



# THE BUZZ

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theSession20

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Some 20 magic aficionados showed up this evening, mostly members of AMS. Non AMS members had been welcomed just as well (at a higher entrance fee) but these formed a very small minority.



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We can wake you up in the middle of the night for.....

A snack.



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## SECRETS OF THE MAGUS

### MARK SINGER

"I know some people find this strange and weird," Jay said. "Actually, after this life I've lived, I have no idea what is strange and weird and what isn't. I don't know who else waxes poetic about the virtues of skeleton men, fasting impostors, and cannonball catchers. And, to be honest, I don't really care. I just think they're wonderful. I really do."

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](mailto:amsterdammagicsociety@gmail.com)



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## DEAR READER

Welcome to 2025! I hope your December was filled with magical moments and wonderful memories. Now that we've stepped into a new year, how are those New Year's resolutions coming along?

One of ours is especially exciting—we're planning to organize an international magic conference! With Amsterdam's well-connected airport and its reputation as a beloved destination, we're confident it will be an incredible event.

Speaking of conventions...

On the cover of this issue, you'll find my friends Andi Gladwin and Joshua Jay, founders of Vanishing Inc. and the masterminds behind The Session convention. I first met Andi back in 2009 at The Session when it was still held in his hometown of Gloucester. That's where I crossed paths with legends like Ray Kosby, John

Guastafarro, Tyler Wilson, and many others for the first time. The convention wasn't just about magic—it was about connecting with others and forging lasting friendships. Many of the relationships I built back then are still going strong today.

This year, Andi and Josh celebrate 20 incredible years of The Session. I want to extend my heartfelt congratulations to them on this milestone, and I wish them another 20 years of success and magic! Be sure to check out the 10-question interview with Andi later in this issue. Inside, you'll also find a review of Giancarlo Scalia's lecture, highlights from our latest online meeting, and much more.

Here's to a magical 2025 and all the adventures it brings!

ENJOY READING

*Fritz with a Z*





## LECTURE GIANCARLO SCALIA

The Amsterdam Magic Society announced several weeks ago that Giancarlo Scalia would visit AMS on November 20 last with the following announcement:

Giancarlo Scalia is an Italian magician and actor based in Madrid. Since starting his magic journey as a child, he has developed his interest in the performing arts by learning various circus disciplines and continues his artistic training by studying physical theatre and mime in Italy and Spain.

Some 20 magic aficionados showed up this evening, mostly members of AMS. Non AMS members had been welcomed just as well (at a higher entrance fee) but these formed a very small minority.

Giancarlo shared with us many of his own inventions and/or improvements of existing effects, mostly employing coins and cards in a parlour setting. During more than two hours with only a tiny (one cigarette long) interval he used the demonstration of his effects to share his vision of magic and his personal theory about magic with us.

Dai Vernon advised us several decades ago already: Be Natural! What does that mean? In general and for you or me in particular?

Giancarlo demonstrated very convincingly how when your body is tense, the audience will watch also (in)tensely and when we relax the opposite happens.

Thus he interlaced his explanations between the effects repeatedly proving the validity and great effectiveness of (t)his approach. For the average spectator this may have seemed a bit repetitive,

but Giancarlo wanted to convince us by showing a variety of examples in his demonstrations. We learn by repeating and as they say in (French) advertising: frapper toujours. In other words, this repetition did not disturb me one bit.

He had chosen his effects on aspects as: clearness of construction, well choreographed and because of his natural and relaxed (i.e. unsuspecting) performance with a maximum impact on the audience. And the audience consisted of a lot of professional and seasoned performers who repeatedly reacted with loud WOW's and with thundering applause.

I have to suppress my tendency to label the last lecture I attended "the best lecture I have seen in a long time" but in the case of Giancarlo I gladly make an exception.

Giancarlo is a amiable and charming person performing at an even and natural pace, knocking his audience between their eyes over and over again.... And they thank him abundantly and load him with praise for this!

To conclude I would like to share a personal experience with you. It must have been around 1970 that I traveled from my (then) home town Zutphen to Amsterdam by train and subsequently by tramway to Marcanti in Amsterdam in order to attend a lecture by Slydini. On the stage was a table with a large (and long!) table cloth and Slydini shared with us (and explained) his pet secrets during some 1,5 hours. This lecture and travel altogether cost me then not only an entire day but also some 75 Dutch guilders, an impressive amount of money for a young student at that time Slydini was a "killer" and because his reputation had traveled ahead of him the room was fully packed.

