

# **The Magician**

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## **Abstract**

*The Magician* is a 18 minutes short musical film. It follows Robert, a magician who performs cards and coin tricks in a struggling venue. He gets told by the venue manager that he needs to perform bigger illusions in order for them to attract the crowds that will allow them to keep the place open. What Robert hasn't told anyone is that he possesses real magical powers with which he can make anything appear out of thin air, fly away and even more. But these powers come at a price : a physical one as he feels pain whenever he uses them, but also a moral one as he so deeply wishes his passion for sleight of hands magic would be enough to impress the crowds. As the public gets to witness his unusual gift, he gets pushed to use his magic more and more to his detriment. It is a film about one's passion versus the demands of a public or, more broadly, making art in a capitalist society which validates profits over anything.

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## Table of Content

<i>Abstract</i> .....	II
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	III
<b>Table of Content</b> .....	IV
<b>Part 1 – Once Upon a time – The Genesis</b> .....	1
<b>Part 2 – In a land far far away – The Writing</b> .....	6
<b>Part 3 – Where magic is real – The pre-production</b> .....	21
<b>Part 4 – There was a magician – The shoot</b> .....	34
<b>Part 5 – Who followed his dream – The post-production</b> .....	44
<b>Part 6 – And lived happily ever after – Conclusion</b> .....	49
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	51
<b>Filmography</b> .....	52

**Part 1**  
**Once upon a time...**  
**The genesis**

It all began a few years ago. I had just moved with some friends of mine in a small village in rural Québec. The world was still going through a pandemic and I thought that life away from the big cities was more attractive. During this time, many people took up new hobbies to fight boredom. One of my friends started practicing magic, card tricks to be more precise. He was very excited to show me the few tricks he had learned, and I was quite impressed as well. We also had a projector at home and would often watch movies or shows together. One of the shows they had started watching was *Penn & Teller: Fool Us*. In the show, the two veteran magicians invite other magicians to perform a trick that the hosts try to figure out. If they don't, the invited magicians receive a trophy and are brought back into Penn and Teller's Las Vegas show. We would try to uncover all the tricks as a group and watch some of them times and times again and, quite often, to no avail. Right away, I fell in love with the show and, more generally, magic.

There was something I found very exciting about being bewildered and puzzled by these magic tricks. I felt a sense of childlike wonder that sparked my curiosity and imagination. One of the great things about magic is that it makes us believe the impossible for a brief moment. All of the rational thinking we have spent our entire lives perfecting and holding as the one true mode of thought comes crumbling down as cards suddenly disappear, reappear or transform in front of our eyes.

Just like magic, cinema is an art form that has the capacity to make us see unbelievable worlds of fantasy and to make the supernatural real for an instant. It is not a coincidence that one of the first true artist of cinema was a magician. Georges Méliès, who was at the helm of the Théâtre Robert-

Houdin at the time, assisted to a screening of the first Lumière film at the Grand Café in Paris in 1895. Méliès was immediately impressed and, as he was already using projection techniques such as the Pepper's ghost or the magic lantern in his shows, he wanted to integrate films made by the cinématographe in his arsenal. He proposed to buy a device from Lumière who refused, but Méliès had his view set on making animated pictures and managed to find his own camera from another source.

According to his own account, his discovery of special effects, which he called *trucages*, came as he was filming a street scene in front of the Place de l'Opéra. His camera jammed and, after the minute it took to fix it, a bus changed into a hearse and the men into women<sup>1</sup>. He saw in this accident something wonderful that would inspire his coming films. He then went on to create an array of fantastic films and pioneered various techniques using both the cinematic device and the art of stage magic.

Although it is often considered that there is a sort of dichotomy in the cinematic art between Lumière's *actualités* which showed slices of life and Méliès' trick films, Tom Gunning argued that early cinema was actually unified under what he calls a *cinema of attractions*<sup>2</sup>. According to him, the early narrative films were more interested in the spectacle of cinema than in telling a linear story, or :

*less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power (whether the realistic illusion of motion offered to the first audiences by Lumière, or the magical illusion concocted by Méliès).*<sup>3</sup>

Méliès himself said about his films that his stories came to him at the very end of his process, after finding the trick he wanted to perform<sup>4</sup>. The thrill of this new attraction was enough in itself to draw in

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1 Georges Méliès, *Les Vues Cinématographiques in Écrits et propos : Du cinématographe au cinéma*, p.30

2 Tom Gunning, *The Cinema of Attraction (s) : Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde in The cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, 2006

3 *Ibid.* p. 382

4 Georges Méliès, *L'importance du Scénario in Écrits et propos : Du cinématographe au cinéma*, p. 87

the crowds. Recounting the mythical screening of *L'Arrivée du train à la Gare de Ciotat*, Tom Gunning says that "if the first spectators screamed, it was to acknowledge the power of the apparatus to sweep away a prior and firmly entrenched sense of reality."<sup>5</sup> I believe that the cinema can still have this power to "sweep away" the common world and bring to life dreams and visions.

Just like the spectators of early films were subject to a rapidly increasing amount of stimulus from the roaring advent of modernity, today's spectators are exposed to sights and sounds beyond reasonable senses. I believe that this situation has come to create a sort post-modern jadedness or indifference towards images. Following Mark Fisher's claim that "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism"<sup>6</sup>, I think that part of our imagination is being subdued by ever-flowing images. It is in part to try and fight against this current that I try to use cinema's power to *sweep away the entrenched sense of reality*, to create the possibility, if only for an instant, to imagine something different, a world where we are allowed to dream. I have always been interested in making films Méliès would call *vues fantastiques*, using *trucages* to create magical worlds. I have experimented with different forms of special effects, both practical and digital, to make films that showcase the fantastical.

It only seemed fitting that I would now include my recent discovery of the art of magic into a new film. I had a setting, but I still had to find a story. One night while watching Penn and Teller : Fool Us, one of the participant performed a trick so incredible that it felt like the only way it could have been done was if he actually had magical powers. I loved the idea. What if a magician actually did have magical powers? How would he use them? Why would he perform magic which is commonly sleight of hand tricks or tricked devices?

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Gunning, *Aesthetics of Astonishment : The (In)credulous Spectator*, p.121-122

<sup>6</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism : Is there no alternative?*, p.2

It made me think that maybe he could keep it a secret. I found the idea of someone having this extraordinary skill, but using the deceit of performing simple magic, fascinating. What could be his motivation to hide his powers?

One of the reasons I preferred sleight of hands tricks over ones that used devices was that they are a truly impressive display of skills. Of course, the ingenuity that goes behind building trick apparatus is a feat in itself, but I find a certain beauty in the lonely act of practicing sleight of hands maneuvers to the point of mastery, where they appear seamless and effortless. It takes a great deal of dedication and passion in order to achieve this level. I found there a piece of my narrative puzzle. What if the reason my magician hides his true powers is because of his unflinching passion for sleight of hands?

Some years ago, I have made a short documentary about an artist, Florent Veilleux, who then became a friend and a mentor. Even when not shooting with him, I would go visit him every week, and we would discuss art, life and everything in between. He has been an immense influence of the practice I have developed from then on and on my output on life in general. Florent was a 'pataphysician. He built kinetic sculptures from various pieces of garbage, toys or trinkets. But one of the things that I found particularly interesting about him was his past before 'pataphysics. In his youth, he had moved to France where he quickly became a popular singer. He had record deals, toured with great names such as Jacques Dutronc and Johnny Halliday. At some point, he gave it all up and moved back to Québec to work on his sculptures. He lived poor, but according to his passion. I always thought that this sort of passion was admirable and it was this flame that I wanted to engulf my character.

So I now had the core of a story. A magician secretly possesses real magical powers that he hides

in order to pursue his love for sleight of hands. I saw there a great way to talk about passions in a world which values commodified work over all. I feel like any artist will be faced at some point with the need to "pay the bills", that their art will not suffice financially. At this moment, what will they do? Does an artist have to comply to demands or is the personal conviction of creating something true and beautiful enough? I wanted my magician to be forced to deal with this dilemma of having to sacrifice his passion or to live true to himself. I thought there was in this issue something not only interesting, but that also had a universal quality. I think the same could apply to a woodworker who loves building beautiful furnitures, but has to work a carpentry job to make ends meet, a chef could love delicate meals but make soulless sauces in a hotel.

I think I was also facing myself this issue. What was I going to do with my practice? Will I keep on making strange little musicals or will I comply to demands from a public, or even give up and work within the industry?

**Part 2**  
**In a land far, far away**  
**The writing**

I had a character, a premise and a theme. Now what would the film be?

My first idea for the film was to make it a very personal journey into the protagonist's internal struggle. My previous films were all very light, some of them even being musicals, and made for a youth audience. I wanted to break away from this and make this film somewhat dark. To me, the idea of this character holding an extraordinary secret seemed like an immense burden and I wanted the film to focus on this aspect of the story. This magician appeared to me as a deeply tormented person leading a sort of double life. How can you evolve in the world knowing you have this incredible ability? I was thinking of superhuman figures who felt exceptionally lonely as a result of their impossibility to relate to common men and women, characters such as Dr. Manhattan in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or even Superman at times.

