

Our Man in Qatar: Michael Wolff on Real War vs. Media War

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THE MYSTERY MAN

With his bedroom eyes and untraceable accent, **Gerard Senehi** is perhaps the city's most alluring mentalist, and his act—bending wineglasses, making cigarettes float—makes even jaded New Yorkers jump. Is he really psychic, or is it just magic? You be the judge.

BY JENNIFER SENIOR

If a man combines alchemy, soothsaying, and a cheerful disregard for gravity in his act, he can't expect to be left alone when the show's over. Invariably, someone is going to buttonhole him and insist he repeat some trick or another. This evening at the Waldorf-Astoria is no exception.

"I'm a cynic and a skeptic," booms Bruce Allen, a barrel-chested advertising man from Indiana. "I really need to see you bend that wineglass again."

Gerard Senehi calls himself the Experimentalist. He makes pens and eyeglasses and long-stem roses jump, seemingly of their own accord, out of people's hands; he changes the times on their watches; he bends keys and coins while they're still in their owner's suspicious grip. And in almost every performance, he can be counted on to bum a cigarette from someone in the audience, light it, and then . . . let it go, leaving it hanging in midair before it sails back and forth between his outstretched hands. (As a grand finale, he grabs it with his teeth and takes a puff.) "Didn't you see the show?" Senehi asks.

"Yes, I saw the show!" says Allen. "But that bent wine stem just killed me. I'd love to see that one more time."

The wine stem's nice, but me, I prefer the quieter, minimalist stuff Senehi does, the stuff involving almost no props at all, suggesting he has full visibility into our thoughts. He guesses the words we're thinking; he guesses phrases we're staring at from books off our own shelves.

Senehi stares at Allen's watch. "How long have you had that?"

"Since Christmas."

"Take a deep breath. Blow on it. Notice anything?" Allen consults. "It stopped. That's impossible."

Senehi nods. "Take another deep breath. Quick. Blow on it again."

The watch is now ticking. Allen laughs, then gets over it. "That's nice," he says. "But Gerard . . . what about the glass?"

Ah, that glass, that glass, that *glass*: It's Senehi's signature piece (though he borrowed the principle from a German magician, Ted Lesley). The volunteer holds the stem of his or her wineglass very tightly, releases it, and whiz-bang, presto, it has bent like a bolt of lightning.

Senehi refuses to repeat the trick. Instead, he picks a fork up off the table, grips the handle with his left hand, and, with his right, gives a hoodooish wave. The neck twists 360 degrees, forming a perfect corkscrew. "Ooooooh, that's great," marvels Allen. "Just great."

Mary Falvey, a senior vice-president at Resort Condominiums International and the woman who hired Senehi for the evening, wanders over. "Look at that!" Allen exclaims, waving his coiled prize. "Look at that! *Look at that!*" "Whoa," she says. She stares at Senehi. "So . . . is it real, or is it magic?" Senehi beams with pleasure. "Ah! Perfect! Exactly!" he says, giving her a seductive smile. "You're in just the right place."

Gerard Senehi hates the term *magician*. It suggests top hats and bunnies and ladies hewn in two. Mentalists, on the other hand, rely on the thoughts and personal effects of other people to bring their acts to life. For Senehi, the joy is in this interaction, and the spectacle is in the storm of questions it generates: *Do you have*



magnets implanted in your fingertips? Did you hypnotize me? Do you ever go to the racetrack? Though Senehi began his professional career in earnest only about four years ago, he already commands between \$4,000 and \$10,000 per performance. Those who book him say he makes an impression unlike anyone else. "Watching most of my performers, you say, That's really cool what a wonderful effect," says Bill Herz, founder of Magicorp Productions, a huge booker of mentalists and magicians for the corporate world. "But with Gerard, you say, 'I wonder if it's real?'" There's an astonishing believability to what he does."



I certainly thought so the first time I saw Senehi. It was Christmas-time, at a private party and even before he took center stage, he had created his own buzzing energy field. He was expensively dressed but shy; he is handsome, with big, liquid eyes, but did not flirt. He spoke with the untraceable accent one associates with Bond villains, but his manner was natural, child-like, affectation-free.

