



THE BUZZ

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LOST IN THE SHUFFLE



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As 2024 draws to a close, it's the perfect time to look back and reflect on the highlights of the year—a common tradition in magic and beyond.

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If you're wondering who "Karl Le Fong" might be, it's not a person but the name of a classic trick from page 7 of The Complete Walton - Volume 1.

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LOST IN THE SHUFFLE

FRITZ WITH A Z

Interview with the Producer/Director Jon Ornoy



This magazine is a production of the Amsterdam Magic Society. If you like to contribute, send this to our editor & designer, Frans de Groot: amsterdammagicsociety@gmail.com

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DEAR READER

As 2024 draws to a close, it's the perfect time to look back and reflect on the highlights of the year—a common tradition in magic and beyond.

Lists of the "best" tricks, books, and performances abound, and while they're subjective, they reveal fascinating trends and new ideas in magic.

At the Amsterdam Magic Society, I am delighted to share that our community continues to grow, thanks to our passionate members. I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who presented a TED-style talk to the Society. For those who missed a meeting or would like to revisit any of these talks, members have access to replays.

Additionally, a huge thank you to the talented magicians who performed during our

gatherings—your contributions make our meetings truly memorable.

I'm especially grateful to Evan for his help in setting up our online Society meetings on the last Sunday of each month, as well as to my fellow board members, Frans, Woedy, and Rico, for their ongoing support.

In the previous issue, I mentioned *Lost in the Shuffle*, and this issue is dedicated to exploring it further. Our next Zoom meeting will focus on *Lost in the Shuffle*, so prepare for some thrilling gambling routines—and perhaps even a surprise visit from one of the documentary's featured magicians.

As the busy holiday season approaches, I wish you all the best with your Christmas shows and magical celebrations.

Enjoy reading!

Fritz with a Z

LOST IN THE SHUFFLE

Interview with the Producer/Director Jon Ornoy



Can you tell us how the documentary came about? How did you meet Shawn Farquhar?

I'd seen Shawn perform on TV before, so when I happened to see an ad for a local performance he was doing near Vancouver in 2019, I took the opportunity to go since my birthday was coming up. It was in a tiny space that couldn't have seated more than 15 people, so no one was more than ten feet from the stage. We had a fantastic night as he pulled out one great effect after another. I found myself still thinking about the show a few days later, so I looked Shawn up and sent him an email, telling him how much I'd enjoyed myself and inviting him out for a beer, with the promise that I wouldn't ask him to reveal any secrets. Happily, Shawn is a very approachable guy who replied quickly, and it was on the second or third time we hung out that he pulled out his laptop and showed me a PowerPoint presentation he'd prepared for a potential TED Talk on something he called the Court Card Conspiracy. The idea that clues to a 500-year-old cold-case murder could be hidden in the designs of a standard deck of cards—some of the most famous art in the world—was immediately fascinating to me and a great hook for a film, I thought.

How do you balance the need for storytelling with historic research when making a documentary?

This project required a ton of research on both the history of playing card design and the French monarchy of that era. From that perspective, the pandemic actually came at a good time because I was locked away in my house with nothing else to do. There was so much about the weird, often incestuous connections between all the royalty of the time that we initially included in the film but ultimately had to cut, even though I loved those stories. During test screenings, people were getting confused about who everyone was and how they were related (it didn't help that families back then used the same few names repeatedly), so we trimmed that back to the bare minimum. In the end, I think storytelling and research need to go hand in hand, because it's the storytelling that takes all those elements and connects them into a narrative that can hold people's interest for 90 minutes.

What were the biggest challenges in making this documentary, and how did you overcome them?

As a director, the biggest challenge was how to bring the film's three main storylines—the history of card design, Shawn's murder mystery, and the relationship between magicians and cards—together into a narrative that made sense and wasn't boring. After the research phase, I worked with a story editor, wrote out each scene on a cue card, and then

spent a week or two rearranging the cards until we had a flow that made sense. That allowed me to write the treatment that we'd base filming on. Later, when we started editing the footage, we found that things that flowed well on the page didn't work as well on screen, so we basically rebuilt the film from scratch using the elements we had.

From a producer's perspective, the biggest challenge is always securing funding, even with a successful crowdfunding campaign and almost a dozen equity investors. Ultimately, I had to put in a significant amount of my own money to greenlight the project, but I'm very happy with where my investment went.

Looking back, what was the most important lesson you learned during this project?

The biggest takeaway for me was the importance of identifying your key audiences early on and engaging them throughout production. For us, that audience was the magic community. The Kickstarter campaign helped us connect with them, and the community we built in that process was incredibly helpful as proof-of-concept for other investors that there was potential interest in our film. You also never know what connections will come your way as more people hear about your project and start talking about it, which can help it develop in unexpected ways.

What do you hope audiences will take away from *Lost in the Shuffle*?

A greater appreciation for just how hard it is to make magic look easy. If audiences walk away having learned things they never knew about something as simple as a deck of cards, maybe it'll inspire them to approach certain things in their own lives from a fresh perspective.

FRITZ WITH A Z



Buy or rent the film now at Kinema
Click [here!](#)





ASI WIND IN LONDON

Arnaud van Rietschoten, Dick Koornwinder, and I flew to London to watch Asi Wind's show. Our expectations were high based on what we had seen from him at magic conventions before.

The venue was a theater in the Soho district, seating around 125 people. It seemed like this theater was designed specifically for magic. If I were to design a theater for magic, it would look just like this one.



Asi's personality and stage presence are top-notch. The moment he stepped on stage, he

had the audience in the palm of his hand. He's funny, charming, and aims to befriend the audience, creating a fun and friendly atmosphere for the evening.



