

MAGIC AND THE MAGICIANS WHO MADE IT

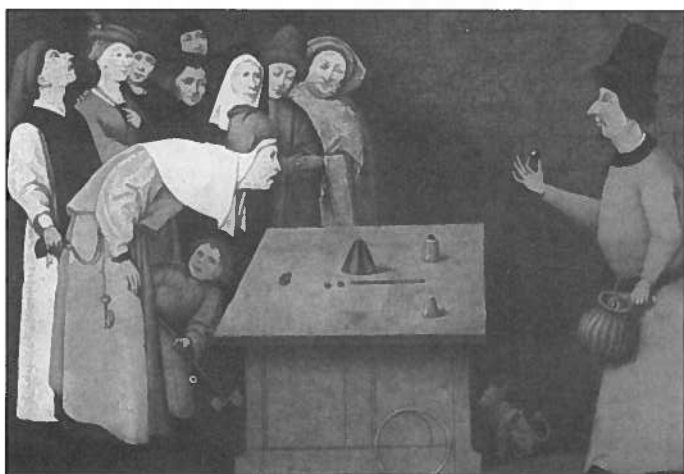
by John Wade



John Wade

Although in this series I have concentrated on the magicians who worked the Music Halls and Variety theatres, I think we should look back at how all the flamboyant illusionists have really developed from centuries of street magicians.

Anyone who served in the Middle East during the last war will remember the chaps doing wonders at the roadside with a set of three cups and a ball that was never under the cup it should have been, with a finish usually of live chicks coming from under each cup. There is a wall painting of that trick inside a burial chamber in Beni Hassan, dating from about 2500 BC. Seneca wrote about it in 3 BC, and through the years Hieronymus Bosch and Breugel the Elder painted the same subject. Hogarth depicted Isaac Fawkes in two of his drawings, and Fawkes must go down in history as one of the most successful conjurors as he died having made two fortunes. In one drawing he is shown producing a dove from a handkerchief, about 200 years before the elegant Channing Pollock made his mark at the Palladium.



*The Juggler (early term for a magician)
by Hieronymus Bosch*

In the sixteenth century Hieronymus Scotto came here from Italy. He showed card tricks to Elizabeth 1st and received 200 crowns for doing so. An American chap calling himself 'Philadelphia', after his home city came to Europe in 1735 and became the favourite performer of

Frederick the Great of Prussia. So popular did he become with the king that the jealous courtiers got together and had him banned from court altogether. My reason for mentioning him is that he left Berlin in some style, as citizens reported having seen his coach departing through all four gates of the city simultaneously.

Robert Harbin, the magical inventor and performer about whom I wrote in a previous article, told me that he had seen a trick done by the roadside in India that to that day had him puzzled. It had to do with a bamboo rod, a ball and water, but unfortunately I don't recall the details. The Indian Rope Trick, which most people understand as a long rope being thrown in the air where it remains erect while a boy climbs up, was a roadside trick. The fact that nobody has ever seen it (although they have a second cousin who had a friend who did), doesn't seem to take away from the legend. Marco Polo brought tales of the feat from China. In 1938 the then President of the Magic Circle and former Viceroy of India offered £1000 to anyone who could reproduce the trick in Lord's cricket ground. Later Bertram Mills, the circus impresario offered another £1000 but the offer was never taken up.

The past few decades have seen a revival of the popularity of street magicians, due in part to some Americans being featured on television. Unlike them however the guys and girls working the markets and shopping malls really can do wonderful magic, many times a day, to real people, without the enhancement of what I believe is called 'creative editing'. One of my favourite current street performers is Peter Wardell who sets up his folding table and finishes his set with the same trick as I mentioned at the beginning of this piece, the Cups and Balls, beautifully done and surrounded by his audience.



Peter Wardell

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In previous articles in this series I have written about those magicians who either had their own full-length shows or topped bills. This time I would like to acknowledge some of the many magicians who were stalwart support acts, many of whom I saw in variety theatres in the nineteen forties and fifties, which were my magical formative years. To me in those days it mattered little who was topping the bill as long as there was a magician on. Inevitably this will be a list of names along with their very imaginative bill matter in which respect my own memory has been aided by Michael Kilgarriff's entertaining book *Grace, Beauty and Banjos*.

I don't imagine that Kardomah ever thought his bill matter *Fills the stage with flags* would still be remembered and plagiarised today. Kardomah did exactly what his bill matter said, and was seldom out of work. His showy performance usually closed the first half of a



Ali Bey

variety show and he spent the entire second half of the show resetting all his flags to be produced again magically when needed. A first half closer with big illusions was Ali Bey, *Quick as Lightning – Startling as Thunder*. Ali Bey, whose real name was David Lemmy was not nearly as fierce as his picture (from the Chris Woodward collection) would suggest, but he was always in demand as Abanazar in the pantomime *Aladdin*. Tragically he was struck by a safety curtain while taking a call and died soon afterwards.

