

HOW'JADOIT?

With topless assistants and vanishing elephants, magic has levitated Vegas. If Houdini were alive, he'd turn over in his grave

By Gerri Hirshey

AS OUR PLANE BANKS FOR LANDING, THE PILOT POINTS OUT A huge black pyramid rising from the desert floor; from its apex, an eerie beam of light pierces the clear night.

"Suspend disbelief, folks," our captain commands. "We're not over Kansas anymore."

Many folks cheer. We are so low approaching the Las Vegas airport, I can see the big tan sphinx that guards the entrance to that Egyptoid temple of wonders, the new Luxor Hotel. I have come to venture through its plaster paws, to boldly ford the tour-boat-jammed "Nile River" that runs through the lobby and ascend to the "attraction level." Ignoring all the posted health warnings about vertigo and back injuries, I will dare to strap myself into a bucking, slamming pod with seven screaming persons from Fujian province (here for the Chinese New Year) and rocket through a "cinematic ride" revealing the "mysteries of the pyramid."

And still, I will crave more magic. I have vowed to seek out fiendish decapitators and body shrinkers, flying humans, vanishing pachyderms, levitating brides and battling monkey men. I have come here to be amazed. And I wish to hell I'd brought the Dramamine.

"Illusion, all illusion!" one Chinese teen keeps howling as our pyramid pod dodges on-screen stalagmites and hostile rocket fire. The force throws us against one another, sends somebody's TicTacs raining against the curved wall screen. A woman starts to vomit into her fanny pack. Despite this pungent reality at his elbow, the teen is still yelling. "ALL HERE IS ILLUSION!"

Which is why the city is sold out. Every 4,000-room mega-inn, every fleabag motel. *Booked*. All comers seem willing to suspend disbelief and their MasterCard privileges with hearty élan. Illusion, in the form of fruit machines, video poker and theme-park hotels, is doing landmark business here. And so is the ancient art of magic. If, as

the entertainment trend-spotters tell us, America is in the midst of a magic renaissance, Las Vegas—a town that can't function without smoke machines and lasers—is the necromancer's Firenze.

Its Medicis are a bunch of wily casino doges and spreadsheet seers who predicted a decade ago what's now dawning on the rest of us: Nineties reality sucks. And its most breathtaking astonishments are rarely pleasant ones. Now that Times Square's bright lights flash on a clock ticking off the national debt and another totting up child gun deaths, it's no wonder that hordes of once-dancin' feet are wearily padding down the Jetways at Vegas's McCarran Airport. The reality refugees have a simple request.

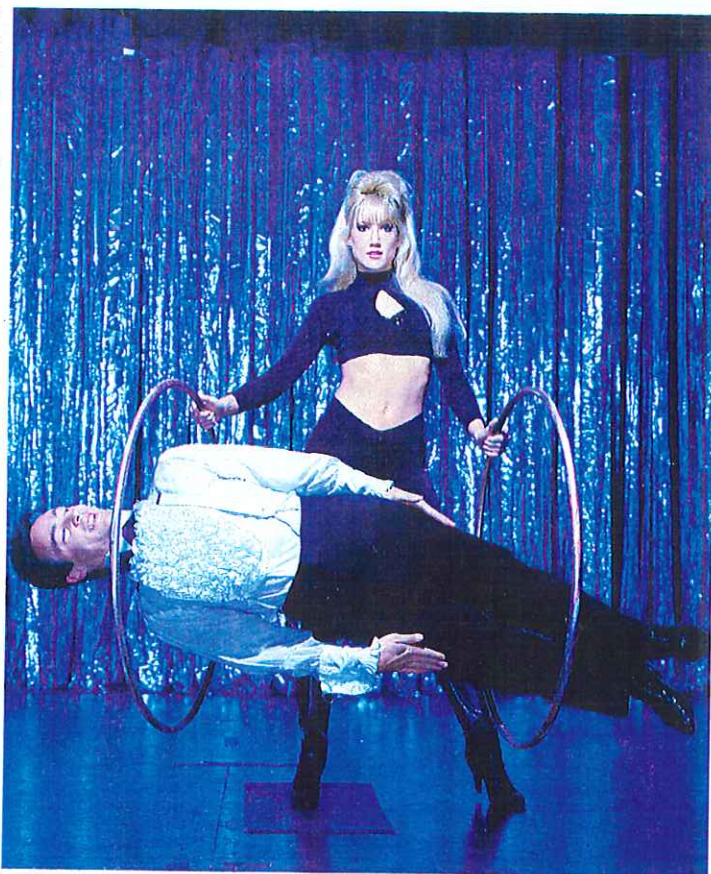
Amaze us.