Reflecting on Giancarlo Scalia I do not hesitate to call him the Slydini of 2025. In case Slydini was looking down on this

November 20 night I am confident that he would have watched with great admiration and appreciation.... and most likely: with a bit of jealousy, as well. Quite a compliment!

TEKST & PHOTO GANDALF





## International Club Night

Hello Everybody!

We had a fantastic third edition of the International Club Nights in November.

Everyone got together to discuss [LOST IN THE SHUFFLE](#), and by the end of the evening, we solved the murder mystery. Again, we had guests from all over the world.

Several performers showed off effects, starting with Killian who performed an effect based on card tracking techniques known by card cheats while gambling.

Loshayden demonstrated one of his latest [OKITO](#) boxes - an incredibly visual teleportation of three coins, one at a time. This box (and related coins) took a month and a half to craft.

Fritz with a Z performed card switches and invisible palming.

Robina joined us again from Texas and showed off her Treasure Chest as well as her performance area for her free virtual shows - which happen on Tuesdays and Wednesdays [free tickets at [RobinaMagic.com](#)].

Bram showed off some magic, transforming several black cards into red cards, and Reg also showed off a card transformation.

Russel Almond III from Virginia joined us; he demonstrated an effect where a rod is inserted through a playing card and is magically freed. <https://youtube.com/@russella3>

Many thanks to all the magicians who visited, and a big thank you to those who showed off effects. Everyone at AMS is looking forward to growing these meetings and brainstorming more and more together.

The next one will be a slight change of pattern - we will do it the second to last Sunday this month - the 22nd! This date will allow us to do festive magic for the holidays and give everyone the next week as a break between Christmas and New Year's.

Please join us, and if you can, do some festive magic! It will happen at 8 pm again, Sunday the 22nd of December.

The Zoom link will be active at that time <https://zoom.amsterdammagicsociety.com>.

This meeting will again be open to magicians whether they are or are not yet members of the Society.

Best wishes,



# 10 QUESTIONS

## Andi Gladwin

1. Most memorable magic convention, both as an organizer and an attendee.

As an attendee, the most memorable convention I ever attended was the TSD Convention in Chicago. It was held in 2003 and was one of my first international conventions. The convention was in homage to Edward Marlo and almost all of his living students were there. I learned so much about his magic that weekend. Plus, there were two other conventions being simultaneously held in the same tiny hotel ... a swinger's convention and a Japanese Christian Revival. It was quite the unusual weekend!

As an organiser, the last time we ran The Session in Cheltenham was pretty special. We had David Blaine, Asi Wind, Derren Brown, Juan Tamariz, Roberto Giobbi and others. It was quite the event, and it was extra special for me as it was in my hometown.

2. What is one of your hobbies?

Is there time in the day for anything other than magic?! I do love watching stand-up comedy though.

3. Favorite city?

That changes regularly. I've spent a lot of time in Chicago over the past year or two because of my show at the Rhapsody Theater, and I have fallen in love with that city.

4. We can wake you up in the middle of the night for...

A snack.

5. Who inspires you as a magician?

I take inspiration from everything and everyone. But my closest magic friends are Joshua Jay and Luke Jermay — and they inspire me a lot!

6. One thing you cannot live without when organizing a convention?

The Vanishing Inc. team. As corny as it sounds, they're the true heroes of the conventions we organise.

7. What trick are you working at the moment?

It's not quite a trick, but I'm spending a lot of time working on the tabled faro riffle shuffle right now. I'm almost there ... most of the time!

8. Ed Marlo or Dai Vernon?

I'm presently writing a biography about Ed Marlo. So I'd probably Marlo. But, alas, in the book I also warn of the dangers of pitting the two against each other!

9. If you could book a performer, dead or alive, who would you have?

Ricky Jay doing his 52 Assistants show.

10. One piece of advice you give to somebody who wants to organize a magic convention.

Pick your team. If you surround yourself with the best people, you'll put on the best convention.