Do you remember Deveen and his New York Blondes? His act was almost entirely the production of cigarettes and cigars and he would have difficulty these days even finding a place to work, as would the great Cardini, and Frackson ...with his *Cigarettes* for the same reason. Douglas Francis, *On the way home*, followed the Cardini model of appearing slightly inebriated as cards and cigarettes appeared and disappeared, but he carried on his own street lamp post which not only set the scene but the attached litter bin also made a receptacle for all the cards he produced. At the end of his act a lady would walk on with a dog on a lead and Douglas would pick up his lamppost and carry it off for protection.

Two acts used only a pack of cards to earn their place on the halls. Billy O'Connor *and his 52 assistants*, and Lionel King, *The Joker – Ace high*. Donald B. Stuart used his height to become *Magic's Longest Laugh*, as opposed to the portly George Braund who was *The Biggest thing in Magic*. Arthur Dowler was *The*



The Great Masoni

Wizard of Cod and Jack Le Dair
The Survival of the Slickest.

Eric Mason as The Great Masoni presented a good illusion show and also did a memory act with his wife Shan. He can be seen to this day in a cameo appearance in the classic film comedy *Passport to Pimlico*. Edgar Benyon from New Zealand had a big show *Bam-Boozalem*, and although very successful The Great Cingalee might have difficulty these days with billing of *The Silent/Yellow Man of Mystery*.

Many other magical names come to mind, such as Claude Lester (The Great Claude), Jack and Mary Kinson who used live mice, and Voltaire who was lighting light bulbs in his bare hands quite a while before the American 'Mr. Electric', Marvyn Roy came on the scene.

I hope these names have jogged a few happy memories for you. Meanwhile I will sign off with my own bill matter *The Patter of Magic Feats*.

Magic and the Magicians who made it

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This will be the last of this series, but we will go out on the biggest name of all, Erich Weiss. Born in Budapest in 1874, and not in Appleton, Wisconsin as he later claimed, he was the son of a rabbi.



The family emigrated to the USA soon after his birth and first settled in Appleton where his father served as rabbi for a short time before they moved to Milwaukee and experienced great hardship, often moving house. It was in Milwaukee though that young Erich

first had his taste of show business where he joined a circus with an act in which he allegedly hung upside down from a rope and picked up pins with his eyelids. Working through dime shows and museums he finally made it to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and soon after that married a young singer, Beatrice Rahner, known as Bess, and they worked up an act around the one illusion called 'Metamorphosis' which was a very fast exchange from a locked trunk.

In 1888 Rabbi Weiss moved his family to New York where there was a bigger Jewish population. Erich continued to study magic and was greatly influenced by a book written by an eminent French conjuror called Robert-Houdin, so much so that he changed his name and added a letter I to Houdin, becoming Houdini. His first name Erich, or sometimes Ehrie, became Harry, and thus was born a show business legend. Houdini knew the value of publicity and never missed a chance to get his name in the papers, and it was not too long before he and Bess were on the famous Orpheum circuit, topping over a young comic called Jack Benny. By then his fascination with handcuffs and other restraints had led him to the fact the public loved an element of danger and he finally became, in a word he himself coined, an Escapologist. He escaped from not only handcuffs, leg-irons and strait-jackets, but from mailbags, a roll top desk, many milk churns, a Siberian prison van, a giant football and even the inside of a whale. He boasted of doing the smallest trick, swallowing needles and regurgitating them on a piece of thread, and the biggest trick of vanishing an elephant. Once on stage Houdini had placed the needles on his tongue and asked a volunteer from the audience to tell the audience what he could see in his mouth. The volunteer was Groucho Marx, unrecognisable



Houdini

without his moustache and after peering close into Houdini's mouth said "Pyorrhoea!" and left the stage.

Not only did Houdini tour the world with his big show, but he also made movies. These were silent of course and as in his character 'Quentin Lock' he always managed to escape whatever situation he was put in within the fifteen minutes of the film. He insisted on doing the escapes for real and not faking them which would have made a more exciting film as his escapes took too long and his movies were not a great success. Houdini became interested in the new craze of flying and bought several aircraft, becoming the first man to become airborne from Australian soil.

In 1926 Houdini was playing in Montreal and was resting backstage when some students from McGill University came backstage to visit him. One asked if it was true that Houdini could take a blow to the stomach, and before Houdini had time to brace himself delivered several punches to the midriff. Houdini did his show that night and travelled to Detroit where although he had appendicitis he managed to do one last show before going into hospital where peritonitis was diagnosed. He died a week later but left another mystery. Throughout his career he had fought and exposed the fake mediums who were cashing in on the craze at the time for Spiritualism. He fell out with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle over this, but he did state in his will that if it were possible to come back from another world, he would attempt to do so on the anniversary of his death, October 31st. For many decades after his death people, including his widow Bess, gathered on the day in séance conditions to see if contact could be made. It never was.



The Houdini show arriving at the stage door of The Poplar Hippodrome 3rd August 1910