Hiding the Elephant
How Magicians Invented the Impossible

Jim Steinmeyer

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Overture

At the height of his career, during the longest continuous theatrical run of his lifetime, Harry Houdini boldly marched to the edge of the stage at the New York Hippodrome and propelled his voice across the footlights to an expectant crowd of 5200 people, announcing his newest headline-making innovation.

"Lay-deeahs and gintle-menh," he began, holding a finger upright. "Perhaps you have all-red-dy heard of the fame and a-comp-lish-ments of my spesh-shel guest!" The world-famous daredevil, escape artist, self-liberator, movie star, publicity genius, and mystery performer was in real life a little man. On the enormous stage of the Hippodrome, he seemed even smaller, but he compensated with an outsized energy, just as he had corrected a thick East Side of Manhattan accent by overenunciating each syllable; his words stabbed the back wall of the theatre like a knife. "Allow me to in-tro-duce Jennie! The world's only vanishing ell-ee-phant!"

Crowds expected a lot at the Hippodrome. The theatre was famous for its ambitious productions, bigger, better, more opulent, and more spectacular than any other vaudeville show. Audiences had seen entire armies invade the stage, marching bands, cavalry charges, and zeppelin attacks. They had craned their necks as the circus acts performed overhead, and they had inched forward in their red plush seats as an earthquake-like rattle seemed to dislodge the wide wooden platform. Slowly, the famous stage sank out of sight, revealing torrents of water, that bubbled up to fill a large tank. Enter the boats, the water ballet, and diving horses.

A Hippodrome show was a special treat for New Yorkers and out-of-town guests, but it was never sophisticated entertainment, with the pretensions of the Broadway revues or plays one block west on Seventh Avenue. The Hippodrome was designed to make audiences gasp, smile, and write home about. This particular show, titled "Cheer Up," predictably included a patriotic medley filled with hundreds of American soldiers. Houdini was the guest act and had been included halfway through the run of the show in order to give it a boost of publicity and attract new crowds.

It was fitting that Houdini had chosen the Hippodrome for the premiere of the largest illusion ever attempted. Even the décor of the theatre was a

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perfect match-Moorish filigree and white marble, and hundreds of gilt elephant heads adorning the electric wall sconces and the tops of each column.

As Houdini completed his introduction, an animal trainer dashed onto the stage, leading Jennie, a full-grown Asian elephant. The ample backstage space at the Hippodrome gave her plenty of room to make a spectacular entrance, running at full speed as she came into view, circling Houdini in wide arcs, shaking her head from side to side with each stride. Jennie was nearly eight feet tall and weighed over six thousand pounds, monstrous and graceful at the same time. The audience likely recognized her as one of Powers' Elephants, a group of performing pachyderms that were regularly featured in Hippodrome revues. For this performance she wore a gigantic baby-blue ribbon around her neck and a "wristwatch"-an alarm clock tied around her hind leg. Jennie stopped in the center of the stage; she stood on her back legs, saluted the audience by raising her trunk, and finally reached over to Houdini to give him a slobbery kiss. He rewarded her with a handful of sugar cubes and joked about how she was contributing to the sugar shortage caused by the Great War.

The curtain opened on an oversized wooden box, about the dimensions of a small garage and decorated like a brightly colored circus wagon. It was raised off the stage by large wheels. As a Sousa march rumbled from the orchestra, the trainer led Jennie stoically up a ramp, through two opened doors, and into the box. Few in the audience would notice this point: It wasn't simply the Vanishing Elephant, but the Vanishing Elephant and Trainer. The doors were then closed as a crew of Hippodrome stagehands in white uniforms and cotton gloves leaned against the corners of the box, slowly giving the circus wagon a quarter turn.

The audience might have suspected that the great beast would be lowered through the floor into the famous Hippodrome water tank, but as the box was raised on wheels, it was plain that Jennie was still inside. The apparatus was far from the curtains, isolated in the center of the vast stage.

