

P.T. Mortimer's Magic and Medicine at Ring Meeting

Posted on [April 25, 2018](#) by [Dennis Phillips](#)

Ring Report Ring #170 "The Bev Bergeron Ring" SAM Assembly #99 April 2018 Meeting

President Mike Matson called the meeting order. Lots of guests: Don Carpenter, Christian Bryan, Jim Leach, Stefan and Territorial VP Scott Humston. Jaffo took the floor to remind us to be friendly to all visitors all the time. There were announcements of the many magic events always happening here in Orlando.

Bev Bergeron's teach-in featured ideas on how to use a balloon to make a cover for a glass of water production. He also showed how he produced uncovered glass of water from his coat.

Phil Schwartz presented Magic History Moment #91. The subject was Frank Van Hoven, an unusual comedy magician who specialized in absurdist humor. He was born in 1886 in Sioux City, Iowa and apprenticed for his Uncle in Vaudeville and for Roland Travers, a traveling magician. Hoven's early attempts at being a serious machines ended in disaster and he realized that could be the basis for his act. He continued to work and fail and improve until he had a high paying act. He was successful in Europe and the U.S.

His act was filled with "accidentally" revealing trick methods and doing absurd stunts such as leaving two boys on stage holding or sitting on blocks of ice while he left the stage for a drink at a nearby bar. Magic historians say that his style can be seen as a prototype of many of today's comedy magicians.

Frank Van Hoven, a victim of alcoholism, died in Ireland at age 44 on January 17th, 1929. He was known by audiences as "The Mad Magician" and by magicians as "The Man Who Made Ice Famous."

The meeting show began with Bob Swaddling fooling us all with a clever Okito Box routine and cards. A coin migrated between cards and into and out of the box. Bob used a clever method to do amazing things. Dan Stapleton showed a baffling wooden finger chopper made many years ago by Chalet Magic. He then did a tableware prediction where all 4 volunteers making random moves with their knives, forks and spoons ended up with what he predicted. Christian Bryan had selected cards traveling between pairs of cards. He did a nice series of sleights with a cigarette and lighter. Nathan Coe Marsh repeatedly had spectators randomly pick cards and he always knew what they freely chose. Jimmy Ichihana dazzled by being able to cut to selected cards and then having a spectator deal in piles which all cards matched.

Concluding the show was Phineas T. Mortimore's Magic and Medicine Show, a new creation by our own Greg Solomon. Greg was costumed and had a nice historic-looking table with banners and he pitched his medicine that was guaranteed to cure, clean and fix everything. The magic medicine did cause some great magic to happen and everything fit into the theme.

Dennis Phillips



Dennis Deliberations ... Ring # 170
“The Bev Bergeron Ring”
May 2018

*Grammar lesson: we find the present tense and the past perfect...
-author unknown-*





I was happy to finally see Greg Solomon's new signature act, Phineas T. Mortimore's old-fashioned Medicine & Magic Show with PT Mortimer extolling the virtues of his "Miracle Elixir" while infusing the show with magic, mirth and a little bit of mystery.

Greg has developed a great commercial act that is unique and ideal for his target audience. It is good solid magic along with a clever prop set up.

Here I am being belted into my straitjacket (Abbott made) at a youth church function in the early 1990s.



I received this comment: “Dennis, I often wonder why magicians still try to entertain with the straitjacket escape. It’s now so archaic. And you get these young “nobody” magicians who’ll put one on and make glib claims about breaking Houdini’s record...”

My answer:

Trust me, it plays big.... I play it mostly for laughs and novelty. What the jacket routine usually lacks is a strong shock-surprise at the end. One you have gotten out, it is sort of a letdown and begs for an encore to top the escape so I fixed the ending.

I present it as a kind of historical lecture and never as a Houdini Challenge. I do mention Houdini and how he did it upside down which I explain is easier than upright because gravity becomes your friend.

I start out by explaining (as I am unbuckling the jacket) that very little could be done for the aggressive mentally insane until about 60 years ago. The insane were laughed at, taunted and pitied and locked away. Today, we give them therapy by putting them on the Dr. Phil Show.

“Bedlam” is a corruption of “St. Mary of Bethlehem” ,an English Hospital for the insane in old England. The mentally ill were chained. There was little else they could do. When electricity was invented in the late 1800s, shock therapy came about and sometimes resetting electrical brain activity through an induced convulsion did help. Restraints like strait jackets, wet sheet beds and other restraints were used. Finally, in the early 1950s the phenothiazine antipsychotic drugs came into wide use with Thorazine , the tranquilizer, being the first. A dose of this high-power anti-histamine and all the voices in the head stopped. Later we learned that tardive dyskinesia (involuntary twitches) was a side effect from long term use. Over the years many families of psychiatric drugs were developed: Benzodiazepines, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, atypicals and SSRIs. So, the strait jacket became less used and known.”

I invite a guy up to help and I demonstrate on him (without any buckling) how it goes on and then I put it on myself with all the standard comedy lines, especially about the crotch strap and the high pitches voice gag.

I then deliberately explain step by step what I am doing and talk about the importance of keeping your cool and staying with the reasoned sequence step by step. I always say that the guy did too good of a job on pulling the buckles tight and I end up rolling all over the floor and struggling.

Then I have about 3 cues for applause. I get my arms over my shoulders, applause. I get the crotch strap loose, applause. Then I wiggle out of the jack without having to unbuckle the back straps, only the neck. I hold the jacket up, do a Rocky fist pump and

toss the jack on a small low cart and do the bows. When that applause dies down I reach over and pick up the jacket ,which is laying on the cart, and say, “I wonder why it was so tough tonight? What is this?” and a bowling ball drops out with a thud! That usually brings the house down. (The ball is loaded in a bag which is the same color as the jacket and it is stolen from the cart).

