

A man with short dark hair and a neutral expression is centered in the frame. He is wearing a black button-down shirt and a dark beaded necklace. Behind him is a large, glowing, circular structure made of dark, textured branches, resembling a stylized tree or a complex geometric pattern. The background is a mix of white and purple light.

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PAUL KIEVE
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Interview by Matthew Field AIMC

Photo: Darren Filkins

There are but a small handful of magicians who are involved in creating magic effects for use in non-magic stage and film productions, and Paul Kieve MIMC is the busiest of these in the UK. Productions he has worked on include *The Invisible Man*, *Scrooge*, *The Witches*, *The Woman in White* as well as opera, ice shows, and the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Paul came second in the 1985 Magic Circle Young Magician of the Year contest, and last year was the winner of the David Berglas Award from the British Magical Society. With his book *Hocus Pocus* about to be published this autumn, Paul was kind enough to pry a few moments from his schedule for a chat.

Matthew Field: Where did you get the background in theatre? Were you interested in acting or directing?

Paul Kieve: I got the theatre background from my mum, who was a child actress when she was up in Manchester. She always wanted to be a professional actress. My father said that she had to choose between acting and him, so she chose him. I suppose it's good she did or I wouldn't be around! But she never totally gave up. She started a family business. My father was a lecturer and then at the age of 40 my mum decided to pull out of the family business and go

back to drama school. She set up her own theatre company, The East End Theatre Company

M What was your introduction to magic?

P My older brother, Mark, took me to Alan Alan's magic store. I remember seeing Doug Henning on television, and I was hugely influenced by that. And that was also the best era of *The Paul Daniels Show*, when all the amazing acts were appearing. Everyone wanted to be Lance Burton. I wanted to be a cross between Jeff McBride, Lance Burton and the Pendragons, probably like everyone else. I wasn't particularly interested in comedy magic, which I suppose was unusual.

M Were you getting instruction in magic at that time?

P My parents had contacted the Ilford Magic Society and they put me in touch with a man called Peter Werth. He was the first to tell me to throw away my Tenyo tricks and to go to International Magic and buy a set of Linking Rings – one of the best bits of advice I was ever given. I was entirely fascinated by the Zig Zag. That was the trick that got me into stage illusions. I ended up building my own in school, in woodwork class. I didn't have an act; I just wanted the box. And ▶

then I persuaded my sister, Karen, to assist me and we did local charity shows, a 45-minute act.

M At what point did you decide to compete in The Magic Circle Young Magician of the Year contest?

P Reading Junior Day was going on at this time and they had a competition and I went into it with my sister. It was the day of my seventeenth birthday in October 1984 and we won it. We had never even thought about winning, we just thought it would be fun to do it. And from there we entered The Magic Circle contest. The most significant thing that happened when I was in the sixth form at school was getting invited to double in on a pop video by the singer Sade, who at that point was not known at all. This was her first single, titled *Your Love Is King*.

M You had achieved success in an area that eludes many other magicians. You were in the right place at the right time.

P I think that's definitely what happened. The Sade video became a huge hit and my hands performing card tricks were quite featured. Sade

Paul as Mefisto the Magician on the BBC's Blue Peter Quest, 2004

would talk about me on TV and radio interviews. I had such fun filming the video that I thought, you know what, I want to do this. I wasn't sure before that if I wanted to do it as a career. I was invited to perform the Zig Zag on *Blue Peter* in 1984, I got a TV spot on the TV show *Illusions*, and I came second in The Magic Circle Young Magician of the Year, so I was on a bit of a roll. That was the same year I did my A-levels so I left school and said, 'Hey, I'm going to be a professional magician', whatever that meant.

M When did you form the Zodiac Brothers?

P I originally did my act with a girl assistant. I was a resident support act in Jersey to an incredible variety of top-of-the-bill performers. I was doing a silent act – Fantasio Candles, Sub Trunk. I had

known Lawrence Leyton, who had been a Young Magician of the Year two years before me, and he asked me whether I'd like to do a double act. After my girl assistant left I thought I'd try it for two or three months. The two or three months turned into four and a half years. Then John Fisher picked up on us and produced us for *The Ronn Lucas Show*. It was a really big break that John Fisher was interested in us.

M The first I came across your name was in 1991 in a report I read in the States about the production of *The Invisible Man* for which you designed the effects.

P I had some very lucky strokes of fate, or whatever you want to call it – maybe timing. One of the most remarkable pieces of timing was our split-up of the double act in the summer of 1991. Literally the following day after our final contract on the QE2 I had a call from the Theatre Royal at Stratford East saying they had a production of *The Invisible Man*, which Ken Hill had written. I suppose out of sheer ignorance of the field of magic in theatre at the time I didn't know how to do the show except by full-out magical ways. And Ken Hill, who has to take a lot of the credit, was the one who said, hey, I'm going to give this guy a chance to do what he wants, and he was 100% behind me.

