

# Kenyan Conjurations

## ...the school built by magic



## Our trip to Kenya - part i

It was an extraordinary thing, to place an empty cup on a starving man's hand and watch his face as he lifted it to discover an orange.

In England, the greatest challenge in being a magician is to make people care. You are the entertaining accessory to the upper classes, the wag who whips the tangerine from the shot glass. Yet in Kenya, performing that same appearing orange trick for a group of homeless men, the difficulty was quite the inverse. They really believed we could make the fruit materialize. We performed not to applause but to ravenous hands which grabbed and eyes which revered in part and part implored. And once we had exhausted our citrus supply and even made several litres of coke appear, there was little more we could offer beyond a loop of card tricks. Stop the card tricks: Why couldn't we carry on making more fruit? For the first time in almost fifteen years of conjuring, I had brought someone a real moment of magic; yet for the first time I felt like a fraud.

Magic tricks began for me in 1993, between the end of wetting the bed and acquiring a taste for tea. My babysitter vanished a fifty pence piece which was a mistake; for I refused, stubborn even then, to sleep until he ungirthed the secret. The back panel of the cupboard thus open to this esoteric new world, I upped daily to the local library to learn my trade. I did not much care for performing then. And I never really believed anyone would understand my appreciation of magic as a psychology. Fooling someone, after all, is a shallow pursuit, and very easily achieved.

Frustrations aside, I did not grow out of my childhood fascination and another seven years into my life I met a soul mate. Word went round school of a remarkable happening in the biology labs. A boy, Drummond, had been making a handkerchief appear and disappear before a div. A simple trick, but perfectly executed. His beak had glimpsed it on arriving and, unlocking the door, instructed Mr Money-Coutts that he was to perform the feat again and again until such a time as the *modus operandi* were fathomed. The period passed, the bafflement did not. The following day I arranged a meeting with Drum and from that first chat until we left school, not a day went by when we did not talk.

We performed a lot: gave assemblies, evening shows, filmed videos on the streets and set up a Magical Society to host the best sleight of hand artists in the country. We even welcomed Uri Geller. In the holidays we turned professional. Between us we gave private performances for Her Majesty the Queen, had repeat bookings at the American Embassy in London, entertained the Directors of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden and appeared on prime time television. It was a lot of fun. But every time I would give a show, and people would applaud, sometimes laugh, shake me warmly by the hand, I would sit on the train home with a hollow heart. It all seemed so feckless. So ephemeral. In a recession, magic would be the first thing to disappear; but it is so *primaeval*, it ought to be the last.

We hatched a plan. We would take our conjuring to the other side of the world. Discover if magic really were the language to transcend languages. And we would use our magic to make a palpable difference. We would go to Kenya and perform in Swahili villages. We would tame Nairobi. And we would film it. When we returned, we would sell the video of our trip and with the monies raised, build a brand new school in the very place we had been: the school built by magic.