

A Manifesto on Emerson & West's Color Monte

The ranting & ravings of Alan Fisher

Please read this first part all the way through before you decide I'm trying to steal credit for someone else's idea.

I first picked up Emerson & West's "Color Monte" around 1977 or '78 at Frank Tomasello's Magic Shop in downtown Pittsburgh. His shop in the old Fulton building was only a nine-minute walk from the college I was attending. I loved the routine and the fact that as a "packet" trick I could carry it around all the time. The plastic wallet it came in was also perfect for holding business cards to hand out. What I didn't like was the open handling as explained in the directions and taught to me by Frank. Doing a Double-Lift with only 3 cards was extremely easy. But I hated doing 2 of them followed by repeating the same 'roll-over' action of the remaining 2 cards so as not to throw suspicion on the Double-Lift. It was, in my opinion, a very awkward moment. No normal person handles cards like that. No one but a magician would ever do that as a way to show three 'different' cards. In my mind it immediately screamed "I JUST DID SOMETHING!". So, I put the effect in my junk drawer for several years and gave up on it.

After moving into our first apartment after graduation with my (then soon-to-be) wife I was unpacking the box of junk drawer items (magicians never throw anything away. We'll cart unused props from one home to the next for decades) when I came across that effect. I pulled it out and started playing with it again. Still unhappy with the opening sequence, but wanting to perform the effect, I ran through the 'file cabinet' in my head of cards slights I had learned for other routines. Almost by accident while just fiddling with the cards my hands fell into the Flushtration Count position.

The Flushtration Count, popularized by Brother John Hamman in his effect "Flushtration" (marketed by Abbott's in 1969) was actually first published in 1955 by Norman Houghton for the effect "Color Blind" in the premiere issue of the Canadian magic periodical *Ibidem*. Using a very open handling of a small stack of cards, usually 4 or 5, you demonstrate to the spectators that all of the cards you are holding are duplicates of each other. In other words, you have 5 Aces of Diamonds. In reality all of the cards are different. As you hold the stack in one hand with thumb on top and middle & ring finger on the bottom, faces to the audience with the Ace of Diamonds visible, you turn that wrist so the palm is face down. With your other hand you appear to slide the bottom card off the stack with those finger tips, retaining that card in the other hand, while the hand with the remaining stack is revolved palm up to show the card faces to the spectators once again. What you have actually done is used the thumb of your other hand to slide the top card off the stack and retained it, not the bottom card. You have just re-displayed the same bottom card of the stack to the spectators. By repeating this simple action for the remaining cards in the stack it appears that in a very open way you have shown the spectators all of the cards in your stack and proved they are all identical to each other.

I realized that if I did a modified version of a Flushtration Count, which I called a Frustrated Flushtration, I could replace the Double-Lift / double turn-over moves at the beginning of Color Monte. By holding the Monte cards in the normal order (Red Diamond, Blue Diamond, Money) I could show the bottom card (red) and then actually take that card from the stack (do not do the Flushtration move). I could then legitimately show the next card (blue) and then do the Flushtration move take the top card (money) and reshew the bottom card (blue). This felt very open to me and could be done very cleanly. All I had to do was get the red diamond from the bottom of the stack to the top so I could continue the routine as written. That was easily accomplished by just referencing the card as the one I had to find as I took the card from the bottom of the stack, turned it over to show the face, and then put it face down on the top of the stack. I immediately put Color Monte back into rotation in my close-up work and it remains there to the day.

Fast-forward to 2016 and the S.A.M. convention in Indianapolis, IN. Magician extraordinaire Meir Yedid is lecturing and I am enthralled, as always, with his material. About halfway through he mentions that he's been thinking a lot about an old packet trick that most of us probably have; Color Monte. He says he loves the routine but never liked the Double-Lift / double turn-over moves at the beginning. Here was his suggestion. I couldn't wait to learn what it was so I could compare/contrast it to mine (I already knew his was going to be better . . . he's Meri Yedid). He then demonstrated a variation of the Flushtration Count. Holy Crap! That's the same thing I had thought of over 30 years earlier.

