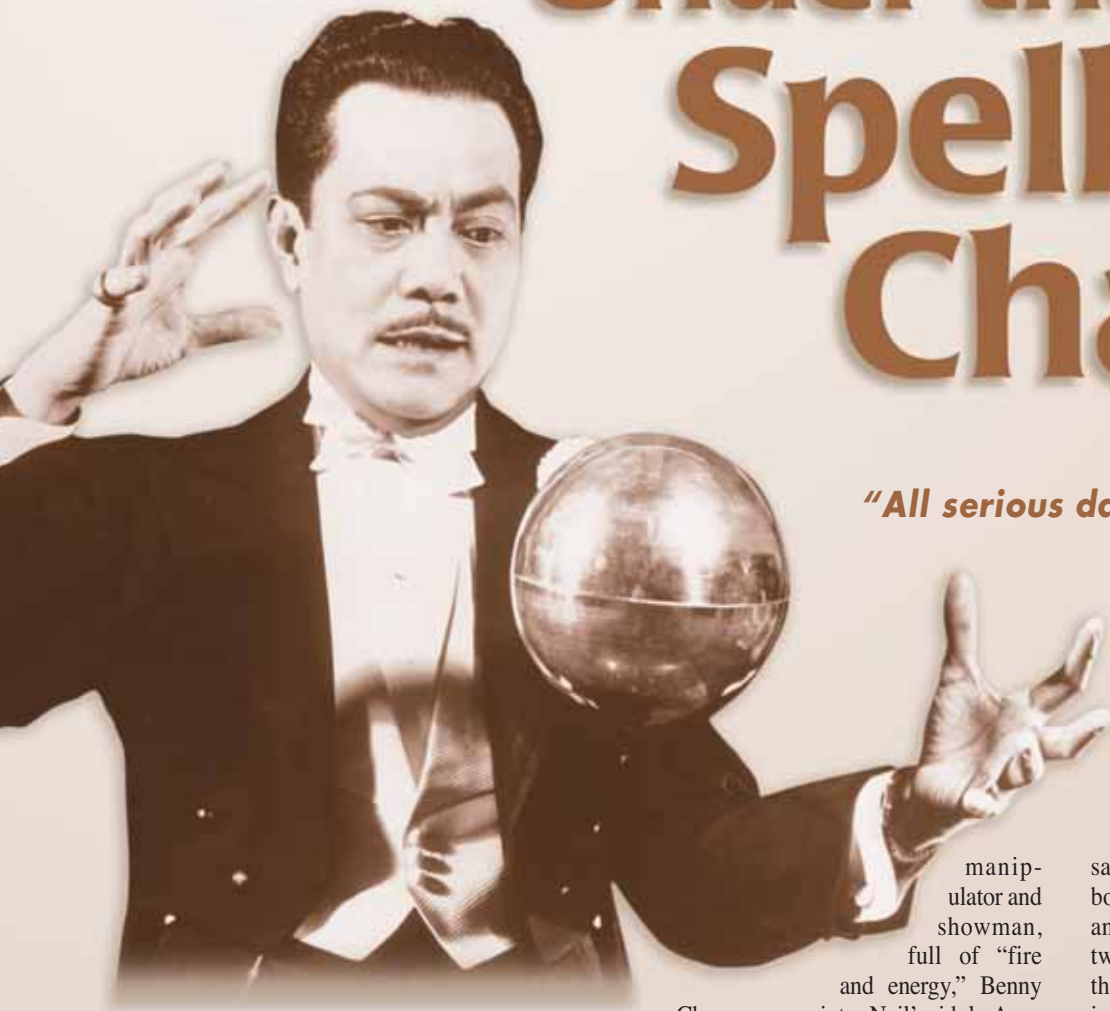


# Under the Spell of Chavez



*"All serious daring starts from within."*  
— Eudora Welty

By Dale Salwak

manipulator and showman, full of "fire and energy," Benny

Since its inception in 1941, it has always been somewhat daring to enroll in the Chavez Studio of Manual Dexterity and Prestidigitation. Students never know what they will discover about themselves, or in what ways they will be challenged, or where the training will lead. What interesting stories must lie behind every sleight learned, routine developed, consolation found, and career launched — because a friend was thoughtful enough to recommend the course, or because by seeming coincidence a student discovered it in an advertisement, or because someone saw a performance by one of its seasoned graduates and then, for whatever reason, he chose to enroll and began to learn.

