Fisher: Sure, well you root for—you want them to succeed. That's back to your thought.

Maloney: And what is Barry Lubin but an actor. He's not a grandmother; he's an actor.

Mitton: Barry Lubin is not a—we're referring to a grandma, the clown in the Big Apple Circus.

Maloney: You know what I mean? It's acting, come on. Paul—where is he? He should not have left.

Reynolds: Paul Binder really should be back here.

Meeh: But the point about the circus skills—it's the same with the straightjacket. If you don't know it's difficult, why watch it? Why is it going to be interesting?

Mitton: Well, the strangest experience on that is I have to tell you, one time at a show in Spain I was in the middle of nowhere and I couldn't get out and I convinced myself—I was able to get out, but I convinced myself that I couldn't. It was the strangest thing. But that's my problem.

Reynolds: The circus is now "performance art." It used to be that Houdini called himself an "escape artist," but now David Blaine is calling himself a "survival artist." What makes his act worth watching, if indeed you think it's worth watching—is he going to survive by holding his breath for—

Mitton: Seventeen minutes, twenty seconds.

Reynolds: For seventeen minutes and twenty-seven seconds or whatever. To steal a line from the late Jay Marshall, “Sometimes I hate myself for not caring.”

Mitton: I have to disagree with that one because I remember actually Jackie Flosso, who was the son of Al Flosso, the Coney Island fakir. He’d listened to David Blaine do an interview on, of all things, the man who is now on XM, the wild morning disk jockey, and now I forget—

Audience: Howard Stern.

Mitton: Thank you. He heard him on Howard Stern talk about a—let’s just say an escapade. And he said, “Mark, this kid’s a star!” He goes, “One word: believability!” Which kind of comes right back to where we started, which was, in hearing him tell an anecdote to Howard Stern that was—let’s just say involved a different kind of Olympics. What Jackie was listening for and really amazed by was that he was so completely and totally believable. It really is a craft. Of course this gets back to the heart of the actor’s trade, and what all the people on the support team of the production team supply is an incredibly believable environment. You might not care about the long time under the water, but if the majority of the people believe it, then he has an audience. We’re back to that thing that Paul was referring to.

Fisher: But excuse me. He’s not asking anyone to believe it. He’s saying this is real.

Reynolds: He’s saying he’s doing it.

Fisher: He’s not asking is he doing it or is he not doing it. He’s saying he’s doing it. It’s real.

Reynolds: Even though it’s a very legitimate question.

Fisher: He’s exhibiting a feat of endurance or ability as a human body. Can a human body not breathe for *x* minutes or… But I don’t know, it’s separated from theater for me. I don’t think it’s involving illusion, and I’m thrilled to be involved with illusion.

Audience: How do you get the two beams of light then?

Fisher: I’ll just tell you a little off the subject—no, I’m happy to. What I was going to tell you was how we focus them, which was interesting.

Audience: I’ll take what I can get.

Fisher: We found a site downtown quite close to where the catastrophe happened, and we mounted in a square form forty of these huge searchlights. What we had to do was figure out how do you layer them? Do you put them in rows? Would a triangle—what would make you see a square in the air? It’s an illusion. It’s not a solid thing. It’s many things side by side. And the trick was how do you focus them, how do you get them perfectly parallel? In today’s world, we think we have all the technology of computers and what have you. After we abandoned almost every other way, we ended up sending somebody to New Jersey with a walkie-talkie and someone up to 96th Street with a walkie-talkie, and the two of them talked to a third person at the light and we said to the guy, “Move it a little bit further to the left.” That’s how we do it every year.

Reynolds: Proves he's a practical man, Jules.

Fisher: Problem solving.

Meeh: Can I ask you a question Charlie? You say you're in trouble if you come out and say, "This is an empty box." But you say the most important thing is to convince them you can't get out of the straightjacket. How is one different then the other?

Reynolds: Well with the escape stuff, you really are selling something that isn't exactly like all the rest of magic. I mean Conan Doyle believed that Houdini actually could dematerialize his body and get out of things. That tension that exists in magic between reality and illusion or between the myth and the fairytale and the detective story—it's out of that tension that magic delivers something that's very unique. No other art delivers it. To be frozen in a block of ice is certainly curious, but is it entertainment? I'm not sure. With Houdini, people did think, is he going to get out of the water torture cell?