No problem here in Bugsy's oasis. The place is lousy with bunny-tuggers. The city is home to *Magic* magazine, the trade bible, and has recently supported as many as nine simultaneous major magic-oriented acts in the big showrooms. Caesars is so bullish on wizardry it's building Caesars Magical Empire, which will house two magic theaters.

There's a conjurer for every taste here. Want some naughty neo-magic? Penn and Teller are regulars at Bally's. Anarchy and social commentary? Try Cirque du Soleil, the Canadian street troupe that now has a permanent home in the achingly hokey Treasure Island Hotel. Cirque's hippie-dippy trickster, Wayne Hronek, will

gleefully dump popcorn on the priciest palazzo pants and—*presto!*—rearrange that \$90 coif in the service of prole power. Get off on big cats and bigger hair? Siegfried and Roy, those Teutonic tigermeisters, fill the 1,500-seat Mirage showroom twice a night, six nights a week—at \$73 a ticket. The waiting line for cancellations stretches past eight banks of slots in the casino.

Magic can now also claim its own superstar. David Copperfield, who does ten weeks a year at Caesars Palace, was on the cover of



Melinda Saxe Burton puts her husband, Lance, through hoops.

Forbes's "top earning entertainers" issue last year—on the strength of his \$26 million income. That's more than Schwarzenegger! More than Madonna or Tom Cruise! Copperfield, né Kotkin, has been in the business since he was 10. He's done fifteen magic specials for CBS. This year, riding this magic mania, he got a two-hour prime-time "retrospective." Suddenly—and with no little thanks to his fiancée, German supermodel Claudia Schiffer—Copperfield is a media toy boy, sucking in his cheeks for Herb Ritts billboards on Sunset Boulevard and ducking paparazzi lightning beneath the commodious shadow of a bodyguard/trainer.

But Copperfield isn't really a Vegas act. He does 500 shows a year, most of them on the hustings: Ohio, Texas, Florida. Even in blasé Berlin, believers get misty over his little-boy-in-a-snowstorm finale.

This mass craving for a dose of shazam has also invaded America's malls and boardrooms. Magic stores from New York to Atlanta are moving trick decks and wands in record volume. CEOs are hiring illusionists to pep up sales meetings. Even among Microsoft's computer nerds at the company headquarters, in Seattle, the current obsession is Magic, a fantasy Dungeons and Dragons-type game played with shockingly low-tech cards. In the game's first six months on the market, more than 50 million cards were sold nationwide, with projections of over 150 million by this summer.

My personal trend-meter gonged when I tapped into a serious magic buzz back home in cynical Manhattan. It's not a magic town—even Copperfield doesn't bring his road show there. Imagine the shock, then, one chilly March morning on the Upper West Side, when four blocks' worth of cool Calvin'd types stood warming their fingers round lattes-to-go. They began coming at dawn on a Sunday in hopes of securing a ticket to see an evening of prestidigitation titled *Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants*. In a city that has more three-card-monte dealers than pigeons, they were queuing up to see card tricks!