M How many effects were in that show?

P By the time we came into the West End there were 48.

M That's an astonishing number.

P Ken for a start was very, very interested in theatre tricks. He supplemented some of the budget for the show with some of his own money. He basically invested in some of the bigger props such as Thomas Marvel vanishing in a box at the end, so we didn't have the limitation of the Stratford East budget. Not that we supplemented the budget that much, because in the end the big hits in the show were bent pieces of coat hanger and invisible thread.

M Did the floodgates open after that?

P It wasn't exactly like that, but I did within a couple of weeks get asked to work with the Royal Shakespeare Company on their Christmas show, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which was their main house production at the Barbican. So I went from Stratford



Photo: Nicholas Leong

East to the RSC in one leap, and it was also around that time that David Wood contacted me to work on his adaptation of Roald Dahl's *The Witches*, the third show I worked on.

M *Scrooge* was another big success.

P Yes. I've worked on *Scrooge* more times than any other show – fourteen or fifteen different productions around the world. Composer Leslie Bricusse has



Photo: Richard Cannon



The Invisible Man at The Vaudeville Theatre, 1993

we met. What are you doing there?

P I'm working on a piece called *L'Heure Espagnole* by Ravel, [performed in March and April], part of a double bill directed by Richard Jones, a famous, avant-garde opera director. It's a kind of opera farce in which people are hidden in grandfather clocks.

M You are involved, I would guess, in getting the people in and out of the clocks.

P It's normally done with the clocks stood against the back wall. In this version they are isolated in the middle of the stage. The director wanted as much playfulness as possible with people apparently still in the clocks when they're lifted up in the air.

M Down the road, almost opposite, is another theatre where something else is going on – *Lord of the Rings*.

P I'm quite lucky that these two things have coincided geographically, because *L'Heure Espagnole* has been in my diary for a year and a half, and *Lord of the Rings* has only been scheduled at Drury Lane since last summer. So I can be at *L'Heure Espagnole* in the morning and *Lord of the Rings* in the afternoon.

M *Lord of the Rings* has a cast as big as an army, doesn't it? It's a huge production – apparently the largest outside Las Vegas.

P It's crazy really. We've been in Theatre Royal Drury Lane building sets since January. The first time an audience will go in and see it is the ninth of May. That's a four month fit-up and technical period. It's an expensive show just from the perspective of keeping the theatre dark for that length of time, let alone the costs of the crew and the physical

production. The stage floor is innovative. From above it looks like a dart board, and if you can imagine it, each one of the sections can individually lift and drop and each of the circles revolves. So there are nineteen different revolving lifts. It's a hugely ambitious piece in lots of ways. It has a cast of 60, it's all three Tolkien stories in one show, it's cost a huge amount of money and it has a fairly terrifying running cost. I worked on it last year for its premiere in Toronto but this version is quite different. The producers are keen not to call it a musical but it does have music all the way through it, rather like the way music is used in a film, and there are musical numbers as well.

M How do you integrate magic effectively into a theatrical experience?

P It's always the case that the magic should serve the story. So the best opportunities for me to do magic in a drama are when the emotional and character-development go hand in hand with a strong bit of magic.

M Do audiences today expect theatre to match or exceed what they can see in a movie?

P I don't think so at all. I think it all comes down to the storytelling. It all



Paul with sister Karen

comes down to whether you are emotionally engaged in what you're seeing. And if the story happens to be about magic or happens to include magical things, which of course a lot of operas and musicals do have, then it's disappointing if those magic moments aren't delivered. But people are not used to seeing magic things happen on a stage. So in some ways you can do simple things and people are really impressed by them if you do them theatrically correctly and with the right sort of timing. Even in film I think it comes down to whether you're emotionally engaged. And that's one of the difficulties with magic on its own – how do you make people care about what's happening when it's difficult to provide any dramatic or emotional journey?

M You said that you made a decision not to go to university because you wanted to pursue magic. Are you happy you made that decision?

P I wanted to do an act and I wanted to play Vegas. I don't want to play Vegas any longer. I feel really lucky to be living in London where there are these opportunities to work in theatre. It's amazing to me to be working at the Royal Opera House and the Drury Lane Theatre. They are amazing spaces. I feel like I'm always learning because of the diversity of projects I am involved with. I like the fact that I learn through what I work on. 

*Paul Kieve's website is www.stageillusion.com. His book, *Hocus Pocus*, is being published on 1 October and is now available for pre-order on Amazon.com.*

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