

Interpreting Magic: Secrets Revealed!

By Steven Goldstein

You are seated in a parlor—a small theater, of only 35 seats—for the singular purpose of witnessing a few curious and unusual things. A sleight-of-hand artist from abroad, renowned the world over, is about to astound and amaze you. Except for one thing: he speaks a language you don't understand. How will you make sense of what is taking place? Meet two of the most well-known interpreters in the world of magic, Tina Lenert and Luis Iglesias.

The suave young gentleman takes the lady's proffered ring, and places it on her open palm. "Concentrate on the happy memory that this ring evokes for you," he says. "Think of that memory as a ray of white light." In a moment, the ring moves, ever so slightly. "Keep your eyes on the ring," he continues in a low, calming voice, "and enlarge this light in your mind; imagine that the light is spinning, growing, rising ..." At that very moment, the ring floats off the woman's palm, and hovers over it. Over gasps from the audience, the young man moves his hand all around the ring, now suspended miraculously in mid-air, and says softly to the woman, "Know that you can completely encircle this warm feeling, and at any moment grasp it"—he plucks the ring from the air—"and hold on to it for the rest of your life." Amid cries of amazement and applause from the rest of the audience, the young man returns the ring to the astonished woman, who, with tears in her eyes, whispers into his ear, "Thank you."

Whether a simple effect with a pack of cards or a social experiment involving a personal memento, the emotional power of a magic performance taps into the spirit

of humanity that is in all of us, regardless of what culture we come from, or what language we speak. And yet clearly—except for those performances that are deliberately wordless—we need to understand what is said in order to be able to fully appreciate the effect. Enter the magic interpreter.

A fortuitous path

Tina Lenert came to the magic interpreting field along a decidedly non-traditional route. Indeed, she is the first to admit that she is not a professional interpreter. But her deep involvement with the magical arts over the years has led her—in addition to garnering fame and respect the world over as a performer in her own right—to be identified forever as the English-language voice of one of the most remarkable close-up magicians of all time, René Lavand of Argentina. ("Close-up" generally refers to sleight-of-hand magic performed for small audiences.)

Born to an American geologist working in Caracas, Venezuela, Tina grew up speaking Spanish, but largely abandoned it when her family returned to the United States when she was 12 years old. She didn't pick it up again in earnest until the early '90s, when she was asked by her husband (also a magician) to interpret for a perfor-

mance being given by Señor Lavand during one of his lecture tours in the U.S. "I was petrified at first," Tina said, "but his combination of patience and artistry opened a new door for me."

Poetry in motion

Part of the appeal for Tina was the way Señor Lavand used language. "There's a poetry and elegance to the Spanish language," said Tina, "and the way he puts together words is just so beautiful; they simply ring in my heart." Interpreter Luis Iglesias echoes this sentiment about Señor Lavand: "There is no one else in the magic community who expresses himself better through poetry and refined language, full of sentiment"; a characteristic that both interpreters agree makes Tina's task especially difficult.

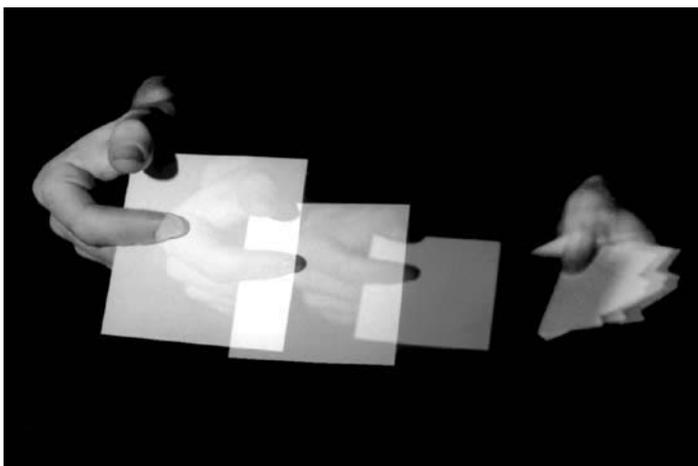
On top of that, Señor Lavand's words, notwithstanding their poetic resonance, have to be integrated into the performance of the magic itself, where the need for interpreting necessarily alters the environment. After all,

"If you do a good job, the audience erases you from the stage."

as with any public entertainment, magic depends on directing an audience's attention through the careful timing of words and action (and, sometimes, music). Isn't this disrupted by the need to stop and wait for a phrase to be interpreted?

"Yes," says Tina. "But it's all about timing; about continuing a flow, almost between simultaneous and consecutive interpreting—even pausing, when it's important to stop and not do anything. To the extent possible, it's about becoming a part of the performance, and not a distraction. After a while, you go on instinct." She felt that one of the best compliments she ever received for her work with Señor Lavand was from the well-known magician Harry Anderson, who said she "was like a bell ringing softly above him."

