

Gospel MAGIC

Christian ILLUSIONISTS use sleight of hand to share their faith, but the results are genuine.

A crowd of antsy teenagers grows suddenly silent and spellbound. They are watching a young man bound by chains struggling to break free from a water-filled coffin on the stage before them. After a tense three minutes under water with only one held breath, illusionist Brock Gill—the person who has kept these kids on the edge of their seats—makes his Houdiniesque escape and emerges, triumphant and dripping wet, to wild applause.

Gill is neither a Las Vegas act nor the latest performer on an episode of MTV Spring Break. He's a 29-year-old Christian who has just risked his life to gain the attention and respect of one of the toughest critics anywhere—the American teenager—and with this latest crowd he's as successful at that as he was with his death-defying stunt.

Now that a roomful of amazed eyes are on him, Gill reveals to his audience that the reason he took his life in his hands with his popular Water Coffin feat was so he could tell them about the love of Christ. By the end of the night, hundreds of young people have come forward to receive Jesus as their Savior.

Gill, who's based in Nashville, Tennessee, is one of a new breed of evangelists who are using the fascinating and ancient art of illusion to reach deeply into the unchurched world with the gospel. Christians tend to confuse "illusion"—which is commonly known as "magic" in today's English—with the biblically forbidden occult arts of sorcery, magic and

witchcraft described in Deuteronomy 18:10-14 and Exodus 7.

The art of illusion, however, has become a highly effective communication tool for sharing Christ with a postmodern world.

“I believe certainly we can use illusions [biblically], and they work very, very well, but they have to be performed according to God’s will and clearly as illusions,” says Minnesota-based illusionist Dave Horsager, who travels with his wife, Lisa, as the ministry team Special Delivery.

Fellow Minnesotan Toby Travis, whose colleagues include Horsager as well as distinguished illusionist André Kole, explains that the idea commonly associated with the word “magic” today is actually better fitted to the original meaning of the French word “juggler,” which meant “puzzle for the eyes.”

He echoes Gill and Horsager, saying that “magic, sleight of hand, illusion—whatever term you want to use—is such a wonderful springboard to talk about Christ.”

Illusions of Evangelism

Many in the magic world credit Kole with being one of the most creative minds in illusion today. He has been responsible for helping to develop such world-famous stunts as making the Washington Monument levitate and the Statue of Liberty disappear, feats made popular by Kole’s good friend and renowned illusionist David Copperfield.

After coming to Christ through an unsuccessful effort to

discount Jesus' miracles as "magic tricks," Kole has dedicated himself to sharing the gospel through his abilities. While doing so he exposes the lie behind occultic "supernatural" activities such as astrology, necromancy and psychic fortunetelling.

"[Magic] is probably the most universal form of entertainment," Kole says. "People like to be fooled, but I always make it very clear that an illusionist is one who presents an artistic effect creating the image of reality. A magician is one who uses natural means to create a 'supernatural' effect."

Illusion offers great potential for cross-cultural evangelism. Travis has used illusion to preach to more than a half million people in Russia, South America and Europe. While he was stranded in India after 9/11, he spent the days it took to find a way home sharing the gospel through illusion with many of the country's Muslims.

As Horsager says: "It's kind of like music—it's wow! in any language."

Dennis Blacksmith, a Christian illusionist and first vice president of the international group Fellowship of Christian Magicians (FCM), notes that interest in magic is at an all-time high in the United States and the rest of the world.

"The highest-paid performers in Vegas are magicians; television abounds with World's Greatest Magic programs; and David Copperfield is a household name," he says.

He believes that using a cultural phenomenon to attract

attention to the gospel is a wise strategy, especially when the current social climate of the West is to question the relevance of religion.

“But more than a door-opener, gospel illusion, gospel magic, magic with a message, object Williams lessons with surprise endings—or whatever name you use—is a good teaching device,” Blacksmith continues. “Since more of what is seen is remembered than what is heard, the use of object lessons holds interest, builds recall and focuses attention.”

Blacksmith traveled recently to Cuba, Nicaragua and South Africa, where he used magic in his team’s evangelistic efforts. For a diplomatic function with the mayor, city council and press of Masaya, Nicaragua, he was asked to perform a single magic trick for the adult audience.