He started with a world map routine. After this, we were expecting more, but since this was a show aimed at laypeople, he chose to perform effects that were good but not particularly exciting for us as magicians. One thing that disappointed me was when he asked the audience to shout out 10 random words, which he wrote on a board. He then demonstrated how to memorize these words using a memory technique. Sure, the entire audience would still remember what was on the board by the end of the show, but this didn't make the performance any stronger. Fortunately, he moved on to more impressive effects, like his famous "page from a book burning" routine (you can find this on YouTube—it's fantastic!). He also performed his effect with six bells, which Arnaud had seen earlier that week during the Gala Show of the Dutch Magic Convention by Rob & Emiel. Asi closed the show with a painted prediction reveal.

Conclusion: Asi is a first-class professional. The theater was truly a dream venue, and the audience left feeling like they had made a new friend in Asi.

For us, the show could have been a bit more thrilling, but we have no regrets—it's always a joy to go on a magic outing with friends!

PETER VOGEL



International Club Night

Hello Everybody!

We had a wonderful second International Club Night last month. Since Halloween was on the way that week, we chatted about spooky magic. Edgar Brumaire and I discussed *The Rose Seance Experiment*, which played again this year in Boom Chicago's attic.

Fritz with a Z gave some tips on turning standard props into comedy Halloween-themed props for this time of year, and Loshayden showed off a new Okido box. Several magicians performed effects for the group - this second meeting had guests from several more countries than the first!

We had guests from 'Open Mic Magic' (Gunnar, Kevin & Ian), who invite performers and audiences to get together for an online magic show each Wednesday.

Max and John joined from South Africa, and Loshayden and Robina joined from the States. Robina has a magic shop in Texas (RobinaMagic.com) and was helping customers while listening in.

Reg Martin was also present and gave us some insights into his work on the Paul Daniels' shows throughout its run.

Overall, it was a brilliant second edition, and I wonder who will visit in the third!

For the third edition, the 24th of November) we will discuss the fantastic film 'Lost in the Shuffle.' This film is all about playing cards and the artwork with which we are all familiar - but somehow wildly unfamiliar at the same time. All the information on this film is in this issue of the Buzz.

If you feel the urge to perform for the group, dust off your best gambling routine for after the discussion!

As always, we will start at 20:00 on the last Sunday of the month. For this third edition, we will again welcome magicians who are and are not yet members of the Society.

The Zoom link will be active at [zoom.amsterdammagicsociety.com](https://zoom.us/j/9123456789).

See you all there!

Evan Kastor

THE KARL LEFONG GATHERING

If you're wondering who "Karl Le Fong" might be, it's not a person but the name of a classic trick from [page 7 of The Complete Walton - Volume 1](#). Named in honor of this memorable effect, the Karl Le Fong Gathering is an annual, invite-only convention in Glasgow that unites some of the finest magicians for a day filled with magic, presentations, and lively camaraderie. Organized by Neil Stirton, Peter McLanachan, and Jack Talbot, this exclusive event showcases high-caliber magic performances, primarily featuring talented magicians from Scotland.



I've been lucky enough to attend the KLF a few times, and each visit is unforgettable. In 2018, I experienced my first Gathering, where legends like Gordon Bruce, Michael Vincent, and Woody Aragon headlined.

That same year, Roy Walton and Andy Galloway also attended, along with Alan Rorrison and Eddie McColl.

In 2019, I returned to see incredible guest performers, including Jackie Clements, Steve Beam, and Dan Chard. Each year has been an inspiring mix of talent and magic mastery.

This year, our Society was well represented by myself, Rico, Danny, and Jose, with Jose joining us for the first time.

The event traditionally begins with first-timer performances, and Jose didn't disappoint; his take on Twisting the Aces

was a crowd favorite, drawing great reactions from everyone in the audience.

The main event highlight was an appearance by Steve Reynolds from the USA, known for his in-depth study of Ed Marlo's techniques. Steve delivered a lecture titled Full Circle, where his rendition of Dai Vernon's Travelers stood out as a personal favorite. His intricate interpretations are impressive, and I've even developed a few routines inspired by his work.

After lunch, the attendee session began—a segment where anyone can showcase their magic. I joined in, presenting a three-card monte routine with an added magical twist. Other magicians performed impressive tricks as well: Mark Beecham used AI to select cards, Danny showed his culling routine, Tim Sutton presented his OFUC Switch published in The Magic Circular, Alan showcased a linking badge effect, Jack Tighe demonstrated a unique second deal, and Ian Kendall offered insights on the Classic Force. Peter brought laughs by pranking Rico with a clever twist on Rubik's Cube magic. He also showed a sandwich routine inspired by Chris Mayhew's "[Casino Royale With Cheese](#)"



The day's grand finale featured Dutch magician Dick Koornwinder, a standout performer whose famed Koornwinder Kar and creative card control techniques captivated the audience. His "Wild Card" effect, however, left the most lasting impression. He placed a sticker on a blank

card, which then magically appeared on all the cards, followed by writing the date on the stickered card. One by one, each card mirrored the sticker and date, only to revert to blank at the end, leaving the participant with a personalized card—a brilliantly executed effect.



That evening, I reconnected with an old friend over dinner, then headed back to the convention hotel, where the magic continued into the night. [Jack Talbot's handling of Ernest Earick's Jack Syna\(ps\)ces](#) was a particular highlight; it inspired me so much that I spent the flight home developing my own version of the routine.

Next year will mark the 10th anniversary of the Karl Le Fong Gathering, and I'm already looking forward to returning and discovering what new magic awaits!

FRITZ WITH A Z

PHOTO'S PROVIDED BY:
NEIL STIRTON AND
JACK TALBOT

10 QUESTIONS

Giancarlo Scalia

1. Hi Giancarlo how are you?

I'm doing very well, thank you. Right now, I'm on a cruise ship in the middle of the ocean.

2. You seem to have a knack for analysing moves/strategies, but more specifically for how they work. Where did this come from?