While I was trying to think of this character and his universe, I kept thinking of gags. I started seeing him as a somewhat pathetic, but loveable, person. My perception of the film started to shift from there. I was seeing how his refusal to comply at all costs was both tragic and comedic. There is something funny about his stubbornness, even though it may cause him suffering. What if it wasn't all that dark of a story after all? It made me reconsider that it could, even should, be a musical like my previous films. Aren't musicals the ultimate spectacle films, the peak cinema of attractions? One of the things that have always drawn me towards is the fact that they present a world so unashamedly removed from the one we live in. They become a fable of sorts by refusing to adhere to realistic representations of social norms. I can't recall any time I've seen people burst out in songs during an

argument, even if I so wish I had.

Furthermore, it felt like this decision brought me as the author even close to the character. Instead of making a film that would maybe be closer to films commonly seen in festivals, a personal and intimate drama, I would stay true to what I had been working on. Musicals are a genre that is very rarely seen, especially in independent filmmaking. It is also a genre that struggles to be considered "serious" or of artistic worth. Telling various people I direct musical films, I am often met with the response that they "don't like musicals". Of course, I dispute this claim (haven't we all grown up watching Disney films?), but it shows the kind of reception that the genre might have. By making this film a musical, I, like the magician, refuse to make a more commonly appreciated genre and stand true to my passion.

I would also describe my interest in making musicals as metamodern in nature. Thimotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker describe metamodernism as being "*characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment*"<sup>7</sup>. Musicals might be seen as a genre of the past by some but I long for the fabled transformative *Gesamtkunstwerk* it could have been. Yet, I know creating a better world through film is an insurmountable task, an impossibility even. Despite this, I aim for my films to "*restore, to the cynical reality of adults, a childlike naivety as opposed to the postmodern "smart" cinema of the 1990s, which was typified by sarcasm and indifference*"<sup>8</sup>. Metamodern films have been characterized by a certain sincerity that had been abandoned in favor of irony in postmodernism. Often cited are directors like Michel Gondry or Wes Anderson as the main representantatives of this trend.

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7 Thimotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, *Notes on metamodernism* in *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, Vol. 2 2010, p. 2

8 *Ibid.* p. 7

I have always liked the genre for its theatricality and rejection of realistic depiction. Musicals unashamedly take place in a fictitious world where people can burst into songs and dance at any time. I think one of the reasons the genre may have a bad reputation is that it has been tainted with quite a few bad films. In recent years, I could not even bear to watch *La La Land* in its entirety and it is one of the main titles you hear in conversations about contemporary musicals. To me, it felt unoriginal and a rehash of some of the worst trends of musicals, that is a cheesy story held together by elaborate dance numbers. I did really enjoy Leos Carax' *Annette* and the short film *Bleu Tonnerre* by Philippe-David Gagné and Jean-Marc E. Roy in recent years. I also have a special place for films such as *Mary Poppins*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Little Shop of Horrors* or *The Nightmare Before Christmas* for the way they present whimsical worlds of fantasy. I do take more inspiration from those types of musicals than the more traditional films of Minelli and the likes that relied heavily on big dance numbers.

Although he expressed his distaste for musicals, Adorno made a case for films that did not resemble lived reality. He said that "*[t]he more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen.*"<sup>9</sup> To him, the "*sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience*"<sup>10</sup> and this makes films especially powerful as capitalist propaganda tools. I would argue that musicals are especially apt at questioning reality for this exact reason. They are as detached from "*the outside world*" as could be. I believe that his position on musicals mostly considers films produced within the Hollywood studio system and that another type of independent musical is possible.

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9 Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry : Enlightenment as Mass Deception*,  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm> consulted on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024

10 *Ibid.*

During our conversations, Florent Veilleux introduced me to the writings of Henri Laborit which became foundational to me both as an artist and a person. He thought that oppression was the nature of societies founded upon rationality. He argued that escape (or *fuite*) into imagination might be the only way to fight against the oppressive demands of a hierarchical society of dominance. He said about imagination that it is the

*"only mechanism of flight, of environmental alienation avoidance, sociological in particular, used as much by the drug addict, the psychotic, than the artistic or scientific creator. Imagination whose functional antagonism with automatisms and pulsions, unconscious phenomenon, is without a doubt at the origin of conscience."*<sup>11</sup>

I think that his views on escape could very well be compared to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of line of flight (*ligne de fuite*). Both are a way, a voyage even, out of the *hiérarchies de contrôle* in Laborit and the plane of consistency (*plan de consistance*) in Deleuze and Guattari. I try to make films that create such escapes from reality (even if temporary) both formally, by having the characters sing, and thematically by representing fantastical stories.

To come back to my film, it also seemed to make sense to me that the film should be targeted, or at least appropriate to, a youth audience. Before I met with Florent, my artistic practice was mostly centered on underground literature (zines and books) and collages within a collective. Our work was "edgy" to say the least and was really targeted towards a punk or anarchist public. I think people who knew my work back then would have a hard time believing I have been making children's musicals for the past couple of years. Florent is really the one that brought me towards this type of content. He had written an album for children and has animated creative workshops with kids. He used to say that kids

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<sup>11</sup> My translation from "*seul mécanisme de fuite, d'évitement de l'aliénation environnementale, sociologique en particulier, utilisé aussi bien par le drogué, le psychotique, que par le créateur artistique ou scientifique. Imaginaire dont l'antagonisme fonctionnel avec les automatismes et les pulsions, phénomènes inconscients, est sans doute à l'origine du phénomène de conscience.*" Henri Laborit, *L'éloge de la fuite*, p. 6

were not tainted by rational thinking and that their imagination could roam freely. I remember one time I went to see one of Florent's installations at the Centre des Sciences of Montréal and, while most people who passed by seemed uninterested, children were drawn right away by it. They would be so interpellated by the work, that their parents would have to drag them out to see the rest of the exhibitions. I believe that children do have a sort of imaginary intelligence that sadly gets shoved away as they have to conform to adult life. I'd like for my work to appeal to this imagination and not only for the actual children but also for the little child who wants to dream in all of us. Making films for a youth audience has helped me expand and trust my imagination rather than being a limitation. In a child's mind, there are not as many questions and things don't have to make perfect rational sense.

Not only does my imagination fit this kind of content perfectly, but it seemed to me like what the film is about is as important to children as it is to an adult audience. The youth is constantly discovering new facets of their own life, new interests and new passions. I believe that they too are taught to comply with the demands of a capitalist society and that they should learn not to forego passions in favor of some more profitable ventures. To me, this idea of a character fighting external demands against his internal desires also did not have to be understood solely in economic terms. The theme seems large enough that it could be related to an experience that any children might have faced at some point.

While not outrightly political, I still wish to instill the ideals I believe in into my work. Especially since I am making films destined to be watched by a younger audience, I try to promote values that I think are positive and aim towards individual and social well-being. Stories play an important role in a child's development. Bruno Bettelheim said about fairy tales that they are *"therapeutic because the patient finds his own solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to*

*imply about him and his inner conflicts at this moment in his life.*"<sup>12</sup> He argues that fantastic tales have a strong impact on a child's growth exactly because they do not present a rigorous explanation of the world or a definite answer to these conflicts. Following this idea, I try to make stories in which the protagonist overcomes hardships by his own means. I hope that a child can find solace by identifying some of their personal issues being resolved in the story.

Magic has always been a part of children's literature and films from the Brothers Grimm's stories to *The Wizard of Oz* and, more recently, the Harry Potter franchise. Following Piaget's studies on child development, Bettelheim argues that "*the child's thinking remains animistic until the age of puberty*"<sup>13</sup> which means that "strictly realistic stories run counter to the child's inner experiences"<sup>14</sup>. He says fantastical stories might seem ridiculous to the adult mind, but align themselves with the way a child thinks and sees the world. Magical tales present such animistic views. It is for that reason that a scarecrow coming to life in *The Wizard of Oz*, a frog turning into a prince in *The Frog Prince* or a talking hat which reads your mind in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* are stories that resonate with children. Even though I have grown up, I still try to instill some of those magical feelings reminiscent of childhood in my stories.

But let me come back to the film. So I had a premise: a magician secretly possesses real magical powers that he keeps hidden because of his love for sleight of hands tricks. Now, I needed to actually build the story around it. The first few scenes were written before I had figured out what the main plot points would be. We had to shoot a scene or sketch for our film in Manfred Becker's production course and I thought it would be a great idea to start right away with the opening scene and the first song.

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12 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment : The meaning and importance of fairy tales*, p. 25

13 *Ibid.* p. 46

14 *Ibid.* p. 53

In this version of the script, the main character was a street magician. I called him Robert as a reference to Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, often considered the father of modern magic. In the first scene, he performed in front of a crowd of either disinterested passers-by or rude hecklers. The reasoning behind making him a street performer was twofold. Firstly, I thought that it would amplify the loneliness of the character. A street performer is always surrounded by an anonymous crowd, but alone in the performing act and with no one behind the scene. The second reason was that I thought it would be easier and more feasible to shoot outside on street corners than find a venue that I could rent out for a decent price.

