The Curious Incident of the Curb Stone at the Convention

Weston-Super-Mare council weren’t to know. How could they? The pavement curb stone outside of the Playhouse Theatre was just another everyday mundane slab of concrete.

The gala show at the Bristol Day of Magic was enjoyable and the conventioners had gathered on the pavement outside to bid farewell for another year. Like most conventions it was like being at a social occasion interspersed with the occasional packet trick and pint.

I was unexpectedly shoved from behind, with a growling voice apologising profusely. I turned to steady the attacker from further onslaught and came face-to-face with a living legend. He had tripped on the curb without being intoxicated (unusual for the inhabitants of Weston) and steadied himself on my wire-like frame.

And that was how I met the man who would go on to become one of my dearest friends, mentor and adopted granddad; Eugene Burger.

In later life, with his wicked sense of humour and mischief, Eugene and I were sat sharing one of the many bottles of red wine we would imbibe over the ensuing years and were reminiscing about the time we had first met. I regaled him with the above chance happening to which Eugene, with a twinkle in his eye, smiled and said ‘Oh, sure, I fell into you by accident!’

Shortly after the Curious Incident of the Curb Stone at the Convention, Eugene introduced me to another of my magic idols; Robert E. Neale. By the time I met Eugene, I was fortunate enough to already know Jeff McBride, but now with the trio of magical masters as my friends, I was in great company and had no excuse not to be as good as I could possibly be when sharing ideas with them.

In 2004 I traveled from London to Eastbourne to visit Eugene so we could share time around the IBM convention as I wasn’t an attendee. Although, and this will get me a lifetime ban, Max Maven lent me his registration card so I could go in and check out the dealers hall. Eugene had considered giving me his, but remarked that of the two he was more well known! The security were checking tags, and they stopped me and I simply showed them the card. On it was Max’s name. And in I walked...

That evening another few glasses of red wine and conversation went happily by. In the time we spent together, Eugene and I would often talk about everyday topics, often outside our shared love of magic. By the time I came on the scene, Jeff and Eugene were well into their explorations of magic and meaning through Jeff’s Mystery School. My friend Kenny Roberts brought the guys over in 2006 and I collected Eugene from the airport (a ritual we would repeat on almost all of his UK visits from then on). Kenny’s Masterclass opened my eyes to the way magic gatherings could be conducted. No negativity, no competition, no put-downs, no dealers, no egos. Just three days and nights with a small intimate gathering of magicians all helping each other and learning from the best.

On one of those days I saw Eugene do a performance that, to me, was his most haunting, most mesmerising, and ultimately, most inspiring routine. The Ballad of the Harp Weaver.

Alone on a chair, eyes closed, with his unique voice, Eugene brought real magic to that gathering. The words came alive, the story full of drama, of sorrow, and of an energy seldom ever seen. When Eugene recited that ballad you could hear a pin drop. Your flesh would crawl with goosebumps. It was a truly magical moment. A master storyteller. In 2016 I arranged a two day event and on the second day I asked Eugene if he’d recite the ballad to the group. He did it with the same passion, the same depth and drama as I had remembered it. For me it was his finest piece. It was his most magical. And not a prop in sight.
EUGENE BURGER
(1939-2017)
In October 2006 I flew to Vegas to perform at the Magic & Meaning Conference. I gifted Eugene a portrait I had drawn. I knew he lived simply with few material possessions, and his warmth for my efforts were genuine. Eugene taught me both how to accept and how to reject a gift. I was delighted that he accepted my portrait with genuine sincerity. The whereabouts of that original portrait I know not. A recent pencil sketch of Eugene accompanies this tribute. I felt compelled to draw him again upon hearing he’d left us.

Back to 2008 and another tour around Cornwall and the South West. Jeff had said about visiting Lands End. Kenny and I were driving a few magicians between us, including Eugene and Jeff. At one point we stopped by a random cliff. I said that we were at Land’s End. The guys were unsure if we were being genuine or pulling their leg. We then said we were off to another location they wanted to see. We drove around the block and back to the same area! And said we were now at the other landmark. Eugene thought it deliciously delightful.

