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Perspectives - Richard Cohn, Motion Picture Gaffer, Magician, Musician

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THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT

Perspectives

Richard Cohn, Motion Picture Gaffer, Magician, Musician

The Rooftops Project's **Kristen Porro** talks with **Richard Cohn**, Gaffer (Chief Electrician) to the television and movie industry on location in New York City, and performing magician, who shares tricks of his two trades that not-for-profits can use to make the most of often imperfect performance spaces.

Richard Cohn is a lighting director, lighting gaffer, and set electrician with thirty years of experience in motion picture lighting and electric for film and television. His credits include The Devil Wears Prada, Freedomland, and Spin City. He has worked for Paramount Pictures, 20th Century – Fox, MGM, Universal, Warner Brothers, The Children's Television Workshop, ABC, CBS, PBS, as well as special consultant to Julie Taymor and Criss Angel. Commercial credits have included Coca Cola, Red Lobster, Verizon, and L'Oréal Cosmetics. Richard is the Education Chairman of Motion Picture Studio Mechanics IATSE Local #52 in New York City. Also a noted magic historian, consultant, and performer, Richard has contributed magic themed articles to Playbill, Brooklyn Bridge, and Motion Image Journal, among others, and has been featured in the New York Times. His talks on the Magic of Brooklyn; the Magic of Coney Island, and the early links of magic and the cinema have been presented in Europe and the U.S.

What do "What Happens in Vegas" and "Monday Night Magic" have in common? Richard Cohn makes both possible, appearing behind the scenes in the former and in front of the curtains in the latter.

By day he is a gaffer, the chief electrician to television and motion pictures, with productions to his credit from the movies What Happens in Vegas, the Devil Wears Prada, and the Smurfs, to television series including Spin City. On the day of our interview, he had just finished a season's run of the show Deception for NBC as well as a pilot for Elementary that has just aired.

He is also a performing magician, and has a lifelong passion for magic and magic history. Our interview took place in the back room inner sanctum of one of New York City's most celebrated magic shops.

Whether he is using the title key lighting gaffer or acclaimed magician, both contain origins meaning "knowing the answer". "Gaffer is an old term," Cohn explains. "It sort of means grandpa. You know how things are done. In the music halls, the head stage hand was called a gaffer. He used to light the lamps and fix a gaff or mistake. It is also used in the glass blowing industry. The foreman in a glass blowing shop would be the gaffer."

Also a pianist, organist and accordionist, Cohn sees all of his worlds converging, with a love of history and filmmaking where pictures live and move. "There are a lot of historical links between magic and film making, particularly in the early days. I've been fortunate in my life to pursue these interests of mine, which interplay and interrelate with one another."

In a modern world where moving pictures can be found as easily on your smartphone as in a widescreen cinema, Cohn is drawn to the magic of live entertainment. He has performed widely as a magician in the New York area for charity events and for special audiences like hospital patients and in senior citizen and nursing homes. His wife, Alexandra, is herself a sound recordist for the picture industry, and is a musician with a father who was a New Jersey bandleader. She performs with a 70-piece wind orchestra.

"During down time between commercial and film projects, Alexandra and I have gone out to do live shows for charity, a combination of old time music and old time magic. People can really benefit from the peculiar energy of live entertainment, and appearances at fundraising events also help with the good works of these organizations."

Cohn notes that this energy is not limited to formal performances. "Even a dog, a service animal, coming into a facility provides a great focus and distraction, a lot of joy. That's also a big element of why you would invite



performers to come to your facility. It's partially this intangible happiness that you can bring to people."

In his professional life as gaffer, Cohn and his clients are used to conditions approaching perfection and with high-end budgets to match. A day later he may transition, magic props in hand, to what might seem to be an impossible location for a successful show.

Not-for-profit organizations are more than familiar with the concept of unpredictability when it comes to hosting or visiting events. It is in this context that we asked Cohn to focus on the not-for-profit world, that church basement or in-patient medical facility that is called upon as the platform for a live performance or event.

Cohn has become a master of adaptation here, too. Cohn will look at the lighting and sound system, but also make simple changes, perhaps to the audience seating if it is portable, or deciding where the performers can make their entrance at show time.

