

David Kwong helps 'Now You See Me' make magic



A behind-the-scenes look at filming around the world for television and movies as seen from the streets.

By **Cristy Lytal**

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The hand is quicker than the eye, according to David Kwong, magic consultant for the upcoming film "Now You See Me" from Summit Entertainment. But that's not the only trick behind how the film's central characters — a gang of four magicians played by Isla Fisher, Jesse Eisenberg, Dave Franco and Woody Harrelson — pull off multiple bank heists.

Kwong, 32, got his introductory abracadabra when he was about 7. He was at a pumpkin patch, where a magician performed a trick involving a disappearing and reappearing red sponge ball.

"I do remember the moment when the fascination began, and it was because my father was fooled," said Kwong, whose parents are both professors at the University of

Rochester. "I asked, 'Dad, how did that work?' He said, 'I don't know.' He still doesn't know! So magic for me was the antithesis of my parents' world of academia."

Kwong, a native of Rochester, N.Y., got his hands on a children's magic set and sleight-of-hand books with what he calls "horrible, cryptic drawings."

As a history major at Harvard, he wrote a thesis about magic but didn't envision himself pursuing a career in puzzles and prestidigitation. So he accepted a marketing job at HBO in New York.

Still under the spell of his lifelong hobby, he headed to Hong Kong, where he began performing magic at corporate parties and cocktail hours. He later relocated to Los Angeles to work as an archivist for legendary king of legerdemain Ricky Jay.

For his next presto-chango, he took a job in story development, first at Icon Productions, then at DreamWorks Animation.

After he was hired as a magic consultant for a string of recent and upcoming film releases — "The Incredible Burt Wonderstone," "Now You See Me" and "The Immigrant" — he knew the time had come to quit his day job. He now heads the Misdirectors Guild, a group of elite magicians who lend their special powers to film and television productions.

"I found my voice," said Kwong, whose signature magic trick involves constructing original crossword puzzles with hidden messages in front of a live audience. "And that voice has landed me these major feature films and corporate engagements. Now it's very clear: I'm bringing something new to the art form. I'm not your birthday party magician in a purple suit."

Magical mastermind: During the script development for "Now You See Me," Kwong had to think like a criminal — and a magician. "There was a very fun, well-thought-out initial script by Edward Ricourt and Boaz Yakin," he said. "We had a loose outline for where we wanted these heists to go, but we needed to fill in the methods that our four magicians would use to pull off these robberies. I spent weeks holed up in a room with [screenwriter] Ed Solomon to bang out the story with him and devise these magical heists."

Pick a card: Kwong taught the actors card tricks on a need-to-know basis. Eisenberg learned to snap his fingers to quickly transform one card to another. And Franco practiced something more athletic. "I don't profess to be a world-champion card thrower, but I taught Dave Franco the basics, and he practiced for hours and hours and hours," said Kwong. "We have great footage of him whipping cards at incredible speeds toward a banana that we were hoping that he could cut in half, and he did. It's all in the wrist."

Mind games: Kwong called upon Irish magician Keith Barry to teach Woody Harrelson methods of hypnosis. "I don't think that I could just walk up to somebody on the street and snap my fingers and put them in a trance," said Kwong. "But that said, if you've ever been to a hypnotism show, the people are really going under." So can anyone be hypnotized? "They call 30 people up on stage, and they whittle it down to the 10 who are the most suggestible," explained Kwong. "It comes down to people's eagerness and willingness to let this happen to them."

Take a deep breath: For one scene, Isla Fisher performed a classic underwater escape act in a massive water tank. "I was there for the shooting of it and rigging up the chains for her to get out of," said Kwong. "And she practiced holding her breath. There was one take where she did it over a couple minutes or something crazy. She told me that she got on the phone with the illusionist David Blaine to talk to him about that. She really got into it."

Seeing the light: Magicians have always relied on technologies such as flash paper, composed of highly flammable nitrocellulose. Fake money made of the compound can literally disappear in a flash with imperceptible residue. "Flash paper is usually done at a very small scale, pinched between a couple of fingers," said Kwong. "And you get a nice theatrical blinding effect, and it allows you to make a small object appear in your hand. With stacks of euros made of flash paper combusting, it would be quite the explosion. So maybe a little bit of cinematic liberty there!"