

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Magic Moments**

Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871) was the most famous of all French magicians, for he is considered the world over as the father of modern conjuring. Jean's père sent his eleven-year-old son up the Loire to the University of Orléans (not to be confused with UNO) to prepare for a career as a lawyer. But his son wanted to become a watchmaker like his dad, and these skills trained him in all things mechanical.

The first magician to use electricity, Houdin was sent to Algeria in 1856 by the French government to combat the influence of the dervishes by duplicating their feats - a real whirlwind tour. His books helped explain the art of magic to countless aficionados: his autobiography (1857), *Confidences d'un prestidigitateur* (1859), and *Les Secrets de la prestidigitation et de la magie* (1868).

One such devotee was arguably the most renowned illusionist and escape artist in history. Born in Hungary in 1874 as Erich Weiss, he adopted the name Harry Houdini as a teenager after having read Houdin's autobiography. Performing twenty shows a day, the young wizard was soon taking home twelve dollars a week. Before long he was an international success, and he would bring this magic moxie to the Crescent City.

It was pouring rain that day in downtown New Orleans, November 17, 1907, when a crowd of nearly 10,000 people gathered along the wharves near the Canal Street ferry landing to witness Houdini triple-manacled for a death-defying plunge into the Mississippi River. To lend an aura of difficulty, honest supervision and local flavor, the magician's shackles were locked in place by First Recorder's Court Judge Jon Fogarty.

Houdini (laden with padlocks, chains and manacles from Orleans Parish Prison) shouted out a cheerful, "Goodbye, boys!" before jumping into the muddy depths from a steamer's gangplank. A short time later, he

arose unchained to the surface and the roaring approval of the hoards above. The following day's issue of the *New Orleans Picayune* quoted the great Houdini:

"That's an awful river. The worst I have ever been in."

It was all part of his mystique.

A contemporary of Houdin's and another outstanding French magician was Buatier De Kolta (born 1845). He is famous for the "Vanishing Bird Cage", the "Multiplying Billiard Balls" trick and his "Vanishing Lady Illusion" (or "De Kolta Chair"), all still performed by magicians today. This widely touring master of prestidigitation died in New Orleans in 1903 while performing at the St. Charles Theatre.

First erected in the 1830s by James Caldwell, this storied theatre burned to the ground in 1842. The second St. Charles Theatre hosted Jenny Lind and Edwin Booth, but it too burned to the ground (in 1899). George King Pratt designed the third theatre (built in 1902 and razed in 1965), where Monsieur De Kolta performed his final feats of legerdemain. This is from the Middle French *léger de main* meaning, light (weight) of hand, or sleight of hand.

Houdini was an avid debunker of so-called spiritualists, most of whom found numerous ways to swindle many susceptible persons missing loved ones. From small back rooms in New Orleans to grand New York theatres, Houdini often visited these séances incognito and then exposed the trickery at the most inopportune moment - for the phony medium. He once offered a \$10,000 reward (way before Ernie K-Doe) to anyone who could produce a "psychical manifestation" which the great conjurer could not reproduce by natural means.

One bad character was Zanzic, an itinerant magician said to be from New Orleans, the offspring of a Jewish father and a Creole fortune-telling mother. His actual name might have been Harry Robenstein, Brenner or perhaps Henry André. But his biggest con was enticing an old pal, Billy Robinson (a brilliant magic mechanist), to design a Spiritualist parlor in Chicago that would put the common everyday fraudulent mediums to shame.

With a \$5,000 bankroll provided by Zanzic's New Orleans manager, Jack Curry, Robinson rigged a trapdoor beneath the séance table to an area where Robinson and Sam Bailey (a Boston-based magician) could open sealed letters, read the contents and seal them back without detection. But everything backfired when they conned Mr. Schiller.

Before a hefty fee was extracted from the old gentleman, he was promised a sexual reuniting with his late wife. The trio had secured a

prostitute who detectives had determined looked a great deal like the deceased spouse, especially in the misty and dark staging area. They told the eager old German that he could spend only an hour with his wife or she would dematerialize (and if he was too near to her at that time, his health could be at risk). Turns out that advice was right, for fifteen minutes later a bloodcurdling scream came forth from the "bridal chamber".

A nude "Mrs. Schiller" emerged wearing only a sheet and cried out, "He croaked. He's dead."

Seems like both Mr. Schiller's heart and eyes were not working that great that evening. The con artists leaned his body up against a building outside (hoping for the best), but Mr. Schiller's driver saw what happened and called the police. Some sweet-talking and some cash probably convinced the cops to let them leave town. These kinds of "spiritualists" were the types Houdini was trying to stop

Home to the "black magic" of Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, it is not unusual that New Orleans has always welcomed diverse and intriguing magic acts. The Blue Room in the Roosevelt Hotel was a frequent host to some great shows in its day. Harry Blackstone (who performed the greatest "vanishing act" of his career in 1942 by orderly and calmly removing an entire Decatur, Illinois, audience row-by-row from a burning theatre) performed regularly in New Orleans. So did his son, Harry, Jr., who wed local girl Arla Gay Blevins. Harry, Jr., died in 1997, but Gay Blackstone is still an active force in the world of magic. Both Blackstones had been regularly invited to the Bards of Bohemia carnival activities in New Orleans.

Some magicians stay in the city for a while, like Harry Anderson (with his Sideshow Magic Shop and Oswald's Speakeasy), then vanish somewhere behind that illusive curtain.

Some end up here. Gladys Herrmann (1895-1966), nee Gladys Martinez, toured as "Madame Gladys and Her Company of Hindu Necromancers" before marrying another great magician, Felix Herrmann (real name Felix Kretchman). She performed with her husband as "Petite Gladys" dressed in a flamboyant costume crowned with a huge signature headdress. Gladys is buried in New Orleans' "Garden of Memories" Cemetery.

Harry Houdini has ended up in a "Miss Danforth Mystery" entitled "The Sunken Treasure", where the famed magician is one of the guests on a millionaire's yacht sailing from Panama to New Orleans.

Today at the "House of Blues" and around town, one can enjoy the magical styling of Dante (Sean Dawson). He also emcees the enormously camp "Bustout Burlesque". In February of 2009, Britney

Spears was sawed in half by Ed "The Misfit of Magic" Alonzo when she opened her "Circus Tour" in New Orleans. It didn't last.

New Orleans is a magical city to all who live here and most who visit, for as Roald Dahl wrote, "the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it."

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