"Some rooms are nicely set up as a theater environment. Somewhere else, we might turn the whole room around by jumping in, turning all the chairs around, and making the back of the space the front. I'm just a ham, so I can walk around and play the accordion. We frequently enter marching, perhaps from the powder room or an office.

"We used to do a show regularly at a church over on the Lower East Side. At one point it was a beautiful facility, but over the years they had so few programs that the stage was always filled with boxes and junk that they'd throw there because nobody was really using it. Then we'd come to do the show. We had been told they have a beautiful stage and we'd get there and the stage was virtually unusable. But we would make the facility work for us."

The philosophy of "making things work" is in large measure out of respect for the informal audiences for whom Richard and Alexandra perform. He treats everyone as a deserving audience. "You've got people with expectations. We don't want to make them wait. If staff are bringing people in wheelchairs, that is one thing. But if you have a seat for a concert or a show, you don't want to be sitting there waiting, whether you bought a ticket or not. You are expecting the show to go on. The longer the delay, the less receptive you are going to be, the less of a good time you are going to have. I'm very conscious how all these things interplay."

Although it is nice when everything is perfect, Cohn believes that imperfection can help the performer hone his or her craft, too. It can encourage remaining versatile, being able to change your program and modify the presentation when the unexpected occurs – as it often does. "I used to be an accompanist for Bobby Baxter. He used to tell performers: 'I hope the chandelier falls down on you.' He meant that he liked the idea of chaos, that it would help push the show to a better level. If everything went smoothly things would be mediocre. If you have got to struggle to be your best, you're going to be better."

Cohn has great sympathy for not-for-profits trying to make their venues work, and in our interview insisted on looking at the question from the point of view of the not-for-profit staff member rather than that of the visiting performer.

"If I'm someone who's in charge of a facility at a church or a hospital, I've probably been contacted prior to the arrival of the performers and they've asked me some basic questions. If I'm cooperative and knowledgeable, I'll have certain answers. It's nice when the facility is well prepared and well maintained, where the liaison has an awareness and a sensitivity even if the space is not designed for this purpose.

"But it may also be that this is a burden to me in addition to the many other tasks I must do every day. These strange people from outside come with their requirements and demands. Some people with performing skills are not really show people. So they don't always know how to set the not-for-profit facilities manager at ease, or they can be very demanding. It may be off-putting on both sides."

Cohn is considerate about the demands that specialty acts can bring. "We used to do a magic show fundraiser as part of a larger annual show of folk music, jazz, and poetry, all in the same venue. Initially there was a lot of friction, because the musician might show up just with a guitar case and start playing, but the magicians have all these boxes, birds that you don't want to get cold, etcetera. You might think 'you guys are a pain in the neck.' But by the third year, the word got out, standing room only with people waiting to get in. The magic show was the biggest fundraiser in the annual series."

Scheduling can be a factor not only for the performers, but for the organization and the clients it serves. "We like to have an hour to set up. But we can set up in 15 minutes, 10 minutes under the gun. We've sometimes had that situation happen, particularly if a hospital or geriatrics facility got behind in their normal activities, whether it's feeding people or cleaning an area. Are we going to be interfering with mealtime? You may have the best act in the world but when food comes out everybody's on the food.

"One mental health facility where we worked gave us an important lesson through experience. They had a smoke break there. Everyone was rationed one cigarette. When that smoke break happened, it didn't make any difference what was going on, everybody ran out into the yard, smoked a cigarette, and then came back in. The first time that happened in the middle of our show, we wondered 'what did we do to chase them all out?' The second time we realized as we were getting close to that time that we needed to plan for an intermission."

"Sometimes there's a very regimented division between the janitorial staff and the cafeteria staff, or between the nursing staff and the administrative staff. Some places everybody works together, some places they don't."

From Richard's experience as a TV and movie industry professional on location, and as a magician and variety artist performing at charitable venues, what are some suggestions that almost any not-for-profit can use?

He encourages using a checklist to anticipate and plan for the needs of the performers. Cohn shared elements of the one he and his wife abide by, in the box on the next page. Cohn attributes the checklist to his wife, also a musician, a sound expert and a union local member. In an ideal world, their preference is to visit the place of performance in advance and set up an hour before show time on the show date. When one or both are not an option, they find that their checklist eases preparation. It can be especially useful where the organization does not regularly host performances, or where the organization uses volunteers.