# Secrets of the Magus

Ricky Jay does closeup magic that flouts reality

## Part 4

Here is an real 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 was about the size of a lady's handbag, and 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 he danced with a midget." A lithograph of Martini-Szeny depicted "a Hungarian Houdini imitator who wore chaps and a Mexican hat and used to have himself strapped to a cactus," Jay said. "I was going to write a book on Houdini imitators that I would call 'Houdini: Howdini, Oudini, Martini-Szeny, and Zucchini, Pretenders to the Throne.' And with these reference books over here I could look up and see exactly where Martini-Szeny performed in, say, February of 1918. I bought this entire collection from an old circus artist in Atlanta who did a barrel act."

We wandered back into Jay's former office at one point. To his obvious annoyance, Rust wound up the "Singing Lesson" automaton. While it was playing, Jay turned his attention to a book that had been sitting on his desk, a seventeenth-century copy of the first book on magic to be printed in Dutch. The front cover had become separated from the binding. "That's nice," he said with sarcasm. "This was not detached."

Rust nodded in acknowledgment.

"That's creepy," Jay continued. "This was a really solid vellum binding. That's why I don't

want people in here who don't know how to handle books."

"Do you know how many hands have been here, Ricky?"

"Yes, and it's really creepy."

When Rust left the room, Jay said to me, "You know, I never had any agreement with Carl. At the outset, he asked me, 'What do you want?' And I said, 'I want access to this collection for the rest of my life.' And he said, 'Fine.' After we moved in here, I unpacked every single book. We catalogued what we could, but, as with any active collection, you can never really catch up. In the five years I was here, I almost doubled the size of the collection. This was the only thing I ever did that I spoke of myself as doing into the indefinite future."

Shortly after eight o'clock the next morning, I picked Jay up in front of his apartment building, and we drove downtown to the courthouse, where the auction would take place. A couple of days earlier, he had said to me, "I've talked to a lot of people who say they might be bidding, and I can tell you that, without a single exception, they're utterly soulless. No one gets it, no one has a clue to what the collection is really about. There actually are people who are knowledgeable about this, but they're not the ones who are able to buy it." As it was, the disposition of the Mulholland Library now seemed a foregone conclusion. David Copperfield, a workaholic stage illusionist who spends several weeks each year performing in Las Vegas and the other weeks touring the world, had agreed to pay two million two hundred thousand dollars for it. The only thing that could alter this outcome would be a competing bidder—bids would be allowed in minimum increments of fifty thousand dollars—and none had materialized.

At the courthouse, we discovered that the bankruptcy-court clerk had altered the docket and we were more than an hour early. Jay and I retreated to a cafeteria, where we were soon joined by William Dailey, the bookdealer, and by Steve Freeman, Michael Weber, and Brian Walton. When we finally entered the courtroom, Copperfield was already seated in

the front row of the spectator gallery, along with two attorneys, a personal assistant, and a couple of advisers, who were also acquaintances of Jay's. Twenty or so other people, among them several lawyers representing creditors in the Rheuban bankruptcy, were also present. Copperfield is a slender, almost gaunt man in his mid-thirties with thick black eyebrows, brown eyes, aquiline features, and leonine dark hair. He was dressed all in black: double-breasted suit, Comme des Garçons T-shirt, suède cowboy boots.

John Gaughan, a designer of stage illusions, who was seated with Copperfield, said to Jay, "Did you bring some cards?"

"Oh, yes," Jay replied. "When you feel your life threatened, you're always prepared." Then he asked Copperfield, "Where have you come from?"

"Atlantic City."

"Ah—from one gambling arena to another."



The judge, the Honorable Vincent P. Zurzolo, appeared briefly, only to learn that Katherine Warwick, the main lawyer for the R.T.C., had not yet arrived. Ten minutes later, she breezed in and, in a friendly, casual manner, distributed to the other lawyers present her reply to a motion objecting to the allocation of the proceeds. About half an hour of legalistic colloquy ensued—a debate over whether the auction could even take place and, if so, when. At last, the Judge asked a fifty-thousand-dollar question: "Is there anyone who is here



to overbid the bidder who has made the initial offer?”

