



# KIM SILVERMAN

## *A Wizard in Two Worlds*

BY TOBIAS BECKWITH

Kim Silverman is the Principal Research Scientist at Apple, but he looks like Dumbledore's more mischievous brother. He has flowing white hair and beard, and a perpetual twinkle in his eye. When performing magic, he is always polished, personable, and truly enchanting. And like the famous headmaster of Hogwarts, Kim is a guiding hand to a group of magicians — in this case, a remarkably progressive magic club that actually fosters the development of performance skills.

Silverman grew up in Burwood, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia. His interest in magic was awakened when he was given a magic kit a week or so before his eighth birthday. In high

school, he found himself poring over the one library book on the subject, and he learned enough to win the school talent show. Kim went on to perform at parties, where his act included a billiard ball routine from the Tarbell Course and a Water to Wine routine. He still remembers drinking from one of the glasses of “wine” to silence a heckler who shouted out, “It’s just a bunch of chemicals” — and being relieved to survive the incident with no permanent damage. A friend from his local fencing club introduced him to the Melbourne Magic Circle, where Kim’s billiard ball routine won him another contest.

At Monash University in the mid-1970s, Kim focused more on his studies than his

magic, earning an undergraduate degree in Experimental Psychology. This was the beginning of the work that led to Kim’s other “wizardly” role: research and development of “Spoken Language Technologies” for Apple. A bachelor’s degree from Monash was followed by an honors degree in Computer Science at Melbourne University, a research position at Giessen University in Germany, and then he was off to Cambridge University in England, where he earned a multidisciplinary doctorate in Cognitive Science, Linguistics, Electrical Engineering, and Artificial Intelligence. Silverman wanted to learn how to make machines speak in a more natural way, with intonation that more clearly conveys the intended mean-

ing to the listener. Today, his research is used in over 250 computer applications and research labs worldwide.

While pursuing his technological goal, magic quietly simmered in the back of his mind. “I’d do tricks for friends during these years, but that was all,” states Silverman. “Magic really came back in 1991. It was my wife, Julie, who got me interested once again.”

Kim and Julie had moved to the United States at the invitation of the prestigious Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey. When their son, Dion, was about to turn three, Julie suggested Kim perform magic at his birthday party. Kim responded, “But I’m not very good,” to which she immediately countered, “But Dion won’t mind!” Her logic was unassailable. So, after a shopping trip to Tannen’s magic shop in Manhattan, the show went on. It was a huge hit. Several parents asked if he would perform for their own kids’ parties, which led to many more, and before he knew it, Kim’s weekends were overflowing with birthday performances. Thinking that if he began charging for the shows, he might not have to do so many, he soon discovered that not to be the case. The requests kept coming in, so he raised his prices. The shows continued. And his magic improved.

Silverman realized that his first passion (the study of human language and how speech conveys meaning) could be a great boon to his second (magic). Very few magicians understand the power of emphasis, pitch, phrasing, and other attributes of intonation in order to convey — or hide — meaning. Nor do many of us understand the vast differences between written and spoken language.

“Written text typically packs several different ideas into longish, complex sentences. But when we talk to each other, we limit ourselves to just one idea per phrase,” notes Silverman. “This is really important when you’re performing. A script that seems well-crafted on the page is often too difficult for people to easily follow when it’s actually performed.” Whether performing magic or giving a technical presentation, Silverman says, “I assume my audience is very intelligent, but also tired, can’t see well, can’t hear well, and their attention is distracted.” As a result, he gets rapt attention and

maximum effect from each piece performed.

Asked if he ever uses his linguistic knowledge in order to misdirect or deceive his audiences, Kim laughs. “All the time! Especially for equivoque, where it’s invaluable.”

Apple approached Silverman in 1993 to head their speech synthesis research; he is now Manager of Spoken Language Technologies. His work appears in Mac computers, iPods, and other Apple products. “In our Macs,” he says, “we’ve made the speech synthesis much more realistic, intelligible, natural, and pleasant. You can even hear the computer take a breath at appropriate places in the speech. Our algorithms analyze a whole para-

graph, rather than a single sentence at a time, in order to decide the intonation of each word in each sentence. Anyone can hear it — just go to

one of the computers in any Apple store. Select any block of text and ask the computer to read it to you. I recommend the voice ‘Alex’ as the best choice to hear the new stuff. And of course, words like ‘Erdnase’ are pronounced correctly.” Having a computer sound *that* much like a real human is another kind of magical experience.