It's not easy to answer this question; it's probably a combination of various factors. One of them could be the high standards I've always held for my personal learning, as well as a huge passion and respect for what I do, the influences I've had, etc. On the other hand, it's about being very honest with yourself and serving the magic, instead of using magic for your own benefit. Of course, magic is very complex because we have to manage many technical, communicative, and other realities simultaneously. If we don't fully understand the language we are working with, it can create internal chaos, which often leads to a feeling of confusion and discomfort. I imagine we've all had the experience of feeling out of place while performing magic or noticing that we're doing something strange at one time or another. For me, the secret is to self-observe and be extremely honest with ourselves. Every time I feel a sense of discomfort or notice that my body is telling me that what I'm doing doesn't quite fit with the present situation I'm living with the audience, I know I need to address it. This also relates to a disruption or a slight distortion in the communication we are establishing with the audience. It's easy to overlook these issues because magic often relies on very clever concepts, which, even when poorly executed, can still result in

applause or laughter from the audience. I believe we shouldn't be overly influenced by these seemingly positive reactions. Of course, they can give us a sense of gratification, but for me, it's more important to listen to ourselves and be honest about whether we've done a good job or not. In my opinion, the quality lies in the details and the process, not necessarily in the apparent final result. I think that to present high-quality magic, it requires a lot of humility, respect for what we do, respect for the audience, and sincerity with oneself.

3. Also how has it helped you?

It has helped me to love what I do even more, to understand the purpose of what I do, and to be at peace with myself, knowing that I'm not using such a wonderful art solely for my own benefit but rather to serve this art and be able to use it to create wonderful experiences with the highest quality possible, with the utmost respect for the audience.

4. What is your lecture in Amsterdam going to be about?

I will try to present my vision of magic and the kind of communication that can be created through magic, analyzing all the aspects that shape the magical experience. I will also show concepts related to movement that can help us feel as free as possible to express ourselves through this art, all with practical examples to understand how to do the least and achieve quality results. For me, a lecture is a dialogue, and I strive to offer a perspective that can be interesting to magicians of all levels, meeting the needs of everyone.

It's well known that Madrid, and Spain in general, is a very special place for magic. When I decided to move to Madrid, I was welcomed in an extraordinary way. I will never stop thanking Dani DaOrtiz, who helped me immensely and showed me incredible generosity. Paco Rodas, for 'adopting' me almost like a father, giving me advice and helping me with extraordinary love. I had the opportunity to spend time with incredible masters like Gabi Pareras, who blew my mind every time I had the chance to be with him. Juan Tamariz, who is obviously an extraordinary person capable of transmitting the passion for magic in a very personal way. Miguel Ángel Gea, a true master, Miguel Muñoz, and many other friends who are also extraordinary artists from whom I learn every day we spend together. In general, being in close contact with people of this caliber has taught me that you never stop learning, that you never 'arrive,' and that one must have a great deal of humility to dedicate oneself to this art. Otherwise, you risk retreating into a reality that distances you from the world and from others, making you believe things about yourself that are merely an illusion, which ultimately leads to nothing positive.

6. Who have been your biggest influences on magic and why?

I think I partially answered this question in my previous response. I've had and still have many influences on different levels. One I will never forget is the time I spent with Lennart Green... simply extraordinary.

7. What are you currently working on?

Right now, I am mainly focused on working on and improving various shows I have in progress, and on performing as much magic as possible at all kinds of events, for both magicians and non-magicians. Years ago, thanks to the great Miguel Ángel Gea, we decided to create a show in which Gea was the original creator of the idea and the director, and the performers are Paco Agrado, an incredible magician and friend based in

Madrid, and myself. I don't want to reveal too much about the show, but the experience of traveling the world as a trio, like a company, is for me yet another manifestation of humility and deep passion and love for this art. Collaboration in magic is not very common, but it's something very important.

8. Would you consider yourself someone who one day would become a master?

I don't know. I don't think it's something you decide.

9. What is your current favourite aspect about magic?

I believe that the essence of magic lies in creating an extraordinary space where we can see things from a different perspective and contemplate reality in an unconventional way. It's essential for me to establish a healthy and enjoyable connection with the audience, emphasizing the importance of passion and love for our craft, treating them with respect, and avoiding any narcissistic tendencies that could overshadow their experience. A magician should be unconventional, aiming to lead the audience away from everyday norms and negative relationships, as there's already plenty of that in the world we live in.

10. Any final thoughts you want to leave us with?

I believe we should consider ourselves very fortunate to have a passion like magic. For me, passion is the driving force of life. Love what you do, transmit this love to those around you, and try to avoid any kind of imposition or arrogance.

RICO WEELAND

Do you want to reserve the lecture Giancarlo Scalia. 75% of the seats are reserved, so sign up and join us!

[Giancarlo Scalia Registration form lecture](#)



Secrets of the Magus

Ricky Jay does closeup magic that flouts reality

Part 3

Victoria Dailey, who, along with her former husband, William Dailey, deals in rare books from a shop on Melrose Avenue, in Los Angeles, likes to refer to Jay as “our worst customer.” She hastens to point out, “He could be our best customer. He wants everything but can hardly buy anything.” Both Daileys regard Jay as “a true eccentric” in the English sense—part Bloomsbury, part Fawlty Towers. More than fifteen years ago, they sold Jay the first book for which he paid more than a hundred dollars. The first time he spent more than a thousand dollars for a book, and, again, when he reached the five-thousand-dollar threshold, the Daileys were also involved. The latter item was Jean Prévost’s “La Première Partie des Subtiles et Plaisantes Inventions,” the earliest known important conjuring book, printed in Lyons in 1584.

“I bought it unhesitatingly,” recalls Jay, for whom possession of the Prévost is a bittersweet memory; uncharacteristically, he parted with it during a fiscal crisis. “I bought it and then, with remarkable rapidity, three particular jobs that I thought I had went sour. One was a Johnny Carson special on practical jokes that didn’t pan out because of one of his divorces. Another was a tour of Australia that was cancelled by a natural disaster—in other words, by an act of God. This book was so fucking rare that people in the magic world just didn’t know about it.”