There was a minute of silence, broken in my corner of the spectator section by Jay muttering, “Unbelievable. Unbelievable.” And, with that, David Copperfield—a man who owned neither a home nor an automobile but was reported to be looking for a warehouse; a man whose stage presentations were once described to me as “resembling entertainment the way Velveeta resembles cheese”—had bought the Mulholland Library for two million two hundred thousand dollars. Katherine Warwick reminded Copperfield’s attorneys that he had fifteen days—until the end of the month—to remove the collection from Century City, because the R.T.C. was shutting down its operation there. There were handshakes among the Copperfield entourage, and then Copperfield approached Jay.

“Thank you for everything,” he said, extending his hand.

“You’ll enjoy it,” Jay said. “I did.”

“You know you’ll be welcome any time.”

“We’ll speak again in the future, I’m sure,” Jay said.

A friend of Jay’s who also knew Copperfield said to me later, “David Copperfield buying the Mulholland Library is like an Elvis impersonator winding up with Graceland.”

A few weeks ago, Copperfield arranged for Jay to be flown to Las Vegas to discuss the collection. A driver met Jay at the airport and delivered him to a warehouse. In front was an enormous neon sign advertising bras and girdles. It was Copperfield’s conceit that the ideal way for a visitor to view the Mulholland Library would be to pass first through a storefront filled with lingerie-clad mannequins and display cases of intimate feminine apparel. With enthusiasm, Copperfield escorted Jay around the premises, insisting that he read each of the single-entendre slogans posted on the walls—“We Support Our Customers” and “Our Bras Will Never Let You Down”—and also the punning tributes inscribed on celebrity photographs from the likes of Debbie Reynolds, Jerry Lewis, and Buddy Hackett.

When Copperfield pressed one of the red-nippled breasts of a nude mannequin, the electronic lock on a mirrored door deactivated, and he and Jay stepped into the main warehouse space. Construction work had recently been completed on an upper level. Jay followed Copperfield up a stairway and into a suite of rooms that included several offices, a bedroom, and a marble-tiled bathroom. The bathroom had two doors, one of which led to an unpartitioned expanse where the contents of the Mulholland Library—much of it shelved exactly as it had been in Century City, some of it on tables, some of it not yet unpacked—had been deposited.

Jay stayed an hour—long enough to register pleasure at seeing the collection once again and dismay at the context in which he was seeing it. When Copperfield asked whether he would be willing to work as a consultant on an occasional basis—“Basically, he wanted to know whether, whenever he needs me, I would drop whatever I’m doing and tell him what he’d bought”—Jay recognized an offer that he could easily resist.

After Jay returned to Los Angeles, he said, “As much as I love this collection, I didn’t think I could handle going through Copperfield’s bra-and-girdle emporium every time I went to see it.”

Clearly, Jay has been more interested in the craft of magic than in the practical exigencies of promoting himself as a performer. His friend T. A. Waters has said, “Ricky has turned down far more work than most magicians get in a lifetime.” Though he earns high fees whenever he does work, a devotion to art rather than a devotion to popular success places him from time to time in tenuous circumstances.

At the moment, he is mobilizing a project that should reward him both artistically and financially. What he has in mind is a one-man show, on a stage somewhere in New York, to be billed as “Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants”—an evening’s entertainment with a deck of cards. He envisions an intimate setting.

"All I value as a performer is for people to want to see me," Jay says. "I mean people who have come just to see me—they're not going out to hear music, they're not out to get drunk or to pick up women. I'd much rather perform in a small theatre in front of a few people than in an enormous Las Vegas night club."

Provided that the right theatre and the right situation materialize, David Mamet has agreed to direct such a production. "I'm very honored to be asked," Mamet told me. "I regard Ricky as an example of the 'superior man,' according to the I Ching definition. He's the paradigm of what a philosopher should be: someone who's devoted his life to both the study and the practice of his chosen field." Having directed Jay now in three films—and they are collaborating on the screenplay of another—Mamet holds him in high esteem as an actor. "Ricky's terrific," Mamet said. "He doesn't make anything up. He knows the difference between doing things and not doing things. The magician performs a task and the illusion is created in the mind of the audience. And that's what acting is about."

