

PYA

A Guide To Performing For Young Audiences

**By
Richard Ribuffo**

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FORWARD

I have been performing magic for young audiences for over 40 years and have read countless books on the art of performing magic for children. When I began reading PYA, I anticipated a book consisting of tricks and routines with a little bit of the business side thrown in. How wrong I was!

It didn't take long to realize Richard isn't just a run of the mill entertainer who wanted to write a book and share tricks. Although this book does include tricks and routines, including some DIY projects which are also adaptable to different themes, it is also jam-packed with information on how to completely build an entertainment business from the ground up.

So much of the business is also shared in these 300 pages. Everything (and I mean EVERYTHING) you need to know about the business side of PYA is in this book, in great detail. Richard has literally left nothing out.

I am blown away with all the content shared in these pages. Whether you're a beginner or a seasoned pro, you can learn something from this book. I know I did.

- **Tommy James**

Extra Materials And Resources

Below is a *QR code* that will take you to an unpublished *page on my website* where you will find *PDF downloads* full of *graphics* you can use when you get to *Part 4: DIY MAGIC*, along with other materials and resources to aid you in your *PYA* journey. Or visit socalkidsmagic.com/pya.



Introduction

Welcome to the wonderful world of PYA! I coined the term **PYA**, which stands for **Performing for Young Audiences**. I based this term on an existing equity theater contract called **TYA**, which stands for *Theater for Young Audiences*. In **traditional theater**, you have a director, producer, stage manager, lighting and sound designers, set designers, grips, and other people working behind the scenes to make the show happen. **PYA** is geared toward the **solo performer** who is tasked with doing *all of these different jobs on their own*. We will discuss **myths** surrounding **PYA**, dive into **real-world challenges**, and find **practical solutions** to help make you a successful children's performer.

You are not alone! There is a vast and supportive **community** of children's performers who are ready to welcome you into their ranks. We take our jobs very seriously. It's rare to find someone in the community who doesn't understand the **business** of PYA. There are many **different types of children's performers** who do everything from magic shows to princess parties. This book is NOT just for magicians. No matter where you fall on the PYA spectrum, you will find something useful.

It is a commonly held belief in our community that **a rising tide raises all ships**. We know that one bad apple can poison the well. Therefore, everyone entering into the realm of PYA must understand the **responsibility** of such an undertaking. If you deliver a subpar performance or poor customer service, it makes all of us look bad. But if you truly do your best to deliver a fun and engaging performance with good customer service, it will raise the community as a whole. If you have **trouble finding** a supportive community of children's performers in your local area, there are numerous online resources, Facebook groups, as well as national and international conventions.

“SHOULD I perform for young audiences?”

I define young audiences as *Pre-K through 6th grade*. Once children are in middle school or high school, they can be considered young adults and should be treated as such. Performing for children requires a certain *temperament*. Some of you might already have that temperament, and others may need to learn it. We are not all cut from the same cloth. I will be sharing *insights* based on my *years of experience*, along with some more *practical techniques* that have been proven over time. I will cover things like:

- The difference between performing for children and performing for adults
- The business of PYA
- The difference between age groups
- Performing for different types of events
- How to write and structure your show
- What kind of equipment should you use, and what should your setup look like
- How to develop a character suitable for PYA

Even though this book will be geared more toward magicians (since that is my expertise), the *concepts, structure, and business* aspects of this book will apply to all types of children's performers. The major difference between types of children's performers is the *content* you present to your audience. If, after reading the book, you decide PYA is not for you, you can still use all the concepts herein to further an entertainment business geared toward adults.

“With great power comes great responsibility” - *Spiderman* movie, 2002

Children are the future (not just a cliché). The children of today will be the paying customers of tomorrow. When you perform for children, you will likely be the ***first live performer*** they have ever seen. This is a huge ***responsibility***! If you're a magician, that means YOU will be giving them their ***first impressions*** of magic and magicians. You will be playing a major role in how they are going to view magicians for the rest of their life. Their ***opinion of magic and magicians*** will be based on this first impression. ***First impressions are everything!*** When an adult says, "I don't like magic," it's likely because they had a ***bad experience*** with a magician at some point. We all start forming opinions at an early age. This responsibility isn't just for magicians. It's also true for performers like puppeteers, balloon artists, mermaids, storytellers, or anything of the like. ***Every performance you give is going to be someone's first impression.*** My goal is to help you make the best first impression possible.

Performing for children can be very ***lucrative***. But that can't be the only goal. There are easier ways to make money! At the very least, you need to have some ***desire*** to be a ***positive influence*** in a young person's life, no matter how small. This doesn't mean you need an agenda or fight for social justice. All you need is a passion for your art and the desire to share it with others. This is true no matter the age of the audience, but it is especially true when performing for young audiences because of that first impression. If you are ***unwilling to take on that responsibility***, then performing for young audiences might not be for you. If there is a will, there's a way. It's okay to be unsure of yourself. That's why you're here and reading this book.

“What's the real difference between performing for children and adults?”