The Cohn Checklist for an Informal Performance Venue:

1. How will the performers unload and load their equipment?
2. Where will the performers park their car, van, or truck? Does it have to be moved after it is unloaded?
3. If a piano is needed for the performance, is there one? Is it in the right place? Is it in tune?
4. What lighting system is available? Has this been communicated to the performers in advance?
5. What sound system is available? What age is it? Will there be someone on hand who knows what button does what?
6. Will someone who has the key to locked lighting, sound, or other equipment, be present with the key? How soon in advance of the performance time?
7. How is the audience seating arranged? Is it fixed or portable?

For organizations that wish to improve the performance characteristics of their facilities, perhaps even with small or no budget, Richard has several suggestions, too.

First, think about easy ways that you can make even the most mundane meeting space or public room more theatrical in feel. “Whether it’s a classroom or a hotel banquet room, there are things you can do to a greater or lesser degree to enhance the lighting and enhance the theatrical experience for people. This can distinguish a true performance from just any other presentation, demonstration, seminar, or training. When I arrive I’ll usually experiment a little bit even with something as simple as light switches on the wall. I can incorporate those lights to help make more of a theatrical environment.”

Second, inspect the surface you intend to use as your stage or platform. “What is the composition and condition of the flooring? This makes a difference where there may be dancers, for example. Can we dance barefoot here? Are there nails in the floor? Are we going to get splinters?”

Third, consider the stage, from the audience perspective, what the performers would call the “front of the house” where the audience sits. Eye contact with the performers is critical in live performance. It is a key distinction between Cohn’s day job in TV and the movies and his live performance experience. “The human eye is very different than a camera, which affects my lighting decisions. Your eye has a great piece of apparatus attached to it – a brain. One thing I learned from another professional magician, Ali Bongo, is that you always have to frame your face whether you are on TV or on a platform. It is about personality. Is the stage a raised platform? Is it on the same level as the audience? Sightlines are very important. In live performance every set of eyes has to be accounted for. In the old days, the theater stage was raked (that is, pitched at an angle toward the audience), while the audience was on a flat level. Magicians

would have to use chock blocks to keep their illusion equipment from rolling down into the orchestra pit.”

Fourth, is there a separate, private spot – even an informal one – for the performers to use before and after the performance? It could be a fancy space, or an office, the library, a classroom, or even the boiler room. “In theatrical parlance that’s called the green room, an area for the talent to relax, preset, perhaps have a bite to eat. You want to be considerate of your performers. If the performers are relaxed and feel that they are being treated with respect, they may go the extra mile for your audience.”

Fifth, is there storage for scenery, instruments and props? This can be important for the organization’s own theatrical properties, or for guest performers who may be playing multiple nights in the host venue. “I’m sometimes amazed that all this money gets spent on a facility that is ostensibly for a particular purpose, but certain key criteria to make it functional have been neglected,” Cohn laments. He remembers one newly constructed university little theater with a beautiful front of house, but behind the backdrop on stage there was just a brick wall. “There was no space to store musical instruments, the orchestra’s stands, or scenery. Someone must have said, ‘well, we need a carpentry shop for building scenery.’ The carpentry shop had a regular door, not even a double door or a big elephant door as we say, so props and scenery had to be moved through a regular door. Anyone with stage experience would of course have designed it to have a double door or oversized door for access for these things.”

When creators like Cohn think of how to elicit oohs and ahs from the crowd, they are at the same time thinking how to ensure the audience will want to come back for more. The puzzle is that no two audiences and no two venues will be the same, which some find to be a very frustrating aspect of setting the stage. I think it’s safe to say Cohn finds it fun.

We asked Richard what a smaller organization, say a church or a not-for-profit theater venue, might do if they had a little bit of capital to invest in their space that might make a big impact. Possibilities came immediately to his mind.

The first was an inexpensive follow spot. Cohn uses a simple spotlight in place of expensive equipment, sets, or attire to accomplish his desired mood and focus.

