

*A Look Into My Act*



by  
*Smallini*  
*The World's Tiniest Magician*



It made me reflect later on that these "lectures" were once so common in the days before celluloid and electronic media. In a review of what appears to be a fascinating book on the subject, *Performing Authorship in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Lecture Tour* by Amanda Adams, Matthew Rubery states,

"Seeing the enviable list of victorians who crossed the Atlantic to lecture on everything from the evils of slavery to the right to privacy makes me wish the phonograph have been invented a few decades earlier. Then we could hear those speeches for ourselves."

In magic, Houdini is famously remembered for giving lectures about spiritualism later in his career. There was even a "Lecture Bureau" called Coit-Abler that managed Houdini along with,

"...such middlebrow intellectuals as the naturalist Roy Chapman Andrews, who discovered some of the world's great fossil-fuel fields, and the critic Carl Van Doren, literary editor of *The Nation*."

[*Houdini: The Career of Erich Weiss*, by Kenneth Silverman]

Houdini, it was reported, could ramble, his lectures lasting two hours or more (Glover acknowledged during the Q&A that reviewers commented that sometimes he could "go on

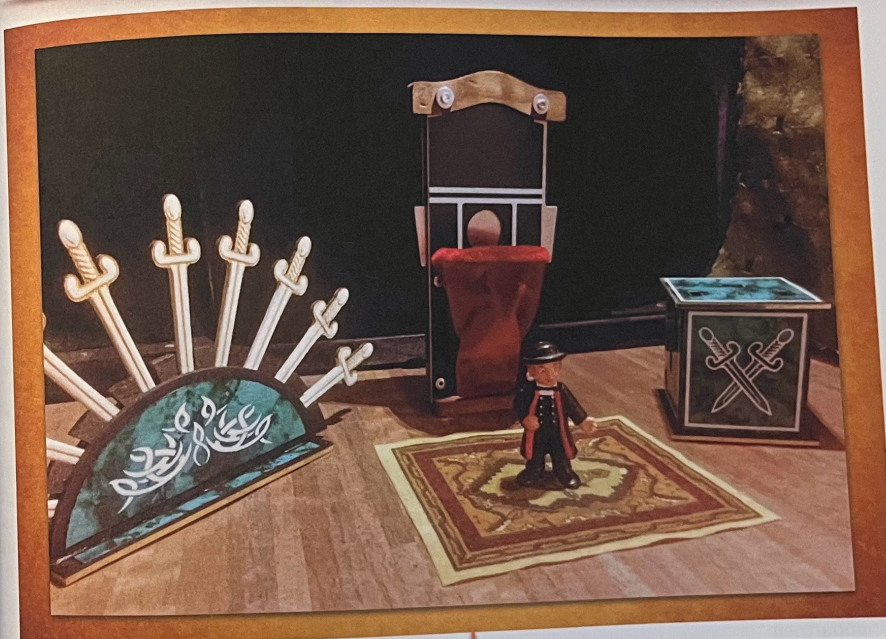
and on" with his answers, and indeed, it seemed like he could talk the whole night).

Along these lines I would be remiss not to mention the live magic shows of Ricky Jay, whose magic performances are interspersed with verbose and articulate stories and descriptions. Like Crispin Glover, Jay is a throwback to the lecture circuit days of old.

There is no lecture component to the suitcase of Wonders. However, Mr. Widdle did used to talk quite a bit as part of the show, although he stays quiet these days, content with his cigarette and side flask, while I entertain on stage.

I admit I feel a little bit of a kinship towards the Crispin Glover "experience," not in the content so much as the existence and structure of his show. When I began the Suitcase of Wonders (co-incidentally twelve years ago), I imagined it as something ongoing and only to be seen live. A creative choice for me, but for Glover, as he mentioned, it also was a financial requirement, albeit one that he enjoys on an artistic merit.

## All Thumbs





## The Piano Card Trick



Once again I find myself writing about a card trick in this journal. Despite my already stated ambivalence (at best) to card tricks in general, I seem to have a soft spot for some of them as evidenced by my previous entries on the wonderful Cards Across and the Diminishing Cards. This time around I am fascinated by a very old (aren't all the best card tricks old ones?) self-worker called The Piano Card Trick.