Something I remind myself before every performance is that ***the child I'm about to perform for just got done flying around the playground on their magic pink dragon, saving the kingdom from the evil wizard, and being crowned ruler of the continent. THAT WAS REAL TO THEM!*** Your competition is their imagination, not other performers. That's the difference between performing for children and adults! ***Kids still believe in magic!*** The child in this example already has a ***preconceived notion*** of what magic is. They don't just *believe* magic is

real; they *know* magic is real. To paraphrase **Jerry Seinfeld**, “*When [kids] are growing up reading about [superheroes], these aren’t fantasies. These are options!*”

In one sense, this means the pressure is off because I don't need to *convince* them that magic is real. I don't need to waste time “getting them on my side.” There is no ***suspension of disbelief*** because they ***actually do believe***. My job as a children's performer is to ***confirm what they already believe*** and to not betray that belief.

On the other hand, there is added pressure because of their preconceived notion of magic. When a magician messes up in front of adults, we call it ***flashing***. When we do it in front of a child, I call it a ***betrayal***. It ***betrays*** their sense of wonder. We must do everything possible to ensure to not betray that child's natural sense of wonder. I know this sounds hyperbolic. It's not. One fear that a lot of magicians have when performing for children is that kids have no fear in “calling you out.” If you make a mistake, they will let you know. When you mess up in front of an adult, the response is typically something like, “I caught that one.” But when you mess up in front of a child, the response is more like, “YOU'RE NOT A REAL MAGICIAN!” It can derail a show.

Mistakes are unavoidable. They are going to happen. Messing up a magic trick when performing for any age isn't good, but the stakes are higher when performing for children. This doesn't mean you should shrug off flashing during a performance for adults . We are obligated to do our best, regardless of the audience. But ***there is a difference between disappointing an adult and betraying a child.***

“Are kids really going to remember you later?”

Now that I have thoroughly scared you by talking about the responsibility of PYA, I want to share with you a ***story about how rewarding it could be:***

When I was a young man, around the age of 19, I taught and performed magic as a counselor at a YMCA summer camp in Gainesville, FL. There was a kid in my group named Devin who was around 10 years old at the time. This kid loved magic! I taught him card tricks and he assisted in numerous magic performances. At the end of the summer, I told him if he wanted to continue learning, he should go to the library and check out some magic books. He gave me a big hug and went on his way.

Fast forward about 14 years. Now 33 years old, I was performing strolling magic at a Halloween party for a local church. A Marine in military fatigues, holding his daughter, walks up to me and asks my name. His eyes lit up! He asked me if I remembered a kid from the YMCA summer camp in Gainesville who took all my magic classes. My jaw dropped! It was little Devin, all grown up! He joined the Marine Corps, got married, had a baby girl, and was deployed to Afghanistan,

Devin told me that he took my advice to check out or buy magic books and kept practicing card tricks. He said that when he was deployed the nights would get cold and lonely, and he could hear bombs going off in the distance. He was able to help keep up the morale of his fellow Marines by showing them the very card tricks I taught him at the summer camp all those years ago, plus some new ones he learned over the years. He said magic helped him get through one of the worst experiences of his life. Not only did it help him, but it also helped the other Marines in his unit. This experience forever changed my perspective of performing for children.

“Why perform for young audiences?”

What we do matters. The way we affect young people matters. PYA isn't just fun and lucrative. I enjoy the challenges, risks, responsibilities, and yes, the money. But I also find it to be extremely ***rewarding*** knowing that I'm having an impact, no matter how small. This impact is two-fold: you make an impact on the child, and then subsequently, you make an impact on the industry as a whole. Once you figure out the *formula* and get over the fears, performing for

young audiences can be so much fun! I enjoy going to work every day. If those aren't good enough reasons, then I don't know what is.

As far as the other question I posed, “*Should you perform for young audiences,*” that one is a bit more personal and will require some self-reflection. Hopefully, by the end of reading this book, you'll have an idea as to whether or not performing for young audiences is right for you. Even if you don't think it is at the moment, get to the end of the book and then give it a try. You don't need to answer this question right now. In my experience, I've seen a lot of performers who thought they would never be able to perform for children because they didn't have the temperament or personality for it. Then they went on to become great children's performers. This book will help provide you with the insights and tools you'll need to answer this question and more.

“How is the book structured?”

For those who are more *seasoned*, feel free to skip around. For my *beginners* who are just starting their *PYA* journey, the book has been designed to take you through a *progression*. Work through each part, chapter by chapter. Each chapter lays the *foundation* for the following chapters. It is divided in the *four parts*:

- 1. Part 1: Production**
- 2. Part 2: Performance**
- 3. Part 3: Building A Business**
- 4. Part 4: DIY Magic**

Your show is your *product*. Having *multiple shows* means having *multiple products* for the client to choose from. *Part 1* is how to develop your product, *Part 2* is how to deliver your product, *Part 3* is how to market and manage sales of your product, and *Part 4* teaches you how to build your own magic tricks and offers some routines to perform them, with approximately 25 minutes worth of material.