Of course, they had to be the best card tricks, with a certain upscale cachet. Ricky Jay is an acknowledged genius of legerdemain. And after years of futile attempts to get his show mounted, he played a totally sold-out run from February through May in the tiny 108-seat Second Stage Theater. The show was directed by playwright David Mamet, a friend and fan. Long a critics' darling, respected for the witty scholarship of his 1986 book of human oddities, *Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women*, Jay drew a mixed bag of magic nuts, eggheads, faddists and high-Q-factor celebs.

The night I lucked in, Jay held us transfixed without bunnies or babes; just the cards, a few windup toys, one watermelon and a seamless monologue that drew on the cadences of three-card-monte hustlers, carny barkers—and François Villon. With all that chat, Jay performed a trick that would be suicide for most wand-wavers: He gave our collective gullibility context. His

Burton's self-levitation takes place with a near-naked female assistant straddling his magic-wand zone.

narrative traced the history of human curiosity, invoking a pantheon of petty thieves and con men, cardsharps and true wizards.

Proud to take his place among them, Jay has always been up-front about the art of illusion. It's his serious life's work to play us for chumps. "Any profession is a conspiracy against the laity," he says, quoting from Thorstein Veblen. "As you TV fans know."

A large, rounded man in a rumpled suit, Jay is not your typical hunky, brilliantined conjurer. His charms are wit and skill. Nonetheless, his performance oozes with the macho assurance of a committed mountebank. "I do this," he'll say of a stupefying card trick, "just 'cause I can."

This is a man who understands the timeless seductions of his art. Though magic and sex have a long and intimate relationship, Jay's is more of a cerebral come-on; the tingle is in the little gray cells.

Here in Vegas, they aim a bit lower than the cerebellum. Houdini, the father of entertainment bondage, would doubtless blush at the trussed nymphets who now brave the perils of magicians' buzz saws. Wanting to experience everything, I opt for the late, "adult" show by Melinda, "First Lady of Magic," at the Lady Luck Hotel and Casino. Melinda Saxe Burton shows miles of perfect, dance-honed leg; her shapely tush is covered by just enough spandex and fishnet to snare a minnow or two. She's a charming and competent performer, vanishing big cats, shrinking a huge white horse, guillotining cabbages and audience rubes with the sweetest of smiles.

Melinda grew up very Vegas—her mom is a former showgirl. And though she does not undress, the First Lady uses song and dance entr'actes featuring stud muffins in gold lamé G-strings and topless women ("my girls") writhing around to "Yakety Sax." There is no magic in these segments, unless you count the stunning ways in which silicone implants can defy gravity. Two tables away from me, a gent in overalls is clearly overcome by this twin-grapefruits-in-orbit illusion. "Damn!" he keeps saying. "Well, awmighty goddamn."

Early the next day I make the rounds of Vegas magic shops, culling what gossip I can from real-estate salesmen plunking down \$30 for the latest cigarette-through-the-quarter trick. I find that Melinda is married to a magician's magician, one Lance Burton, who performs at the Hacienda showroom and also runs a magic shop there. Seems that after a huge wedding ceremony at the Tropi-

cana last summer, Burton levitated his bride.

The local cognoscenti insist Burton's got it all—killer sleight-of-hand chops, the requisite big illusions ("though not like Copperfield, who can buy anything"). "Lance and Melinda are kinda the yin and yang of magic acts out here," confides a time-share broker trying out a set of disappearing foam balls. "Hers is more tourist magic—the big critters, the girls. He's a classicist. Can blow your mind with a pair of doves and a candle."

I point the rental chariot south on the strip, and run straight into techno-magic gridlock. Opposite the crowd heading in for the "Harrah's Spellbound" magic revue, people are rubbernecking the 7 P.M. eruption of the Mirage Hotel's volcano—which is hard by Treasure Island's genuine sinking frigate. Inching along, I think wistfully of Copperfield's famous levitating Ferrari.