Houdini, now little more than a black speck hovering in front of the action, signaled for the orchestra to stop. "Watch closely . . . for it happens in two sec-conds," he proclaimed. The whole operation had in fact taken several minutes to this point, but no one would quibble with his exaggeration. Drumroll. He clapped his hands, and the stagehands, taking their cue, quickly ran to the opposite ends of the circus wagon. They reached over and opened circular doors, cutout panels in the ends of the wagon so the audience could look straight through the box to the bright curtains hanging at the back of the stage. A loud crash chord, and Houdini turned to face the audience. "You can plainly see . . . the an-nee-mile is com-plete-ly gone!" Houdini was right. The box really looked empty.

The Great Houdini bowed deeply as the front curtains closed. Amazing. And then the most amazing part: The Hippodrome patrons squinted at the scene, mumbled to themselves, and let go with what seemed a collective shrug, contemplating the next feature on the busy program: a trapeze act. They'd

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just seen the most gigantic wonder ever presented on a stage yet greeted it with only a deflating smattering of applause.

Houdini was a terrible magician.

That's not how he's remembered, of course. But to his public, during the first decades of the twentieth century, Houdini wasn't thought of as a magician at all; he was the escape artist, the fellow who got out of jails, swam to the surface after being nailed in a box and thrown into the river, or wriggled out of a straitjacket while dangling upside-down from the cornice of a building. Houdini was fiercely proud of his escape specialty; it was his innovative, new act that had made his name on vaudeville and music hall stages. His sensational challenges as an escape artist had quickly given Houdini legendary status, which transcended the variety stage and make him the envy of magicians, comedians, jugglers, and singers. He was no mere amusement; he was a myth: a lone figure who challenged the system, a hero who refused to be restrained.

As far as audiences were concerned, there were other men who were great magicians, like Howard Thurston, who toured American cities every year with his big show and covered the sides of buildings with his colorful posters. In London there was David Devant, of the famous Maskelyne and Devant Theatre of magic, who produced solid ivory billiard balls between his fingertips or performed in dramatic plays featuring stage illusions. In one of his most memorable effects, he made a lady disappear in the middle of a well-lit stage; as he attempted to embrace her, she seemed to dissolve into thin air. In vaudeville you could see T. Nelson Downs, whose specialty was sleight of hand with hundreds of silver dollars, or P.T. Selbit, who toured with famous mysteries like Sawing through a Woman or Crushing a Lady.

Houdini was about something altogether different. He was not especially graceful or elegant, as magicians were expected to be, but was a restless collection of shapes: slightly bowlegged, with muscular shoulders and a triangular face. He'd found his calling with the escape act, which complemented his brash, rough-around-the-edges appearance. But Houdini desperately wanted to be a magician, a real magician.

Houdini's Vanishing Elephant was the result of over fifty years of careful experiments by stage magicians in France, England, and the United States; it was also a secret that had been purchased by Houdini and the latest flourish in his spectacular career, spanning a lifetime of theatrical mysteries. The man behind the trick remains a puzzle. Harry Houdini was a famously complicated personality, and much of his life seemed to consist of dares, challenges and denouncements, which were played out in his vaudeville act. He had been born Erich Weiss in 1874, and his early inspiration was the romantic, adventurous autobiography of Jean Robert-Houdin, the Parisian magician of the mid-1800s. The Memoirs of Robert-Houdin so influenced him that he took a stage name derived from Robert-Houdin's as an homage.

Robert-Houdin's book was filled with his picaresque adventures, brushes with royalty, and dramatic triumphs over superstitious tribes in Algeria, who deeply believed in magic and were cowed by the French master. Renowned

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as the "Father of Modern Magic," Robert-Houdin had a short but spectacular career. In 1845 he opened his own theatre in Paris and performed elegant, sophisticated conjuring. His illusions were ingeniously combined with mechanical figures, called automata, which he constructed.