The late Jon Randall arranged for us to get religious access into the circle of Stonehenge for sun-rise. Another pinch-me moment. As we walked into the circle on that misty morning at 4am a few other people were already in the circle preparing to enjoy and embrace the moment in their own way. Unbelievably, despite being the other side of the world, a guy instantly recognised both Eugene and Jeff and they began to drum together! Eugene thought it an act of complete naivety. I phoned Donald and he apologised and paid for the return and sent me a ‘proper’ copy. Upon hearing this story many years later, Eugene offered to buy my upside-down copy saying it was most probably a one-off! I had already long since returned it and now had a correctly bound copy in my library. Eugene shook his head in dismay at my foolishness. And this wasn’t to be the only time I disappointed him with that book!

Another memory; I purchased Spirit Theatre many years ago. Having saved up my pocket money at that time, I sent off for the book from Donald and Betty at Magic Books By Post. It came and I was disappointed that the cover was actually bound on upside-down. An act of complete naivety, I phoned Donald and he apologised and paid for the return and sent me a ‘proper’ copy. Upon hearing this story many years later, Eugene offered to buy my upside-down copy saying it was most probably a one-off! I had already long since returned it and now had a correctly bound copy in my library. Eugene shook his head in dismay at my foolishness. And this wasn’t to be the only time I disappointed him with that book!

On another UK tour many years later, Eugene asked if I could bring my copy of Spirit Theatre to a lecture as he would be talking about it and wanted to have a copy for people to peruse. By this time I had become an expert on treating my magic books like work-horses; penning annotations, thoughts and highlighting key sections of many books (I have since moved on to post-it notes and pencil). One book which had been abused in this way was Spirit Theatre. Eugene was flicking through it, not realising I was watching, and seeing my crude underlinings, notes and jotted remarks, shook his head once again. It would seem I’d never learn.

Another memory and another masterclass in ‘less being more’. Jeff, Larry and Eugene were doing close-up before a theatre show for the public. I was producing the event and running around making sure everything was okay. I could see Jeff working away, saw Larry in another part of the audience, but no Eugene. The room was noisy and there were other performers doing work with lights, juggling, flashes of fire and a lot of activity was vying for the interest of the audience.

And then I saw him. He was stood calmly, quietly, to one side of the auditorium. Looking down with a curious expression, he simply had a matchbox on his hand.

Without a word, the spectators nearest to him began to sense something was happening. Something odd. And then the box twitched. Eugene reacted subtly. And then the box moved again. Those nearest began to talk amongst themselves; ‘did you see that’?, ‘look, check this out’! By now I had moved close enough to take in the ‘performance’.

Gradually that box danced magically on his hand, coming to life, opening mysteriously, the inner tray falling out from its cover. Eugene never once looked away he were witnessing this miracle too.

And then, at the end, simply held one part up, studied them with a bemused expression and handed them out. And then simply walked away with a smile.

Masterclass.

Around him the others continued to throw fire and shout.

Many late nights of talking happened over the years.
Eugene had a wonderful gift to be truly present when you were together in discussion, never being distracted. Always listening. Always remembering. He’d pick up conversations sometimes months later, exactly where you left off. Because he cared. He cared deeply.

Looking forward; I have helped organise a tour for Spring 2018 and was excitedly anticipating another few weeks on the road with Eugene, this time being our first UK tour visiting Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Due to his passing we’ve had to cancel what would have been the first ever Magic & Healing Conference, which looked at ways the magician can help practitioners and patients in their relationships. But, I’m pleased to say that both Jeff McBride and Larry Hass are continuing with the Mystery School tour next April and we know that throughout Eugene will be with us. As the author of Spirit Theatre and the leading authority on Seance and Bizarre Magic how could he not?

My lasting memory of Eugene is one of simplicity. We were talking and eating over dinner. Both of us with the now obligatory glass of red wine. Eugene simply smiled and squeezed my hand over the table. His eyes gave off such warmth. I don’t know how to put it into words; he would simply be there fully, totally, in that moment, smiling through his eyes, and you felt you were in the presence of someone very special. Someone who was magical to their very core. Someone who made you feel what friendship truly was.

All these memories and shared times. All because of that fateful curb stone. God Bless Weston-Super-Mare council.

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David Berglas and Eugene Burger

A Magical Evening at the Magic Circle.