The Hacienda hunkers at the bottom of the Strip like some exhausted duenna, catering to a bus-and-budget crowd. Burton's magic shop is in a dreary little arcade with a sign that warns the curious "THE SECRET IS TAUGHT WHEN THE TRICK IS BOUGHT." In the hotel's musky showroom, I settle in beside a large, felt-skirted escapee from the polka convention down the hall and a young Canadian gent fussing with a yellow pad and a clipboard.

The tickets are just \$20, and the expectations are low. But—*presto!*—it turns out to be the best value in town. Burton, a handsome fellow, first appears on a streets-of-London stage set, leaning on a gaslight like some Dickensian roué. Nattily tuxedoed, wearing purple evening gloves, he performs dove, candle and floating-ball tricks with breathtaking fluidity. His is a slightly wicked grace; he manipulates a scarf into eel-like undulations, mouths and palms lit cigarettes with the smug assurance of a riverboat cardsharp. All to lilting Vivaldi.

This segment is patter-free and borders on the poetic. It's easily the most irresistible part of the show. Burton also has the de rigueur big illusions, including a woman popping, *Aliens*-like, through his midsection. And he peels down to a Stanley Kowalski undershirt, re-

vealing chiseled arms and shoulders, as he prepares for the *pièce de résistance*. This self-levitation takes place with a near-naked female assistant straddling Burton's magic-wand zone. As they rise toward the ceiling, she pants, rocks, inches up toward his chest—an illusion most impressive for its technical smoothness and audience palpitations.

The guy with the clipboard is moaning audibly: "I wish it was *mine*, oh, how I wish it was mine." Turns out he builds illusions for

Siegfried and Roy have all the subtlety of Zsa Zsa's closet, sending their tigers onstage in a Rolls.

Melinda up in Canada. But how killer, he muses aloud, to file the patent on something so incredibly *hot*.

By the end, the polkamaniac is fairly overcome. She'd let out a few muted screams, a passel of "Oh, my Lord's. When I ask her why she anted up the double sawbuck from her polka budget, she gets straight to it. "Honey, I do love my polka. But it's got no *wonderment* to it, you know?"

Over a Sprite nightcap, she adds that it was flat thrilling to see some of that wonderment in person. Never took to magic on TV, where you can't tell what all's real anyhow. I leave her in line to shake Burton's hand and buy an autographed magic kit for her grandson. "Sweetie," she tells Burton, "you're a lotta bang for the buck."

As I wait in line for a big-ticket extravaganza, I decide that her point about TV is well taken. Magic is an art best experienced close enough to hear the beat of a dove wing—to follow the play of a card *right before your very eyes*. It's a kind of intimacy lost with the demise of vaudeville and circus sideshows. Ricky Jay raised hackles (and far less money for himself) by refusing to move his show to a larger theater. Like many arena rock acts, Copperfield has addressed the intimacy problem with large video screens in the bigger halls he plays.

Siegfried and Roy use another approach. They just make the act much bigger than the room. Before the show, hooded wizards wander the audience sprinkling fairy dust, peering, touching. I get a heart sticker affixed to my cheekbone. "You suppose they're marking us for something?" asks my tablemate.

Once they hit the stage, S and R have all the subtlety of Zsa Zsa's closet, sending their tigers onstage in a Rolls. But you gotta love 'em. Nearly old enough for a senior discount at the MGM Grand Theme Park, they're scampering around in a dozen costume changes, making an elephant vanish and reappear, carousing with ze beeg felines in a production that makes *Cats* look like cheesy

dinner theater—all to a crashing theme song by their little brother in illusion, Michael Jackson.

In fact, their magic invokes the same high-tech paranoia of the Pale Gloved One's road shows. An evil sorceress, monkey men, mechanical monsters and giant cocktail shakers take turns hectoring da boyz, who battle back with machismo 'n' magic. There are almost as many villains as sequins.