Such a world must have seemed like a wonderful dream to young Erich. He quickly learned the rudiments of the craft, endlessly practicing the maneuvers in Robert-Houdin's own guide to sleight of hand and swapping the latest secrets at the local magic shop. Robert-Houdin had written of his overnight success in magic, instant acceptance into the world of Parisian society, and his glittering career. He was celebrated in the capitals of Europe for his ingenious deceptions and inventions. Houdini found work in grimy dime museums, the big-city versions of sideshows, where the magic act was given a few short minutes to impress the crowd as they paraded past a row of human oddities. Houdini's first successes consisted of the usual handkerchief and card tricks; for a while he billed himself as the "King of Cards," trying to impress audiences with his newly mastered manipulations and flourishes. He worked on the midway at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893; in a burlesque show in Manchester, New Hampshire; on the platform of a medicine show in Kansas; and in a small tent circus through Pennsylvania, where he presented a magic act, performed as a singing clown, and then muddied his face and climbed into a cage to appear as the "wild man." Show business for him was not very much like the world of Robert-Houdin.

Houdini's beloved innovations, the escape tricks that set him apart and gradually became the staple of his act, were derived from traditional magic. The Davenport brothers, New York performers in the 1860s, had presented an act in which they were tied securely inside a large wooden cabinet. When the cabinet was closed, a series of chilling, ghostly manifestations was produced from the cabinet. The brothers secretly escaped from the ropes to orchestrate the illusions, and then retied themselves before the cabinet was opened again. Houdini's act emphasized the freedom rather than the spirits, challenging his audience to restrain him with ropes, chains, or handcuffs. John Nevil Maskelyne of London had introduced the escape from a sealed trunk around the time Erich was born. Maskelyne's escape required several minutes as the trunk was concealed inside a cabinet. Houdini increased the pace of the trunk escape, calling it Metamorphosis. He would be locked inside the trunk, which was then hidden by a curtain. Houdini's brother, outside the trunk, clapped his hands three times, signaling three seconds. When the curtain was pulled open, they'd changed places. Houdini was outside the trunk. His brother was now securely locked inside.

His escapes, not the card tricks or handkerchief tricks, made Houdini a success. Vaudeville theatres and music halls were always anxious for the latest novelty. Houdini's remarkable iconography-the little man taking on the bonds of society-was evidenced in the elaborate challenges that he proudly accepted. In London in 1904, early in his career, Houdini was dared to escape from a special pair of handcuffs that had taken a proud British workman five years to make; they were designed using the famous "pick-proof" Bramah lock, the pride of English machining. Houdini hesitated. The Daily Illustrated Mirror formalized the contest, wondering if the smart-

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talking Yank was worthy of his reputation. The next day, thousands crowded into a London theatre to watch Houdini take on the Mirror's cuffs. They were clamped on his wrists, the key turned, and he retired inside a small curtained cabinet to begin his work in secret.

The following seventy minutes are legendary. After working diligently in his cabinet for over half an hour, Houdini emerged perspiring, with his collar pulled away. The audience was ready to applaud but was disappointed to see the cuffs still firmly in place. Houdini asked that the lock be opened so he could remove his coat. The audience groaned. The representative of the paper demurred. After all, this was an obvious ruse to see how the lock operated. No, he refused to open the cuffs unless Houdini admitted defeat. The audience must have shared in this opinion. The wily American was trapped, suggesting a transparent excuse to gain his advantage.

Houdini shrugged, pulled a penknife from his pocket, opened it, and held it in his teeth. He gathered his frock coat over his arms so that it hung at his wrists, and dramatically shredded the coat with the knife, bit by bit, until he could pull the pieces away from the handcuffs: dared, defied, defiant. The audience whooped and cheered. Houdini disappeared back into his cabinet.

The band played on for almost 30 minutes longer. Houdini readjusted the curtains to get a better look at the lock; he called for a glass of water. Suddenly, he bounded from the cabinet, free of the impenetrable cuffs.

The audience nearly rioted. Houdini sobbed in relief; the committee onstage hoisted him to their shoulders and carried him around the theatre as handkerchiefs were waved and the crowd shouted their approval. It took one hour and ten minutes for Houdini to play all the parts: outsider, bounder, conniver, then victim, gentleman, hero.