Then Senehi began his performance bending wineglass stems, floating objects, the whole bit and the amazing thing was, his stage persona remained exactly the same. He was charming and slightly awkward and totally unslick. He used no canned

music, which even his most accomplished cohorts do, and he didn't rely on any patter, which still tends toward the rim-shot yakety-yak of the Vegas lounge. (For example: "You'll notice I have three balls – hey, I'm not proud!")

"When Gerard performs," says Allen Zingg, a well-known fellow mentalist, "it's almost like an *absence* of a performance."

Whatever it was, it startled all of



us speechless. Some of it was the booze, I'm sure, but I think most of our pleasure came from the charged, liberating innocence we all suddenly felt. These were tiny miracles we were seeing. For most of us, this was as close to religion as we'd ever come.

The next day, I called one of my closest female friends to tell her about it.

"There has to be some explanation," she said, sounding surprisingly cross.

"I know," I said. "But this was a rough crowd, and you should have seen how promiscuously we gave up our cynicism. It was like some sort of religious experience from the sixteenth century. A colleague of mine declared he was a witch."

"A witch?"

"It seemed like the simplest explanation at the time."

"Did he try to pass himself off as genuinely psychic?"

"That's just it. He wouldn't say."

"Because he wasn't. He isn't."

"I know. *I know. I know.*" And I

did know.

Of course I did.

Okay. So I've gathered together a group of scientists at my friend Brian's new loft because I'm curious to see whether they're as flappable as I am. They're not physicists or engineers, who might be better equipped to explain Senehi's techniques, but they're all analytical people, all trained to come up with hypotheses and test them for a living. There's Terry, a professor of bioinformatics at Rockefeller University; Larry, a biochemistry professor at Columbia Medical School; Dave, a neuroscientist at Suny-Stonybrook; and Dimple.

Dimple is the guy I really want Senehi to meet. He's a good-looking and outrageous polymath, a physician-in-training who's just finished his doc-



torate in neuroscience but earns a handsome living as a screenwriter. I figure if he doesn't have some creative explanations for what Senehi does, no one will. He also comes from a long line of astrologers to the kings of India. His father abandoned the profession when he read the palm of a friend, foresaw the death of his child, and watched it all come true.

Dimple believes in none of this stuff. "Let's lay this on the table right now," he declares, pretty much the moment he and Senehi are introduced. "There's no such thing as psychic phenomena. 'Psychic' is how people describe something that can't be attributed to a single sense. Five

hundred years ago, a *burp* was probably considered psychic until they discovered gas.”

A half-hour later, when Senehi begins his act, he makes a beeline for Dimple.

“Can I have something of yours?” Dim removes his glasses.

“Hold them like this. . .”

Dim keeps them unfolded and places them flat in the palm of his hand. Senehi flutters his hand above them. They pop upright.

“Telekinesis,” says Senehi.

There’s something else that Dimple’s father accurately predicted: The shrieking car wreck that nearly killed Dimple when he was 17 years old.

Dim folds his arms, shifts in his wheelchair, and gives Senehi a wicked grin. “Telekinesis? Uh-uh. Now, if you could make me get up and walk to the bathroom – *that’d* be some telekinesis”

Senehi laughs. “Fair point.”

Ultimately, if Senehi’s audiences are shrewd and psychologically inclined, they all return to the same question: How do you *want* us to think you did this stuff? Senehi’s peers are bitterly divided over the answer. It comes down to a question of ethics: Are you an honest liar? Or a dishonest one? At one end of the spectrum, there is Uri Geller, the famous seventies mentalist who grandiosely claimed (and still does) that it was his own supernatural gifts that enabled him to bend spoons; at the other, there is James Randi, an accomplished magician who made a name for himself by exposing the hokum of Geller and his ilk. (In 1996, he even offered \$1 million to anyone who could demonstrate evidence of the paranormal in a setting he controlled. The prize is still unclaimed.)

Senehi has an abiding interest in this debate. “I’ve always been interest-

ed in what’s real and what isn’t,” he says. “I take this question very seriously.” What he decided on, in his act, was to split the difference between Uri Geller and James Randi, challenging both the credulity of believers and the unsmiling vehemence of skeptics. “It’s like being a storyteller, right?” he says. “When the storyteller is really good, the line between reality and unreality blurs—you’re not really sure which is which.”

There are some lines Senehi refuses to cross. He won’t give private readings. If someone comes to him with a personal question, especially a medical one, he tells them very candidly that he has no way to know the answer. Often, if audience members look too spooked, he blurts out: “Hey – it’s just a trick.”