Archaic? Maybe, but it never fails to please and interest a crowd!

The following marketing method, by a magician, is hilarious. It is from this guy's web page! It seems ,to me ,the totally wrong way to sell yourself!

He takes pains telling you what he does not do! And how bad and hackneyed other magicians are!

The implication is that the answer is to go back to vaudeville! One hundred years ago! Does that make sense?

<http://hagermania.com/vaudeville-magic-comedy-entertainment/>



In his words:

Ninety percent of working stage magicians include at least one of these items listed above in their performances and for many this list comprises half their show: for some, this is their show! If you are a professional entertainment buyer, you probably recognize some of these worn-out routines. Magicians who perform these catalog

bought routines are a dime a dozen. Though some of those magicians may perform these routines well, they are still only rehashing old material. If you want something new and fresh out of magic, Vaudeville Magic is the only answer.

Routines you will not see:

(Follow the links below to see magicians performing the same routines.)

- [Floating tables](#)
- [Bowling ball productions](#)
- [Vanishing Bananas](#)
- [Instant Magicians](#) (audience member as magician)
- [Burnt Shoes](#)
- [Multiplying Bottles](#)
- [Snowstorms](#) (with sappy story)

This fellow seems to not realize these effects are used because they are familiar and they are modern classics.

Sure, some effects can get over used but it depends on your venue. I would not try to play Vegas or a TV show with these but most magicians can not afford creating new material and most people have never seen these effects.



Is he talking to magicians here, or the public? The “I want to bring things that people have never seen before” statement is *ridiculous*. Walk into any typical urban cookie-cutter magic shop, and chances are, you’ll see 99% of the stuff in there that has NOT been seen by 99% of the people walking by the shop out on the street. By magicians’ standards, even the most “overworked” and “hackneyed” tricks and illusions become brand new revelations to those not into magic. And that’s precisely why the locals in every city and town rely so heavily on what we call those “overworked” classics of magic.

You can just go to a magic shop or magic builder and buy what most magicians do, but that's not what I'm about. With 'Mindfreak' on television and 'Believe' live, I want to bring things that people have never seen before. That process is very difficult. It's very challenging, and you never know how long it's going to take - months or years.

Criss Angel

I would suggest there is another reason Criss Angel should be telling us (the magic community AND the public) why he wants to avoid the illusions of the standard magic builders and tricks from the magic shops: Being a Las Vegas headliner, he has to sell himself to the longtime talent agents stationed there who have “seen it all”. And so he needs to come up with some spectacular (new?) magic that *they* have never seen before. And he’s simply trying to avoid the puzzling psychological nature of the people who, after having seen a few touted “spectacular” magic shows, go back home and rave to their friends about that geeky cornpone magician in the checkered suit who pulled a chocolate chip cookie out of his fly...



I am sharing a few thoughts , on Harry Anderson, that I had by e-mail with Larry Thornton, my long time Canadian magic friend:

Harry Anderson, is no longer with us. He passed away at his home in Ashville, North Carolina at age 65. Harry started out as a Street Magician and most of us first saw him on Saturday Night Live in the 70s doing his “Geek Trick” (Pain in the Vein-Needle through the Arm) . He went on to land the starring role in “Night Court”. Who can forget that quirky hilarious show filled with oddball characters. Harry even managed to revive the career of Mel Torre by letting it be known that he was a big fan.

Anderson was very much like Johnny Carson and Steve Martin in that he transcended magic and became a comedy actor and star. People tend to forget they started out in magic. Harry tried to not let forget it but the mostly did. Which constitutes a sad indictment of the art: that if you *really* want to make it in show business, chuck the cringeworthy magic and make people forget — or never become aware of — your laughably humble beginnings as a ‘no-talent’ kid perpetually glued to a deck of cards and constantly craving attention.

Bev Bergeron noticed that Jimmy Stewart worked with Bill Neff but after movie fame, his early connection with magic was never mentioned.

Wouldn't it be nice if some magician could become as famous as a mainstream performing artist *without* having to transcend their original chosen profession? I guess the *first* criterion would be to become *original*. In the entire history of modern stage

magic, only *Houdini* reached such a height. And that's why he's still such a memorable legend today.

There is a "contest" television series on now, called *Showtime at the Apollo* (Thursdays on Fox) that's hosted by Steve Harvey. Though it's touted as a "variety" show, singers, and to a lesser extent, comedians, outnumber other kinds of performers by at least 5-to-1. If a performer is really good, the audience goes into hysterics of ecstasy that makes the kids on Blaine's first television special look like semi-responsive zombies. But if the act stinks, within about the first 3 seconds that same crowd suddenly morphs into a crazed "lynch mob" booing and shouting as loud as the can. And that's when an eccentric dancing guy prances onto the stage with a large hook and ushers the idiot performer off.

NOW HERE'S MY POINT: I happened to see a few of the shows that featured a magician, or to be more specific: an illusionist, an escape artist, and on the third show, a mentalist. Now in *every case* these guys were fantastic, fooling the audience completely, and I'm not just speaking as a died-in-the-wool magic fanatic. The Apollo audience showed a strong appreciation for them, and the 'dancing clown' stayed off the stage. But on all three shows, when it came time for the judging, the audience applauded and made as much noise as they could — only for one of the singers, and sometimes the comedian.

And I was reduced to wondering, "*What the heck does a magician have to DO to win over this crowd!?*"

As a magician, you could have *flown onto the stage, walked on water, cured a guy of his leprosy, multiplied fishes and loaves, and as a grand finale — made both yourself and the M.C. VANISH IN A PUFF OF PINK SMOKE!!* —And you wouldn't have had the slightest chance of winning the contest.

Dennis Phillips