So it turns out, I figured out it wouldn't exactly be easy to shoot on the streets. I never had the experience of shooting in public before and, looking back at it, it was maybe a bit foolish to think it would be simple. For an assignment in one of my classes, I shot just a short scene outside on Roncesvalles Avenue. Even with just a minimal crew and setup, it felt very hard to work among constant questions from onlookers, uncontrollable noises and other unpredictable factors. It also came to my mind that the weather could be a huge issue, making us potentially lose entire days of shooting if it were to rain on a scheduled shoot day.

But perhaps the main reason that I have changed from a street performer to inside a venue was for the benefit of the storyline. I was starting to have difficulties building a plot solely around this street magician. It felt like the story really needed an external force acting on him. I couldn't just center my whole story around this protagonist. I needed another character to make his struggle clear and also to open up the story. I first thought of a neighbor. I saw this character as a friendly figure who would try to cheer our hero up. I quickly started seeing this other character as either shallow or uninteresting plot-wise.

All of this brought me back to thinking about setting the story in a venue. I could see a clear antagonist in the manager of this venue. This type of character is definitely a trope in stories set in the show business world. Think of the crooked circus master, the greedy boss or the rapacious producer. He would personify the demands of the public for a certain kind of magic, the one that Robert tries to avoid performing. I would be naming this character Frank, simply in reference to Danny DeVito's character in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. For some reason, I always pictured this character to look like Danny DeVito, small and boorish. One day, I watched Milos Forman's *Man on the Moon* for references for the film and I was quite surprised when I saw that DeVito played Andy Kaufman's manager in the film.

Now my story was starting to take shape. Robert performs in a struggling venue his sleight of hands tricks. Frank demands that he changes to something that would attract the crowds for them to save the venue. As Robert tries to impress using solely his card and coin tricks, he realizes that it will not suffice. He tries using his magical powers and the crowd goes wild. Frank pushes him to use his powers, but Robert would still rather try to dazzle the spectators with his card tricks. He tries again and fails.

Then I was stuck for some time with finding a proper and satisfying ending. The crowd would not just suddenly be amazed by his sleight of hands tricks. I first thought that he could maybe act up and take revenge. He could make everyone disappear or something of the sort. It didn't exactly feel appropriate though. It seemed like an easy way out of the story and out of character for how I pictured Robert. It also did not feel really satisfying concerning what I was trying to say with the film. It was an ending that did not resolve the conflict in any way. It seemed entertaining maybe, but that was about it.

Thinking about the story one day, I was struck by an epiphany. A way that he could resolve his issue without exactly succumbing to the public's demands was to find another type of public that did appreciate his tricks. He could decide to leave the stage and share his passion by opening up a magic school. There he would be amongst others who are appreciative of his skills and want to learn from him. I thought it was a very satisfying and positive ending. The conflict finds a resolution and it opens up the finale in a nice way.

Furthermore, I had a friend of mine do a storyboard for the first song. He studied drawing in Halifax and is now living in Toronto. When he read only the first few scenes, he told me he really could identify with the character. He told me he was struggling to find work as an illustrator that actually interested him. He then said that he was thinking of starting to teach drawing to kids. I was baffled. It did seem like my newfound ending could resonate with people.

It also helped solve an issue that I saw potentially arising where Robert could be misconstrued as having a sense of superiority over the audience, that he would see himself as some sort of higher being. Of course, this is not what I was trying to get across. I saw Robert's vision of his own powers more like a kind of curse than a blessing. It makes him feel more ostracized than superior.

So I got to writing a version of the script with this new ending in mind. In this version, Robert angrily gets back to the stage after seeing that the crowd only wants his magical powers. He uses his powers to nag them and then disappears completely from the stage. He reappears alone in his home. The next day, he goes to a park to practice his card tricks alone. A kid sees him and is drawn to him. Robert shows him a simple card trick and as the kid goes away with his parent, we see Robert smile.

The actual teaching was not yet shown in this version. It was implied by the kid's interaction in the park. I did like the scene, but it raised some new issues with the script. It now felt like maybe this new kid character could be introduced earlier in the film. This sudden revelation did seem like it was coming out of nowhere and probably should be hinted at earlier in the venue. I had conversations with my supervision committee who also felt the same way. The new idea was to introduce a new character, a child, who would be sympathetic to Robert. My goal was to also make him a character that the audience of the film would identify with. He was going to be the character that was right all along and that Robert should have just listened instead of trying to please the crowds at all. He would be the "good one" as opposed to Frank who is a negative influence on Robert. I also wanted this character to represent the childlike wonder I too felt witnessing magic. I hoped that the audience too would identify with the kid's excitement about Robert's tricks and would side with him.

Writing this character in was not much of an issue. I named him David in reference to David Copperfield, another famous modern magician. I decided to make him related to Frank. It would explain his presence in the venue. I decided to make him his nephew while keeping the whole backstory absent from the film. I thought that it would be enough for the spectators not to question too much him being there in basically a bar. I didn't change much of the script, I just sprinkled his presence here and there. It did immediately give a new life to Frank and Robert's interaction though. By having Frank being dismissive of the kid, it made him even more antagonistic and by having Robert not listening to him either, it made him more flawed as a protagonist. It was apparent right away that it would also help bring the ending together.

However I still had one major issue with my script. Why was Robert so reticent about using his magical powers? There was the possibility that the film audience would not understand his struggle and

maybe even wish that he would use his powers. This problem was also discussed with my supervision committee and the issue was that there were not many external signs of why he wouldn't just use his magic.

The problem I was having with writing this external force on him was that he is pretty much an "all-powerful" being. Most problems he would face he could just magically "poof" away. He needs money? He can just make it appear. Someone physically threaten him? Poof, he's gone! It proved pretty challenging to find difficulties for an almost god-like character. I tried thinking of other such characters. The most obvious one is Superman, who is all-powerful, but has one weakness: kryptonite. Narratively, he needs this one weakness or else it would be very hard to put Superman in any kind of danger. Robert also needed something to endanger him.

The solution was that using his powers would come to some price to him. It would cause him some physical pain every time he uses them. I was first hesitant about this because I was afraid that it would take away from the fact that he is foremost fighting a moral dilemma with himself between his passion and the requirements of the public. I thought about it for some time and decided it was still the better option. There is something very telling about the manager and the public encouraging him to perform these magical tricks while he is in pain. I think that there are many examples of famous artists whose torment was romanticized and made into a spectacle for the enjoyment of the masses; artists such as Sylvia Plath, Kurt Cobain or Jean-Michel Basquiat just to name a few. This idea also reinforces Robert as the archetypal sad clown as in the famous joke about Pagliacci heard in *Watchmen* :

I heard joke once: Man goes to doctor. Says he's depressed. Life seems harsh, and cruel. Says he feels all alone in threatening world. Doctor says: "Treatment is simple. The great clown - Pagliacci - is in town. Go see him. That should pick you up." Man bursts into tears. "But doctor..." he says "I am Pagliacci."

The way that I decided to show this physical pain was to have smoke come out of his hands when he would use his powers. At first, it would be more subtle and then amplify as he uses them more. It helped create a sense of rising action and urgency. It made the moment when he would get angry at the crowd much stronger. It also made me rethink his disappearance at this moment. It didn't feel exactly climactic enough. This was discussed with my supervision committee who also felt the same way. I rewrote this part and instead of just vanishing away, he would now use his powers to the point of collapsing. The following scene would have him in the hospital with David. He would show him a card trick which would lead into his opening of the magic school.

So my story was starting to look very good, but I still haven't said much about the songs. It is a musical after all, so it is quite a big piece of the film. Like on my previous films, I was working alongside the same composer, Sarah Presne, who is also my partner. Our first collaboration on a musical was on *La Voix d'Henriette* in 2021. We both had the dream of making musicals one day, but I always felt like it may be too big of a project, that it couldn't be done without an appropriate budget. We were then fully living the pandemic and I think it really pushed me to want to make something that would feel very different than the rest of the films being made during that time. I thought it was the right time to finally do a musical. It was also my final BFA project, so it being a school project, the stakes were not as high as if it were fully funded project. It was a very fun project, but there definitely were some issues with the writing of the songs. We conceived the songs with a structure closer to a regular song and not really as musical numbers of a film. They were quite long and had choruses. At the time, it felt appropriate because it is a structure which we are used to but, once I got to edit the film, it became apparent that it halted the story too much.

On our second musical, *Si les requins pouvaient parler*, we corrected this issue. The songs were shorter and without choruses. It was more successful in that regard but another issue arose. To me, it felt like the musical numbers were not all that well integrated within the story. It still halted the story for the time of a song. They almost felt like short sketches inside the short film. For this new film, I wanted the story to flow seamlessly between sung and unsung moments.

