



» Film (<http://www.craveonline.com/film>) / Interviews (<http://www.craveonline.com/film/interviews>) / Exclusive Interview: David Kwong on Now You See Me

Exclusive Interview: David Kwong on Now You See Me

Magic consultant David Kwong talks about the real illusions in *Now You See Me*, who came up with that piranha trick, and his secret project with J.J. Abrams.

May 31st, 2013

Fred Topel

Like

321

Tweet

1

0



Now You See Me may be the most original movie of the year. Nobody else is making movies about bank robbing magicians. And if you're going to counter with *Upstream Color* (<http://www.craveonline.com/tag/upstream-color>), I will say I have seen more movies about stem cell pigs than I have about bank robbing magicians, just objectively speaking. David Kwong consulted on the magic tricks in *Now You See Me* (<http://www.craveonline.com/tag/how-you-see-me>), as well as the recent *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone* (<http://www.craveonline.com/tag/the-incredible-burt-wonderstone>). Kwong is a magician himself, and a cruciverbalist who advised on the infamous comedy *All About Steve*. We got to speak with Kwong about the tricks he helped design for *Now You See Me*. Some spoilers follow but we keep it vague about the big tricks in the film. Though now that *Burt Wonderstone* has been out I wanted to ask him flat out about their final trick, but I've placed a warning before that question.

CraveOnline: So they come to you and ask "How does a magician rob a bank?" What do you say?

David Kwong: I say I've done it already. No, there was a brilliant, brilliant script written by Ed Ricourt and Boaz Yakin. What they really needed help with, and I was so thrilled to collaborate with those guys and Ed Solomon, was to devise the actual magical mechanics of the film. So we did have to fill in a lot of the spaces there. They had the broad idea of where they wanted to go but it was fun designing the blueprints for how a magician would pull off a robbery.

Did you also have to have a sense of how a writer or director would set up a heist movie?

Yes. I've been watching them my whole life so certainly where they wanted to go, and I used to be a development executive so coming out of that world of writers and working with directors, that is why they wanted to use me for the project and how ultimately I think we were all successful together collaborating.

The opening card trick Jesse Eisenberg does made me see the 7 of diamonds when he flipped through the cards, and I was only in the movie audience. What is it about that trick that makes even a movie audience gravitate towards that card?

Well, I can't reveal the exact mechanics of it but it is something that [director] Louis Leterrier and I were very excited about. There's been lots of, obviously decades, of TV magic done before but no one's ever done it for a movie audience, for a feature audience. It's a way of controlling what people are seeing. That's ultimately what illusion is. That's what film is. Magic and film, they're both illusions. Whether we're doing it in a single instance just like that or whether we're directing people's attention throughout the entire story, it all comes down to misdirection and illusion.

In the movie he says he could have had the hotel manager make any card she picked appear in the window. Isn't the trick to force her to pick the 7 of diamonds?

Well, the story is that he hired an electrician to make any card appear, so you have to put yourself in the story itself. The woman could pick any card and he would make it appear on a building. It would be great if we could do 52 different prints of the movie but we just have one.

Right, I'm thinking more what I know about magic, it's more important to make the subject think they're picking their own card, but really you're telling them what card to pick.

No comment on that but you're on the right track.

When we're introduced to Woody Harrelson's character, can a hypnotist really catch adulterers like that?

Hypnotism is one of those fascinating gray areas that is a very real thing. We don't quite understand how it works but it's a very real practice. It ranges from neurolinguistic programming to stage hypnotism where you have someone jump up and down on one leg and squawk like a chicken. I think we're taking some cinematic liberties but what we're doing throughout the whole film is we're grounding what these super magicians do in very real practices. I do think that if you were to ask somebody the right questions and look at their facial tics and the changes in their voice, you would be able to discover the hidden truths. We worked a lot with my good friend Keith Barry who is an Irish mentalist. He worked closely with Woody Harrelson on his practices that he employs for hypnotism and mentalism.

Could you hypnotize me to be able to fall asleep like a normal person at night?

I don't particularly practice hypnotism. Keith certainly could. He's been doing it a long time. I read an article last year that he actually put his wife into hypnosis when she was in labor with their most recent child to calm her down.

I went to a hypnosis show years ago and it was amazing. I did not go up on stage as a volunteer and I wish I had, because at the end of the show he gave everyone the suggestion that they could fall asleep and wake up feeling rested. I followed up with one of those people and he said it worked, so I was insanely jealous because I cannot do that.

Yeah, I've gone on stage myself and I did not fall under the spell. Usually with those stage shows they call up 30 people and they have to whittle it down to the 10 that are the most susceptible. It comes down to who is really going to be a believer and allow this to work on them. They have to really want it to happen. That's part of magic is finding the right audience members on which to play your tricks.

And that hypnotist did that. I feared the same natural anxiety that doesn't let me sleep would also not let me fall under suggestion, as much as I want to.

I am the same as you. I wanted it to happen so badly that maybe I was trying too hard when I was up there concentrating. It's still a very gray area. No one quite knows how it works but mentalists certainly take advantage of it.

Is the piranha trick kind of mean, to make a whole audience think a woman has been devoured by piranhas?

It is mean and I can credit Alex [Kurtzman] and Bob [Orci] for adding in that last icing on the cake so

to speak. We wanted to do a water escape. We wanted her to be a female escapologist, a female illusionist. The original iteration was just going to have the shackles in the amount of time but they came up with the idea of dumping the flesh eating fish on top of her, but we see that all the time. It's no different than a magician sawing somebody in half. Ultimately, that's pretty cruel, and they put them back together. We did see those theatrics throughout the centuries of magic, somebody getting harmed and restored.

That's interesting to know Orci and Kurtzman are pretty dark if they thought of the piranhas.

Yeah, I think they have a range of material but yeah, these are the guys behind "Fringe," *Star Trek* and Bob Orci is an amateur magician himself which is why he was drawn to the script and why we ended up working together. Bob's seen my performances and we just had a mutual love of the material.