“They sat spellbound by the story, message and mystery of the gospel presented in this unique way,” Blacksmith recounts. “Without magic, I would never have been given the opportunity to give my testimony at this political event.”

Gill and his wife, Andrea, know firsthand the value of live performances in catching young people’s attention. Because teenagers have been raised by the television, he says, the value of his performance is enhanced because teens see it live, not on a TV screen.

“[Magic] works for us because we’ve found a good combination [of content and presentation] for our target audience,” he says.

The Gills never set out to be a magic act. Rather, they

believed God had called them to reach youth. “I’m an evangelist, and I just found a creative way to do it,” Gill points out. “The only reason I do [illusion] is for outreach.”

‘This Is Just Theater’

Despite the proven credibility of illusion as a useful tool in communicating the gospel, some Christian magicians have experienced criticism and censure from the church, though that resistance is rapidly fading.

Travis recalls a time early in his career when a group of women gathered signatures on a petition to cancel his performance at a large church in California. The pastoral staff stood behind him, however, and challenged the women to attend the event, which they did.

Although the controversy kept the attendance numbers down, the same women who had opposed Travis came to him in tears the morning after his show, begging forgiveness for their misunderstanding. The church has since hosted Travis for many events.

“They were well-intended but uninformed,” Travis says of the incident.

For Kole, who has spent the last 40 years developing his craft and sharing Christ with his audiences, the church landscape has changed dramatically over his career.

Bill Bright, the late evangelist and founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, took a chance on Kole by allowing him to perform

for the ministry's college groups, despite disapproval by most of Bright's staff. The decision paid big eternal dividends, as Kole has since performed at more than 3,000 universities and helped thousands come to know Christ.

"During the past 40 years, he has been used of God to reach literally millions of people around the world," Bright once said of Kole.

However, for evangelists who are influencing society for Christ by using illusion, the greatest resistance comes not from other Christians who disagree with the technique, but from Satan, who knows that effective ministry can change people's lives.

The Gills have many times experienced both the attack of evil and the protecting presence of Christ during their nearly 300 days each year on the road in ministry. They currently put on a program called Freedom Experience—a three-day lineup that includes a Christian rock band and an extreme-sports team. It is offered free to the public and sponsored entirely by local churches.

The wholesome performances are staged in public schools. Everyone is invited to a grand finale on the third night when they give a powerful presentation of the gospel and Brock performs his breathtaking Water Coffin stunt.

"There's a spiritual war that's pretty obvious that goes on just naturally," Gill says. "With what we do, since it's very heavily evangelistic, I think there's an extra spiritual opposition [or] battle that goes on wherever we go."

The couple say they have seen many physical manifestations of what's going on spiritually. They cite the presence of witches and Goth gangs at their performances and instances of vandalism and death threats.

"Usually, between 50 percent and 80 percent of the crowd is unchurched, so they don't know how to act," Gill says. "Seven witches came to the show one night ... as a witch coven, and they went home half as large because three of them gave their lives to Jesus!"

Shortly before the mass killings at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999, a Goth group wearing trench coats attended one of the Gills' performances, intending to disrupt it. Two of them left the show as new Christians.

"One of them, the first thing he did—rather than coming down to the altar or going to see a counselor—was go to the bathroom and wash off all his makeup and take out some of his piercings," Brock says. "It was his way of saying, 'My life is changing.'"

"I think what happens is they experience the real supernatural power," he continues. "I think that they see that supremacy of Jesus, and it's attractive to them. For a person who's looking for supernatural power, they find the real thing."

The Best Ghostbusters of All

German-born performer Peter Togel stresses the importance of informing audiences that the feats they are seeing are only tricks, sleight of hand—not acts of supernatural or paranormal ability. Even Togel, who performs as a "mentalist," or someone

who makes predictions about the future, is able to impress his audiences with forecasted headlines using old-fashioned trickery, something he makes sure his audiences understand.

“There are people who say, ‘I have supernatural powers, and I’m using them,’ and that’s exactly the opposite of what we do,” Togel says, affirming that deception is the evil side of magic. “I’m very clear that all the things I’m using are the laws of physics. The difference is, I’m creating an illusion, and I will tell them that I’m creating that illusion, that it’s not real.”

If Togel can’t convince his audience that his “predictions” are just an illusion, he cancels his show.