As I have briefly mentioned, the first song of the film (well the first song at that point, but I'll get back to this) was written already in the first iteration of the script. In this scene, Robert finds himself alone in his apartment after being told by Frank that he needs to change his act and perform bigger tricks. He practices a card trick then he snaps his finger to make a card levitate toward him. It is the revelation of his magical powers for the spectators. He then sings about his love and passion for sleight of hands, and the fact that the public would rather see what he doesn't care for his powers.

I named this song the *Magician's Lament*. One of the things that needed to change was that the first version made Robert seem more whiny than excited so I removed some of the lyrics where he complained to include more of him being excited. He also did use his magical powers quite a bit in the song, which made sense with the way the script was prior, but now that it caused him pain, it needed to change. Narratively, we still needed to see him use his powers because it is the scene in which we learn about them. The solution was to make him use them in bursts of anger.

This also brought some changes in the musical aspect of it. The first version of the song had a beautiful piano accompaniment. The musical reference I gave to Sarah was Shostakovich's *Waltz No. 2*. Now with the change of emotions in between when he sang about his passion and his powers needed some changes in the melody as well. The results were not only more appropriate narratively but made

for a much better and dynamic song.

The second song to be written is the one that comes when Robert goes back to the venue and gets interrupted by Frank who warns him that he better change his act now. This one, that we named *Tonight*, was really meant to be a sort of duel between the two characters. I tried to write while having a very snappy blues-type rhythm in mind. I was thinking about songs like *Hit the road Jack* by Ray Charles, *Boom Boom* by John Lee Hooker or *I'm a man* by Muddy Waters. The idea was to have different melodies for each of the characters so it feels like the music is battling it out as well.

Much like a lot of blues songs, I went with a repetitive hook for Frank's part: "*Tonight*". I made every segment of his part of the song start with this word. It helped with the rhythm, the sense of urgency in what he trying to say to Robert, but also musically with the word starting with an aggressive "T". For Robert's part, I wanted to echo the previous a little and bring back the formulation "*masterful trickery*". I also wanted each of them to somewhat ignore the other. They each have a very clear idea of what should happen in tonight's performance and they won't budge from their position. I had Robert dismiss Frank's requests and Frank not even letting Robert speak out.

The next song comes when Robert gets on stage and tries to impress the crowd with his card or coin tricks one more time to no avail. We called this one "*Hello and good evening*" in reference to his first line when he gets on stage. I wanted him to be jolly and confident for the first part of the song. He then uses his powers which makes the crowd go wild. When he tries to go back to sleight of hands, he is met with indifference. A clear switch happens though the moment he comes to the realization the audience only wants to see his powers. I wanted the switch to feel almost like there are two songs within the same one, which is something that ends up being in a few songs.

The next song also had a mood change in the middle. In this one, he goes on stage full of anger and uses his powers to the point of collapse. We named this one "*Mad Magic*". Robert would lash out at the public and use his powers to mess with them as an act of revenge. The song changes from this initial fury into a sadder tone when he starts collapsing. I wanted the song to start off with Robert by himself in his apartment and then segue into the venue. I also wanted the lyrics to be directly addressed to the audience. The music was going to be much more rock n' roll than the other ones. The main reference given to the composer was *Jesus Christ Superstar's Heaven on their minds* for its energy.

The last song of the film was to be set in the magic school with Robert welcoming a new student. In this one, David was to sing and we also really wanted to have the kids in the school sing in a choir. Musically, the idea was to use the theme from *Hello and Good Evening* as a sort of recurring theme.

After writing the final scene, I went back to the script and saw that the scene when Frank exposes the problem to Robert right in the beginning could also be done in a song. This way, the film would start right off with music instead of a dialogue scene. The dialogue was already written with some rhythm so we tried just using it as is for lyrics. It worked with close to no changes.

Overall, we had quite a few songs for a somewhat short script, which I think is a good thing. The songs were also dynamic as they changed from different emotions within them. I also felt like they were very integrated in the story. In my previous musicals, I sometimes felt like the songs would slow down the action quite a bit. In this script, they helped propel the story forward in a nice and smooth way.

**Part 3**  
**Where magic is real**  
**The pre-production**

So at this point, I had a script that I was feeling good with and it was time to move on to making it happen.

At first, there was a moment when I doubted that it would be possible at all. I received a response for SSHRC funding saying I did not get the grant and that I was on the waiting list. With no money, I was starting to regret my idea. How was I going to rent a venue, pay my actors and feed my crew? I needed actors, an audience, a magic school and magic props. I felt like it might have been too ambitious of a project to do with no money. Film and money have a complicated relationship. Out of all art forms, it definitely is one that does require funding. You can get locations for free, get your friends to work and act for free, get rentals from school, but you'll always need at least some cash to buy food for everyone, props and costumes. At that moment, I regretted being a filmmaker and felt like I should have written a novel instead.

Luckily, it didn't last for too long. I received another message from SSHRC saying I was now getting the funding. It was on.

Now I had to find a crew. First, I had to pick a director of photography who would help me bring this project to life. I had worked with one, Artem Mikhailestky, on a project for the Directing Short New Narrative class. He had expressed his willingness to shoot my thesis film. The shoot we did together went alright for the most part and he had some experience as a DoP. There were still some moments while shooting that I felt like I had to argue about the way some of the shots should work. I

feel that the relationship between a cinematographer and a director is key and that, while the cinematographer knows how to render a shot, the director knows what the shots should show to tell the story.

Shortly after, I was approached by another cinematographer who saw my previous film and manifested his interest as well, Mikhail Petrenko. I now had to pick between these two. I knew that I was going to have to break someone's heart. The nature of the beast they say.

Mikhail was the more experienced of the two. He had shot a couple of feature-length films already and had worked on high-end commercials. My initial worries with picking him over Artem were that he was quite slow to respond to e-mails and it felt complicated to get ahold of him. I was also worried that, being a more established cinematographer, he would bring a negative attitude with him. I finally got to meet him on a Zoom call. The talk went well, but I still wasn't entirely sure.

I still liked his portfolio better though, not only because of the more prestigious track record, but mainly because I liked the actual style better. Artem's projects were much darker and more urban than Mikhail's commercial work which is more exaggerated and bright. I do like the look of commercials and I wanted the film to look more polished. I believed that the contrast between a "commercial" look and the content of the film, which is somewhat unusual, could be very interesting.

I ended up meeting with Mikhail in person. It went great. We talked about the film, but also various topics and it was smooth and pleasant. I felt a good connection that was hard to picture with only a Zoom call. So I decided to go with him. I had to tell Artem which did not take it very well. But then again, it's the nature of the beast.

The next important role that I managed to fill was the production manager. On my previous films, I had taken care of all the production side of it myself and it had been incredibly draining. It also made me feel like I wasn't as ready as I would have liked to be creatively due to the burden of getting everything ready for the shoot, so I really wanted to get a production manager for this one.

I got very lucky to find one rather quickly. I met him through a fellow regular at the local pub, Matt Harper. The first time I met Matt Harper, he was very drunk, too drunk even. When he heard my accent, he went into a tirade about how people in Québec should just speak English like everyone else. I was having none of it. We got into a pretty heated argument over it. It turns out that he actually spoke some French himself and the argument continued in French. It got pretty bad. We were both standing up and loudly arguing in French in front of confused bargoers and staff. The next time we saw each other, he felt bad and we made it up. From then on, I always grabbed a few beers with him whenever I saw him. Anyways, one day he came in with a group of people and I joined them. At some point, we went outside to smoke a cigarette and this one guy, Geoffrey, tells me he works as a production manager in his spare time. "It's my chance", I was thinking. So I had the time of our cigarette to pitch my film. The fabled cigarette pitch. He said he was interested. I took down his contact information and we went on to drinking. A few months later, I texted him to ask once more if he wanted to work on my project. He accepted.

My first assistant director was not too hard of a pick. Steven Griffin who is in the MFA program as a screenwriter offered his help. He had some experience as a first A.D. on other short films, but also as a third A.D. on bigger productions for the DGC. He was also someone I was getting well along with, and that was perhaps the most important factor. I was also feeling like he had the right kind of personality to be a good A.D. He was efficient, organized and not scared to tell someone off.

I had help from another person from the MFA program. Yeimy Daza offered to help me as a casting director. She had worked for a casting agency before and had access to professional casting books. It would prove to be extremely helpful.

The last major role I had to fill was the production designer. This proved to be a little bit stressful for some time. I didn't really know anyone who could do the job and my classmates were struggling to find one as well. I didn't know where to look. I asked around and I got a lead. Raevn Brasch was working on another MFA film, Meysam Motazedi's, and she apparently might be able to help me out. I contacted her and she replied that she wasn't sure if she'd be available. A week or two later, I met her in person as I was helping out Meysam as a production assistant on his shoot. She still wasn't sure that she could work on my film because of another job, but we had a good time. She ended up not getting the other job and let me know she'd be doing my project. She had a pretty good portfolio too.

