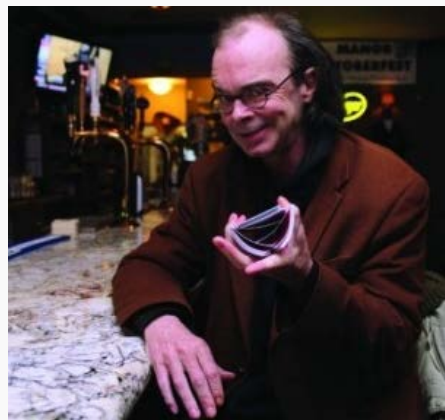


The Friendly Conman: A reformed grifter tells his story to Soho audiences

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By Leonora Desar

“For this, you have to be prepared to come along for the ride, my friends. Are you prepared to come along for the ride?”

Simon Lovell steps on stage into a muted patch of light and squints out at The Huron Club in Soho. He’s mid-fifties-ish, with gray-glazed hair casting a strange halo over his aged, baby-faced features. A too-large worn brown sports coat billows and creases over his rail-thin frame.

“It’s basically just the story of my life,” he drawls, his English accent dripping from every syllable. “The story of how, as a small child, I fell in love with doing card tricks then fell out of love with doing card tricks, allegedly became a career con man and criminal, maybe did a bit of jail time and then, not surprisingly, fell in love with doing magic tricks again.”

Lovell is doing now what he has done so well almost every Saturday night stretching back over the past seven years—he’s giving us a show. It’s the performance of his one-man piece, *Simon Lovell’s Strange and Unusual Hobbies*, to be exact, of which he is both star and writer, offering a glimpse into his life as an alleged former grifter.

Did you catch that word in there—“alleged?” As he later tells me, “Could be true, but might not be!”

“All of this”—everything he will say about his life—“comes with ‘allegedly’ in front of every statement.”

Little do I know it, but I am about to hear stories about illegal high-stakes card games, scores gone wrong and how to spot the perfect victim (“rich people wear good shoes,” Lovell observes). I will learn about how he got his start as an alleged con man and about how it all came to an unexpected end.

But with everything couched in his elusive disclaimer, what can I possibly believe?

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“You have to live out of two suitcases,” he told me over a drink the night of his show. “Be ready to leave the moment someone rats, the moment it all goes bust. You can’t have friends. You can’t feel guilt. You have to have 10 driver’s licenses. Twelve passports. You’re completely invisible.

“Actually,” he continued, “you’re like a ghost.”

Sipping his drink, he said, “A great con man is like a great salesman. I’ve done a lot of talks with salespeople, I’ve even written manuals for some rather large companies—one which is based on 5th Avenue in New York City, by the way—and one of the things I stress to them completely is that you don’t ever try to sell something to somebody. The higher the price, the less you try to sell it. What you do is you try to create an emotional hole in them, where they think that object will fill that emotional hole.”

OK, so how does a great con man get his start?

From another great con man, no doubt—Lovell’s grandfather.

“My grandfather, he was this shady guy who would go away for a few weeks and come back and have pockets full of cash. And I think he just saw something in me...he saw this little look in my eye. He took great delight in me beating people coming into the bar at pool standing on my little box and then, later on, he started teaching me an awful lot more.”

One of those later lessons was in the dip—that’s con-speak for pickpocketing—which Lovell claims he pulled off for the first time at the age of 9 or 10. By 14 or 15, he upped his game to art fraud and high-stakes cards. Soon enough, it became his living.

Allegedly.

“When you get involved in that business, it’s like getting on a roller coaster, because you start meeting people, they start asking you to do something and you do something for them—you know, favors for favors, quid pro quo stuff—and it’s a ride that’s very difficult to get off. But it’s such a great life, it’s such an easy life.”

But in spite of what you might think, it wasn’t about the money. No, it was about the rush.

“It’s about knowing you can manipulate people and take their little heart and go, *gotcha*.”

That’s what it was about.

South Africa. Gaborone. Zambia. Australia. Macau. Chile. Argentina. Belize. England. Scotland. Wales. He’s been to them all, played in them all, the game that they call the con.

Until one day, when he was about 35 years old and, suddenly, he no longer could.

“I just had a complete meltdown at one point. And it was like an instant. I just apparently took a guy for a not inconsiderable sum of money—he started weeping. And I just couldn’t stand it anymore; I gave him some of the money back. Now, I didn’t give him all of the money back—I’m not an idiot. But at that point, I couldn’t help myself, I gave him 25 grand back.

“I went back to my hotel room and I thought, OK, you can’t do it anymore, because once you start to care, you’ve lost your edge...”

So how much did he make before he quit the game?

“I wouldn’t say what I made but I will tell you, a good proposition guy would make half a million a year, a good art fraud guy can make two million a year.”

What about jail?

“Ohhhhh,” he cooed. “Let’s just say I’ve been in trouble from time to time, but there are no records. Records have a way of vanishing.”

Two weeks later, I’m on a subway, then a bus to the middle of nowhere in Forest Hills, Queens, to meet Lovell at his “local watering hole.” All for some answers, for just a glimpse into—well, I’m not really quite sure what.

Lovell ambled in, disheveled, in his familiar brown sports jacket.

And just like that, it all starts up again.

“First of all,” he said, sipping a beer, “Most people don’t want to report a con if they realize they’ve been conned because they feel like idiots. And they think the police will laugh at them—which, by the way, they will, behind their back; ‘You fell for that?’ They’ll do their due diligence, they’ll try to do their job, but by then the con man is long gone and they don’t even remember what he looks like.

“I told you: You have to be invisible. See, I’m gone. No, I’m back again—you’ll blur the issue, you’ll confuse everything. You know those film shots where you put Vaseline on the lens? That’s what you do to that person; you Vaseline their eyes so they can’t quite remember the significant timeline or what actually happened.”

It was a feeling I was beginning to know all too well.

I just throw it out there: Which part of his story is real and which is just alleged, I had begun to wonder?

“I’m not answering that, I’m sorry,” he said. “Just say that everything is alleged...*allegedly*. You won’t find a police record on me anywhere in the world.

“It’s all about being nice to people,” he said with something like a smile, “and letting them trust you, even though they shouldn’t. And studying people. Study their weaknesses. Study their strengths. Exploit both.”

Both?

“You can push a little bit. See where they’re going to get a little frisky on you. Play any role—any role that they want you to play. Let them almost con you, if you like. But you’re in control.”

But how do you know what role to play?

“Well what role do you want me to play?” he asked, locking eyes. “The friendly con man you’re interviewing...It doesn’t mean I can’t still take your college fund or your job or your house. But that’s the person you wanted me to play.

“Oh, I’m being very open with you, honestly, I really am. I know that’s good, coming from a con man, but honestly I am. But that’s just an example of—what did you expect of me? A professional con man who’s reformed, who’s friendly. And what did you meet? A professional con man who’s reformed, who’s friendly...

“That’s the answer to your question. You give people what they want to see.”

Simon Lovell’s *Strange and Unusual Hobbies*, Saturdays at 7p.m. at The Huron Club at The SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. (between Sixth Ave and Varick St), www.sohoplayhouse.com.

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