“With the material I use, I feel clean about the stance I take” says Senehi. “The context is clear: I’m entertaining.”

But for some performers, vagueness of any kind is coy, arrogant, a crime of almost a moral nature. “Monday Night Magic” won’t even allow performers onstage unless they include disclaimers specifically saying they’re doing tricks, not extra-sensory experiments. The very term *mentalist* makes Michael Chaut, the show’s founding producer, break out in hives. “The only difference between a mentalist and a magician,” he sniffs, “is that mentalists charge 50 percent more.”

And Chant’s attitude is positively benign compared with that of his partner, the sleight-of-hand artist Jamy Ian Swiss. “If you tell the audience you’re doing anything other than tricks,” he grouses, “you’re not doing entertainment. You’re doing religion.”

Do you have a spare key? Senehi asks Terry. She fishes around in her pocketbook. “Hold it in

your hands like that. . .”

She sandwiches it.

“Feel anything? Rub it gently.”

We wait. “It’s very. . . warm, she says, looking vaguely alarmed. “Oh, my God!” She opens her hands and stares at the crumpled product.

“You. . . are. . . real!”

“Don’t take it too seriously.”

“I’m giving up science.”

“This is science, actually.”

“You are bringing to life things I believed as a 12-year-old!”

Dimple looks unimpressed.

Senehi notices. He grabs a spoon, balances it on my wineglass, and makes it rattle with wild abandon from about four feet away.

“Magnets,” says Dim.

“Okay then,” says Senehi, still well out of reach of the spoon. “Watch.” We stare. The spoon suddenly arches its back.

Now Dim looks flustered. “Is that your spoon?” he asks Brian, our host.

“Is it Sabatier?”

Dim picks it up and reads the engraving on the back. “Yes.” He tries bending it back. It won’t budge.

Senehi believes in psychic phenomena. In fact, he’s been obsessed with the supernatural ever since he was 10, when his friends were drawing cards from a deck and he was able to predict four in a row. Senehi readily admits that this experience—and all psychic experiences he’s had since—can be chalked up to coincidence. “But if you put your attention there, you’re more likely to experience it,” he says. “That doesn’t necessarily mean its real, but if I had to take a position, I’d say it is.”

Senehi was born in Paris in 1959, the child of two Iranian émigrés. When he was only 1, his father died, and he was sent to Switzerland to live with a governess in the same town where his sister had been sent to boarding school – at age 4. When Senehi himself turned 4, he too

attended the school, and he remained there until his adolescence. He came to the United States at age 12, already fluent in two languages and proficient in four more.

Like most future conjurers, he was a secretive teen who spent hours locked in his room, poring over magic books, practicing tricks with cards and coins. “And I was fascinated, really fascinated, by things I couldn’t understand,” says Senehi. “Whether it was a mathematical puzzle, the workings of a watch, the universe, the stars. If I had been more intelligent, I would have been a scientist.”

As a college student at Amherst, Senehi continued to entertain people with magic tricks, but he hardly considered it the basis for a career.

And belief systems. Though Senehi never articulates his own faith in psychic phenomena (unless he’s prompted), it informs his whole performing persona, not only by giving him a vague tinge of the mysterious but by enabling him to take whimsical

“No way . . .
“Turn it over.”
It’s the three of clubs.
“No way. No way, no way, no way.”
Senehi is giggling helplessly.
“How’d you do that?” Dim asks.
“Honestly?”
“Honestly.”
Senehi shakes his head. “I’m not sure.”

Then I called Senehi’s sister. “My mom always wanted Gerard to be a lawyer or a businessman,” she said. “And he always felt so guilty that he didn’t. So what happened is, he joined a cult.”

At first I think she meant the world’s fraternal order of magicians. She didn’t.

“Well, it’s not really a cult,” she continued. “More like a group that studies enlightenment.

And once Gerard joined it, he felt all the guilt lifted off his shoulders. He wanted to lead a life of truth.”

It turns out that when Senehi isn’t

Not long after graduation, he heard Cohen lecture near campus. Afterward, he decided his questions about metaphysics were of more than a passing interest. “Everyone asks the big questions,” he says. “But we usually get distracted by other things, so we never go very deep with them. We forget we have this profound interest in what life is all about.” Today, Senehi’s world revolves around Cohen’s campus.