It is the Daileys’ impression—a perception shared by other dealers in rare books and incunabula—that Jay spends a higher proportion of his disposable income on rare books and artifacts than anyone else they know. His friend Janus Cercone has described him as “an incunable romantic.”

“Probably, no matter how much money he had, he would be overextended bibliomaniacally—or should the word be ‘bibliographically’? Anyway, he’d be overextended,” William Dailey has said. “The first time I met him, I recognized him as a complete bibliomaniac. He’s not a complete monomaniac about books on magic, but within that field he is remarkably focussed. His connoisseurship is impeccable, in that he understands the entire context of a book’s emergence. He’s not just interested in the book’s condition. He knows who printed it, and he knows the personal struggle the author went through to get it printed.”

In 1971, during Jay’s nomadic phase, he spent a lot of time in Boston hanging out with Diaconis, who had begun to assemble a library of rare magic books. Diaconis takes credit for explicating the rudiments of collecting to Jay and animating his academic interest. He now regards Jay as “ten standard deviations out, just the best in the world in his knowledge of the literature of conjuring.” Jay’s collection—several thousand volumes, plus hundreds of lithographs, playbills, pamphlets, broadsides, and miscellaneous ephemera—reflects his interest not only in magic but also in gambling, cheating, low life, and what he described in the subtitle of “Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women” as “unique, eccentric and amazing entertainers: stone eaters, mind readers, poison resisters, daredevils, singing mice, etc., etc., etc.” Though Jay abhors the notion of buying books as investments, his own collection, while it is not for sale and is therefore technically priceless, more or less represents his net worth. There was a time, within the past decade, when he seriously considered becoming a bookdealer himself. The main thing that dissuaded him, he says, is that “I wouldn’t want to sell a book to a philistine, which is what every bookseller has to do.” Unlike a lot of collectors, he actually reads and rereads the books and other materials he buys, and puts them to scholarly and performing use. Therefore, he has no trouble rationalizing why he, rather than someone else who might turn up at an auction or peruse a dealer’s catalogue, is more worthy

of owning, say, both variant editions of “A Synopsis of the Butchery of the Late Sir Washington Irving Bishop (Kamilimilianalani), a most worthy Mason of the thirty-second degree, the Mind Reader and philanthropist, by Eleanor Fletcher Bishop, His Broken Hearted Mother,” Philadelphia, 1889 and 1890.

One day last spring, I got a phone call from Jay, who had just returned to Los Angeles from Florida, where he and Michael Weber spent several months doing “pyromagical effects” on a movie called “Wilder Napalm.”

“There’s a pile of mail on my desk,” he said.

“I hope there are a few checks in it,” I said.

“Yes, actually, there are. But, of course, I just spent it all on a book.”

The book in question was Thomas Ady’s “A Candle in the Dark: Or a Treatise Concerning the Nature of Witches and Witchcraft,” which includes an important seventeenth-century account of an English magic performance. I had once heard Jay allude to “A Candle in the Dark” during a lecture at the Huntington Library, in San Marino, California. The Huntington owned a copy, and so did a few other institutions. Jay described it to me as “exceedingly rare—only one copy has been sold in my collecting lifetime,” and said that he had acquired his from a New York dealer “after a long negotiation.” On a subsequent visit to New York, he took me to meet the dealer, Steve Weissman, a preternaturally relaxed fellow, who was obviously quite fond of him.

“We have a common interest,” Weissman, who does business out of an office on the East Side, said. “We do like the same kinds of books. I don’t specialize in Ricky’s area of interest—only Ricky does—but I find that I gravitate toward it. My stock is dominantly literary. And I like oddball subjects: slang dictionaries, magic, gambling, con games. The advantage for me with Ricky is that he’s an enthusiast for a wide range of subjects. Most customers arrive and they’re entering the dealer’s world, my world. He walks in and I enter his world. The next customer through the door might be

a Byron fanatic and I'll have to enter his world. It's not a unique situation, but with Ricky it's particularly gratifying, because of the kind of collector he is—passionate and knowledgeable. Ideally, I would also include rich in that equation, but he doesn't qualify."

Referring to "A Candle in the Dark," Weissman added, "I don't doubt that I could have sold it for more money to someone else. But it's more fun to sell it to Ricky."

A young man with a ponytail and peach-fuzzy sideburns and wearing a herringbone-tweed topcoat entered the shop. As he closed the door behind him, the doorknob fell off. He picked it up and handed it to Weissman's assistant and said, "I think this is yours."

Sotto voce, Jay said, "Who is that guy?" "I think he's someone who's trying to swindle us into buying a Visa card, or something," Weissman said.

When the young man was ready to leave, a few minutes later, the doorknob had been reattached but would not turn. Twenty minutes elapsed before we were finally rescued by an upstairs neighbor who was able to open the door from the outside. While we waited, before our liberation seemed certain, Jay gestured at the wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling shelves of rare books and said, "To most people this would be hell. But to me it's just a holiday."

Several years ago, Weissman attended an auction at Christie's and, bidding on behalf of Jay and Nicolas Barker, of the British Library, bought a collection of rare engravings whose subject matter was calligraphy. Jay writes in a stylized calligraphic script, and Barker, having spent much of his professional life cataloguing and studying antiquarian manuscripts, confesses to being "passionately interested in the history of handwriting." There were more than thirty items in the auction lot, and Jay and Barker divided them according to a simple formula. "I kept all the images related to armless calligraphers," Jay says, "and Nicolas got all the calligraphers with arms."