Jay now spends the greater part of his typical workdays alone in his Old Spanish-style Hollywood apartment. It is the repository of his collection, the research facility for his scholarly pursuits. Overloaded bookshelves line the living-room and bedroom walls, and stacks of books on the floors make navigation a challenge. Posters, playbills, and engravings decorate any available wall space—several Buchingers, Toby the Learned Pig (the most gifted of the sapient swine), Madame Girardelli (the fireproof woman), Houdini suspended upside down in a water-torture cell, Erno Acosta balancing a piano on his head, a three-sheet poster of Cinquevalli (the most famous juggler at the turn of the century). Jay sleeps beneath a huge color lithograph of an Asian-looking man billed as Okito, whom he described to me as "the fifth of six generations or the fourth of five generations—depending on whose story you want to believe—of a family of Dutch Jewish magicians, a twentieth-century performer

whose real name was Theodore Bamberg." Between two books on a shelf in the corner of his kitchen is a photograph of Steve Martin, inscribed "To Ricky, Without you there would be no Flydini. Think about it. Steve." This refers to a comedy magic routine that Jay helped Martin develop a few years ago, a dumb-show piece that he has performed at charity events and on television. As the Great Flydini, Martin appears onstage dressed in tails, unzips his trousers, and smiles uncomfortably as an egg emerges from his fly, followed by another egg, a third egg, a lit cigarette, a puff of smoke, two more eggs, a ringing telephone, a bouquet of flowers, a glass of wine, a silk handkerchief that a pretty girl walks off with and drops, whereupon it flies back inside his trousers, a Pavarotti hand puppet, and soap bubbles.

The last time I visited Jay in his apartment, he was working simultaneously on more than half a dozen projects. Within the past year, he has begun to do his writing on a computer, rather than in longhand on a legal pad with a calligraphic pen. This has evidently not made the process any less daunting. "Writing is the only thing in my life that hasn't got easier," he said. "I can say that categorically. Right now, I'm finishing a magazine article that was supposed to be about human ingenuity, but somehow I've ended up writing about child prodigies. Here's my lead sentence: 'Solomon Stone, the midget lightning calculator, was an overachiever.'"

I go from Solomon Stone to the Infant Salambo. This was a child who was from a turn-of-the-century show-biz family. She was abandoned by them for several years, and when they turned up again they realized she had been neglected, had had absolutely no education.

But within a year she was appearing onstage, having been reinvented as Salambo, the Infant Historian—get this—"absolutely the most clever and best-informed child the world has ever seen."



He showed me a prospectus for Jay's Journal of Anomalies, a letterpress-printed broadside for "a periodical devoted to the investigation of conjurers, cheats, hustlers, hoaxers, pranksters . . . arcana, esoterica, curiosa, varia . . . scholarly and entertaining . . . amusing and elucidating . . . iconographically stimulating . . ."

"I just finished a piece for Jay's Journal on performing dogs who stole the acts of other dogs," he said. "Next, I want to do a piece about crucifixion acts—you know, real crucifixions that were done as entertainment.

The idea for this came to me one Easter Sunday. Bob Lund, from the American Museum of Magic, has just sent me a little book on Billy Rose's Theatre that contained one sentence he knew would interest me—about a woman who swung nude from a cross to the strains of Ravel's 'Boléro.' Her name was Faith Bacon. This was in the thirties. Unlike some of the other performers I've turned up, in her act she only simulated crucifixion. Anyway, I'm playing around with that." Over the past few years, Jay has given a number of lectures on the origins of the confidence game, which he hopes to expand into a book-length history of cheating and deception. For the Whitney Museum's Artists and Writers series, he is writing a book to be illustrated by William Wegman and others. It is a history of trick magic books, which were first produced in the sixteenth century. "I'm really intrigued with the concept of the book as both a subject and an object of mystery," he said.

Most afternoons, Jay spends a couple of hours in his office, on Sunset Boulevard, in a building owned by Andrew Solt, a television producer who three years ago collaborated with him on an hour-long CBS special entitled "Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women," which is the only prime-time network special ever hosted by a sleight-of-hand artist. He decided now to drop by the office, where he had to attend to some business involving a new venture that he has begun with Michael Weber—a consulting company called Deceptive Practices, Ltd., and

offering "Arcane Knowledge on a Need to Know Basis." They are currently working on the new Mike Nichols film, "Wolf," starring Jack Nicholson. When Jay arrived at his office, he discovered that a parcel from a British dealer had been delivered in that day's mail. "Oh my. Oh my. This is wonderful," he said as he examined an early-nineteenth-century chapbook that included a hand-colored engraving of its subject—Claude Seurat, the Living Skeleton. "Look," he said, pointing to some scratched numerals on the verso of the title page. "This shelf mark means this was in the library of Thomas Phillips, the most obsessive book-and-manuscript collector of the nineteenth century."