Doubtless the Mirage management feels

that cynical press types need a little magic Rolfing, and I have been placed, unknowing, in the sucker seat. At one frenzied point, Roy—he of the many topstitched codpieces—comes roaring off the stage in full armor, two mean monsters in pursuit, and flings himself on top of me, beseeching.

HELP ME, PLIZ! YAAAAAAAAAAH!

Happily, the imprint of his breastplate is an illusion that fades quickly from my forehead.

I still treasure a keepsake Polaroid of David Copperfield levitating me in his secret magic warehouse ("a dumb camera trick, but people seem to think it's cool"). Despite the considerable wonders of his stage show—the gorgeous flying sequence, a soapy snowstorm that howls from his bare hands, the pliant women he wears around his jeaned legs like chaps—I am most enchanted by a tour of Copperfield's private lair.

He sleeps and works here, in an old bolt factory on the outskirts of town. Illusions—giant buzz saws, the Ferrari—are built and tested in a hangar-like work area. The lovely Claudia, in a tiny kilt and huge platform shoes, is heating up the plush living quarters. But despite all the perks, the greatest rarities are upstairs, under glass.

Here, with a security and fire-prevention system that rivals Cheops's little pyramid scheme, Copperfield has housed and restored the world's finest collection of magic books, artifacts, props, illusions, costumes and correspondence. Houdini's baby shoe, his famous trunk, a rifle that Chung Ling Soo used in his catch-the-bullet-in-your-teeth act (until, alas, he missed). There is Dante's spirit cabinet; the radio-equipped turban of Alexander, the Man Who Knows; a priceless tract published in 1584 to discourage the burning of magicians as witches.

The large room is dimly lit, save for spots trained on the most fabulous artifacts. It's an astonishing repository of human oddity, obsession and genius, and walking through it can raise the tiny hairs on your neck. And it's

all the property of one Nineties magus. "We may open it to the public someday," Copperfield says. "But right now I enjoy coming in here alone at night, lighting things. It's very cleansing and spiritual. It relaxes me."

Not an easy thing for a hyper dude who gets his kicks from escaping a burning raft at the edge of Niagara Falls. But he insists he's not immune to the powers his predecessors exert from the grave. Sometimes he gets the willies in this big, quiet room. "It's *very* spooky," he says. "'Cause all these items were important to these guys."

It is interesting to note that he bought much of this treasure out from under Ricky Jay, who was formerly the curator of the celebrated Mulholland Collection in Los Angeles. Copperfield picked up the entire Mulholland inventory at a bankruptcy sale for \$2.2 million—a price way beyond the means of Jay or the Library of Congress, which maintains a considerable Houdini collection. Such are the rewards of making magic for the masses. Now David Copperfield has done what even Elvis couldn't. He's bought his heritage, and housed it in a desert fortress.

"It validates what I do," he says of the collection, which, to his great surprise, has cast its own spell over him. He has more than doubled the Mulholland acquisition, spends lavishly for curation and restoration. Families of magic legends have begun donating items, because they trust him. He says he's committed enough dollars "so that after I go, the collection will be kept together."

Copperfield is not a collector of many other things. He doesn't own a real home or a car. Doesn't drive but is always on the road. True to his brotherhood, he remains an upscale itinerant. This magic madness is another validation, but it's a bitch to keep ahead of. He says his fans are more sophisticated now. They want new stuff, wild stuff, outrageous feats that have to be videotaped and rehearsed for months before the biggest mirrors money can buy. He wants to leave them so awestruck they can't even mouth that ancient ejaculation, *HOW'JADOIT?*

He is fondling a set of Houdini's lock picks, heavy instruments that look primitive in the hands of anyone but their master. Copperfield says that his own sophisticated flying mechanism cost \$700,000. When I ask if there is a difference between an illusionist and a magician, he grins. "Yeah. If you call yourself an illusionist, you get paid 20 percent more."

He reaches for Schiffer, who has just materialized at his side. "Listen, don't ask how I did this one," he says, kissing her. "That question is getting *real* old." •

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