It’s a strange thing to contemplate: All day long, Senehi struggles to deepen his understanding of reality; at night, when he performs, he works to conceal nature’s laws.

Yet one can’t help but wonder whether it’s his spiritual pursuits that have made Senehi such an effective performer. One of the central aims of Cohen’s philosophy and most Eastern religions, for that matter – is to understand the inconsequential value, and place, of our own egos. That’s a highly



“You could call it intuition. Or maybe guesswork. But there are things that happen THAT I CAN’T EXPLAIN.” }

risks during his performances. “There’s a small percentage of things I do in my shows that involve no skill whatsoever,” he says. “You could call it intuition, definitely. Or maybe guesswork. But there are things that happen that I can’t explain.”

Senehi pulls out a deck of cards and lingers in front of Dimple for a moment. Then, in a grand, deliberate motion, he throws a card face-down on the table.

“I want you to try to name that card.” Dim looks up at Senehi and then back at the card.

“No way . . .

“Name it. Don’t think. Just name it.” Dim defiantly takes his time.

Then he looks Senehi in the eye. “Three of clubs.”

“Turn it over.”

crashing in his tiny studio over by the U.N., he lives in a group house in Lenox, Massachusetts, on the property of the Evolutionary Enlightenment Fellowship, an organization started by a former professional musician named Andrew Cohen.

Senehi is perfectly aware of how suspicious his involvement with Cohen’s group must seem. “I never discuss my spiritual beliefs in my shows,” says Senehi. “It’s a huge risk. The word *spiritual* alone is enough to . . .” He drifts off.

As many of us do, Senehi first started agonizing over existential questions in college. “It was getting on senior year, he says. “And you’re supposed to know what you want in life. But a traditional education doesn’t tell you what the purpose of life is.”

effective goal for performers. “The times I don’t perform well are when I’m self-conscious – then I’m not as convincing,” says Senehi. “But when I put myself out of the way, I can just *be* what I’m doing.”

Senehi, and I are at lunch again, this time discussing a stunt he arranged at that Christmas party I attended, in which a random guest read aloud a prediction he’d mailed to the host a couple of weeks earlier. Not only did it pinpoint the events of the party to a tee, but it described what the reader was wearing, which made her nuts.

So it seemed clear – at least the morning after – Senehi had at some point switched either the envelope or its contents. “Isn’t it just as interesting

to have people wondering how you switched them?" I ask.

"Totally, yeah."

"So why won't you admit it?"

"Are you *sure* I did?"

"Yes"

"Even if you never saw me go near it?"

"Yes," I repeat. "If you actually had the ability to predict the future, you wouldn't be working bar mitzvahs. You'd be working for John Ashcroft"

He chuckles. "Tough point to counter."

"This is as close as you'll get? You won't just say you switched the envelopes?"

He considers, then gives me a level, penetrating stare. "But you know what you're asking me, right?" he says. "You're asking me to say that Santa Claus isn't real."

Dim is nattering to himself

about the three of clubs. "That's the one trick where there's no explanation. Unbelievable. What, do I ooze 'three of clubs'?"

Dave nods. "That was impressive." "It would have been better if I said 'three of clubs,' and *then* he threw it down. There'd have been a little margin there."

Terry and Larry, meanwhile, are arguing. "I'm convinced," says Terry, "there are things for which we don't have theories."

"Terry, he's part of a community that does this for a living. . ."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

Larry looks up at Senehi. "Well, you've blown Terry away."

Senehi raises his arms: *And you?*

"Even though I can't explain it," says Larry, "I just presume you're doing something beyond my ability to

figure out."

"But that's what it reduces to no matter what," says Terry. "Either way, it comes down to a set of rules we don't know."

"Well, yes," says Larry. "But some would be inclined to attribute it to something supernatural."

"But you're not 100 percent sure?" asks Senehi.

"I'm pretty sure I'm 100 percent sure." Senehi raises his eyebrows.

"I'm 99 percent sure you're doing something that's just extremely skillful."

Ninety-nine percent. Based on that silly three of clubs, I suppose that's where I am, too, which says something pretty powerful about Senehi. That one percentage point is what separates the world's atheists from its agnostics. And it's a howling universe bigger than the difference between 99 and 98. ■