For Neil Foster, it was a notice in *Genii*, along with the recent deaths of his parents and the inevitable feeling of emptiness, which propelled him in 1949 to move from Aurora, Illinois to Los Angeles where he met the founders of the school. Little did he realize that this event would change the entire course of his personal and professional lives. As a superb

Chavez grew into Neil's idol. As a lovely lady with a kind manner and a great sense of humor, Marian charmed him immediately. They became not only his teachers, but his lifelong friends. "All that I am in magic," Neil would write 30 years later, "I owe to Chavez."

In 1953 and on the strength of seeing Neil's performance at the Houdini Club Conclave in Wisconsin, Norm Nielsen also chose to cross the threshold into Chavez and experienced a similar transformation. He remembers Benny as "one of the most dynamic performers" he ever witnessed, and Marian as elegant and sophisticated. "I was always thrilled when Benny showed me a new move," Norm has

said. "He was extremely expressive in his body movements, particularly with his face and with the articulation of his hands." These two people left such an impression on Norm that, without them, he is sure he would not be in magic today. Similarly, Channing Pollock, whose performing career spanned stage, screen, and television, has said of his enrollment, "It was the best move I ever made."

From testimonies of many hundreds of stu-



Marian Chavez coaches a female manipulator at the Sunset Studio in 1946.

Photo courtesy Norm Nielsen



A 1941 publicity photo when the Chavez Studio was at 729 West Ninth Street in downtown Los Angeles.

dents, it is clear that as performers and as teachers, Benny and Marian were unusually gifted. From stories of the school's progress since their passing in 1962 and 1978, respectively, it is also clear that the Chavez legacy

continues to cast an undeniable spell upon the magic community. Why? And what is it about the course that serves such a deeply personal purpose for students from all walks of life? We may find some answers by turning to five vital principles of theatre that take us to the heart of the Chavez philosophy.

The first rule of theatre is that creation is always, *always* the successful resolution of internal conflict — the artist's, first of all, and then perhaps of those who appreciate what he or she has created. Ironically, some performers are at their very best in public when they are at their saddest in private. "Somewhere within him, Frank Sinatra aches," wrote the music critic, Gene Lees. "Fine. That's the way it's always been; the audience's pleasure derives from the artist's pain." Although students enroll in Chavez for myriad reasons, somewhere deep within many of them there lurks a conflict — intellectual, emotional, spiritual or some combination — that the lessons may help them to overcome. How to find resolution through the medium of art and the connections the performer makes with his audience — all this is a very real message of Chavez that was born out of its founders' personal tragedy.

In 1938 Benny and Marian were performing their classic stage act in an Australian club. "Both were personality plus," wrote John Booth. "They knew magic inside out and were artists." Behind the building, asleep in a

house-trailer, lay their five-year-old daughter, Ruth. Sometime during the evening a gas lamp exploded, igniting the interior of the trailer and killing her. Grief-stricken and guilt-ridden, her parents ceased traveling; and with strength of will that would become a key to all their later accomplishments, they began to re-build their lives.

Although it had long been possible to be trained in most branches of entertainment, Benny knew that magic remained almost untouched in the field of education. Why not open a school that would make it possible for prospective magicians to be taught in an organized, practical way? Everything in the curriculum — lessons in timing, poise, acting, make-up, showmanship, entrances, bows, microphone technique, along with tried and tested routines that the public loved — would come directly from their many years of stage experience. This would be a way of working through their personal pain. They would do it for themselves, for the memory of Ruth, and for the magic community.

The second rule of theatre is that the aspiring performer defines his market, first, and then creates a product to fit that market. In hindsight, it is clear that Benny and Marian practiced this principle as well as they taught it. They began in the Chavez's garage in Panorama City, California, with Sol Herrera as a partner. As demand grew and after Sol had



Benny shows Chavez pupil Norm Nielsen a bit of finesse with card fanning.

dropped out, they moved into two studios — at Second and Hill Streets, where students learned for nine months, and at Ninth and Figueroa Streets, where they received the final four months of training. Al Lewis, Joe Romero and Walter Cummings, among others, joined the faculty, and there were daytime and evening sessions with thirty or more students in each class. In 1946 the curriculum was licensed as a Professional Trade School by the City of Los Angeles, accredited by the California Board, and approved under the GI Bill of Rights. Given that professional magicians and theatrical agents worldwide were unanimous in both praise and approval, it seems safe to say that Benny had indeed met a universal need when he opened the school. In 1950, the studio moved to the 6900 block of Sunset Avenue at Highland Avenue in Hollywood.

