

MIND GAMES

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West End. (He starts his seventh season in London in July.) On Thursday, April 10, he returns to the Philharmonic Center for the Arts in Naples for one night with his "Mind Games Extra!" show.

People call him a mentalist, but that's not a term he regularly uses.

"I'm a purveyor of mind games," Salem says, "which means I use a combination of psychology, motivation, influence, intuition, instinct, the tricks of the advertising man, stage craft, all sorts of things, just in order to guide and influence the way you think about things."

When he's on stage, he says, he makes it clear that "one, nothing I do is supernatural. Two, at no point will anybody be embarrassed or humiliated in any way, shape, or form, and three, as I say, 'This evening what you're getting is entertainment, and not a seminar.' So I set up the context very clearly."

What he performs are very sophisticated parlor tricks --- but on stage, in front of hundreds or thousands of people.

"My show is not a one-man show, it's a 1,500-person show," he says. "Just as a teacher should never be just about the teacher, teaching is getting feedback from the class...the same thing with the kind of performing I do. I'm constantly gauging my audience."

He feels that doing his tricks for a large audience is even easier than performing them one-on-one.

"Mass mind is sometimes far easier to control than an individual," he says. "Unfortunately, most dictators and politicians know that, that what one person might not do, you get them in 10 or 20 and suddenly you have a different kind of phenomenon. 'The Crowd' by Gustav le Bon was the earliest book on this kind of thing - the 1800s. And I'm sure every dictator has read it, as I'm sure has every advertising man. As should most performers. Because what he's basically saying is that there is a difference between group think and individual thought."

Salem talking privately is at least as interesting as the tricks he performs publically. He taught psychology on the college level for 12 years, and his conversation is peppered with references to Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman and various books on psychology, sociology and communication.

What he does on stage isn't as exciting as teaching, he claims.

"I miss teaching every single day," he says. "In my soul, I'm a teacher. And I always have to be conscious of the fact on stage that I do not wish to pontificate, I don't wish to confuse. I wish to entertain. Now, if you leave the show with a little bit of enlightenment, great. People all the time come up to me and say, 'What can I read to find out more about this?' That excites me to no end to hear that. There's not many shows where you go, 'What can I read?' Because you've just been laughing and been amazed for an hour and a half, and now you're asking to read something. That's great."

He has no way of predicting random events. He can't tell you what tomorrow's weather will be, or the next winning lottery numbers. He can't "read" people who are drunk, psychotic, or on drugs. And he couldn't read someone who's a Method Actor.

"I can only work with other people's thoughts that can either be influenced, guided, or that I can pick up some clues from," he says. "I can't work with totally random events."

And he doesn't like surprises in his personal life, even if they're pleasant ones. He likes to control his environment as much as possible.

"My mind is very structured and categorized," he says. "I plan enormously. I'm at airport four hours early. I'm always well-prepared as possible for any situation. I don't like surprises. I like reading fiction

reading is power

>> Entertainers rarely discuss books during their interviews, but Marc Salem named numerous titles throughout as well as referring to people such as communications theorist Marshall McLuhan and anthropologist/social scientist/linguist Gregory Bateson.

"Reading to me is the gateway to the universe," Salem says. "I think it's a McLuhan-esque idea that we see the world in certain ways because of the linearity of books. It's a medium that involves us in what McLuhan considered a very hot kind of way. And science could've only come about through books, which refers to one idea, then another over here, and another idea over here. You can't do that with television and say, 'Wait, go back and forth,' that idea of cross-referencing and serendipity.

"You walk into a library, and suddenly you see a book you hadn't seen before. That's difficult in a technological age. I think serendipity is what genius is. I think discoveries come from taking A and mixing it [with something else] in another way that nobody's ever thought of before, and suddenly you have a whole new thought."

Here are some of the titles Salem referred to during his interview:

>> "The Disappearance of Childhood," "Teaching as a Conserving Activity" and "Teaching as a Subversive Activity," all by Neil Postman

>> "The First Three Minutes" by Steve Weinberg

>> "The Gift of Fear" by Gavin De Becker

>> "The Games People Play" by Eric Berne

>> "The Crowd" by Gustav le Bon

that has surprises in them. I always liked 'the Twilight Zone' or an O. Henry story with a twist ending. But in my personal life, I'm not a control freak, but I want control over the circumstances that guide my life."

Ask Salem, the son of a rabbi, if he believes in the supernatural, and he gives an answer worthy of a politician.

"It's a tough question," he says. "First of all, because my show has nothing to do with the supernatural. It's an important point for me to make. The show is not supernatural. Have I seen things that I cannot fully explain? Yeah. Does that mean that it's supernatural? I don't know what supernatural means. These words are so laden with so much luggage that I don't know what that means anymore. A hundred years ago, wouldn't a heart transplant be supernatural? Wouldn't television be supernatural? I mean, what does supernatural mean? Controlling electricity is supernatural. Does it mean controlling nature? Our mastery of nature, or destruction of it, is certainly supernatural."

What he does on stage is perfectly explainable, but beyond the knowledge or explanation of most other people he says.

"I put it within an entertaining context, so it's fun and not frightening," he says. "I work with everything from probabilities to intuition to lucky guesses, to pumping."

If he has a sixth sense, it's his sense of humor, he says. It's also likely he possesses a photographic memory and the ability to quickly add large sums in his head.