In a chapter of "Learned Pigs" entitled "More Than the Sum of Their Parts," Jay recounts the skills and accomplishments of various men and women, all celebrated figures between the sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries, who lacked the usual complement of appendages—arms or legs or digits—and compensated in inspiring ways. He dotes especially on Matthew Buchinger, "The Wonderful Little Man of Nuremberg," who was born in 1674, died around 1740, and, in between, married four times, sired fourteen children, and "played more than a half dozen musical instruments, some of his own invention, and danced the hornpipe . . . amazed audiences with his skills at conjuring . . . was a marksman with the pistol and demonstrated trick shots at nine pins . . . was a fine penman; he drew portraits, landscapes, and coats of arms, and displayed remarkable calligraphic skills." Buchinger managed these transactions without the benefit of feet or thighs, and instead of arms he had "two fin-like excrescences growing from his shoulder blades." He stood, so to speak, only twenty-nine inches high. The Christie's auction enabled Jay to add significantly to his trove of Buchingeriana—playbills, engravings by and of the Wonderful Little Man, self-portraits, specimens of his calligraphy, and accounts of his performances as a conjurer. Segueing from a passage about Carl Herman Unthan, who was armless, played the violin with his feet, toured in vaudeville as "Unthan, the Pedal Paganini," and "fired the rifle . . . with enough skill and accuracy to be compared with the great trick shot artists Ira Paine and Doc Carver," Jay writes, "Writers, scientists, and medical men have explored the psychologies and physiologies of these prodigies; they and the public alike are intrigued by the relationship between the horrific and miraculous."

This last phrase concisely expresses Jay's central preoccupation as a scholar and a performer. "Learned Pigs" contains only passing references to Houdini, whose tirelessness as a self-promoter was concomitant with his gifts as an illusionist. Jay has attempted to rescue from the margins of history performers who in their day were no

less determined than Houdini to please their audiences. Here is an echt-Jay paragraph: As the novelty of fire-eating and -handling wore off, those performers not versatile enough to combine their talents into more diversified shows took to the streets. In 1861 Henry Mayhew, in Volume 3 of "London Labour and the London Poor," described one such salamander. After a fascinating and detailed account of a fire king learning his trade and preparing his demonstrations, we find the poor fellow has been reduced to catching rats with his teeth to earn enough money to survive.

The rest of the fire-handlers, geeks, acid-drinkers, bayonet-swallowers, mentalists, contortionists, illiterate savants, faith-healing charlatans, porcine-faced ladies, and noose-wearing high-divers who populate "Learned Pigs" routinely sacrifice their dignity, but they never lose their humanity. "I don't want to be seen as somebody who just writes about freaks," Jay says. "A lot of the people I write about were very famous in their day, and they were a great source of entertainment. Today, audiences are just as curious, just as willing to be amazed. But look at everything we're barraged with—it just doesn't lodge in the imagination the same way." His mission, in sum, is to reignite our collective sense of wonder.

Jay's fruitful combination of autodidacticism and freelance scholarship is itself a wonderful phenomenon. Reviewing "Learned Pigs" in the Times, John Gross wrote, "One effect of Mr. Jay's scholarship is to make it clear that even among freaks and prodigies there is very little new under the sun. Show him a stone-eater or a human volcano or an enterologist and he will show you the same thing being done before, often hundreds of years earlier." In the Philadelphia Inquirer Carlin Romano wrote, "'Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women' is a book so magnificently entertaining that if a promoter booked it into theatres and simply distributed a copy to each patron to read, he'd have the hit of the season." A blurb on the jacket from Penn and Teller says, "It's the coolest book . . . and probably the most brilliantly weird book ever." Jay wrote much of

"Learned Pigs" while occupying a carrel in the rare-book stacks of the Clark Library, at U.C.L.A. At one point, Thomas Wright, a librarian at the Clark and a former professor of English literature, tried to persuade him to apply for a postdoctoral research fellowship. When Jay explained that he didn't have a doctorate, Wright said, "Maybe a master's degree would be sufficient."

"Thomas, I don't even have a B.A."

Wright replied, "Well, you know, Ricky, a Ph.D. is just a sign of docility."

As Jay was completing the writing of "Learned Pigs," he received an offer, unexpected and irresistible, to become the curator of the Mulholland Library of Conjuring and the Allied Arts. John Mulholland, who died in 1970, was a distinguished magician, historian, and writer. He was also a close friend of Houdini, whom he befriended in his capacity as editor of *The Sphinx*, the leading magic journal of its time. Above all, he was an obsessively thorough collector of printed materials and artifacts relating to magic and other unusual performing arts. In other words, if Jay and Mulholland had got to know each other they would have become soul mates. Mulholland's collection comprised some ten thousand volumes, in twenty languages. In 1966, he moved it to The Players Club, on Gramercy Park, and until his death he remained its curator. In 1984, the club put it up for sale. The auction gallery that was handling the sale enlisted Jay to help catalogue the collection and advise on its dispersal. Jay feared that it would be broken up or sold overseas, and either outcome seemed perilously likely. At a late hour, however, a young Los Angeles attorney, businessman, and novice magician named Carl Rheuban—someone Jay had never heard of—turned up and bought the library intact, for five hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars.

Like a lot of promoters who floated extravagant fantasies during the profligate eighties, Rheuban knew friendly and indulgent bankers. As it happened, the friendliest of these bankers was Rheuban himself. In 1983, he founded the First Network Savings Bank,

leased office space in Century City, offered high interest rates to attract deposits from all over the country, and started investing the funds in complex and wishful real-estate ventures. By the spring of 1985, Jay had an office on the bank premises, where the collection was housed. Soon, he also had a steady salary, a staff of three assistants, a healthy acquisitions allowance, friendlier-than-ever relationships with dealers all over the world, and control of a superb research library. Plans were drafted for what Jay anticipated would be "a dream come true": the collection would be moved to a building in downtown Los Angeles, which would also accommodate a museum and a small theatre where he would regularly perform, as would other artists who appealed to his sensibilities. Edwin Dawes, a British historian of magic and a professor of biochemistry, who visited the library and regularly corresponded with Jay, has said, "It just seemed as if Ricky's fairy godmother had appeared to provide the environment in which to work and all the facilities to do the job." Even from the perspective of Jay, the inveterate skeptic, it was a nearly ideal situation. And, clearly, Rheuban, who was occupied with diverse enterprises, regarded him as the ideal overseer.