On the first Doug Henning special, which was done live and to this day has the highest television rating of any variety special ever on television, we did the Houdini water torture cell and it involved hanging upside down in a tank of water. It wasn't recorded, it wasn't on tape, it was actually happening, and people watched it from all over the world. It was one of the few times in television that gives maybe Evel Knievel and stuff like that an edge that will draw an audience. When we rehearsed the water torture cell, one of the first things I said was let's put a scuba tank in the bottom of the cell. And Doug had to use it. Sure it's a gaff for him getting out of the cell, but it's not completely danger-less.

Meeh: How is that different from the safety wire on the aerials?

Reynolds: Yeah, it's Jules. Save me, Jules!

Maloney: No, I'll tell you: you can see the safety wire. It's right there.

Reynolds: I can see the wires in *Peter Pan* when people fly around the stage.

Maloney: Well, I would offer, that is different.

Fisher: Yeah, the wire in *Peter Pan* is allowing the effect to happen. The safety wire is there only in case of need.

Maloney: I remember before safety wires when I watched the Wallendas get under a tent in the Ringling Brothers circus. It is a different experience to see it without the safety wire than with the safety wire. I'm not in favor of one or the other, I don't think people should die for my entertainment, but I think part of the excitement is that everybody's looking up and saying, they could die.

Reynolds: That's it. And the feeling of triumph in the members of the audience when they do see seven people high make it across that wire and get to the platform. It's really a great emotional thing. It's an emotional thing because it's real. The audience isn't asked to believe. They know it is real.

Mitton: And it should be said that that was absolutely brilliant. I can say as a teenager home in Wisconsin watching Doug Henning struggling to get out of this water torture cell, I completely bought it. It was like a big surprise because it really looked like he had drowned. And there was a phenomenal ending that you should actually see sometime. Your work on that was unbelievable. I was certainly convinced. If there was a safety net, I wasn't aware of it.

Reynolds: There was none. The worst tragedy we actually had in that whole thing was that Doug lost an earring.

Mitton: Well, speaking of working without a net, if you have a question please go to the microphone—oh, there's a bit of a race.

A: I conduct a theater discussion series here at the institute, where the audience sees a play and then has a discussion afterwards, and I look forward to hearing a lot of the different reactions to the performance that we've just been listening to. It's extremely stimulating to listen to your experiences in making theater. I have a question to ask, though, that has to do with the assumption that there's a reality and there's art and there's a great divide. Of course those of us who are psychoanalysts—and I'm sure not psychoanalysts—are aware that we're really talking about childhood. We're talking about everyone's childhood when they are first trying to realize what's real and what's not real. That becomes something that performers and audience share together, this tension between what's an illusion and—.

What I want to ask is, I think we talk about art imitating reality and reality imitating art. We have to see that the two are not so divisible. When children grow up they want to know how are children born, where do they come from? Somehow 2,000 years ago the idea got spread around that there was a virgin birth. Mary gave birth without having had intercourse. Now that's an illusion—I refer to religion—that we've lived with for 2,000 years. That's an illusion that became a reality in our culture. When George Bush sent our troops over to Iraq, he said there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and we had to go over there. I just want to emphasize that this distinction between—I mean, there's a lot of art in the real life, and there's a lot of reality in art. I think this division that we're making is somewhat a false one. Two thousand, three thousand years ago when the sun was arising, people thought this was a god or something: they created a kind of thing. We're now talking 2,000 years later as if we know what reality is and we know how to just tweak the stage so that we make it real. But I think we're living in a particular moment in time, which I don't think we've given justice to—either childhood or the history of mankind.

Reynolds: I agree with everything you say. I think there is an ethical thing about taking an illusion and passing it off to people. Taking an illusion and lying about it and saying this isn't an illusion, this is real. It's like Uri Geller bending spoons and knives. He's telling people that he really is doing that. First of all it seems like a kind of trivial way to prove you're God, but it is unethical for him to do what is basically a magic trick and say it isn't a magic trick. A magician doesn't do that. Some mentalists do it, but magicians shouldn't lie. It's a bad thing.