My team was starting to look pretty good, but I still needed a cast. My main worry was to find a proper candidate for Robert. I needed someone who could act, sing and do magic. I called it the triple threat. With Yeimy, we let out a pretty large casting call. I figured that the character could be any gender, aged mid-twenties to mid-forties and any race. I felt that the only important characteristic was that he (or she) should be younger than Frank. The rest didn't impact the story and the character so we might as well open the call to most people. For the self-tape, they had to act one scene, sing a song of their choice and do one magic trick, preferably a card one.

We received seven self-tapes. Out of these, only one was a woman and she was terrible in all three aspects so she was out of the question right away. One was a great magician, but a poor singer

and actor so he was out as well. One was a very good singer, but not as good for the other aspects. There were only two who were quite good in all aspects. One, Fikayo Odunayo, was clearly the better singer though. He even sang one of his own compositions in which he also played the piano accompaniment. He was definitely ahead but I still wanted to call back both of them in case he wasn't a good fit personality-wise. He was great in the call-back too. He even came in wearing a suit for his costume which I thought showed he was very motivated to get the part. He looked handsome, but not too much. He was nice and he was good. I had my guy.

For Frank's part, I wanted a white man over fifty. It was the one part where gender and race were a factor. He represented showbusiness and a sort of patriarchal authority. As I have mentioned earlier, I always pictured Danny DeVito when writing the part. He was not available, so I tried to find someone with similar characteristics. I had a few self-tapes with very different cast types. I called back three. One couldn't make it in person so we did the audition over Zoom. I liked him but while talking, he mentioned that he was based in Philadelphia. Of course, I didn't have the budget to make him come over so he was out. The other one was this tall and rough-looking guy. I liked his energy. He did seem like he could make a convincing villain. The main issue was that I thought that he wasn't that great of a match with Fikayo. The last one, Richard Ouellette, was great. He had pretty close to the look I was looking for and he was nice to talk to. He even spoke French which could potentially make some of the direction easier.

David's part was open to kids aged 10 to 12 of any gender or race. I figured that the kid could be either gender and probably preferred a girl now that the cast was all men. I had an overwhelming response for the part. There were about 35 self-tapes to go through. Some were immediately out and quite a few were stunningly good. I narrowed it down to five. Three girls and two boys. One of the

things I was looking out for while doing the auditions was the kids' parents. It was my first time casting a kid and I felt like I not only had to pick the right person, but also the right parents. In the end, I was hesitating between two of the girls. They were both good, one was slightly better I found. My hesitation came from the fact that the better one was very much of a child actress. She had shot a few things before and she was doing singing competitions and such. I thought that maybe the parents might be overbearing. I still decided to go with her, Ella Li, and have not regretted my choice. I changed the character's name from David to Judy, but still kept the part the same.

Now with a cast, I had to find where we would shoot this film. Locations are crucial for the general look of the film and I needed quite a few. The big question mark was the venue. How would I find a place that both looked good and would be affordable to rent out? It definitely had me worried for some time as I was not sure where to look for such a place. One day, I was with Mikhail at a screening at Cinecycle. We were talking about the film and then it hit us. The place was perfect for the shoot. It had a lot of character, it was large and we could easily transform it into a cabaret-style venue. The following week, I met with Martin who runs the space and he agreed to let us shoot there for a very reasonable fee. Amazing.

At this point in the script, I had one scene set in a hospital. This location turned out to be very easy to find. I wrote to York's nursing school to tell them I would like to shoot there. I scheduled a visit and they agreed to let me shoot part of my film in their facilities. It looked very good. It even was used as a set for *The Handmaid's Tale* apparently. The magic school was also quite easy to find. I was at a magic store in North York, Browser's Den of Magic, and I asked them if there would be a way for them to sponsor me by loaning some props to create a magic school set. They instead proposed that I shoot in the store on a Monday as they are closed for business on that day.

The one that I thought wouldn't be an issue at all was actually the hardest one to find. I wanted to find a nice apartment that had a specific look. I wanted it to look older and with wooden fixtures. What I realized when looking for a place, was that a lot of Toronto apartments are newly renovated. I looked around on AirBnB, but I could find nothing that had the appearance I was going for. I found a few that were pretty close, but still not the perfect place. I kept on saying that it was very annoying because I felt like I would have found the type of apartment I was looking for in no time in Montréal. I found the place we ended up shooting in on Facebook. I spent the summer months experiencing the hell of Toronto apartment hunting so I was registered to a few housing Facebook groups. I had already found a room (well not exactly, but I was going to crash on the living room floor where I was already living for a few months), but I saw the pictures of the place I wanted to shoot in in one of these groups. It was perfect. It had a lot of character, wooden fixtures and even a checkered floor. I wrote to the person who put the ad saying I wouldn't be living there, but that I'd like to shoot there. There was some back and forth, but he finally agreed.

The next step in pre-production was to conceive and test all of the special effects. My initial idea was to do them in a way that would have been possible even back in Méliès' times. That meant either practical or editing tricks. I thought that it was an interesting idea, but also it made it so that most of the effects were done on set. There were quite a few match cuts planned and those didn't worry me too much. As long as we set the camera still for these shots, we'd be fine.

First off, I had to figure out a way to get smoke coming out of Robert's hands. I looked around to see if there was some Youtube video or something of the sort about a similar effect. The closest I found was a miniature smoke device that people make to include in dioramas. I asked on the practical effects subreddit and someone answered, a magician nonetheless. He said there was a device used in

magical performances that would be perfect for the trick. It was a very small smoke machine that was remotely activated. You could strap it to your wrists and have the smoke come out. I checked out some demos and it looked very good so I ordered two of those.

One of the bigger tricks comes during the *Magician's Lament*. Robert snaps his fingers and his torso disappears from his legs to reappear on the table. The gag was inspired by *The Four Troublesome Heads* by Georges Méliès in which he takes his head off four times and puts it on a table. I had a very clear idea of how it would look visually and should be done. The plan was simply to cut a hole in the middle of a table and have his torso come out of it. The effect would happen in a match cut and we would have a wider shot with his legs standing there and just mask out his upper body. Raevn's idea was to get a table with an extension leaf. We would make an extra leaf with a plank and cut a hole in it. When it comes time to do the effect, we could switch out the leaves. That way, the table looked full without having to use a tablecloth to hide the hole initially. Luckily, she managed to find a cheap table that had the perfect dimensions and was extendable.

The other trick that proved to be quite challenging was the moment when Robert disappears and then reappears inside a box on the stage. This gag was also in reference to a Méliès film, *The Magician*. To me, it seemed like a simple enough effect. We just do a match cut to make him disappear and then cut back to a wider shot of the stage with the box. The issue was with the actual build of the box. It needed to stay closed but fall apart to let the actor exit. It couldn't just open on the top because it had to be high enough for the actor to stand inside of it, but then it would be too high for him just to step out. The solution was to have each side cut separately and held together by a lid on top of it. When the actor would pop the lid open, each of the sides would fall off. She already had an appliance box that was perfect for it. It just needed to be solidified a little bit.

Another effect that changed between the writing and the pre-production was the audience member getting his shirt taken off. My initial plan when writing was to just do a match cut to him shirtless. As I was thinking about it, I was getting worried that the match cut on his face might not look too great. One day while riding my bike, I was struck with an idea. It could actually just be ripped out. We could have a shirt that is cut in the back and attach a string on it under the table. When the time would come, we could just yank on the string to have the shirt pulled under. I sped back home to try it out. It worked very well and looked very funny.

The rest of the tricks didn't worry me too much. It was some gag strings and then some match cuts, which are things I have all done before. I tried some of them out, like the card flying into his hand, and only made some slight adjustments. We had to simplify some of the effects from the script such as beer glasses flying off the tables. For this one in particular, we decided to blow a bowl of popcorn with a leaf blower the corn flew all over. I was feeling pretty confident about most of the tricks and my production designer was also aware of how they would work.

With Raevn, we also to find a way to dress the venue. Cinecycle was a great-looking place, but it wasn't exactly a show venue to start with so we had to build a stage and find some curtains to really make it look right. I felt like the stage curtains were also important to help isolate Robert when he is performing. I liked the idea of having a curtain on each side and behind as a sort of cage for him. The curtains, and many other set dressing items, we found at Wiseacre who gave us a very good deal on the rentals.

One of Raevn's questions to me about the script was at which time period is it supposed to be set in. I did not exactly specify it in the script, partly because I saw the story set in a somewhat timeless

period<sup>15</sup>. I didn't want to have any clear indications that it would be set in a contemporary setting (cellphones, computers, fashion, etc.) or any very definite time period for that matter. Raevn ended up finding quite a few vintage items, both for sets and costumes, that looked great at Wiseacre. The only thing we couldn't find there was Robert's top hat. I felt like it was a pretty important piece of his costume, but he had a very large head and nothing at Wiseacre fit him. She ended up finding another one somewhere else, but it was an antique and did have a pretty hefty rental price tag.