In April of 1990, however, First Network was abruptly closed by California banking regulators, and the Resolution Trust Corporation (R.T.C.), the federal agency created to cope with the nationwide savings-and-loan crisis, moved in to liquidate its assets. Rheuban soon filed for personal bankruptcy, and was reported to be the subject of a criminal-fraud investigation. With no forewarning, Jay discovered that he could not even gain access to his own office without first receiving permission from self-important bureaucrats who didn't know Malini from minestrone. The irony of this was unbearable. Had Ricky Jay, of all people, been victimized by a high-stakes con game?

If Rheuban did commit crimes, the government has yet to persuade a grand jury that they were transgressions worthy of an indictment. Nor does Jay at this point have a desire to know how, precisely, First Network

came undone. Regardless of what was going on inside the bank, Jay had felt that his working arrangement with Rheuban was basically satisfactory. Though they have not spoken in almost two years, he expresses no bitterness toward his former employer and benefactor. For the functionaries of the R.T.C., however, he harbors deep contempt. Because Rheuban's personal insolvency was enmeshed with the bank's insolvency, the fate of the Mulholland Library was for many months suspended in legal limbo. Brian Walton, an attorney and friend of Jay's, who advised him during the fiasco, has said, "When you look at the question of the ownership of the library, the moral ownership was clearly in Ricky's hands. The financial ownership was obviously elsewhere. But, of course, artists will often become divorced from what they create. Every day, there would be one yahoo or another messing with what were, in a moral sense, Ricky's treasures. One day, Ricky came by the library and there were some government people videotaping the collection for inventory purposes. And they'd just placed their equipment wherever they felt like it. Ricky looked at one guy and said, 'Get your stuff off those posters.' And the guy said, 'I'm So-and-So, from the F.B.I.' And Ricky said, 'I don't care who the fuck you are. Get your crap off those posters.' "

The outlandishness of the situation was compounded by the fact that the Mulholland Library proved to be a splendid investment—the only asset in the First Network bankruptcy which had appreciated significantly. After a year and a half of what Jay regarded as neglect and mismanagement, the R.T.C. finally put it up for sale at auction. The day before the auction, which was to be presided over by a bankruptcy judge in a downtown courtroom, Jay gave me my first and last glimpse of the collection, which was still in Century City. In the building lobby, on our way to what had been First Network's offices, on the fifth floor, Jay pointed out that the bank's small retail operation was now occupied by a custom tailor shop. Upstairs, we walked through an empty anteroom that had once been lined with vitrines, then headed down a long beige-

carpeted corridor. James Rust, a young R.T.C. employee, emerged from a corner office—formerly Rheuban’s—and greeted us. Our first stop was a large storage room filled with material from the collection of a German physician named Peter Hackhofer. “I bought different parts of this collection from Hackhofer in several crazy transactions,” Jay said. “He used to lead me on incredible goose chases all over Germany. We’d end up doing business at three in the morning on the Autobahn, halfway between Cologne and Frankfurt. We’d be pulled over to the side of the road with theatrical posters spread out on the roof of his car. Once, I went all the way to Germany to buy a collection that Hackhofer was going to broker, only to find out that the owner refused to sell. Months later, in New York, I met Hackhofer at a hotel. He’d brought with him a hundred posters, which, because his room was so small, he spread out in the hallway. He had to restrain me from attacking a bellboy who rolled over some of them with a luggage cart.” The storage room contained hundreds of books, in German and French, as well as a silk pistol, a billiard-ball stand, a vanishing and appearing alarm clock, a cube-shaped metal carrying case for a spirit bell, and a paper box with a ribbon on it, which Jay said was “a Victorian production reticule.” I knew that I could have happily occupied myself there for several hours, but he seemed eager to move on. We walked down another long corridor, past the erstwhile loan-servicing and accounting departments, and came to a locked door. As Rust unlocked it, Jay looked at me with a wry, I-will-now-have-my-liver-eaten-by-vultures sort of smile. We stepped into a square room, perhaps thirty by thirty. Bookshelves and glass-enclosed cabinets lined the walls, and tables and flat files filled the interior. Separated from this room by a glass partition was a ten-by-twelve cubicle that had been Jay’s office. It contained a desk, a wall of bookshelves, and a side table. Two automatons stood on the table. One, called “The Singing Lesson,” was the creation of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, the nineteenth-century watchmaker-turned-conjurer, who is considered the father of

modern magic. The other was a Chinese cups-and-balls conjurer built by Robert-Houdin’s father-in-law, Jacques Houdin. A large, framed color poster of Malini, advertising his “Round the World Tour,” hung on the wall to the left of Jay’s desk.

“I heard that that poster holds some sort of special significance for you, Ricky,” James Rust said.

Jay responded with an opaque, querulous stare that said, in effect, “Hey, pal, everything in this place holds special significance for me.” Along the back wall of the main room were shelved bound volumes of *The Sphinx*, *The Wizard*, *The Conjurer’s Monthly*, *The Linking Ring*, *The Magic Circular*, *Das Programm*, *La Prestidigitation*, *Ghost*, *The Magic Wand*, *The Gen*, *Mahatma*, and other periodicals. I spent an hour and a half in the main room, exploring the contents of the file drawers, staring into the glass display cases, pulling books from shelves, admiring framed lithographs, and listening to Jay. Ultimately, the experience was disquieting. Connected to virtually every item was a piquant vignette—a comic oddity, a compilation of historical or biographical arcana—but each digression inevitably led to a plaintive anticlimax, because the tangible artifacts had now passed from Jay’s care. I paged through the scrapbook of Edward Maro, “a Chautauqua-circuit magician who played the mandolin and did hand shadows.” A Barnum & Bailey poster trumpeting automotive daredevils—“*L’Auto Bolide Thrilling Dip of Death*”—had been used by Jay when he was “writing a piece about crazy car acts for an automotive magazine.” There was a lithograph of Emil Naucke, a corpulent charmer in a flesh-colored tutu, of whom Jay said, “He was a German wrestler in drag, he was a famous strongman, he had a theatre of varieties, and as part of his act or even hinted at in writing that such a thing existed. It got disseminated to three or five of us, and the one who does it beautifully is Ricky. Charlie had the capacity to watch Ricky practice it for several hours non-stop. He’d keep moving around the room to see it from every possible angle.”