Horsager goes to great lengths to ensure that his audiences understand that his stage feats are the result of years of practice. “I want people to know it’s illusion,” he stresses, “even if not how, so that they know it’s not supernatural.”

Occasionally Horsager goes so far as to reveal how a public-domain sleight-of-hand trick is done, to prove it has a natural rather than a supernatural source.

Togel believes most Christians can’t differentiate between reality and illusion and says magic can help sharpen discernment.

“Sometimes I’m very skeptical—will [Christians] be able to see false prophets if they come along?” he asks. “That’s where magic can help. If you have people who understand how to create an illusion, that helps you [identify] when false preachers come along ... using tricks to create ‘wonders.’ ”

Kole agrees. "I feel that magicians ... have done a great service to the Christian community by exposing these things and proving that only Jesus can perform real miracles," he says.

His concern, however, is that Christians still attribute greater power to Satan than he actually has. Kole has written numerous books and articles to expose those who falsely claim to have the ability to use occult powers. His standing offer of \$1,000 per second to anyone who can prove for up to 25 seconds that he or she can recreate the miracles of Jesus by paranormal powers has never been taken.

"Nowhere in the world have I ever found anybody—apart from the miracles of God working through Christians—that had a supernatural, occult ability," he says.

Renowned author and theologian R.C. Sproul touched on the contribution of magicians to the Christian community in his book *Surprised by Suffering* (Tyndale House). "It takes a thief to catch a thief," he writes of those who have exposed false practitioners of "evil" occupations.

"Mediums that have impressed scientific investigators have been exposed by professional magicians. Magicians tend to be the best ghostbusters of all. They know the carefully guarded secrets of the tricksters," says Sproul.

Blacksmith points out that the stigma of magic is "as silly as thinking ventriloquism is of the devil."

"When ventriloquism first was practiced, the audience actually

thought the little man was possessed,” he quips. “Today, no one believes this, and we just marvel at the skill.”

Blacksmith concludes that those who espouse that “parlor magic is occult” are taking the church back to the last century for no purpose. He counters that modern magic as practiced by Christians is earthly entertainment—with an eternal benefit.

“It’s skill,” he affirms, but adds: “And it’s good, clean fun—with a message.”

How a MAGICIAN Found God

Once a skeptic, world-famous illusionist André Kole has shared his Christian faith with millions since his conversion.

André Kole, one of the most respected and accomplished inventors of illusions today, has been practicing magic since his youth. He became an accomplished magician and built a successful illusion company after graduating from Arizona State University with a degree in psychology in the late 1950s. He soon discovered that worldly success was not going to bring him lasting happiness.

Then God began to reveal the unusual path he would follow to find Christ.

“Someone challenged me, as a magician and as a skeptic, to investigate the miracles of Christ,” Kole says. “This was important because Jesus claimed to be God. To back up those claims, He said in John 10 [vv. 24-25], ‘Do not believe My

words unless I perform miracles that only God can do.'"

From a magician and psychologist's point of view, Kole surmised, it made sense that if the miracles were real, then Jesus was telling the truth. And by contrast he expected that if the miracles were proved false, then he would know Jesus was the greatest magician ever.

"Most atheists try to explain away the miracles by saying that Jesus was just a magician, just doing clever magic tricks," Kole explains. "The trouble is—I'm a magician. I know what a magician can do and what he can't do."

Kole investigated Jesus' miracles for months. He progressively eliminated each possibility of some form of mesmerism, hypnosis or other means of trickery.

In the end he agreed with the Jewish religious leader Nicodemus of the Gospels who told Jesus: "'No one can do these [miracles] that You do unless God is with him'" (see John 3:1-2, NKJV). At that point, Kole quit questioning the authenticity of Jesus' claims.

After that, he grew to understand what it means not only to believe in God but also to have a personal relationship with Christ. In the nearly 40 years since, Kole, who is 67, has shared his faith with more than 250 million people in 76 countries.

His Magical Spectacular illusion show keeps him on the road for more than half the year. He presides over a company, André Kole Productions, in Tempe, Arizona, and is working on a book, currently titled Jesus: Magician or God? It is based on the

research that led him to Christ and will explain 11 reasons why it would be impossible for Jesus to have been a magician.

Rachel Williams is a freelance writer based in Nashville, Tennessee.