In order to prepare for the shoot, I had somewhat regular coffee meetings to discuss with Mikhail. He asked me pretty early on what I had in mind for aspect ratio. I said that I would really like a more horizontal image, something like 2:1, because a lot of it happens on a stage. He suggested that we use anamorphic lenses and go even wider with a 2.39:1 aspect ratio. I liked the idea because the anamorphics would give us a very nice and dreamy feeling that I felt was very appropriate for the film. Furthermore, some time before the shoot I got to see Sophie Dupuis' *Solo*. It also took place quite a bit on a stage and used anamorphics with a wider aspect ratio as well. It reassured me I was not the only one who made this association. We also discussed Mikhail's idea to make it all handheld. It was not something that had crossed my mind as all of my previous films were all shot on a tripod and dolly.

At some point, he asked me to provide him with a list of visual references for the film. The list I made was mostly comprised of films that dealt with stage performances and had musical elements to them. One of the films from the list that resonated with him was the Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis*. In particular, it was a scene in which the protagonist performs a song on stage. It's a film that I like quite a bit and it touches on similar themes about art and passion. Mikhail thought that we should

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15 I think this also brings back my will to make metamodernist films as a "a deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretense that that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not" Thimotheus Vermeulen and Rovin van den Akker, *Op. Cit.* p.12

shoot the venue similarly to the way they shot the bar in the film, that is with a dimly lit room and a spotlight on the main character. I also had some references for the way I wanted the crowd to feel. There was a scene from Leos Carax's *Annette* and one from *The Blues Brothers*. In both scenes, the crowd felt like a homogeneous mob which was what I wanted to go for in my film as well. I included some references to actual stage performances by singer Jacques Brel, notably for *Le Port d'Amsterdam*, *Les Bourgeois* and *Ces gens-là*. Not only was Brel an outstanding performer, but I've always loved the way his filmed performances looked. He seems very vulnerable and lonely up on the stage and I wanted this kind of feeling for Robert on his stage.

We also discussed the shot list on more than a few occasions. I had preemptively made a storyboard for the whole film. When conceiving the shots with Mikhail, even though we would rethink most of the shots, it was still very helpful to have this document as a reminder of everything that needed to be shown in the film. There was a lot of back and forth and we managed to come up with a shot list that I found very exciting. It was the first time I worked with a DoP that was as involved with establishing the shots. It felt like a true collaboration and I was happy with my choice of cinematographer. We had a few shot ideas that ended up making Judy a slightly more important character. I thought it was a good thing as she is the one that I hope the spectators relate to the most.

While trying to work out a schedule, we also figured out that the hospital scene might be a bit much if we wanted to keep the shoot short. The entire additional unit move made it so we couldn't really contain the shoot in four days. I decided to switch out the scene to Robert's apartment. It stayed the same but in a different setting.

I had a few rehearsals with the actors as well during pre-production. The first one was done over Zoom. The idea was mostly to discuss with everyone the script and their character's intentions. It is something I had done in the Directing Actors course and I thought that it had helped me a lot. We didn't really rehearse the performances themselves, but from that point on, I knew that the actors and I both had the same ideas about the film.

I also had a few meetings just with Fikayo to discuss the magic tricks that he would perform. I had an idea for a few of them, but I wanted to see what my actor was actually capable of doing and go from there. He had a couple of ideas for different tricks that we ended up using instead of the ones in the script as they were more visually interesting. He was also the one who proposed the coins in the bucket trick in the opening scene. I loved the sound that it made and I immediately saw the film opening with just the sound before we got to see the character on stage.

We had one vocal practice with each one of them with a friend of mine who is a singing teacher. It went pretty well for the most part. Ella's session was very easy. She only had a few lines and she was doing very well, we just had to adjust minor things. Fikayo was also doing great. I was a little worried before we started because he had quite a few songs and they were not exactly easy to sing. He still did good and we made great progress. He had also mentioned that he couldn't read music, but he actually could. I just think that he was a little hesitant about his technical music skills, but he was fine. We couldn't go over all of his songs in a single one-hour session, but my friend rescheduled another meeting with him and they got through everything. Richard's session was a little tougher. He sang well and had a good energy, but he was struggling with timing. It did make me a little worried about his lip-syncing abilities on set.

We then had one blocking rehearsal in a studio at York the week before the shoot. We didn't go into much detail about the performances, but it was still helpful to situate everyone. I even had a nice surprise while rehearsing. We had to find a trick that Judy would show to Robert towards the end of the film. Fikayo proposed that it would be a simple coin production behind the ear. I loved it. I then had the idea that Robert could do this very trick to Judy in the beginning of the film, foreshadowing Judy's. The one thing that worried me in this rehearsal though was Richard's attitude. He tried to propose shots, and argued about some of the storyboard and such. It felt like he was taking me for a simple student and that his experience made him more knowledgeable. I've let it rest and figured we'd see how everything goes during the shoot.

We had a recording session in a studio which went very well. It felt incredible to finally hear the lyrics I had written be sung out loud. The film was becoming a reality. I was ecstatic.

**Part 4**  
**There was a magician**  
**The shoot**

If there's one thing I don't love about making movies, it's that I don't get to shoot very often. It's by far the most exciting part, but also by far the shortest. Needless to say that on the first morning of the shoot, I was very excited. I woke up bright and early and headed towards Cinecycle. When I arrived, Steven was the only one already there as well. I hadn't met most of the team yet. There were a few people that I found either via references or social media and Mikhail had found the camera team. Before everyone got on set, I prepared coffee and started clearing out some of the space. The crew started to arrive. Mikhail's team were all Ukrainians. They all seemed very nice and professional. When everyone got there, the set started to bumble with activity. The set was being built, the camera assembled and the lights fixed.

It was incredible to see everyone at work. It promised to be a great shoot. Steven asked me if I was nervous. Of course, I wasn't. I was way too exhilarated to feel any sort of stress at all. Richard was the first member of the cast to arrive. I remember his face when he got there. At that moment, he realized that it was a bit more than a simple student film, it was looking like an actual production. Fikayo arrived shortly after. He was struck with the same realization, but it did scare him a bit. It was his first bigger project being the lead. He looked very stressed. He went to change into his costume and stayed in the bathroom for quite some time. I thought it was better to give him the space to zone in. When he got out, I went to see him to make sure that he was ok. He was still nervous, but I think when he saw that I was so jolly it did help him calm himself.

The first scene we did was the one with *Tonight*. We started with that one because it only required Robert and Richard and also we would open up the ceiling in the venue and use the natural light on the set. Furthermore, it was a relatively easy scene with no tricks or complicated camera movements. I also was worried the most about Richard's lip-syncing during this song so getting it out of the way on the first day felt like a good thing.

It did take quite a few takes to get all of the singing and performances right. We had planned a lot of time for it though so it did not make us late. The set was looking amazing on camera and working with everyone was a blast. What a start. Fikayo was doing great and Richard was being very receptive to my directions. Once this scene was in, I knew the rest would be smooth sailing.

The only other scene we had on schedule for the day was the second one in which Frank tries to get Robert to change up his act. Ella was going to be in this one with the other two actors. I was curious to see how she would act once all the eyes were on her. For this scene, she had a simple task, sweeping, and just one line.

While we were trying to set up the scene, the fog machine stopped working. Everything came to a halt while someone was trying to fix it. We wanted to do this scene in one long continuous take that panned quickly from one character to the other as they sang their lines. There was a backup plan in case it didn't work, but that was still the main idea. While we were waiting for the machine to work, the camera operator suggested we just try it a couple of times to see if it works. Right away, we got very close. We were feeling confident it was going to work. We just needed the machine to come back to life and we'd get it done.

I don't think it actually got back to running, but we still had a machine. I didn't follow the whole thing, but I believe someone went to get another one from somewhere else. Anyway, the show was back on. Having already rehearsed the shot a few times, we got right into it. It did take a certain number of takes until we got it. It'd get so close at times, but we really wanted it to be near perfect because there was no way to cut bits of it if it was just the one take. It took 14 takes, but we did get it. It was a great moment. Everyone was very happy and it was a great way to end the day. We even finished a bit ahead of schedule. I was happy about it because I had friends from Montréal play a punk show that evening so I'd be able to head there.

Mikhail offered me a ride and we talked about the day a bit in his car. He was very satisfied with the day. He also told me that the crew had great morale all day. The mood of the shoot depends on the director's attitude he said. It made me confident that I did a great job. I had been jolly, excited and stimulating. I do think that directing is also a performance. There is a crowd of people who look at you and you do dictate how the day goes. I feel like it's important to keep a smile and to let it come through if I am tired or nervous. It helps everyone if they feel like the person steering the boat is in total control of themselves. I do like to use a lot of positive reinforcement. I used to coach fencing when I was younger and it's something that I learned there. We would never tell someone not to do something as this can cause that person to focus on that specific thing and unconsciously keep on doing it. Instead, you try to tell them something to do, a positive direction, that will eliminate the mistake they are making.

On the second day, we were going to shoot *Mad Magic* and then the dialogue scene that comes after *Hello and Good Evening*. We figured that we might as well do the bigger scene requiring more backgrounds right away. I was afraid that the set would get a little chaotic with many people there. The

scene also had a lot of effects so I thought it was best if we gave it a lot of time and knocked it out before other things in case something went wrong.