After both Vernon and Miller died, there were memorial services at the Magic Castle—events that Jay refused to attend, because, he said to Freeman, “most of those people didn’t know anything about Vernon and Charlie.”

“I now say that keeping secrets is my single most important contribution to magic,” Diaconis says. “Listen, I have lots of things I won’t tell Ricky about. It’s pretty hard for us to fool each other. Several years ago, he borrowed my deck and had me pick a card. Then he told me to reach into my left trousers pocket and there was the card I’d picked. For half an hour, I was as badly fooled as I’ve ever been. In order for him to bring that about, he had to take dead aim at me. That’s a phrase we use in discussing the big con: taking dead aim—deeply researching somebody’s habits.” Jay once subjected Freeman to an equally unsettling experience. “I walked into Ricky’s apartment one day, and I was wearing a shirt that Charlie Miller had given to Ricky and that Ricky had left at my house,” Freeman says. “I was returning it, but, just for fun, I had put it on. I took the shirt off, and Ricky said, ‘Oh, just leave it on the back of that chair.’ Then we started talking for a while and he said he wanted to show me a new trick. He spread the deck face up and told me to point to a card. I did, and then I gathered and shuffled and dealt them face up. There were only fifty-one. I didn’t see my card. And he said, ‘Oh, well, go over and look in the pocket of that shirt over there.’ And the card was in the shirt pocket. It takes a lot of knowledge about people to be able to do something like that. Ricky was enormously satisfied. Did I figure it out? Well, I was very fooled at the time. I felt stupid, but it was nice to be fooled. That’s not a feeling we get to have very often anymore.”

Victoria Dailey, who, along with her former husband, William Dailey, deals in rare books from a shop on Melrose Avenue, in Los Angeles, likes to refer to Jay as “our worst customer.” She hastens to point out, “He could be our best customer. He wants everything but can hardly buy anything.” Both Daileys regard Jay as “a true eccentric” in the English

sense—part Bloomsbury, part Fawlty Towers. More than fifteen years ago, they sold Jay the first book for which he paid more than a hundred dollars. The first time he spent more than a thousand dollars for a book, and, again, when he reached the five-thousand-dollar threshold, the Daileys were also involved. The latter item was Jean Prévost’s “*La Première Partie des Subtiles et Plaisantes Inventions*,” the earliest known important conjuring book, printed in Lyons in 1584. “I bought it unhesitatingly,” recalls Jay, for whom possession of the Prévost is a bittersweet memory; uncharacteristically, he parted with it during a fiscal crisis. “I bought it and then, with remarkable rapidity, three particular jobs that I thought I had went sour. One was a Johnny Carson special on practical jokes that didn’t pan out because of one of his divorces. Another was a tour of Australia that was cancelled by a natural disaster—in other words, by an act of God. This book was so fucking rare that people in the magic world just didn’t know about it.” It is the Daileys’ impression—a perception shared by other dealers in rare books and incunabula—that Jay spends a higher proportion of his disposable income on rare books and artifacts than anyone else they know. His friend Janus Cercone has described him as “an incunable romantic.” “Probably, no matter how much money he had, he would be overextended bibliomaniacally—or should the word be ‘bibliographically’? Anyway, he’d be overextended,” William Dailey has said. “The first time I met him, I recognized him as a complete bibliomaniac. He’s not a complete monomaniac about books on magic, but within that field he is remarkably focussed. His connoisseurship is impeccable, in that he understands the entire context of a book’s emergence. He’s not just interested in the book’s condition. He knows who printed it, and he knows the personal struggle the author went through to get it printed.” In 1971, during Jay’s nomadic phase, he spent a lot of time in Boston hanging out with Diaconis, who had begun to assemble a library of rare magic books. Diaconis takes

credit for explicating the rudiments of collecting to Jay and animating his academic interest. He now regards Jay as “ten standard deviations out, just the best in the world in his knowledge of the literature of conjuring.” Jay’s collection—several thousand volumes, plus hundreds of lithographs, playbills, pamphlets, broadsides, and miscellaneous ephemera—reflects his interest not only in magic but also in gambling, cheating, low life, and what he described in the subtitle of “Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women” as “unique, eccentric and amazing entertainers: stone eaters, mind readers, poison resisters, daredevils, singing mice, etc., etc., etc., etc.” Though Jay abhors the notion of buying books as investments, his own collection, while it is not for sale and is therefore technically priceless, more or less represents his net worth. There was a time, within the past decade, when he seriously considered becoming a bookdealer himself. The main thing that dissuaded him, he says, is that “I wouldn’t want to sell a book to a philistine, which is what every bookseller has to do.” Unlike a lot of collectors, he actually reads and rereads the books and other materials he buys, and puts them to scholarly and performing use. Therefore, he has no trouble rationalizing why he, rather than someone else who might turn up at an auction or peruse a dealer’s catalogue, is more worthy of owning, say, both variant editions of “A Synopsis of the Butchery of the Late Sir Washington Irving Bishop (Kamilimilianalani), a most worthy Mason of the thirty-second degree, the Mind Reader and philanthropist, by Eleanor Fletcher Bishop, His Broken Hearted Mother,” Philadelphia, 1889 and 1890.

One day last spring, I got a phone call from Jay, who had just returned to Los Angeles from Florida, where he and Michael Weber spent several months doing “pyromagical effects” on a movie called “Wilder Napalm.”

“There’s a pile of mail on my desk,” he said.

“I hope there are a few checks in it,” I said.

“Yes, actually, there are. But, of course, I just spent it all on a book.”