The current opinion, based on experts who have examined the Mirror handcuffs and the records of the event, is that Houdini had staged it all. He had the cuffs made and then entrusted them to a man who would deceptively step forward to "challenge" him, and this careful preparation seems consistent with the way he went about all of his escapes. Houdini took bold challenges for his publicity; he seldom took real chances with his escapes. Ultimately, well-reported episodes like the escape from the Mirror cuffs made Houdini's reputation as a determined, mysterious master of locks. There wasn't anything magical about it, even if the performance was a glorious deception.

His most famous escapes, like being locked inside a giant-sized milk can or shoved upside-down into the tall, narrow aquarium of water he called the Chinese Water Torture Cell, were thrilling examples of showmanship and sensational features in vaudeville. Houdini portrayed himself as the little man and delicately cast the proceedings as a cross between a sporting event, a noble acceptance of a dare, and an execution. The audience seemed to sense that they were watching something extraordinary, and more than a few have commented on the odd sensation of being in the audience when-those in attendance suddenly remind themselves-something might go wrong.

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Despite the myths that have filled out Hollywood screenplays, Houdini never failed in an escape. He was too much a perfectionist, too careful in his planning. He also never disappointed an audience. For example, twice a night, as he performed the Chinese Water Torture Cell, which he featured for thirteen years in his career, he was locked in the tank of water and surrounded by a curtained cabinet. The audience waited patiently, calculating how long they could hold their own breaths. Sometimes Houdini escaped in as little as thirty seconds. Sometimes he extended the suspense, taking over two minutes before showing that he was free. During these longer acts, the spectators shifted uncomfortably in their seats, calculating that he must have run out of air. With the anxiety at a fever pitch-and there is no question that Houdini had a supernatural ability to calculate this moment-he would burst through the curtains, dripping with water, gasping for breath. His specialty was convincing each person that they had witnessed a near catastrophe.

All his life, Harry Houdini proudly associated with magicians. He was president of the Society of American Magicians and the Magicians' Club of London. His fellow performers seemed to tolerate Houdini as one would a spoiled child, indulging his monstrous ego, nodding politely through his arguments, and congratulating him lavishly on any successes. Mostly, they stayed out of his way, as he tended to view any performing magician as a rival.

Sometimes, strangely, even dead magicians seemed to be rivals. Houdini had long collected materials on the history of magic, with an aim toward writing a book on the subject. During his years of research, his focus changed, and he began collecting facts that challenged the importance of his idol, Robert-Houdin, and in particular the truth of the French master's famous memoirs. The finished volume was titled The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin, with the surprising premise that his onetime inspiration and current namesake was actually a fraud. Houdini picked apart many of the showman's exaggerations and quickly labeled him a self-promoter. Where Robert-Houdin wrote modestly, underplaying his abilities, Houdini accused him of ignorance and ineptitude. Houdini even lambasted him for using a ghostwriter.

The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin was indicative of Houdini's mercurial personality and his love of challenges, but the vengeful tone of the book made it an embarrassment. Houdini seemed to forget how inspiring and literary the French magician's memoirs had been; he put it under a microscope and analyzed every phrase as history. A generation later it became apparent just how shortsighted Houdini had been.

Robert-Houdin, researchers now know, was a clever writer who authored his own books. Houdini, on the other hand, regularly employed ghostwriters to clean up his ragged prose, including The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin. When his peculiar history was released, magicians thought the accusations were rich coming from Houdini-a man renowned for shameless self-promotion and a tin ear for the fine points of conventional magic. According to his friend the well-known illusionist Servais LeRoy, Houdini

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had a pleasing stage presence but was in no sense a finished magician, although this detail never seemed to trouble him. As an illusionist he never left the commonplace. His escapes were incomparable. I frequently wondered at the indifference of the one and the perfection of the other and finally was forced to the conclusion that his want of originality was the answer.

