

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

By MICKI McCLELLAND

Breaking the most sacrosanct of courtesies normally extended a diner, the waiter said to mentalist BANACHEK, "Oh no, it's not you again!"

The remark became understandable a few minutes later when BANACHEK concentrated his magic on one of the restaurant's forks. Steel was no match for the powers of this prestidigitator, the fork snapped in half.

"When I was a teen-ager attending Trinity High School in Washington, Penn., people would come up in the cafeteria and ask me to bend their forks,"

BANACHEK said. "After a while, the school had no choice but to start issuing plastic utensils."

Unlike most magicians, BANACHEK, 35, uses only a few props.

"Everything I need fits right here," he said, displaying a businessman's briefcase.

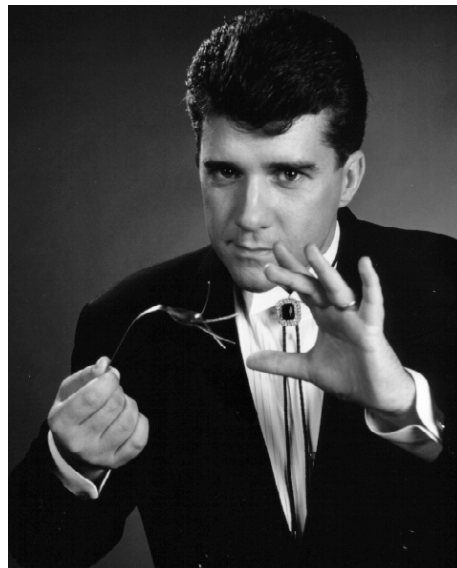
While "magician" is a layperson's generic term for all who practice sleight of hand, what

BANACHEK does is sleight of mind. As a mentalist, or mind-reader, his props are "the five senses. I use the five senses to create the illusion of a sixth senses."

Each show I do, everybody in audience is thinking different things," he said. Because of the kaleidoscope of ideas at play out there in the dark, "every show is unique in its own way." Yet, after the initial fork-breaking and in the clear light of

a noontime restaurant, BANACHEK'S illusions are open to close inspection. The reporter is asked to think of a subject for a fictional story.

"An evil fairy," was the response. BANACHEK then asked how many words would be used in the story and how much the reporter expected to be paid for writing the tale.



Answers given and written down, BANACHEK then produced from inside his coat, a fold-over wallet that contained pictures of his family, credit card - the usual things that personalize a wallet. Something else was there, too.

From the wallet he withdrew two pieces of white card stock that had been stapled, at 1/4 inch intervals around all four sides. It was apparent that inside the stapled card stock was a folded piece of paper.

Asked to tear along one edge so as to not disturb the contents, the maneuver was done and the letter within removed.

These words were written, in BANACHEK'S handwriting, on lined note paper:

"Today a lady I have never met before will decide to write a story about an evil fairy. It will contain approximately 1,030 words and she will be paid \$25,000 for writing it. Signed this 18th day of October 1995, BANACHEK."

Tables were looked under. Sleeves were scrutinized. Eyes were rubbed. Credulity was set drifting as hopelessly as the spaceman who sees his lifeline severed from the mother ship.

Then BANACHEK bent the reporter's only quarter.

When the celebrated performers Penn & Teller last played Jones Hall, they spent some of their free time with BANACHEK at his home. While they were together, BANACHEK showed the fellow magicians a videotape of his "Bullet Catch" act.

The feat is explained:

"Two people from the audience are brought on stage. One scratches initials into the bullet: the other uses a black marker to make initials. The bullet is loaded into a 38-caliber gun. The gun is fired through a glass plate and I catch the bullet in my teeth."

The bullet removed, initials are checked by the two audience members and everyone breathes again.

Penn & Teller, upon hearing that BANACHEK no longer performs the effect, bought the "Bullet Catch" conundrum for a nice piece of change. "I was compensated well," is the way the British

BANACHEK left England when he was 9, moving to South Africa with his mother, stepfather and two brothers. The stepfather was an



alcoholic and their mother fled. Abandoned, BANACHEK was left to raise his two siblings, age 1 and 6, alone. "One of my brothers made contact with our mother some years ago. She's a good lady who made a mistake," he said, generously. Circumstances of his young life perhaps did impact on his abilities as a mentalist. It's certainly reasonable to assume they toughened him to face impossible odds.

Accomplishing a stunt tried by Harry Houdini, but never completed by the legendary magician, BANACHEK successfully escaped after being buried in a coffin. Houdini wrote in his diary: "The weight of the earth is crushing," in remembrance of his repeated failures. BANACHEK said many of his peers often ask what sort of diary entry he will make to describe his successes. But triumph has been accompanied by terror on occasion.

"I was almost killed twice," he revealed. "I almost have given up the buried alive after those close calls. I will do it if the money is right."

Prior to that, however, the stunt was performed to completion in California. It was his first attempt. "A group out there wanted something special for Halloween," he recalled. "They dug a hole 9 feet deep, I was inside a 3-foot coffin. Had to tunnel out of 6 feet dirt. Took me two hours to escape. The whole time I was down there I worried what would happen if California was hit by an earthquake."

When asked by the Japanese to perform the stunt in Tokyo, "they got it wrong," he said. "They dug the hole 12 feet deep. During the time I was buried, a typhoon hit. Water makes dirt heavier. Had to escape a hole that was three-fourths mud."

David Copperfield, the "GQ-ish magician," known by millions for his performances of legerdemain on television, "has talked to me about buying my buried-alive act," BANACHEK said.

Copperfield, in BANACHEK'S opinion, "brought magic back to magic," and he's always delighted when people ask, "Did David Copperfield really make the Statue of Liberty disappear?"

BANACHEK'S wife, Heidemarie, acts as his publicist. Because of the efforts of this "beautiful lady," he said, "I'm paid twice as much" as he would ask. Booking engagements for BANACHEK usually result from "word-of-mouth recommendations," he said. Busy year-round, the dream is to do his own television show. "I've got the format worked out. It would be a talk show based on reading minds. Very personal and intense," he explained.

Performing mostly at corporate functions, BANACHEK also has achieved amazing results for clients who hire him to do trade shows. "It's a form of selling," he said. "People walk away from the booth and say, 'Did you see that guy over at SPI (Specialty Products & Insulation)?' For this company, specifically, I've won two awards in Dallas and Houston for most creative booth."

Giving nod to the scariest time of year, BANACHEK ended the interview with a Halloween trick. Reluctant to go into details, it's enough to know a voodoo needle was involved, along with burning paper, and blood on the reporter's hand.

Miraculously, when the waiter returned to gather up broken forks, bent quarters, letters predicting the future, charred effigies, and bloodied tissues, all proof of BANACHEK'S magic had disappeared from the table.

Into the reporter's purse. Souvenirs of an amazing afternoon.