



It's the rare artist who embodies a craft so fully that they become their art, defining the medium as a living reference for the practice that they perform.

When someone mentions the word *magician*, an image of a tall, lithe man adorned in Victorian garb and donning a Mephistophelean goatee and top hat typically comes to mind. Unbeknownst to most, this image in our collective unconscious derives from a real personage from the late 1800s: Alexander "the Great" Herrmann, the most famous and influential American magician of his time and one of the top draws on the theatrical scene. He was a household name whose image was caricatured in media throughout the world—the archetypal magician incarnate who helped spearhead the golden age of magic and mystery.

Playing to packed houses throughout the United States and abroad, Herrmann brought to his magical and comedic shows wondrous illusions, lavish scenery, a multitude of animals, variety acts, and a truly unique and mesmerizing personality. He enraptured vast audiences through the art of prestidigitation with cards and coins, entertained them with a boisterous wit, awed them with the most technically advanced staging of the day, and topped it all with a genuine French accent that added mystique and refinement.

Herrmann was a prankster with a knack for public display, which gained him notoriety and free advertising for his traveling show. With his eccentric dress and unmistakable profile, he was easily spotted at town markets, with an entourage of press in tow to document the gold coins found in eggs and beards, the heads of ducks severed and restored,

and other surprises that gathered large, gleeful crowds, along with many a shop owner who saw no humor in his mischief. One of his favorite routines was to pickpocket objects from passersby in an obvious manner; right under the watchful eye of the police. When he was arrested and hauled to the courthouse, surprisingly none of the objects could be found on his person. With an innocent demeanor, Herrmann would suggest the officers themselves be searched, at which point, to their astonishment, the stolen goods would be found. This routine usually ended in good spirits when the Great Herrmann revealed himself as the instigator, though he was no stranger to the jailhouse—sometimes his sense of humor didn't quite mesh with the local gendarmes.

Herrmann traveled in his own railroad car with cutting-edge mechanics for

comfort and performance, and cabins adorned for a king. Along with his full cast and illusions in tow, he typically brought a stable of fabulous show horses (in their own lavish boxcar) that he paraded through town centers and which consistently placed in major equestrian events. He amassed and lost great wealth, gambled with mountebanks, gave profusely to charitable institutions, was an honorary member of scores of social clubs, considered a true friend by countless individuals, and was a ubiquitous presence in every major newspaper in the nation.

Herrmann's greatest prize, however, was his wife, Adelaide, who not only assisted in his illusions but brought her own talents of grace, charm, and fashion to every show. She enchanted audiences with the serpentine dance, under marvelous multicolored calcium lights—much to the chagrin of Lottie Fuller, who originated it. She dressed most exotically and had a persona on and off the stage that complemented Herrmann's to a tee. Married by the mayor of New York, the two performed together for royalty and presidents and lived the kind of magical life found in fairy tales.

Tragically, in 1896, at the age of fifty-four, Herrmann's heart gave out in his railcar with Adelaide at his side while returning from a charity event in upstate New York. Throngs of onlookers blocked the streets at his funeral, and men of great wealth and fame served as dignitaries to the man who defined theatrical magic.

Because of his laissez-faire attitude with money, his legal issues, and the sheer cost of his shows, Herrmann left his wife with little capital. After a brief stint with Leon Herrmann, a European "cousin" who failed as a replacement because he lacked chemistry with her, Adelaide used Alexander's apparatus and staging to excel on her own. She is still the most successful woman magician in history and performed grand shows to great acclaim, with a spritely athleticism and charm that lasted into her seventies.

## Victorian Magic

Michael Cantori



The Victorian era was a time of real magic, as profound scientific innovations sprouted at a pace never before seen in human history. With his dramatic inventions, like alternating current, visionary scientist Nikola Tesla captivated the public's imagination as only a true sorcerer can. The AC/DC wars of Edison and Westinghouse brought spectacles of power and social change that truly boggled the mind. Being able to capture, save, and share voices and images; replacing the light of fire in the home with a glass bulb—these changed perceptions of what was possible. Magicians of the day quickly took notice of the potential and inherent wonder of these new technologies, adeptly incorporating them into their acts.

The French magician and inventor Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, known as the father of modern magic, took full advantage of the scientific ignorance of his audiences. Houdin would suspend his son with no visible means of support through the magic of the newly discovered elixir ether (which was known to buoy the spirit in the operating room as well). Similarly, he would reduce men to the strength of a small child with his "light and heavy chest," which employed

a powerful electromagnet beneath the stage to attract a hidden steel plate in the chest's base.

Houdin's performances were so powerful because he did not simply present fanciful impossibilities but wondrously plausible effects that resonated on a psychological level. A young Hungarian immigrant by the name of Ehrlich Weiss so admired Houdin that he took his name for his own (with an added *i* at the end), eventually becoming the first international superstar entertainer.

Since science could now harness waves of invisible energies to allow communication through the very air itself among the living, was it also possible to reach out to the spirits of the dead? Many thought so, and thus spiritualism was born. The impetus for this new fad began in 1848 with a pair of young sisters in New York who claimed they could communicate with the deceased through sharp rapping noises that emanated from the beyond. Though the Fox sisters' methods were disproved by numerous sources as the mere snapping of toes and other bodily joints, the allure of contacting lost loved ones was too great, and they attracted a large and fervent following. Even renowned luminaries such as Arthur Conan Doyle, who brought us the supremely rational Sherlock Holmes, jumped on the spiritualist bandwagon with writings and impassioned rallies that attracted thousands.