Maloney: But we also haven't discussed, we don't have the time to discuss—it would take another evening or another several evenings to discuss the creation of illusion in the service of the state and how governments let's say mask—the Inigo Jones/Ben Johnson masks in the

service of the state, versus the anti-mask which was allowed twenty minutes before the huge spectacle which was meant to glorify. To see George Bush in the pilot's uniform—he didn't fly the plane and land it on the carrier. That's one illusion, and then we have the illusion of victory is ours. You make wonderful points, but boy it's exhausting just thinking about staying here for another ten hours.

A: I would suggest that Uri Geller may have been doing spoonerisms but that is—. Sorry about that. George Bush, the Virgin Mary, the people who believe it, they are not lying. They're guilty of cognitive—guilty is the wrong term—they're committing cognitive dissonance. Doug Henning was probably subconsciously in deference to the New York analytic, looking for transcendence from the very beginning.

Reynolds: I believe that's true.

Laughton: And I think in another sense that's cognitive dissonance as well.

Fisher: I'm just going to ask again, because I've always wondered this about Doug—was he not disappointed week after week, doing something—

Reynolds: It was funny. One of the tenets of the whole TM, Maharishi thing was that they were going to learn to fly. Out in Iowa they actually had two huge airplane hangars. One was the women's flying dome and the other was the men's flying dome. These had sponge rubber mattresses on them. They would leap in the air and land right back down again. This was the beginning of learning to fly, which the Maharishi said that they would be able to do. Every day they'd go in and they'd bounce up and down in these things, and that was their flying lesson for the day. One day I said to Doug, "Doug, do you really buy this thing? That you're going to be able to fly?"

He said, "I've been doing it now for six months," and he said, "The more I do it, the lighter and lighter I feel when I do this." And I said, "That's because you don't eat." He lived on nuts and berries. But they were very sincere people.

Fisher: Isn't that sad in a way?

Reynolds: It's sad to me.

Fisher: I'm sure George Bush believes in what he's saying.

Reynolds: Yeah, maybe. Maybe he believes it because Dick Cheney told him.

A: I'd like to add an important note. I think it's important. The poetic imagination is in disrepute in this country right now. A student of mine did a beautiful play on the parents of murdered children in Houston. The papers called him the new Arthur Miller. HBO called him on the phone and said, we want to make a movie of your play, give us the clippings. And he said, oh, I made it up. I did research and I made it up. And then they said, we can't do it because we only do fact-based movies. Now as Peter says, we don't have the time to discuss this at length, but you know, in reality television, is that real? No! But the idea of the imagination is being downplayed, which is a whole other discussion of why are they doing that.

Reynolds: Film started as a magic trick. Magicians saw film and said hey, this is a great trick. I'll put it in my theater and do it. That's precisely what Melies did. He was the head of the Theater Robert-Houdini in Paris and he saw these very early primitive movies and presented it as one more magic trick. Then eventually film came along and it killed vaudeville and put all the magicians out of business. It's a great irony. Very interesting.

A: I was wondering—how do you get out of a straightjacket?

Mitton: It's a lot of hard work. You have to dislocate your shoulder most times. You should never try it at home, should you happen to have a straightjacket.

A: I'm not planning to do it to me. I meant my brother.

Mitton: You can always get him in it, but see if he can get out. That's what my brothers would have done with me. But they had a good time. Afterwards I'll show you a little way to loosen up your wrists, all right?

A: Okay.

A: I noticed seeing a production that has wires, people being lifted off, and all these big productions really get in the way of me suspending my disbelief. I'm much happier with a smaller production where I become part of the loop. I could describe all the faces looking at the audience. That's when it really works for me. Otherwise I look at a production and think, they shouldn't have spent money on this stuff. They shouldn't try to fool me like this. I want to see the real thing. It's ultimately not very satisfying. I was curious about our human yearning for coming in and having our beliefs suspended. Other days maybe we come in and yearn to find out what are the mechanics of this. I think we can be different audiences on different days.

Reynolds: It's also kind of related to why radio—you know, you listen to something on radio and the sets and the costumes and all the things that make up a film are much more real because they're in your mind. You've created them. To shoot a story—people say, oh, that's a fake building. But your imagination doesn't build fake buildings. It's a much more real experience.