The book in question was Thomas Ady’s “A Candle in the Dark: Or a Treatise Concerning

the Nature of Witches and Witchcraft,” which includes an important seventeenth-century account of an English magic performance. I had once heard Jay allude to “A Candle in the Dark” during a lecture at the Huntington Library, in San Marino, California. The Huntington owned a copy, and so did a few other institutions. Jay described it to me as “exceedingly rare—only one copy has been sold in my collecting lifetime,” and said that he had acquired his from a New York dealer “after a long negotiation.” On a subsequent visit to New York, he took me to meet the dealer, Steve Weissman, a preternaturally relaxed fellow, who was obviously quite fond of him.

“We have a common interest,”

Weissman, who does business out of an office on the East Side, said. “We do like the same kinds of books. I don’t specialize in Ricky’s area of interest—only Ricky does—but I find that I gravitate toward it. My stock is dominantly literary. And I like oddball subjects: slang dictionaries, magic, gambling, con games. The advantage for me with Ricky is that he’s an enthusiast for a wide range of subjects. Most customers arrive and they’re entering the dealer’s world, my world. He walks in and I enter his world. The next customer through the door might be a Byron fanatic and I’ll have to enter his world. It’s not a unique situation, but with Ricky it’s particularly gratifying, because of the kind of collector he is—passionate and knowledgeable. Ideally, I would also include rich in that equation, but he doesn’t qualify.”

Referring to “A Candle in the Dark,” Weissman added, “I don’t doubt that I could have sold it for more money to someone else. But it’s more fun to sell it to Ricky.”

A young man with a ponytail and peach-fuzzy sideburns and wearing a herringbone-tweed topcoat entered the shop. As he closed the door behind

him, the doorknob fell off. He picked it up and handed it to Weissman's assistant and said, "I think this is yours."

Sotto voce, Jay said, "Who is that guy?" "I think he's someone who's trying to swindle us into buying a Visa card, or something," Weissman said.

When the young man was ready to leave, a few minutes later, the doorknob had been reattached but would not turn. Twenty minutes elapsed before we were finally rescued by an upstairs neighbor who was able to open the door from the outside. While we waited, before our liberation seemed certain, Jay gestured at the wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling shelves of rare books and said, "To most people this would be hell. But to me it's just a holiday."

Several years ago, Weissman attended an auction at Christie's and, bidding on behalf of Jay and Nicolas Barker, of the British Library, bought a collection of rare engravings whose subject matter was calligraphy. Jay writes in a stylized calligraphic script, and Barker, having spent much of his professional life cataloguing and studying antiquarian manuscripts, confesses to being "passionately interested in the history of handwriting." There were more than thirty items in the auction lot, and Jay and Barker divided them according to a simple formula. "I kept all the images related to armless calligraphers," Jay says, "and Nicolas got all the calligraphers with arms." In a chapter of "Learned Pigs" entitled "More Than the Sum of Their Parts," Jay recounts the skills and accomplishments of various men and women, all celebrated figures between the sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries, who lacked the usual complement of appendages—arms or legs or digits—and compensated in inspiring ways. He dotes especially on Matthew Buchinger, "The Wonderful Little Man of Nuremberg," who was born in 1674, died around 1740, and, in between, married four times, sired fourteen children, and "played more than a half dozen musical instruments, some of his own

invention, and danced the hornpipe . . . amazed audiences with his skills at conjuring . . . was a marksman with the pistol and demonstrated trick shots at nine pins . . . was a fine penman; he drew portraits, landscapes, and coats of arms, and displayed remarkable calligraphic skills." Buchinger managed these transactions without the benefit of feet or thighs, and instead of arms he had "two fin-like excrescences growing from his shoulder blades." He stood, so to speak, only twenty-nine inches high. The Christie's auction enabled Jay to add significantly to his trove of Buchingeriana—playbills, engravings by and of the Wonderful Little Man, self-portraits, specimens of his calligraphy, and accounts of his performances as a conjurer.

Segueing from a passage about Carl Herman Unthan, who was armless, played the violin with his feet, toured in vaudeville as "Unthan, the Pedal Paganini," and "fired the rifle . . . with enough skill and accuracy to be compared with the great trick shot artists Ira Paine and Doc Carver," Jay writes, "Writers, scientists, and medical men have explored the psychologies and physiologies of these prodigies; they and the public alike are intrigued by the relationship between the horrific and miraculous."

This last phrase concisely expresses Jay's central preoccupation as a scholar and a performer. "Learned Pigs" contains only passing references to Houdini, whose tirelessness as a self-promoter was concomitant with his gifts as an illusionist. Jay has attempted to rescue from the margins of history performers who in their day were no less determined than Houdini to please their audiences.

BY MARK SINGER

APRIL 5, 1993

(To be continued)

This article appears for the first time in the New Yorker.



AGENDA

November 20 | [Lecture Giancarlo Scalia](#),
Cafe De Buurvrouw Amsterdam

November 24 - [Amsterdam Magic Society
Zoommeeting](#)

December 3 [Amsterdam Magic Show I](#)
Boom Chicago Amsterdam

December 9 | [AMSociety Meeting](#),
Mascini Amsterdam

December 11 | [Sips & Sorcery](#) Backstage
Café, Oudezijds Armsteeg 7, 1012 GP
Amsterdam

December 12 [The Great Magician
Curating Mysteries](#) - Rico Weeland I
Mascini, Amsterdam

January 7 [Amsterdam Magic Show I](#)
Boom Chicago Amsterdam

January 10 - 12 [Festival der Illusionen](#)
Sindelfingen, Germany

January 11-14 - [East Coast Spirit
Sessions 9](#), Myrtle Beach, South Carolina
USA

January 11-13 - [Gator Gate Gathering](#),
Orlando, Florida ,USA

January 12-14 - [The Session](#) in London,
England January 13 | [AMSociety Meeting](#),
Mascini Amsterdam

January 25-27 - [MagiFest](#) in Columbus,
Ohio, USA



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