"I use techniques of the psychologist and the advertising agent and the journalist. I don't do sleight of hand. I don't make anything float, I don't make anything disappear. The magic I make occur, occurs up here," he says, pointing to his brain. "It is a psychological kind of magic as opposed to a physical kind of magic. It is sleight of mouth, more than it would be sleight of hand. It is paying attention, as opposed to misdirecting an audience. So in many ways it is the exact opposite of what a magician might do."

Which of course begs the whimsical question, could Salem then pull a hat from a rabbit?

He pauses, but only for a second.

"My brother was a psychologist for many years, and he pulled habits out of rats," he

states, then chuckles.

He has me pick a book from three books, holds it out towards me, and flips through the pages, stopping when I tell him to. He then has me read to myself the first two words on the top of the page. Then he starts saying the alphabet, staring at me intently. He's trying to guess what the first letter is. Initially, he gets the first letter wrong, because I giggle as I try to keep a poker face.

But with no problem, he soon figures out the two words I'd read.

Salem's a good reader of people; he's been hired by lawyers to advise on jury selection. He hastens to add that he helps them select people who will judge honestly, and not those who will just be pre-disposed to his client.

On his "60 Minutes" segment, he asked a group of people to draw something. He told them to lie and say no when he asked them a question. Then he held up each picture and went down the line, asking each person if they'd drawn that image. By reading their subtle responses, he was able to tell each time which one was lying.

It's not necessarily "a tell," that poker players look for, it's more a slight change from the norm, he explains. Maybe they won't look you in the eye and are suddenly staring at you, or vice versa.

"The advantages of non-verbals, once you understand them, are that they are far more difficult to hide," he says. "Because a person who is using them is unaware that they're using them. But they're never blatant. It's a communication I call a package of signals. And you want to see everything work together.

"So someone says, 'How do you know someone's lying?' I say, 'It depends.' Normally, if they speak slowly, for example, and suddenly they start speaking quickly. That's a red flag. So you're looking for differences from the norm, as opposed to looking for a thing that's a tell, so to speak."

For example, parents can tell when their children are lying, and spouses often know when they're being fed a line. It's intuition.

Ask him if he played poker with card-man extraordinaire Ricky Jay, (who's had his own one-man show on Broadway), who would win, and he smiles. Ricky Jay's a friend, Salem says. He also explains that he doesn't play poker or gamble. He recognizes that with his personality he could easily become addicted to the game, so he doesn't play.

He does a few more tricks, some which succeed, some that don't. He asks me to write a two digit number. I write 27, but he guesses 22. He writes a letter of the alphabet and then asks me to write what I think the letter is. I write F, and am correct. (Afterwards I wonder if subconsciously I heard the three strokes of his marker on paper: the first strong stroke and then the two, quick, additional ones.)

It's the law of probabilities, Salem says. If he guesses wrong, he makes a joke and moves on. He asks me to draw something on paper. I draw a cat's face. But Salem's drawn a pair of glasses. He explains that after asking me to draw something, he took out his glasses, as a subconscious prompt, but I wasn't paying attention.

And with Salem, it's all about paying attention.

Go to his Web site, he says, and there's a piece on the nature of how we create reality.

"First of all, we have to pay attention to things," he says. "And then we have to make meaning out of them. So that making meaning, that interpretation, is as important as observing it. And I think we've become very bad observers, and even worse at making meaning. We're bad observers because there are so many things to see, the competition for our attention and the bias that we give to things like vision, over our other senses...I think we lose out.

"I think that we unfortunately have not educated ourselves to understand how to make the translation to the meaning of things. We need a greater depth of knowledge to do that. I think most Americans



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most dictators and politicians know that, that what one person might not do, you get them in 10 or 20 and suddenly you have a different kind of phenomenon. 'The Crowd' by Gustav le Bon was the earliest book on this kind of thing - the 1800s. And I'm sure every dictator has read it, as I'm sure has every advertising man. As should most performers. Because what he's basically saying is that there is a difference between group think and individual thought."

—Marc Salem

have pretty good breadth of knowledge. Television shows show you everything. Hey, it shows you the surface of the moon, it shows you Mars, the planets, who's in the Big Brother house. So it gives you very good breadth. It just doesn't give you depth, understanding, meaning, connection."

Though people praise e-mails and text messaging for their ease and quickness, modern technology actually muddies communication.

"I'm not a Luddite. I'm not saying destroy all technology," he says. "On the other hand, I think that technology always opens up a Pandora's box of problems that only other technology can solve, and they create new problems, ad infinitum. I think that nuance, for example, is impossible in an e-mail. Even in word-to-word communication, do we rarely get the message intended. Which is why I think non-verbal is so important. The non-verbals we provide give the nuance, give the subtlety. They give the meaning behind the words."

Salem's always been hyper-sensitive to others, to non-verbal clues, to the way people think about things. He's always been good at influencing others' thinking. You get the idea that if lacking a moral core, this avuncular man could make an excellent con-man.

But he's devoted to teaching and entertaining.

"Marshall McLuhan said, 'Anyone who thinks there's a difference between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either,'" Salem says. "So I think that every good educator is a good entertainer, and every entertainer, whether they realize it or not, has a curriculum that they're training other people in. It may be a nasty, bad curriculum, but people are listening to them, are emulating them. They are teaching them something about the pecking order, about roles that people play, about all sorts of things."

When people leave his show, he says, "they see the world through slightly different glasses. They see that they could have better relationships with their kids, their lovers, their friends, if they see the prism of non-verbal, that there's an entire world of unspoken language that unfortunately we don't pay attention to anymore. So if there is a moral to the show, it's that you could see the world as a much better place." ■