Maloney: I've been doing this for a long time and it's hard sometimes not to get cynical. It's hard not to get depressed about the state of my particular art. But the thing that is true and that never ceases to amaze me is that people still want to see theater as much as they ever did. I see people waiting in line to get into a play, and I say, what are they doing? Why are they coming? The people that I wish there was a punishment for are the people who are sort of perverting the theatrical experience, as Arthur said. The reality television, the things that are taking away our use of our imagination. I don't know what the answer is to that. It feels like a tsunami that we just cannot stop. I don't know if there will ever be a recovery from it. But I know the desire in the human heart and soul and mind to go to see a live play is still burning. We're just running out of opportunities for that experience.

Reynolds: Well, the thing that's depressing about the television experience with so-called reality shows is you're really being sold a bill of goods. This is not like going to a play or watching a magic act. People are telling you that these people are out in the jungle and there are cannibals

behind the trees. You know that just out of the frame is the commissary wagon and lights and cameras.

Maloney: A support staff of a hundred people.

Reynolds: A support staff of people. You know this person isn't going to die falling over the falls. There are too many people there to save them.

Fisher: The Marshall McLuhan book about hot and cold mediums—well, the radio is a hot medium because you have to work at it. You have to think. This is the tiny thought I have occasionally about reality. Even when you see the Cousteau films where he is doing something alone in the water, you know that somebody else is near him with a camera. Or *National Geographic* where somebody's climbing up a steep cliff—somebody's nearby with a camera.

Mitton: I love that comment about the feedback loop. One of the most amazing things about being a live performer in an area like illusion is that it is corrective over time. The audience is such a phenomenal teacher. One of the greatest things that I learned from that magician that I studied with was to really carefully listen to my audience. The last part of the training was I would go out and do shows and come back with all the problems that I didn't have a good answer for. That's an amazing process that just never stops. Everyone who works in live theater is really blessed by this direct connection with their audience. We always have something to learn from that.

A: I'm a writer and I'm making the switch from non-fiction to fiction, so I'm beginning to learn how to create illusion. What I'm learning is that in a way, less is always more. I think people really want to believe and the art of creating an illusion is inviting them in and providing it with just enough to give them an opening to move into it and make something out of it. The more you explain, which in a way is those wires that are visible, the more you shut them out, in a funny way.

Reynolds: Yeah, absolutely. I totally agree with you.

A: Two things just to get any reaction from anybody. Freud and Jung, when they were asked how did you figure out what you wanted to do, they both said remember what you loved to do as a child. Start doing it again as an adult. I was wondering how that might connect with how you got into doing what you do in terms of some aspect you loved to do as a child and you follow through by seeing this whole thing about illusion, vision. Where there's no vision, the people will perish. How source is accessed and comes into existence is to that process a vision of image, imagination, that mystery. We're interested in this because this is the way nature works and operates and how source comes into reality and we progress and evolve. Like mirror means "mirrare" to be filled with wonder and amazement. It's interesting.

Maloney: I can tell you my first memory, one of the first. Maybe it's not the first. The first memory of my father and why I'm in this business. My father is wearing a dress. He's walking down the main street of our little hometown. He's got a wicker basket on his back. In the basket is a little boy with his legs over the front of it. He's wearing a sailor hat and he's waving to a crowd. I'm in the crowd. The boy is the basket is my father. The lady in the dress in my father.

Attached to his waist is the front part of a woman with huge breasts and her arms are around back holding onto the basket. It's a costume. It's one of my earliest memories: my father as this old lady carrying this little boy. Both of them were my father. What do you think of that, doctor?

So it was an illusion, it was funny. It was a clown act as part of a small town American parade and it was an illusion. I'm very fortunate to have had a father who was an actor. It's the profession which engaged me at a very early age, and a profession which I've been fortunate enough to follow all these years. I'm really one of the lucky ones to be able to have done all my life what I love to do.

Reynolds: It's funny. People love to be astonished and amazed. But they really don't like to be deceived or fooled. If you can amaze them without lying to them, then you've got something really strong going for you.

Maloney: How did you guys get to do what you do, these special things that you do? When you were young did you have an experience with that?

Meeh: My first theatrical memory is *Brigadoon* and the curtain went up on a scrim with the dry ice cover behind it. It just transported me. That combined with the fascination and joy in natural beauty—the dry ice cover—a lot of the things I work with are natural elements. Fire, wind, fog, rain, water. They're not easily controllable. There is an element of unpredictable—well, I guess, if you look at the physics of it, it is predictable. But to control all of the elements in the theatrical environment is not possible. So the joy of the unexpected and the beauty of it is just fascinating for me.