Magicians and charlatans alike quickly took advantage of spiritualism's emotional impact. They came up with a slew of novel innovations that supposedly aided communion with the dead. The Davenport brothers were the most famous, with their infamous "spirit cabinet" that enchanted audiences with seemingly impossible occurrences that could only be explained by the presence of supernatural beings. Within the cabinet, the brothers would be tightly bound to chairs with ropes. After the doors of the cabinet shut, instruments well out of the tethered siblings' reach

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would, to the crowd's astonishment, play eerie tunes. Moments later, the doors would be reopened, revealing the brothers as tightly bound as before. As with the Fox sisters, their exhibitions were continually exposed as frauds, but the masses' lust for mysteries beyond the grave assured the brothers a long, successful run.

In an interesting twist, it soon became popular for theatrical magicians to stage exposés debunking spiritualism. Harry Kellar, the role model for Frank Baum's Oz (and a former assistant for the Davenport), incorporated a cabinet in his show, as did Herrmann and, later, Houdini. After being bound with chains, handcuffs, and other restraints and staging far more elaborate goings-on than spirits supposedly playing musical instruments, the magicians would make a seemingly impossible escape and explain their methods afterward to both educate and amuse.

Ironically, the seeds for the decline of magic's golden age were in a technological wonder that the magicians themselves embraced and enhanced toward the end of the Victorian era. Just as the still-photography studios of Mathew Brady decimated the ranks of portrait painters during the mid-1800s,

the emerging technology of moving pictures was to be the eventual nemesis for variety acts and live performance as a whole. The transition was gradual, as theater owners and performers alike at first saw movies as just another novelty on the periphery of traditional entertainment. As time went by, the cinema eventually eclipsed the entire industry of traveling showmen, with the same curtains lifting to reveal a silver screen where once was flesh and blood.

Traditional theater and classical music still held their own, though the juggler, bicycle acrobat, and strongman lost their footing. Many magicians tried their hand at the new industry, hoping to bring magic to the screen; after all, cinema was merely another illusion. George Méliès mystified viewers with innovative special effects and comedy, and later Houdini hung from airplanes and fought nefarious cartels to showcase his physical prowess and escape artistry. But as cinema became big business, the field became more competitive, and viewers more fickle. Neither magician was long for the screen.

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 Magic is an ancient and odd profession, an amalgamation of gambling,

thievery, snake-oil salesmanship, and shamanism, all tightly packaged as theatrical entertainment. It's always been an insider's art, as the audience is not supposed to see the subterfuges the magician uses to fool audiences. Only fellow magicians can fully appreciate the time and commitment needed to attain such skill, as the spectator sees only the results rather than the mechanics of the work. Magic is also one of the most universally accessible of the performance arts, as a well-crafted show can both entertain the young and intrigue the old with time-honored attractions that hit us on a primal level.

Ultimately, the skills of the magician are trivial if they cannot be presented effectively, as the magical experience exists within the mind of the beholder rather than on the stage. Magic can reach its potential only when presented by a personality who can convince an audience that the mysteries it witnesses are real.

Robert-Houdin famously said that "a magician is an actor playing the part of a magician." The Victorian age represented a time when the magician-actor was at the top of his game, so much so that his image would transcend the era to become an indelible symbol of deception and illusion. The stage magician performed the great service of presenting the unfathomable universe as part of the human experience. After all, without mystery, there is nothing to aspire toward, nothing to imagine, and nothing to give us a purpose.

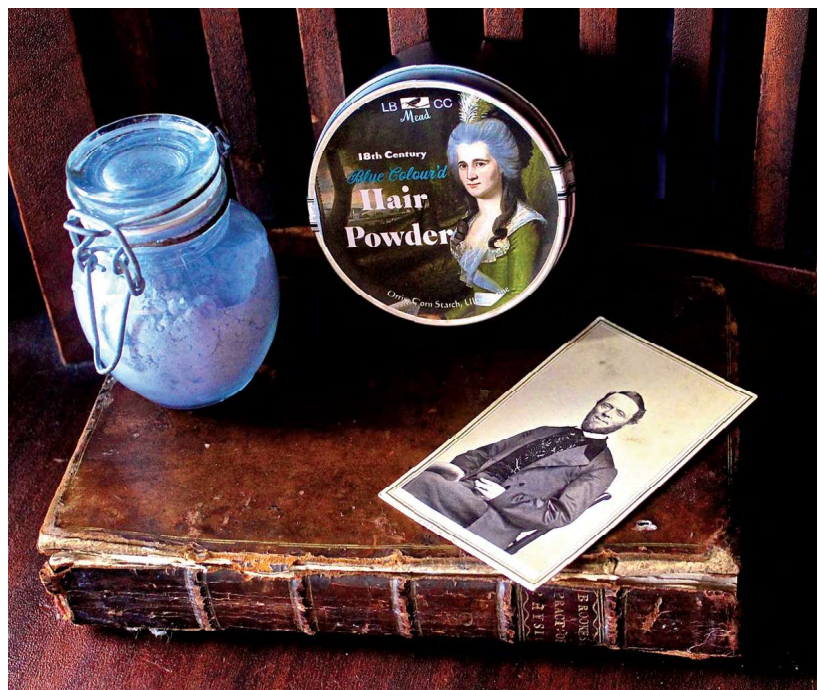
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## Blue Hair Powder is Back!

LBCC HISTORICAL IS THE FAIRYLAND OF VIRTUAL APOTHECARIES by Laven Slover

Imagine walking into a Georgian apothecary with its mortar and pestles and tall glass cases and seeing Jane Austen perusing lavender water and smelling salts or perhaps seeing the dapper politician Charles Fox shopping for blue hair powder, or the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge picking up laudanum. Now picture yourself in that shop in the Victorian era and running into the Brontë sisters buying herbal remedies, violet water, facial powders, and a gift of Bay Rum or mustache wax for a gentleman (that none of them will ever marry).