Words by Jay Fortune

A rare visit by two magical titans ensured a packed evening at the Magic Circle.

David was hosting an evening discussing his favourite magic books. The VIP guest list ensured the event was well attended, meaning a last minute change of room inside the Circle to accommodate the numbers. David was to perform one single magic effect, which was highly unusual for the book discussion evenings. Most featured no actual performances. But that night would be different and memorable for all who were there.

David asked for someone to help him, preferably somebody who’d never seen him perform before. To much amusement, Eugene was singled out.

David proceeded to offer Eugene a choice from four decks of cards. One was freely chosen, shuffled, cut and two cards were freely selected. A book was used as an impromptu table surface, both magicians standing. The two freely chosen cards held at his fingertips, David asked Eugene which card he would like to hold in which hand? A decision made, he was invited to change his mind if he so wished. And then came the revelation. The impromptu table was now shown… a set of Eugene’s lecture notes from over 30 years ago. And then Eugene was invited to turn to page 3. There was a photo of a much younger Eugene holding the very same two freely selected cards and in the correct hands; the right hand held the same card, the left also.

Eugene remarked it was one of his most magical evenings.
INSPIRATION & KINDNESS

By Jeff McBride

Where do you find your greatest inspiration?

Eugene was often asked this question. Here’s a clue to how he was inspired by his magical adventures.

Eugene helped many magicians make their dreams come true. Through his mentoring, writing and performances, he has inspired thousands of magicians around the world.

One of Eugene’s favourite places to fill up on inspiration was the United Kingdom. Eugene had many devoted students who returned his inspiration in very tangible ways. Kenny Roberts, Jay Fortune, Larry Hass, and many of Eugene’s close magic friends created tours for Eugene to teach and perform.

I had the honour of traveling the world with Eugene, and had the great privilege of participating in many of these events over the years. The tours were mostly arranged out of Eugene’s desire to visit mystical and magical places like Cornwall, Stonehenge and Glastonbury. Eugene was a voracious reader and loved reading books on magical power spots and mystical places. He had a great desire to live his dreams.

Kenny Roberts was one of Eugene’s biggest fans and supporters. Kenny helped Eugene to realise one of his great dreams: to travel through the magical land of Cornwall.

Mario Morris created a space for Eugene to teach at Glastonbury. Under the shadow of Glastonbury Tor in an ancient hotel tavern, Eugene shared his wisdom by the fire-side surrounded by his devoted students who traveled to learn from him... Students from all over Europe came to sit by the fire-side and listen to the tales and teachings of The Master. For many of us, it was a dream come true.

And our dear friend Jon Randal took Eugene to Stonehenge for a stunning and magical sunrise ritual. Eugene says it was one of the most magical times of his life... And he meant that! It is good to have friends that can help dreams come true, and Eugene had many friends all over the world that shared their love by creating magical experiences for him.

Eugene and I had a wonderful evening with Paul Kieve at The Old Vic performing in a magical variety show.

One of the most memorable moments of our adventures in the UK was when we got to attend a night at London’s Magic Circle, honouring David Berglas. During the evening David performed a card miracle for Eugene as the assistant. The final revelation showed two cards- the exact same two cards in the photograph that adorns the inner cover of one of Eugene’s books from many years ago. Eugene was so impressed with David’s ingenuity and the passion that he put into creating this magical moment shared between two friends and witnessed by the Magic Circle members... Pure magic artistry!

That same evening another very rare moment was arranged by the members of the Magic Circle. Eugene got to hold his favourite magic poster of all time; David Devant’s most famous poster “All Done By Kindness”

Eugene was a deeply spiritual man. He was the kindest, most loving and most inspiring man I have ever known.

Eugene taught us that in order to give the gift of inspiration to our students and our audiences, we must go and seek our inspiration. His life’s work and his inspiration will continue in the hearts of his many students and his writings... and they both have the power to make other people’s dreams come true.
Eugene Burger was a genuine master in our field: a supremely gifted performer, writer, philosopher, and teacher of magic.

Since his death in Chicago on August 8, 2017, there has been an astonishing outpouring from magicians all over the world: testimonies, eulogies, performances in his honour, and remembrances. All of it widens our perspective on the man; it has been beautiful and moving.