Audience: What did P.T. say to Eugene O'Neill?

Fisher: I don't know, what did P.T. Barnum say to Eugene O'Neill?

Audience: I don't know. That's why I'm asking the experts.

Mitton: Answer?

Fisher: I don't have any idea.

Reynolds: There's a punch line lurking there somewhere.

A: I don't have the answer, but I guess I had a question for the panel. You talked a lot about suspension of disbelief, and I've found for myself as my logical mind developed and the more I learned about something, I became, let's say a lot more skeptical of being fooled. Once I got to a more expert knowledge level in certain areas, I always found it's interesting how I could return to being the child and my mouth would gape and look at something done really well and be in the moment with it. You guys are all experts, as actors and as magicians. What is it for you? Are you still able to be—to go for the ride? Are you always sitting back with a little bit of distance?

Reynolds: I absolutely love to be fooled. I really do. A number of us here were recently at a historical conference. One of the features was a very, very famous card trick called the Hooker Rising Card. We were all baffled. We really were. There were two highlights—the other was

Jules's talk on lighting. Those were the two things of the entire event that I remember. If I had seen those two things I would have been very, very happy. And I'm very curious as to how the Hooker Rising Cards work. I've thought a lot about it and I've done a lot of research on it, and everybody else has and you have. But what a great experience.

Fisher: Can I elaborate on that, on the effect? We went to see a magic trick that was actually created in 1919—ninety years ago in Brooklyn by a doctor who wanted to develop a magic trick basically where you pick a card, or you choose a card or you think of a card, it's put into a deck, and the card rises. That sounds so simple and so banal almost. Well, it's a magic trick. There's a thread. Here was an effect where we watched it done over and over again, each time in a slightly different way. The lighting was simple. There was not a lot of shadows; it wasn't things that were hidden. There were not a lot of stories involved. They didn't try to distract you with other things. But whatever method was used was so well concealed that after about five to eight minutes I gave up trying to figure it out. I just went with it and I was watching magic. It was one of the best things in my life watching that effect. It was so hard to believe that I couldn't figure it out. That astonished me, knowing a little bit about science, and we live in a world where we grow up with a lot of technology. It was all wiped away by this very simple card trick.

You ask, are we stilled fooled or still taken in by it all? I am still taken in and I'll give you an example that answers your question also, how did I get started. When I was maybe eight years old, I saw a children's entertainment in my school, but it was something like a play like Rumpelstiltskin. There was a wall—it was a scrim—a brick wall covered with ivy, and there was a man standing in front of it and slowly, magically, I saw this woman inside the castle. It was a piece of scrim. Scrim is a fabric like net stockings, has paint on it, and if you light it from the front, you can't see through it, and if you put light behind that piece of cloth, you now can see through it. The cloth becomes invisible. It's used to this day. I use it in shows, we use it in magic. But it was so magical that this wall could disappear.

I have another experience, which I saw when I came to New York many years later. Here's a place you wouldn't think of. I went to see a Balanchine ballet of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* This entire ballet takes place with people running around all over the stage, on the stage level, and the very last moment, Puck stood down center and did a pirouette and lifted off and went up, flew, and the curtain came down. It was just magical. I still go to see plays or I go to see—even films I find are full of fantasy in which I get caught up in the storytelling. And I love being fooled by magicians. I'm totally easily fooled.

A: I wanted to say that my father was a magician and he had worked in the circus. That's where he met my mother who was a bareback rider—

Reynolds: May I ask their names?

A: Well, I'll get to that. He had many wonderful tricks and illusions and I was very entertained from what I can remember when I was very young, from being one year old to two years old to fifth grade. When I went to class that day and told my teacher about it, she said, you better come see me after school. When I went up to see her, she said, "Well, I know your parents and I know your father is a scientist, a government scientist who works on satellites. I seriously doubt he was a magician, and I know your mother and I seriously doubt he met her at the circus," and I was

shocked, but then I realized uh-oh, I think she's right. I've been just fooled all these years. So I went home, I confronted my father, and he said, "What? Oh, I was kidding." So I just want to say that his lying to me was a bit of a tall tale and I said, "I think I can't go back to school. We have to leave town." But I also think that his tale made the tricks more magical and more exciting. I did deal with it later in therapy.

Mitton: We want to thank you all for coming.