Now did I for a single second think Meir Yedid had stolen from me? HELL NO!!!! A completely different thought hit me like a ton of bricks. I had an idea for an enhancement to an effect (I would never use the word 'improvement') that was so spot on someone the caliber of Meir Yedid had the same thought. And believed it was a good enough thought that he included it in a lecture at a major convention. I started to wonder if any of the other ideas / routines / effects that I had

developed for myself over the years might actually be better than I ever gave myself created for. As soon as I got home after that convention I did a full inventory of everything I had created (fortunately I had years of notes available to review). I picked one of my favorite routines that showed my skills as a performer, a writer of original material, and began building a whole character around it. The routine centered on the prop “Newton’s Nightmare” and was told as a poem I had written years earlier based on a story routine I wrote a decade before that. I created a character of a riverboat gambler / con-man from the late 1800’s that was described in the poem. We found vintage costuming and music for underscoring (which I heavily edited, but that’s a separate lecture). My wife, a published playwright, edited the script to really tighten it up. Since I was a gambler, I developed a Matrix routine using poker chips. Then we bridged the two routines together with more poetry at the end to tie everything up in a nice bow. I worked with the members of my magic club (IBM Ring 252) to polish the routine and get it ready for competitions. I got a lot of compliments on it and a few trophies to boot. I decided to enter it in the joint IBM/SAM convention in Louisville in 2017 as part of the North American Championship making it all the way to the finals in close-up. Much to my surprise I received an invitation to compete at the FISM World Championships in 2018 in Busan, South Korea (which I did). That led to my invitation to join 4F, yet another milestone in magic I never in my wildest dreams thought would happen. And the whole thing traces back to one small moment when a fire was lit under the confidence in myself and my magic. And that fire has literally taken me halfway around the world and allowed me to stand with and get to know the best in our art. Not bad for a packet trick.

Ok, enough about me. Back to my other thoughts on that packet trick. I was performing it once at an outdoor event. A grandfather and grandson were my audience for this one impromptu performance between the main shows. The kid was a typical teenager who ‘knew it all’. Once I finished and handed him the cards to examine he immediately focused on the diamond cards, ignoring the money card. He tilted them in his hands back & forth and proclaimed “I knew that’s how he did it.”. When I asked what he meant he explained that the reflective foil used for the diamonds reacted to the sunlight. As you tilted the cards they would look like they were changing color. But, in fact, they never did. It was all just a cheap optical illusion done by the refraction of light. There was nothing his grandfather or I could say that would change his mind. He knew how I did it and I wasn’t good enough or smart enough to fool him. As he strutted off in utter arrogance continuing the argument with his grandfather (whom I doubt knew how the effect was actually done but knew for certain the kid’s explanation was dead wrong) it dawned on me that I didn’t need to use the diamond cards. The routine is all about the Three Card Hustle done on street corners. I even mention in my routine it’s sometimes called ‘Find the Lady’. So why am I using cards with giant diamonds printed on them that exist nowhere else in the universe except this one trick (much like the Double-Lift / double turn-over sequence)?

In the Three Card Hustle they usually use a Queen of Hearts. For years now the backs of Color Monte cards used a red Bicycle back design (originally, they had a slightly different design). I could replace the red diamond with a Queen of Hearts. But what to do about the blue diamond? I needed for spectators believe that I would naturally have 2 of the other card. Otherwise I’m using cards from multiple decks or they were somehow trick cards or something. Then it hit me. Every deck comes with 2 Jokers and everybody knows it. What most lay people or ‘muggles’ don’t realize is that the 2 Jokers are different. They just know there are 2 Jokers in every deck. If I replace the blue diamond with a Joker, the one with the larger image, it wouldn’t raise any red flags for a spectator. They would just accept it. I may be overthinking this part but I’ve never had a single person look oddly at that Joker the way so many did at the diamond cards. Plus, depending on the lighting (but in a different sense from the teenager’s lighting) it could be hard for a lot of people to tell the difference between a red diamond and a blue diamond during the performance. But everybody can tell the difference between a Joker and a Queen of Hearts and easily follow them throughout the routine. And since so many people, especially older ones, have seen the Three Card Hustle they understand the routine so much better. They aren’t following it eagle-eye like they were watching a magic trick. This is a stroll down memory lane for them. I see them nodding in remembrance at each moment as if to say. “Yup, I remember seeing that. That’s exactly what happened.”. When you get to the end you have them so totally hooked and drawn in by the story that the kicker becomes even stronger. It’s almost like they are jolted back to reality. They dive for those cards to try and piece together what just happened.

I hope you’ve enjoyed these thoughts and stories about the Color Monte and, if you don’t already have them incorporated into your routine, might consider adding them. A lot of people don’t perform this effect anymore because they feel it’s so old. But it’s only old to us who have performed it for decades on end. To most audiences, it’s brand new. And now, maybe even a bit more entertaining and mysterious. I hope you’ll give these ideas a try. I also hope you spend this much time thinking about and examining all of the effects you have. Who knows what you may come up with or what fires may be lit under you? You never know where they might take you.