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'Now You See Me': How real illusionists made movie magic

by Emily Rome



Image Credit: Barry Wetcher/Summit Entertainment

Magicians have amazed audiences with illusions for centuries, but in modern entertainment, filmmakers are the reigning wizards. Visual effects are their illusions. CGI is their bag of tricks. All that is very familiar to French director Louis Leterrier, whose movies include *The Incredible Hulk* and *Clash of the Titans*. But for his latest movie, *Now You See Me*, opening today in theaters, he set out to limit the use of computer-generated effects.

“I was coming from those big spectacle movies where CGI was almost like one of the main characters, but from the very beginning [of developing *Now You See Me*] we decided to take a low-tech approach to everything,” Leterrier says.

Now You See Me stars Jesse Eisenberg, Isla Fisher, Woody Harrelson, and Dave Franco as magicians who come to be known as the Four Horsemen. When they rob a bank in the middle of one their spectacular show performances, they’re pursued by FBI agent Dylan Rhodes (Mark Ruffalo).

For some inside knowledge of the magicians' world, Leterrier hired David Kwong, founder of the Misdirectors Guild, a group of illusionists who consult on films. Kwong helped develop the film's script and was one of multiple illusionists who taught the actors their tricks.

Jesse Eisenberg, however, wasn't all that comfortable with the idea of lying to an audience (which, yes, may be ironic coming from an actor, though he told Kwong the unspoken contract between a magician and his audience is a different kind of deception), so secret-keeping became a tough part of the magician-in-training's job description as suave sleight-of-hand genius J. Daniel Atlas. "I would teach Jesse something, and then I would walk away to get a cup of coffee, and he would turn to the people next to him and say, 'Here's how I did it,' and he would show them! And I would get so mad at him," says Kwong (seen in the below photo with Eisenberg). "He's such an honest guy, but I think he ended up having fun embodying this role of a deceiver."



Image Credit: Barry Wetcher/Summit Entertainment

Dave Franco, as Jack Wilder, the pickpocket who looks up to Atlas, stars in Kwong's favorite scene: a fight between Franco's and Ruffalo's characters where Jack uses "sleight of hand-to-hand combat." Franco spent a lot of time practicing for the moment when Jack uses an unexpected weapon against Rhodes: a deck of cards. "Dave can throw cards with incredible speed and accuracy across a sound stage," Kwong said. "We set up targets for him in the production office, and he would knock them down and slice through a banana."

That fight sequence is a "fantasy come true for every magician," Kwong says. "As little boys, we were doing that in our living room with invisible ninjas, imagining how to use our knowledge of angles and perception and take advantage of them." Though practical effects were aplenty on the set of *Now You See Me*, there were some fantasies in the film that did require CGI. Leterrier asked Kwong and other magicians, "What effects have you always wanted to perform but don't quite have the method for it yet?" Those dream illusions — like Fisher appearing to levitate inside a bubble — became the show highlights of the Four Horsemen, whom Kwong and Leterrier call "the magicians of tomorrow."

So while the actors learned the real crafts of magicians — Eisenberg mastering card tricks, Harrelson becoming a proficient hypnotist, for example — there were some “illusions of tomorrow” that required CGI enhancement. Fisher’s escape from a tank of piranhas at the beginning of the film got some help from Industrial Light and Magic since the actress didn’t have years to master that trick. Eisenberg’s smooth swap of handcuffs from his own wrists to Ruffalo’s (seen in the trailer) also got some CGI enhancement because the moment is easily missed on film and because those heavy handcuffs dropping onto Ruffalo’s wrists could be painful.

Just as EW reveals those CGI tricks to you, *Now You See Me* explains how some — but not all — of the Four Horsemen’s illusions are done. The filmmakers strove to find a balance between satisfying the audience’s desire for answers and also keeping some mystery alive. “My approach to magic has always been to break it down intellectually for people, and by doing so I believe it causes them to appreciate magic even more,” Kwong says. “Some magicians may bristle at this, but I enjoy pulling back the curtain just a little bit to give people a glimpse into the mechanics of illusion.”

Also starring Morgan Freeman and Michael Caine, Now You See Me opens in theaters today, May 31. Kwong’s past magic consulting projects include Paranormal Activity 4 and The Incredible Burt Wonderstone. He’s currently working on his one-man show, The Lexicon, and a project with J.J. Abrams.