The very best Houdini mysteries, like his wonderful escapes, were neither elegant nor sophisticated but hinted at supernatural power. At one engagement he appeared to walk through a brick wall, disappearing in a three-fold screen that had been set up on one side of the wall and quickly emerging from another screen on the opposite side. It was a perfect complement to the Houdini myth. Another favorite effect, the East Indian Needle Mystery, consisted of supposedly swallowing a packet of loose needles and a length of thread, then regurgitating them perfectly strung together. It was an old sideshow feat, but it suited Houdini's showmanship.

These successes led him, several times in his career, to deemphasize the straitjackets and water tanks, presenting "Houdini's Grand Magical Revue." In his last tour, Houdini decided to include an extended section of magic. He caused gold coins to appear in a small glass chest (an invention of the reviled Robert-Houdin). He made a bouquet of feather roses grow in a pot. A girl entered a box and disap- peared. Another lady was turned into an orange tree. Alarm clocks disappeared on one side of the stage and appeared, loudly ringing, on the other.

"It was awful stuff," in the opinion of Orson Welles, who was taken by his father to see Houdini's last tour in Chicago. The 1926 program consisted of three acts of Houdini: magic, escapes, and exposures of spirit mediums. According to most reviews, Welles's opinion was typical. The escapes, including his upside-down escape in a tank of water, were "thrilling"; the exposures and accompanying lecture on spiritualism were "riveting, like a perverse sort of revival meeting." But the magic merely filled out the evening.

"He was a squat little man in evening clothes," remembered Welles. "The first thing he did was march to the front of the stage and rip off his sleeves; he pulled them right off, showing his bare arms. Can you imagine? A short-sleeved tailcoat? Even as a kid, I realized the coarseness of it. It was supposed to be a sort of 'nothing up my sleeve' thing. Then, of course, he proceeded to perform a bunch of silly mechanical tricks that couldn't have involved his sleeves at all."

Typical was his opening trick, in which a metal lamp supposedly disappeared from one table and reappeared, with a wave of a wand, on another. It was a magic shop item manufactured by the Conradi company, and a touch of a spring telescoped the clanking, mechanical lamps into tabletops. "Houdini's magic was just a bunch of junk," according to Vic Torsberg, a longtime Chicago magician. "You know, that push-button German crap. That's what he performed." At one of Houdini's performances, when fellow magician David Bamberg was in the audience, the lamp trick spectacularly misfired. Bamberg was horrified to see the misshapen metal lamp clearly pop from the tabletop as the audience snickered. Houdini seethed. He stopped the music and promptly informed the audience, "The

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cause of the failure of this trick is due to the poor workmanship of Conradi-Horster of Berlin."

After years of publicity stunts and dares, Houdini could add little finesse to these illusions; it just wasn't in his nature. Audiences had come to expect genuine thrills from Houdini, and he couldn't make mere tricks worthy of his reputation. Houdini compensated by attempting to portray his performance of magic as a challenge, force-feeding the mechanical wonders to the audience with great dollops of his personality. Watching him play the part of an elegant conjurer was a bit like watching a wrestler play the violin.

The true violinist was Howard Thurston.

"You have to realize that, in their day, Howard Thurston was every bit as well known as Harry Houdini," Walter Gibson once told me. Gibson, the prolific author of The Shadow stories and numerous books on magic, had ghostwritten for both Houdini and Thurston and knew them well as friends. Howard Thurston was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1869 and was America's most successful magician from 1908 to 1936. He toured with an enormous show, featuring a cast of beautiful chorines, an appearing lion, a disappearing horse, Sawing a Woman in Halves, and the Indian Rope Trick-one spectacle after another. "In fact," Gibson believed, "Thurston was probably better known than Houdini. Still, every bit of Thurston's publicity was about getting you into the theatre to see the show. And Houdini's publicity was about creating a legend. As each year passes, Houdini becomes more and more famous, and Thurston is forgotten."