The mail had also brought a catalogue from another British dealer, who was offering, for a hundred and fifty pounds, an engraving and broadside of Ann Moore, the Fasting Woman of Tutbury. By the time we left the office, an idea for an issue of Jay's Journal had begun to percolate.

"I could do fasting impostors and living skeletons," Jay said. "Or what might really be interesting would be to do living skeletons and fat men. For instance, I could write about Seurat and Edward Bright, the Fat Man. Except I might prefer a contemporary of Seurat's, Daniel Lambert. He was even fatter than Bright, but he's been written about more. With Bright, the pleasure would be writing about the wager involving his waistcoat. When he died, the wager was that five men twenty-one years of age could fit into his waistcoat.

As it happened, seven grown men could fit inside. I have an exquisite black-and-white engraving of Bright, from 1751. And I have a great hand-colored engraving of Bright and Lambert, from 1815, which has an inset of the seven men in the waistcoat."

Back at the apartment, Jay examined the Seurat book and brought out for comparison an 1827 eight-page French pamphlet on Seurat. I asked what other Seurat material he had, and he removed his shoes, stood on the arm of a sofa, and brought down from a shelf one of four volumes of the 1835 edition of “Hone’s Every Day Book, and Table Book; or, Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastimes, Ceremonies, Manners,

Customs, and Events, Incident to Each of the Three Hundred and Sixty-five Days, in Past and Present Times; forming a Complete History of the Year, Months, and Seasons, and a Perpetual Key to the Almanac.” In it he immediately found two engravings of Seurat, alongside one of which he had written in pencil a page reference to a competing living skeleton. “Oh, yes, I remember this,” he said. “I have stuff on other living skeletons, too. I’ve got to show you this George Anderson poster I bought at an auction in London in 1983.”



Ricky Jay  
(June 26, 1946 – November 24, 2018)

We moved into the dining room, where there was a flat-file cabinet. He opened the bottom drawer, which was filled to capacity with lithographs and engravings, each one a Ricky Jay divagation: “T. Nelson Downs, the King of

Koins . . . Samri S. Baldwin, the White Mahatma . . . Holton the Cannonball Catcher. I have a lot of stuff on cannonball catchers. . . . The Freeze Brothers, blackfaced tambourine jugglers . . . Sylvester Schaffer, a great variety artist . . . Josefa and Rosa Blazek, the Bohemian violin-playing Siamese twins. And here are Daisy and Violet Hilton, the saxophone-playing Siamese twins from San Antonio. . . . And here’s Rastelli, perhaps the greatest juggler who ever lived. . . . What’s that? Oh, a poster for ‘House of Games.’ . . . I’m just trying to get to the George Anderson piece that’s sticking out at the end. . . . Oh, this is the Chevalier D’Eon, a male fencer in drag. He used to be the French Ambassador to the Court of St. James’s. It’s a great story but it takes too long.”

Jay had reached and placed on the dining-room table the George Anderson poster, a postbellum piece printed in New Hampshire using wooden type and a large woodblock image of Anderson, who had made an art and livelihood of attenuation. He appeared to be five and a half feet tall and to weigh about sixty-five pounds.

“I know some people find this strange and weird,” Jay said. “Actually, after this life I’ve lived, I have no idea what is strange and weird and what isn’t. I don’t know who else waxes poetic about the virtues of skeleton men, fasting impostors, and cannonball catchers. And, to be honest, I don’t really care. I just think they’re wonderful. I really do.” ♦

BY MARK SINGER

APRIL 5, 1993

(End of the series)

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





## AGENDA

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

Februari 4 [Amsterdam Magic Show I](#)  
Boom Chicago Amsterdam

Februari 10 | [AMSociety Meeting](#), Mascini  
Amsterdam

February 12-16 - [Flasoma](#) in Cali,  
Colombia USA

February 14-16 - [Blackpool Convention](#) in  
Blackpool, England.

February 17-19 - [Kapital Konvention](#) in  
Washington, DC USA

March 1-2 - [NEMCON](#) (New England  
Magicians' Conference)

March 7-9 - [Winter Carnival of Magic](#) in  
Pigeon Forge, Tennessee USA







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