Surprisingly, I came across this trick not in its original close-up form, but with fruit replacing cards in Jim Steinmyer's stage version, Apples and Oranges, from his book, *The Conjuror's Anthology*. The basic plot of all the versions remains the same, whereby after counting out pairs of objects into even piles, a spectator is asked to place one more object onto either pile, thereby making that one the odd pile. After a wave of the magic wand, it is revealed that the pile originally thought to be odd is now even, and the other pile odd. The object has transferred from one pile to the other. In description, it doesn't sound like much, but in performance, if done right, it seems utterly impossible.

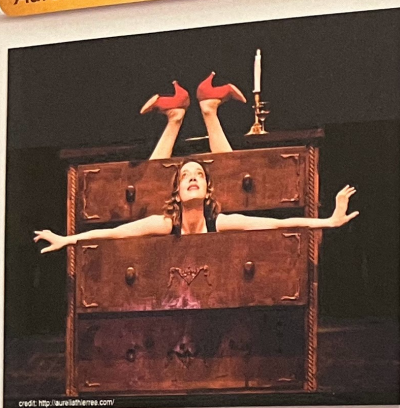
After reading the Apples and Oranges version, I was interested in not only performing it for a group at an upcoming annual retreat in Maine, but perhaps adapting it for the Suitcase of Wonders stage. This latter idea would be a mighty challenge, for all versions of this trick require carefully constructed patter by the magician, while I am currently performing tricks in the style of the late Silent Mora (set only to music, with no talking whatsoever). Adding to the difficulty of this proposed adaptation is the requirement of active involvement from a spectator, another no-no in my act (the stage viewing area being too small to accommodate sustained volunteer interaction). I really have no idea how a trick like this would work in the Suitcase of Wonders, but I seem to keep thinking about it anyway.

When I posted a request on an online magic forum for thoughts about Apples and Oranges, two distinct and opposing opinions emerged. One was that the trick was best performed with cards as originally intended, and the other was that any other pairs of objects used were better than cards (an opinion also shared by Steinmyer). Penn and Teller have said they are always on the lookout for card tricks they can use with other items - a valid and interesting idea. On the other hand, there is something about the original Piano Card Trick, with its use of the spectator's fingers formed as a "piano" to hold the pairs of cards, that seems just right. And it is this version that I am currently looking at, perhaps once again in vain, to adapt to the Suitcase of Wonders stage. I don't know how I would pull it off, but I like the image of a pair of hands (Mr. Widdle's in this case) being used as the holders for the cards on the stage.

One slight variation that I might employ would be to use only black cards for the trick, referring to them as piano keys. I would also use a non-face card as the one flashed as the 'odd' card, and its suit match in the other pile. This, in case the spectator chose to look at the new odd pile, would find the suit match, and perhaps think it was the original odd card that had transferred. But of course, the trick really should end with the counting of pairs in the piles.



## Aurelia Thierrée



Rummaging through some ephemera lately, I came across a playbill for a show I attended back in 2008 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The show was called *Aurelia's Oratorio*, starring the wonderful Aurelia Thierrée.

Aurelia is the talented daughter of Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, the celebrated British circus performer, and one-half of the creative team behind the legendary *Le Cirque Invisible*.



## The Mummy's Journey





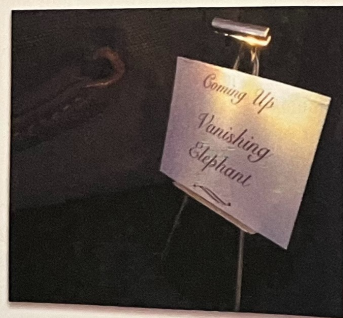


To accommodate the different size and shape of these new footlights, we must now replace the wood flooring, also long overdue. We will continue to use the fine black walnut dollhouse flooring, but now it will be mounted onto a sturdy slab of maple wood, instead of poster board.

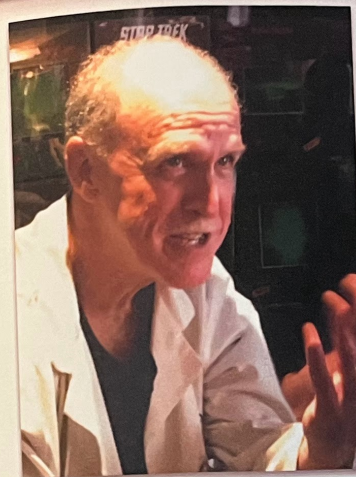
But the footlights are not all! We have also acquired two carriage lights (with the same copper coloring) that will be mounted on the Suitcase of Wonders sign. They will have tinted gels installed that will give off a lovely orange glow from above the stage. Very classy.