“One follow spot, intelligently operated, can do so many things that create a wonderful theatrical environment. You can put a boomerang in with different colors. You can use it as a pin spot or a follow spot. Broaden it out or come in tight and you can emphasize the talent’s face.” Through lighting, Cohn draws the audience’s eyes exactly where he wants, whether they realize it or not. A follow spot also doesn’t require much space. “One spot can be easily moved or stored away in a closet.”

Acquiring a spotlight is just one artistic technique used to highlight the performance. Ambient lighting in the room can contribute, too. “Light can be used to create mood to create attention, to direct attention, to create time of day or time of season, changing of time,” Cohn explains. When a lighting technician does his job right, the effect is subtle but dramatic. Color temperature and aesthetics can be more critical for Cohn’s TV and movie work. “With a live magic show, people’s brains make these adjustments and accommodations.”



Cohn warns that selecting lighting changes for general facilities management upgrades and energy savings can have unintended effects on the suitability of the space for performances. "Somebody may suggest you could save money by retrofitting the whole place with CFLs (compact fluorescent lights) and you won't have to use old fashioned filament light bulbs anymore. But some major lighting manufacturers view fluorescent as dead end technology. Most fluorescent lights are limited spectrum light. You can't take realistic photographs with it, for example. Also, a lot of CFLs are not dimmable. So you've may have a facility with an excellent dimmer system, where you spent money on wiring it and hanging the lighting system. Then you replace with CFLs and you can't achieve the nuances you want for a theatrical or dramatic show. You've crippled part of your creative ability, wasting a good feature of your facility as a performance venue.

"LEDs (light emitting diodes) function on low power and reduced heat so are likely to last longer than say an incandescent bulb, and lower energy costs. But not all LEDs are the same, either. Photographic quality LEDs are much more expensive than the garden variety that people are putting in to save money. There are even color-changing LEDs. But these are very costly retrofits. You might want to go in that direction if you had the money."

Cohn's second idea is an inexpensive, portable electric piano. This comes from their experience, knowing what a gamble it is to walk into an elementary school, nursing home, or community church and having no clue what sound is about to come out when you hit the b flat.

"I'd be looking for the piano. Is the piano in tune? If the piano is not in tune, the entire ensemble is thrown off. A lot of people are not musicians. They may say the piano was just tuned, but because it is an old and neglected instrument the tuner was not able to bring it up to 440 hertz, which is concert pitch. So the tuner tuned it down. Now, for a voice, that is not so important. For a guitar where you can tweak the strings, not so important. But with other instruments, particularly brass and woodwind instruments, there is much more limited latitude. Alexandra might not get the saxophone in tune. That one piano affects the rest of the orchestra. We stopped asking if there is a piano. Alexandra and I bring our own. And we always bring an accordion no matter what."

Cohn points out that the lesson applies to other types of performances, too. For legitimate theater groups, this might mean portable scenery or a dimmer board to control lighting.

Cohn and his wife swear by their reliable little keyboard, knowing they will hear the same pitch whether they appear off the beaten path in New Hampshire, in a state-of-the-art New York Law School, or in an old, former Liz Claiborne facility he adapted for a one-time lighting trades event.

"I'm not talking about a plastic toy. This is an actual electric piano with weighted keys, that a conservatory-trained musician might be comfortable using in a charity performance. The cost of these instruments has come down astronomically in the past few years, from top-name piano brands. These are portable. They never need to be tuned. A piano like this might be \$500 or less. You might get a little amplifier for as little as \$100 to go with it. That is once again a great complement to your facility and it's portable. You can put it in a closet, it's not going to take up a lot of space. You're not going to need a piano

tuner to come regularly. You're not going to have to continually remind the cleaning staff not to spray cleaning solution on the keys. Its low maintenance, but very versatile, money well spent."

A third tip is to focus on the performance platform, for example risers. Folding risers emphasize visibility and sight lines, because what is more un-enjoyable than straining your neck or sitting on your feet to see the speaker?

"Many places have risers if the high school has a band. Other auditoriums and spaces have them so that you can place your speaker or presentation six inches or higher up. They help to make the place more of a theatrical environment; one place elevated for the talent and another place where the audience is staged that helps. The risers are modular. You can fold them down, you can once again store them away. In some cases though they are perfectly good to leave out all the time."