I had put out a call for backgrounds on social media and the school's mailing list. I had a few responses both from classmates and strangers. I also asked most people I knew if they could make it. In the end, most people who said they would come didn't show up. I guess if you don't pay people you don't know, you can't really rely on them. There were still a decent amount of people from school. I was a little worried that it might look silly if there was only younger people in the crowd, but I don't think it turned out too bad. We only see the crowd in glimpses and it's not too noticeable. I still would have preferred a larger and more diverse audience, but it is what it is. On the positive side, it did help the set not to get too disorderly.

Before starting to shoot, we tried one of the tricks which was someone's chair being pulled off. We quickly realized that the chairs were not that easy to slide away as they sort of stuck on the floor. We decided to change up the trick to have the table move away. We put the table on a cloth and there was someone out of frame that pulled it away. We wanted to make this part of the scene look like it was one continuous take as well. The idea was to whip pan between Robert and the audience members and cut in the motion blur of the pan. What we did was start the pan on the stage and end it on the person getting the trick done to them by Robert. I was looking at the monitor and when the camera operator had the right framing on destination, I called for the person doing the effect to go. It seemed like a good way to do it at the moment, but now that I've seen the footage, I would do it differently. What happened was that there was a delay between the camera operator getting the frame and me calling it out, and then another delay between me and the person pulling. It did slow down the action in the final result. Maybe another to have done it would have been to get the monitor to the person pulling so they could

see themselves when the framing was right, thus eliminating one step of delay.

It still is the way we proceeded with the other tricks. After the table, we did the popcorn blowing-up gag. Someone on the team proposed that we rig the leaf blower up instead of having someone holding it up. The gaffer got on it while we were working on the previous shot. It was a funny-looking rig but it worked. The shot took quite a few takes to get everything right. We had to set the rig at the right place and height, get the timing right, the amount of popcorn in the bowl, etc.

The next trick we were going to do was the shirt being pulled off. I was starting to feel everyone's energy slightly fade out at that point. We were a bit behind schedule and we hadn't done much that day yet. Furthermore, there were the backgrounds who didn't have much to do but wait for big chunks of time. When we finally got to roll, the effect worked very well and swiftly, so much that it created an instant general laughter. Everyone was now back in a great mood. I knew that we had just picked up some steam. We got this one in just a few tries

Fikayo's performance during the song was spot on. I think that the song was engaging enough that it really helped dictate his acting. I found this on my previous musicals as well. It can be easier for the actors to embody their part if they let themselves go with the music.

Once we got to do the box gag, we thought it'd be nice to have a cloud of smoke coming out as he emerged out of it. We filled the box with the smoke machine while he held his breath inside. It was quite funny to see from the outside. One thing that was a bit disappointing at that moment was that the small machines on his wrists did not respond very well. They would sometimes only let out a tiny bit of smoke or not work at all.

After this scene, we were still a bit behind. We still had the dialogue scene to do. We decided to only do the one wide shot for now and see the next day if we had time to do the coverage. It was definitely a risky move, but it was getting late and we still had two more days to go. I wasn't very happy about it and was hoping for the best on day three.

The next day, we had *Hello and good evening* and the opening to shoot. We asked a few backgrounds from the previous day to be there as well. This scene actually went without many issues at all. The tricks were simple match cuts and there was nothing that really went wrong. There even was a great moment when we did the last part of the song where he reappears at the back of the room. Fikayo's performance was great and I actually got a bit emotional in reaction to Robert's plea. It's at this moment that it dawned on me that this film was different than my previous ones. I realized that this one was a lot more personal and had a certain sensibility that I always thought my other films somewhat lacked. When we got to filming his hat flying off, I let Mikhail and the crew play with it while I took a step back to think about what was coming up.

After this scene, we took a lunch break. Mikhail and Steven approached me to have a discussion. They were both feeling like the next would be too much if we did shoot the magic school in the morning and then headed to the apartment afterward. We would have had to get there quite early and shoot very quickly to be able to get everything. Furthermore, it was all the way up in North York and public transit did not run at that time in the morning. They proposed that we either rewrite the end to have it happen at the apartment or try to think of another shoot date later for the magic school. We all knew that reshoots were not going to happen. I took a pen and a paper bag and headed for the alleyway. I was very nervous.

I calmed myself down and came up with something that I wrote down on the paper bag. Instead of the magic school, we would extend the previous scene with Judy and Robert a little bit. Now that we sort of elevated Judy's importance in the script, I thought it would work if she was the one who came up with the idea of the school. She would show the coin production Robert did to her earlier in the film to him and then say she has an idea. We'd then cut to them just putting up posters for the magic classes. I showed it to Steven and he liked it too. I was feeling very confident about this new ending. Even more so than what was originally planned. I was starting to have issues with the way the magic store looked when compared to the venue. The two locations didn't really feel like they were part of the same kind of universe. It was also cute and succinct. Steven typed up my paper bag script and we showed it to the cast.

After this eventful lunch break, we shot the opening scene. It went pretty smoothly after the very first shot that took some tries to get right. It actually went so well that we were now ahead of schedule which allowed us to come back to the scene we had just done in a wide shot the day before. I was very happy because I definitely was not confident with the scene otherwise.

We did the scene and I could feel a sense of excitement among the cast and the crew. On the last shot of the day, I even was going to call it a day, but the crew insisted that we do a few more takes. I wanted to let everyone go and rest, but they felt so engaged with the project that they wanted to make absolutely sure we did it right. I was touched. We finally got everything and it was time to wrap on the venue and Richard. He hung around. He felt like a kid that has to go home after playing at the park but doesn't want to.

Now that the magic school was out, we got to start a little later on the last day. I got near the apartment before the crew to find a location in the streets where Robert and Judy could put up a poster. Luckily, the apartment was in a nice looking and quiet part of town, and, as we know, Toronto doesn't have much of either of those to offer. I wanted a nice-looking wooden pole that they could staple into. We scouted the area and found a place that was just right. It just so happened that the cars were all parked on the other side of the street that day. We did the shot there and headed back inside.

We then dressed the apartment's kitchen for the shoot. I had brought a bunch of my books and posters for the occasion. I still think it's funny when I look back at the footage to see my posters in his place. One of them is of Le Bar L'Ostradamus in Québec City where I used to work and there's even a self-portrait of me. Not many people would know those details, but I liked that it made Robert closer to me. After all, he is the most personal character I have written so far.

We shot the scene with Judy and Robert. For the first shot of this scene, we follow Robert's hand holding a glass and passing it on to Judy. It was an important shot for me as it represents Robert passing the torch to someone younger. The scene went very well. Ella was amazing as always. We finished up and wrapped Ella.

We then did the scene in the bathroom before taking a break. To me, it was a little bit of a throwaway scene and I would have been ok with not doing it. Fikayo insisted that we do it. He showed me his script and he had tons of notes on it. I just let him do his thing. He did bring a whole lot more into this moment than what I had in mind myself. I let him do a few takes with different interpretations to his will. It comes to show that sometimes an actor can delve into the character even further than the screenwriter and director as he is the one who embodies it.

After this scene, we took a lunch break. It was around that moment that we started to hear a lot of people sniffle. In fact, a lot of the crew, and myself, were starting to get sick. There must have been someone who had some kind of virus and had been spreading it around on the shoot. I do have an idea who it might have been, but I'll keep that a secret.

We then moved to the one shot of the scene at the beginning of *Mad Magic*. Mikhail had an idea that we do this scene with a very strong light coming from the window and that we'd only see his silhouette from the back. I liked the idea, I thought it was very strong visually. Fikayo did not like it though. He thought that it would be hard to understand his character's emotions. I told him that the visual was strong enough to convey emotions without needing to see his face. I think he was just disappointed that we skipped one of his close-ups.

After this, it was time for the last scene of the whole weekend. We were going to do *The Magician's Lament*. It was quite the scene to do at last with everyone now tired and sick. I'd say it did not go as well as some of the other scenes. The performance was fine and it looked good, but we did have some issues with some of the tricks, and also with time. We really had to clear the apartment for midnight, both for the tenants who lived there and for all of us who needed some rest.

We had to give up on the bunny gag. I wanted him to lift his hat and reveal a bunny plush. The plush did not hold well on his hair and, since it wasn't part of the song and didn't change the story, so the gag was out. We could have make it work with some more time, but we didn't really have that luxury at that moment.

We still had to do the other gags though as he sang about them. The "cut in half" one worked quite well. We had to wait for a good take on the wide shot for me to call freeze. When we got it, the set was locked off with only the production designer and the art assistant going in to change the leaf extension. We then squeezed Fikayo's torso in there and resumed the shot. It was very funny to see his body come out of the table like that. The one I'm the most disappointed with was the CN Tower bit. The plan was to do a match cut during his movement. Fikayo was a bit confused about the way it would work and I tried to explain it to him, but it didn't really work. I was very tired and quite sick, so I just figured I'd let him do it a bunch of times and at least one of these would work. Turns out, it didn't.