By most accounts, it was Thurston who was the great magician and Houdini who envied his status. Orson Welles, as a boy, idolized Thurston for his captivating voice; the magician was, in many ways, everything that Houdini was not. A small man (Thurston was still some four inches taller than the five-foot, two-inch Houdini), he had a straight back, aquiline nose, high forehead, and dark eyes; he was perfectly suited to evening clothes and not prone to tear them away. Thurston was said to have studied at Moody Bible Institute, and his oratory was worthy of any pulpit. "I wouldn't deceive you for the world," he proclaimed from the stage. There couldn't be a more preposterous statement from a professional magician, but Thurston could make the claim because of his warm rapport with his audiences. He stood behind the curtain during each overture, hidden from the audience but whispering to them his pre-show mantra, "I love you all. . . . I love you all. . . ." He realized that his success was expressing that love on the stage.

Typically, he would linger over the tricks that used children from the audience. A standard effect, in which cards rose from a deck, was enhanced when a little boy in the audience was urged to stand on his theatre seat and pull his father's hair to make the cards rise. The boy, suddenly convinced of his own magic, became the focus of the effect. His father, wishing to indulge him, winced stoically, and Thurston, casting the spell over the proceedings, temporarily turned his audience into the center ring of his magic circus.

Another favorite effect involved a little girl who was, Thurston explained, to be awarded a live rabbit as a pet. She was invited onstage, and the rabbit

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was wrapped in paper. But checking the parcel, Thurston found that the animal had turned into a box of candy. Sensing the girl's disappointment, Thurston followed her into the audience, and then reached down her father's collar, pulling out another live rabbit. The little girl left the theatre with the candy and the rabbit.

How was it done? On one level it's possible to explain the secret very simply. Thurston swiftly switched the rabbit for a box of candy using a tricked tray; he introduced the final bunny into the father's coat using sleight of hand. But those simple deceptions were secondary to the emotions that played on the face of the little girl: her belief in magic as she seemed to win, then lose, then triumph, after all. Playing out this drama with a child from the audience required the deft touch of a master.

Throughout Thurston's career, his most famous illusion was the Levitation, which he included in every performance. When Thurston spoke of discovering the secrets of levitation from an Indian fakir, his wonderful sermon-trained baritone took command, modulating from a ripple to a wave, slowly casting a spell.

In all our lives there are certain events that stand out that cannot be forgotten. I am going to show you something now, ladies and gentlemen, you will remember as long as you live.

His audience knew instinctively that Thurston had searched the world for such wonders. (He really had toured the Indian subcontinent early in his career as a magician, although his marvelous, invisible levitation device was perfected in London, Cincinnati, and Yonkers.) When he mumbled the mystic hypnotic incantation that held the princess aloft, the children in his audience watched, dumbfounded, convinced of real magic. (His spell was actually a genuine string of Hindi profanities.) Finally, as the beautiful princess, draped in sweeps of white and pink silk, floated high over the stage, lying as if asleep in midair, Thurston passed a seamless metal hoop over her, twice.

Round your form I cast the mystic spell. Rest and sleep. Sleep, Fernanda. Safely, securely, as you did at the temples of love in India.

He invited a small boy from the audience onto the stage. Taking the boy by the hand, Thurston walked him completely around the floating lady, then lifted him so that he could touch the golden ring on her finger for good luck.

It is said, in those parts of the Himalayan Mountains, that if you make a wish, a sincere wish, and touch the ring of the floating princess, that wish will be granted. True in India. True here.

It was more than a trick; it was theatrical magic.

Houdini would have been ridiculous had he attempted this sort of illusion. Still, he was technically a magician, even if he had difficulty convincing the public of this. The secrets of his escapes were hardly the work of superhuman strength, supernatural flexibility, or supersensitive lock-

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picking. Much of his work was dependent on the basic secrets of magic, ingenious and dependable. He didn't take those secrets to the grave. His brother inherited his apparatus, and Houdini's particular escape secrets, even his famous Water Torture Cell, have been studied and copied by other magicians.