In addition to interpreting for Señor Lavand, and translating some of his books into English, Tina has, on a more limited



basis, interpreted for American magicians during their lectures in Spain. “It is a privilege to communicate these performances,” she says.

Schooled in the profession

An entirely different route to interpreting, and especially magic interpreting, was taken by Luis Iglesias. For Luis, while his interest in magic also blossomed early—as a youngster, he believed one of Spain’s most influential magicians, Juan Tamariz, had supernatural powers—his young adult life was all about language. Born and raised in Spain, he took language seriously while at school, eventually living and studying in the U.S. and Britain, and receiving a translation and interpretation degree from the Universidad de Salamanca (Spain), with French, German, and Italian on his resumé as well. While working for various financial institutions and as a management consultant, Luis began translating magic books in his spare time. This in turn led him to interpreting, and has culminated in his working for the *crème de la crème* of the worldwide magic community.

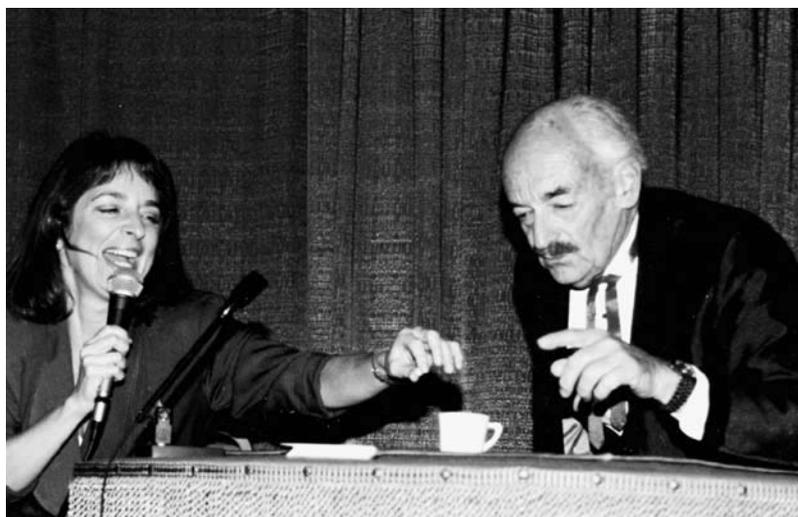
“I must know the tricks they will be performing,” Luis says of his preparation to interpret for a magician. “Essentially I want them to tell me their jokes and funny

lines, and to define my range of movement and location on the stage. It’s like having a blueprint, or a roadmap, of the performance. Being a magician myself, I thus know where they are going, and how the routine is going to end, so I don’t feel ‘lost.’”

Being a magician oneself is obviously an imperative for anyone interpreting a magic performance or lecture. Not only for the obvious advantages of understanding the theatrics of performing, but also, again, in preparation. “Preparation also encompasses keeping up to date with magic’s most recent tricks, books, and performers, so you know what to expect. If there’s something I’ve never seen, it usually comes up during our briefing before the show.”

A sense of rhythm

Like Tina, Luis also feels that the interpreter must have a great sense of the cadence of a performance, in order to stay in sync with the artist. Although it depends on the performer, this often means working fast, but in any case it requires taking cues from the performer and offering the same emotions—enthusiasm, intensity, drama—that the performer is trying to convey, including voice inflections, gestures, and facial expressions. The result is that the interpreter is indeed not merely the conduit for what’s being said, but in fact an integral part of the performance. “If you do a good job, the audience erases you from the stage,” says Luis. “They perceive you doing lip-sync with the artist; they put your voice over his mouth ... it’s as if you are the artist’s twin brother who happens



In close-up magic, the interpreter must necessarily be a supplementary part of the performance. Here, Tina Lenert interprets for the great Argentinian magician, René Lavand.

to have studied Spanish.”

The magicians themselves have a responsibility for the success of their act in front of a foreign audience. “Since interpreters are part of the performance,” says Luis, “most good magicians will choose material that accommodates this situation. For example, in effects where instructions must be given to the audience, they must not be complex. It’s a difficult situation for a spectator to be in, because while physical interaction may occur between the spectator and the performer, aural (listening) interaction occurs between the spectator and the interpreter. And so things must be made as simple and straightforward as possible.”

As for the business end of interpreting, matters such as compensation are dependent, not surprisingly of course, upon the skill and experience of the interpreter. Most interpreters for magic lectures in Spain are not professionals, but those of Luis’s caliber can command above-average fees. “(Magic) Convention organizers see the audience’s response to the interpretation—the overall enhancing effect that it has on people’s appreciation of the performances—and they realize it is worth the fee.”

Who among us would doubt that? We need only think back on the performance described at the beginning of this article to see how demanding such a job would be, and how difficult it would be to do it well.

Sounds like interpreting, doesn’t it? ◀