But that was it for the shoot. We wrapped and everyone went back home. It was an incredible weekend. Mikhail called me the day after to thank me for the opportunity to work on this film. He said everyone had a wonderful time. I was very happy with the whole thing, living on a cloud even. It wasn't over though.

**Part 5**  
**Who followed his dream**  
**The post-production**

After the thrills of shooting, comes the lengthy anguish of editing. I find that I always first go through a very exciting phase of discovery with the footage, then followed by remorse of things I should have done differently before finally coming to terms with the film I have made.

I managed to get a first rough cut rather quickly. The way the film was shot was somewhat linear which made cutting it together pretty easy. The musical numbers are also rather quick to edit as you are stuck in time with the song.

I was very happy with how some of the effects turned out. For instance, the "cut in half" gag worked wonderfully. However, some of them did not work all that well right away. The CN tower gag, which I already knew while shooting would be a problem, did not really work. There were a few issues with it. The first one was that the match cut looked a bit weird. His torso was moving in the cut and the movement between the two moments did not really match properly. The other thing that bothered me with the shot was that the cut between the medium shot of Robert on the table and then a close-up of his hand didn't feel right. I didn't see any other way to shoot it though as seeing his face was certainly going to make the match cut not work.

I played with the shot quite a bit. I tried to find the two moments that would match the most and then I masked out his shoulder so that only his arm would cut between the two moments. It worked better already, but it wasn't exactly perfect. The effect was getting better but I was still not satisfied with the jump to a closer shot. One of the things about it was that it really made the effect obvious. The

cut didn't seem to be motivated by anything other than realizing the effect and it made it pretty clear that it was a match cut. That meant that even if the match cut worked perfectly, I still think that it wouldn't sell the effect all that well.

I ended up trying to integrate the tower in the wider shot that wasn't really planned for it. What I did was take a frame out of the closer shot into Photoshop and cut out the CN tower. I then used this element to add it into the wider shot with some tracking on his hand. After adding some motion blurs, it did look pretty good. It was only there for a very brief moment too which I believe helps as it is surprising and you do not really have the time to focus on it too much. I was relieved that it worked. I was concerned enough about that moment that I even thought if there was a way to completely remove the line from the song.

I had a similar issue with another shot in the same scene. Towards the beginning of the scene, before he starts singing, he makes a card fly into his hand. There was also a cut from a wider to a tighter shot in order to make the effect. For that one, we used a piece of wire taped to the card. The cut itself wasn't as bothersome, but it did make the effect very obvious. What I ended up doing was starting the movement of the flying card in the previous shot. I took a still of the last frame before it started flying off in the wider shot, cut it out and then made that element fly off the deck. It just does so for about 10 frames, but it is surely enough to sell the effect. For that moment too I think that if it held up for longer, it might not look right, but with it being so short, it really works that way.

But let me come back to the first rough cut itself. It was a fine assembly cut. Nothing seemed like it was a catastrophe and the scenes worked pretty well. There were still a few issues that arose right away from this cut. Some of the scenes had some issues with rhythm. The dialogue scene right

after Robert uses his powers in front of Frank seemed long. At that point in the story, it now felt like the scene should happen faster. It still is an important scene, but the core of it could be told faster. In the following cuts, I managed to shorten it quite a bit while keeping the essential of the scene in the film. Needless to say I was very happy that we could go back to shooting the extra coverage.

Still, the main problem that was made clear in the first stages of the editing process was that it wasn't exactly clear that Robert's powers were bringing him pain. The smoke machines on his wrists did not work every time and in themselves, they didn't indicate his pain quite enough. This might be my biggest regret of the shoot. I wish that there had been someone there to act as a special effects supervisor to really be focused on those types of things. I was looking more at the performances and at some moments I forgot to watch out for the smoke. I showed the film to a few people and it didn't always communicate well on that aspect. Some people got it, some didn't.

I tried to look through the footage to see if some unused takes had either more smokes or a clearer indication of his pain in the performance. At some moments, I was able to find him wincing in pain which helped. It still wasn't quite enough. The solution was then to add some visual effects to amplify the smoke and also add a sound effect whenever he would use his powers.

It was also proposed by my supervision committee that I could separate the film into chapters with title cards. I thought about it for some time. I was thinking of something along the lines of a pop-up book that could open up to reveal the title and some image from the film like his hat or a stage. I ended up not doing it for a few reasons. The first one was I wasn't sure where the chapter breaks would happen. It seemed like some of them would feel very short and I was afraid that it would interrupt the story too much in a short film. The other main reason was that I was having a hard time envisioning

something that would look right with the rest of the film. Most of what I was mentally picturing felt like too much of a departure from the aesthetics of the footage.

Another major aspect that had to be dealt with in post-production was the musical score, both for the songs and the rest of the music. I had put some temporary tracks to help with the editing. In the beginning, there was Shostakovich's *Waltz No. 2*. I love this song and I have used it as a temporary track in nearly everything I have edited. It has a very cinematic feeling and it is a great song to open a film with. Sadly, it is not in the public domain so I am not able to use it for the actual score.

The music that she did for the scene was inspired by Shostakovich's piece as it is a waltz as well. But the main idea behind was not just to copy Shostakovich, but to create a new piece that really introduced the film, its universe and its music. The opening music exposes some of the themes that will come back at later points of the story, namely the *Magician's Lament* and the first song. Operatic overtures often functioned similarly, or "as a background against which events in the opera are thrown into relief."<sup>16</sup> The idea behind the music in the opening scene is to present the themes that will represent the two opposing ideas during the film, that is Robert's passion against Frank's demands. Much like Wagner with *The Flying Dutchman* who "can tell the story of the opera the way he does only because he had first told it in a different way in the overture"<sup>17</sup>, the core issue of the film presented through those two musical themes.

There was a similar idea with the music in the ending. Sarah brought back the musical phrase from the *Magician's Lament* that comes when Robert says : "*I wish that they could see / the same*

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<sup>16</sup> Van De Moortelle, Steven, *Form, Narrative and Intertextuality in Wagner's Overture to "Der fliegende Holländer"*, in , *Music Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (March 2013) , p. 47

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

*magic as me*". I also wanted the music to sound grandiose, much like some of Max Steiner's conclusion compositions in films like *Casablanca* or *Gone with the Wind*. What she ended up doing was an orchestral music for the emotional side of the scene and then a little jazz finish for the happy ending. I think it is a very successful composition in the sense that it leaves the spectators with a sense of heartfelt joy before the credits start. We had planned to use the *Magic's cool* song that was unused during the shoot during the credits and it did fit quite well.

Then there were some adjustments to be made to some of the songs that were already recorded. Notably, the *Tonight* song in which Richard's recording were quite off tempo. Sarah ended up redoing the music to fit his singing style as it was already recorded and shot making it impossible to get him to be right on beats. I find the end result very satisfying as we get the music really changes when each of the characters sing amplifying this idea of a duel of sorts between the two.

**Part 6**  
**And live happily ever after**  
**Conclusion**

Overall, I would say that I am satisfied with the film. I think it tells a meaningful story in an appealing manner and I would even say it is my best work so far. With it being my third musical, I feel like I am getting a better grasp on the way to integrate music into the script. In this one, I am particularly happy about how seamlessly it switches between the non-musical and musical parts. I also believe the lyrics tend to be more poetic in this one as compared to my previous films.

It was also my biggest shoot so far. I had the privilege to work with an amazingly talented crew that brought professionalism on set. It was a great experience. I am glad to see that I felt comfortable within this environment and that seasoned film workers also had a wonderful weekend on the set. I think I did a good job directing the actors. I have really felt the accumulated knowledge, both from my previous shoots and my experience at York, coming into play when it came time to talk to my actors. Fikayo did a great job but required a lot of directions. He did ask for his motivations quite often, even when he just had to respect blocking for technical reasons. I always tried to think of something on the spot to justify his movement.

There is definitely a few things I would do differently now though. Firstly, if I were to shoot the film again, I would get a special effects supervisor. I felt confident in my ability and knowledge of the effects to just do it myself but it turned out to be a bit much on set. It was very hard to look over things like the smoke and also the actors' performances. I was slightly overwhelmed and it did hurt the film not having an extra person on set to be focused on this aspect. I would have also liked to spend more time with the actors on the songs before we got to recording them.

I think it is my most personal film and the one in which I have made myself the most vulnerable as an artist. In my previous films, I feel like I had the tendency to hide myself in a way behind comedy and a certain aloofness. In *The Magician*, it is made a lot clearer that I am talking in part about myself. The character himself is also more vulnerable than in my previous projects. Not only does he feel sad or insufficient, but he goes as far as being in the wrong.

To conclude, I would say that the tone of the film has been my greatest surprise. I always had in mind something bittersweet, but I didn't think it would be as much on the bitter side rather than the sweet side. It is a feeling that I would like to explore even more in my future projects. I find that there is something poignant and true in the slivers of sadness in a comedy.

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