When asked for the secret behind a student's success, Benny believed that it comes down to one essential word — practice, and lots of it. Here we arrive at the third principle of theatre. It has been said that one of the biggest differences between top performers and lesser ones is the amount of deliberate practice they have accumulated. If this is true for the concert violinist, professional ice-skater, mathematician, writer, chess grand master, or surgeon, for example, then it is no less true for the aspiring magician. As days become weeks become months, slowly the students work on the material, until they know the tricks so well that they no longer have to think about the technical requirements. "Conscious learning becomes unconscious knowledge," the surgeon Atul Gawande has written, "and you cannot say precisely how." Slydini called the results "unconscious competency."

But Benny also believed that it is not

enough to learn the tricks. Students can practice before a set of mirrors in the privacy of their studio "til the cows come home," as Neil Foster liked to say, but at some point they must step out of the classroom and onto the stage — and risk what they have learned. This brings us to rule number four: In magic, as in most professions, skill, judgment, and confidence are learned through experience, haltingly and humiliateingly. Now the audience becomes the teacher. Unpredictable, challenging, generous, demanding — it will let the performer know what works, and what doesn't, and why. Slowly, as the students develop a strong set of audience-listening ears, they learn to revise, sometimes ruthlessly. Along the way, they also discover how to take unmistakable command of both the stage and of those who have arrived to be entertained. "As soon as the performer walks onstage," Marian would say, "the audience should feel something important is about to happen."

If the performer becomes so engrossed in his work that he or she ignores their audience, then they will most certainly lose their attention, no matter how great the technical skill. The fifth and perhaps most important rule of theatre, therefore, is that a performance is more about *who* we are onstage than about *what* we do.

Ask any layman what is remembered a year or two after seeing a magic show. With a few obvious exceptions — and unless there is an instinct for the art to begin with — he or she will have forgotten the exact nature of the tricks, but will have remembered the performer's image and the feelings it evoked. Behind the tricks there must be a human being who forges an emotional bond with each member of the audience through his own stage identity and style. He must make them care. "A warmth from within," said Benny, "is the secret of the pro."

"No reputation is more than snowfall," wrote American poet Delmore Schwartz. "It vanishes." True for some teachers and performers, perhaps, but 65 years later it is safe to say that the legacy of Benny and Marian Chavez will survive. Magicians to the core, professionals to their fingertips, they held nothing back in their efforts to turn out exceptionally skilled conjurers.



Photo courtesy Dale Salwak

Dale Salwak with Marian Chavez in 1977, the year before she died.

Their contributions to the magical world have lasted not only because of their proven methods of instruction but also because of the practical principles that the training inculcates into every student who is willing to put forth the energy, time, and diligence required to complete the course.

Although not all students enroll seeking a career in show business, all of them benefit greatly from the training in ways that go beyond the magic. "You may never use billiard balls, cards, coins, or thimbles in a performance," Marian used to say, "but the principles you learn from mastering the routines will apply to your everyday life in ways you can't even imagine." This is a lifelong commitment.

To some observers, such single-minded attention to detail might seem obsessive, but ask those devoted to their craft, and they will say the same thing. The most satisfying work requires the utmost concentration. "There is no point in work," wrote D. H. Lawrence, "unless it absorbs you like an absorbing game" — an inner game, that is, where all serious daring starts. ♦

Dale Salwak, who was a Chavez student from 1963-65 and later helped Marian teach, continues to perform internationally while directing (since 1978) the resident and home-study programs from his studio in Southern California. Dale is at work on a longer, more detailed history of Chavez and welcomes hearing from any readers that might have anecdotes to tell or experiences to share. You may reach him at: [dsalwak@citruscollege.edu](mailto:dsalwak@citruscollege.edu) or visit Dale's web site at: [www.dalesalwak.com](http://www.dalesalwak.com).



Photo courtesy Gary Frank

Benny coaches Bud Abbott and Lou Costello on the set of Universal's *Mexican Hayride* in 1948.