Ironically, he did leave the world with one spectacular mystery, a single feat that has been hotly debated since his death in 1926. It wasn't one of his daredevil escapes or his headline-making challenges. Instead, it was the lackluster moment of pure illusion in the Hippodrome: No one really knew where or how he hid that elephant.

This famous illusion, a typical Houdini feat promising more than it delivered, has enthralled generations who have sought to solve it. It presents a real puzzle. How could Houdini's accomplishment, in which a live elephant disappeared in the bright glare of spotlights, have failed to impress an audience? His brief turn on the Hippodrome stage touched upon the essence of the magician's art and the subtle differences between wonder and deception.

In fact, it probably was a great illusion, not for its ability to dazzle his audience but for the backstage intrigue and ingenious thinking that it represented. Houdini's Vanishing Elephant hinted at fifty years of carefully evolved optical illusions for the stage, the work of many past masters at deception, and the particular achievement of one little-known showman, who had been laboring to change the techniques of magic. It had started a half-century earlier, on a small stage in London when a British civil engineer discovered that he could create ghosts. It was evolved, in spurts, by a series of ingenious magicians and showmen who were anxious to use the latest creations in their performances. They devised marvelous, dreamlike deceptions, which were guarded like backstage treasures or stolen in meticulous acts of espionage. Like any great illusion, Houdini's Vanishing Elephant was the result of equal measures of mathematics, optics, psychology, and blustery showmanship-a secret perfectly hidden in plain sight.

Magicians guard an empty safe.

In fact, there are few secrets that they possess that are beyond the capacity of a high-school science class, little technology more complex than a rubber band, a square of mirrored glass, or a length of thread. When an audience learns how it's done, they quickly dismiss the art: "Is that all it is?"

The real art is how the rubber band is handled with the finesse of a jewel cutter, how a mirror is used or concealed precisely, how a masterful performer can hint at impossibilities that are consummated with only a piece of thread. Magicians understand the careful interactions of secret and performance and have learned to appreciate the art for these subtleties. But casual observers, eager to diagnose the gimmick or solve the deception, focus on the uninteresting part and are quickly disappointed, the same way one can always turn to the final pages of a mystery novel.

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The success of a magician lies in making a human connection to the magic, the precise focus that creates a fully realized illusion in the minds of the audience. The simple explanation is that seldom do the crude gimmicks in a magic show-those mirrors, threads, or rubber bands-deceive people. The audience is taken by the hand and led to deceive themselves.

Jean Robert-Houdin was famous for the opinion that a magician is actually just "an actor playing the part of a magician." It was an especially important distinction in separating the loud mountebanks on the street corner making balls appear and disappear beneath three metal cups from Robert-Houdin's elegant Parisian deceptions. Today it serves to remind us that a magic show is a piece of theatre, and the Frenchman's analogy can be extended: A magic effect is a short play that simulates a supernatural occurrence. Like any real play, there are characters and a developing plot. There is a progression, or an arc, to the action. There is a surprise and a resolution, which not only completes the audience's expectations but builds upon them.

Just as no actor would attempt to walk on a stage, instantly begin crying, and expect to move the audience to tears, no real magician thinks that a performance consists of flapping an Inverness cape and-poof!-causing a lady to disappear. It only works that way in comic books. A great magic performance consists of a collection of tiny lies, in words and deeds, that are stacked and arranged ingeniously to form the battlement for an illusion. It's a delicate battle of wits-an audience that welcomes being deceived, then dares to be fooled, alternately questioning, prodding, and surrendering. A great magician seems always to play catch-up to their thoughts but secretly must stay two steps ahead-not only solicitous and anticipating, but suggesting.

In order to understand how Houdini hid his elephant, we're going to have to explain a few secrets. We'll have to violate that sacred magician's oath. In the process, I promise that there will be a few disappointments and more than a few astonishments. But to appreciate magic as an art, you'll have to understand not only the baldest deceptions but also the subtlest techniques.

You'll have to learn to think like a magician.

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