Cohn's mind shifts back to the front of house audience seating area, too. "It would be nice to have a cart for chairs. If you have 50 folded chairs on a cart, you can take them in instantly to set up. It can even be an activity before and after your show for the audience or people on your staff and volunteers to help set up the seats."

At the same time, Cohn emphasizes safety in everything he does, from lighting to basic set-up. "I'm a member of a labor union. Sometimes these may seem to people like inflated costs. On the other hand, there may be reasons why a facility wants its trained staff rather than a volunteer. I am very conscious of security and safety issues. Things can happen in a blink, people just doing thoughtless things. You may not be able to turn the hands of time back again. In-house people may be trained in the nuances of what they've got. Another reason why they find it expedient and perhaps wise to have a janitor or a designated person come to help with the set up is so that you don't get a know-it-all volunteer that comes in and abuses the facilities."

Cohn's professional training as an electrician and lighting expert prompts an immediate example in his mind. "A lot of people don't really understand electricity. They think, 'oh, I don't have enough outlets. Let me just keep adding power strips. The more holes that I can plug into, the more electricity I have,' they may believe. They don't understand it is all going back to a 15-amp breaker or circuit. In older facilities, these abuses can happen even more.

"We see this particularly in New York City, where you have still got old fuses rather than breakers and the super or the facilities guy for whatever reason stuck a penny in there. There's also still some knob and tube wiring in places, although it may not be allowed as places of public assembly. Knowingly having an environment that has built-in hazards is not safe, not smart, and not good citizenship."

Cohn's passion for working in cinema extends to his role as the Education Chairman at Motion Picture Studio Mechanics IATSE Local #52 Union. In this sense, Cohn is finding suitable space for the Local's own non-profit educational programs and conferences. Here the professionals often find themselves adapting to less than ideal conditions, too. For years, the organization held its primary annual event in old warehouse dives.



"Motion Pictures Studio Mechanics has been looking for a space for training and seminars for a long time, because we have a fairly active program of training and we also like to do industry events. I particularly do, because I'm an equipment geek. I go to trade shows and I like new gadgets. Then I want to be able to share that with the younger guys. So in conjunction with the Local 600 of the Cinematographers Guild (that's all the camera guys and the loaders and the assistant cameramen), we've been staging these east coast lighting workshops for many years. It's like a magician's convention. It's the place where the lighting geeks want to be, like moths to a flame.

"When we started, we'd use temporary space in an empty studio or one of the equipment houses, perhaps even in their loading bay. Sometimes we'd have to scramble at the last minute, because the space we planned to use just got rented and we would need to find a new place."

Local #52 has newly acquired a permanent home. It is in a former factory building in Astoria, Queens, ironically across the street from the old Steinway piano factory. They literally had to raise the roof, to 42 feet, creating high ceilings for lighting and special effects. Given the talents of the Local's members, they were able easily to access the right engineering and professional talent both to assess the building before they committed to acquire it, and then in the renovations. "We have not only been to a lot of movies, we've made a lot of movies," Cohn reflects. "It was costly."

Now they can furnish it according to their training and industry specific needs. But it brings the Local back to the drawing board as well. Like other not-for-profits, they find themselves solving one issue but confronting another.

"It took years to get our own space, but our event grew bigger in the meanwhile. The space we wound up with isn't big enough for everyone who wants to attend our largest events. But the space is really good for other things we plan to do, training and testing."

Just like at a magic show or a charity event, a sold-out conference for the lighting Local suits Cohn just fine. As he puts it, no matter where an event takes place, there is one goal for any performance. "Get people in the seats! You build a momentum by your implementation of your good intentions. Isn't that the object?"



Kristen studies at New York Law School, where she is a candidate for the Juris Doctorate degree in 2013. She is a student member of The Rooftops Project team. She hopes to combine her interest in the food, wine, and restaurant industries with her law degree, and currently works in the legal department and the real estate team of a corporate owner and operator of restaurant and retail locations, as well as with a New York City restaurant consultant on large projects in the City. Her undergraduate degree is from Pace University, where she received degrees in both Arts & Science and Business.



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