Nonetheless, I have been asked by Eugene’s executors to write his obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honoured to do so. I have written a long, detailed, and personal obituary, a statement of his history, and I am honou

Eugene Burger was born in Chicago in 1939. He fell in love with magic at the age of seven after he saw Jack Gwynne perform in Chicago. Eugene pursued magic passionately as a boy and teenager. His father would take him to magic hotspots around town where he watched excellent magicians, including Don Alan who served as a special inspiration and gave Eugene guidance.

Magic fell away from Eugene as he graduated from Beloit College and then received a Masters of Divinity degree from Yale University and a Masters of Philosophy degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the late 1960s, Eugene moved back to Chicago and spent a number of years in various social services positions, including that of Director of Welfare for the City of Evanston.

Around 1974, magic reawakened in his life as he, along with his close friends Marcella Ruble, Dennis Rook, and Erik Counce, launched a successful séance show in Chicago titled Hauntings. Emboldened by its success and encouraged by his friends, in January of 1978 Eugene resigned from his nine-to-five job and became a full-time professional magician.

Eugene spent the next twelve years performing in increasingly upscale restaurants and lounges in Chicago—through which he built an extensive private and corporate party clientele. Also during this time, he was writing and publishing extraordinary books that would revolutionise the way magicians understood and performed magic. The earliest of these books include Secrets and Mysteries for the Close-Up Entertainer (1982) and Intimate Power (1983).

After a number of successful runs at the Magic Castle, and winning two consecutive “Lecturer of the Year” awards there in 1984 and 1985, Eugene published, through the assistance and vision of Richard Kaufman, several books that are essential reading for magicians, including Spirit Theater (1986), The Performance of Close-Up Magic (1987), and The Experience of Magic (1989). By 1990, Eugene Burger had become an international star.

Eugene always felt deeply fortunate to count two other great magicians among his closest friends: Max Maven and Jeff McBride. Eugene met Max in 1979, and their friendship flourished over all the years. On the professional level, Eugene brought nearly all of his material to Max for advice and assistance, which Max generously gave. Eugene and Jeff met in the late 1980s—a close friendship that eventually became an extremely productive partnership when, in 1991, they created The McBride Magic & Mystery School, of which Eugene was the Dean.


In 2008, Eugene was the focus of a wonderful documentary by Michael Caplan, A Magical Vision: The World of Eugene Burger.

Over the course of his career, Eugene received extraordinary recognition from his peers. For example, in the year 2000 he was named “One of the 100 Most Influential Magicians of the Twentieth Century” by MAGIC magazine. In 2009, he received a prestigious “Performing Fellowship” from the Academy of Magic Arts. And in 2012, he received the third-ever “Special Award for Theory and Philosophy” from FISM.

Eugene’s health throughout his entire life was exceptional. In the past five years, he had more work than at any time in his career: magic lectures, workshops, shows, conventions, and many weeks in Las Vegas to teach at the School, and he never missed the mark! However, in June of this summer, 2017, Eugene was hospitalised on August 5 and passed away on Tuesday, August 8. It is any comfort, I can tell you Eugene died exactly as he wanted; quickly, with no pain, and surrounded by a group of loving friends.

Eugene Burger is gone, and the magic world grieves. But Eugene has more to share. In early 2017, he and I began working on a new book titled Teaching Magic: A Book for Students and Teachers of the Art. I sent the book off to the printer just before Eugene’s diagnosis, and so it is untouched by awareness of his loss. Teaching Magic will be released in the fall of 2017.

In addition, in 2010 (after a short hospitalisation for heart arrhythmia), Eugene approached me with a request to write and publish two posthumous books that would finally reveal his many unpublished routines. The answer, of course, was “Yes!” Since then, he and I have been working intently on these books: planning, organising, gathering, filming, writing, approving, and so on. They have a ways to go but are fully underway, and they follow Eugene’s intentions to the letter.

Yet today, and for months to come, we mourn. We have lost one of our brightest stars, someone who taught us, through his shining example, that magic can be a great art, someone who called upon us to remember that magic isn’t about tricks at all. As Eugene always said, magic is about life. And he showed us over and over with a simple strand of thread he was at peace with the fact of death—the great mystery.