Not long after his move to Apple in Northern California’s Silicon Valley, another magician working at the company invited Silverman to attend a Whit Haydn lecture at the Palo Alto SAM Assembly. As Silverman put it, “I was hooked! I had no idea that magic lectures existed. I’d always learned from books. A whole new world opened up for me.” He became an enthusiastic member of the club, and he was soon president.

The club is a very active one. “We welcome anyone committed to furthering the art of magic,” says Silverman. “And we’ve created a few different ways to support that.”

The first of these involves the requirement that every member actually perform at least once each year. “It doesn’t have to be good, you just have to do it.”

Second is a “Performance Experience” program. The club chooses from its members those who have worked hard on their routines

I assume my audience is very intelligent, but also tired, can’t see well, can’t hear well, and their attention is distracted.



*Kim Silverman in his role as wizard Merloch Silvermaine, circa 1562 [top], and as himself, wizard of Spoken Language Technologies for Apple [below].*

but are in need of “air time” in front of real audiences, then arranges shows at retirement homes, hospitals, and similar venues. Magicians work in pairs — one experienced “worker” and one less-experienced member. The worker introduces the other magician, who performs for a few minutes, then the worker closes with a strong routine. Afterward, the members receive feedback on their performance. This way, they perform the same routine for several different audiences and hear feedback from several different workers.

Third is the “Learners’ Workshop,” which opens every club meeting. Members learn a magic routine in detail, move by move, together. Then they perform it for one another, working to master every step. They don’t move on until all of those attending have mastered the piece. And only learners are permitted to attend — no passive observers. “Sometimes we’ll spend up to six months on one piece. This single focus is intended to be the opposite of most magic lectures.”

Today, in spite of a demanding schedule at Apple, Silverman continues to perform regularly at festivals, bar mitzvahs, weddings, and corporate events for professionals throughout California. He performs strolling close-up as an ice-breaker as guests arrive, so by the time he does his full stand-up show, he already has a personal connection with most of the guests in the audience.

Almost every weekend, from spring through fall, he performs at the many Renaissance festivals in the area. “That was an accident, actually,” Kim admits. “I was approached by a chap in a diner where I was having breakfast, and he asked if I knew about renaissance festivals. I told him I was a magician and would love to do magic at a Renaissance festival. He told me, ‘I think we can arrange that.’ He was the Guild Master for a local Renaissance reenactment guild, which I then joined. I told my wife we’re now members of a Guild. She said ‘Great! What’s a Guild?’”

The work in the faires has affected Silverman profoundly, helping him understand the importance of character in his performances. The St. Gyles Guild reenacts the court of Mary, Queen of Scots, in the year 1562, so Silverman was required to create a character, with a full backstory. “I became Merloch Silvermaine, a visitor to Mary’s court, representing an order of wizards from northeast Romania.” The character is professorial, kindly, benevolent, and respectful. “I often ask myself: *How would Gandalf perform this — and why?*”

Silverman is interested in the area where science and magic interact. He believes that modern magic can give us insights into how the human mind works, and science can motivate and improve magic presentations. For example, Kim explains to the audience how parapsychol-



*Performing at renaissance festivals, Kim Silverman shows magic to anachronistic visitors as a representative of an order of wizards from northeast Romania.*

ogy uses the theories and methods of modern cognitive science to investigate mental abilities that are outside of mainstream psychology. This “explanation” is really his introduction to *Out Of This World*. The aim is to encourage the people in his audience to be open to the possibility that they themselves might possess more abilities than they think, and then to demonstrate that they are able, mysteriously, to accurately guess the color of every card in a shuffled deck.

In another presentation, Kim explains to the audience how light causes photosensitive chemicals in the retina to change the firing rates of the receptor cells, and that these chemicals themselves change color when light strikes them. Therefore, if you can view a person’s retina a few milliseconds after he or she has viewed a high-contrast image, you can see an afterimage in the retina. He dem-

onstrates this by asking someone to choose and view a card from the deck, after which he looks into that person’s eye and “reads” the identity of the chosen card.

“It’s all about that look you see on someone’s face, when they’ve been totally amazed by the experience of magic,” says Silverman. “I want my magic to make people feel better about themselves and how they relate to their lives. I don’t measure my success by how much laughter or applause I get, but by how many people cry, or come up and hug me, look me in the eye, and say ‘Thank you!’ Magic is about so much more than just tricking people.” **M**

*Tobias Beckwith is the author of Beyond Deception: The Theory and Technique of Creating Original Magic. He has been manager/producer/director for Jeff McBride and Marco Tempest for over twenty years.* **M**