Last but not least, we have upgraded our apron display easel from a wooden stand to a lighted brass one. It looks stunning, and will really help to highlight the "Coming Up" signs in between illusions, as well as the "Please Take One" sign for the candy dish at intermission.

These new lighting improvements are making me consider performing more often in darker situations. After all, this program is billed as an evening stage show.



## A Visit To The Holographer's Laboratory



Mr. Sapan, better known as Dr. Laser, gave an entertaining lecture in his unique gallery of homemade holograms (Andy Warhol turning pages in a magazine, for example) before leading the group of about twenty people down into his basement lair, where he makes lasers and holograms. We were asked beforehand if anyone objected to being in a small space with a puff of cigarette smoke as part of a demonstration. No one did, and so Dr. Laser replied, "Good. I hate those people anyway!" The smoke turned out to be a medium for the laser to be projected upon in the dark, creating a dazzling, trippy effect, even if it did leave our clothes smelling of cigarette smoke for a couple of hours.

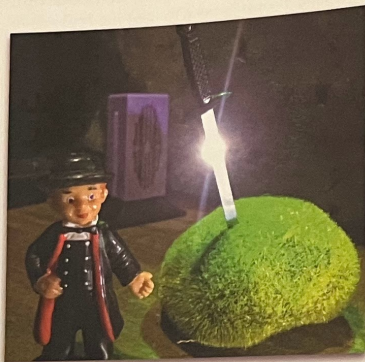
Last Saturday was a beautiful Spring day in NYC, so of course I decided to bring my oldest son (age 11), to see the underground Holographic Studio, located in Gramercy. The Studio is described on their website thusly:

"Located in a former blacksmith's forge, the world's longest operating gallery of holography is now in its fourth decade. We have been named the Number One Obscure Museum in America by Mashable. Founded by one of the original pioneers of holography, Jason Arthur Sapan, Holographic Studios is a leader in display holography."





## Some Retired Material: Excalibur



Every magic show that has been active for some years is subject to the rotation and/or substitution of material. The reasons for removing an item from the lineup can vary. Perhaps an illusion does not resonate with the audience like it once did. Maybe a trick is physically worn out, and it's not worth the magician's effort to fix or replace it. And sometimes an effect might be stowed away simply because the performer has tired of performing it; He doesn't get that spark from presenting it on stage like he once did.

When it comes to my show for the Suitcase of Wonders, I, Smallini, have retired several items over the years for all of the reasons stated above. For the most part, a trick's departure from my act will be organic, meaning it will be gently nudged aside in favor of a new illusion. This doesn't happen very often, as new material usually takes a long time to develop, and there must be something about the trick that's getting replaced that is unsatisfactory to me in some way.

After a trick has vanished from my show, I'll forget about it for a long time until one day when I might be reminded of it (perhaps I'll come across the apparatus in one of my magic drawers), and I'll be amused or surprised at my thinking behind the effect. "Did I actually get away with this?" or "Hey, that principle wasn't bad. Maybe I should revisit it another way."

As I'm now in the mood for reminiscing about old tricks in the act, I'll begin with this routine that was featured in the first series of performances I gave in the Suitcase of Wonders.

When I first saw the Tenyo trick, *Crystal Cleaver*, I immediately thought it could be a feature in the act. The effect was baffling and the apparatus was in perfect scale to yours truly.

Sold as a pocket trick to amateur magicians of much larger proportions than myself, *Crystal Cleaver* is usually presented in the same manner by all those who buy it (the typical amateur magician has little patience for bringing originality to tricks that are purchased or even learned from a video or book):

A wedding band is borrowed from a spectator and placed inside a clear plastic box. The box is covered with an opaque plastic cabinet with two vertical slits on either side. A small sword is introduced and inserted through the slits near the top of the cabinet. The magician then thrusts the sword downward, seemingly (impossibly) through the clear box with the ring inside.

When the cabinet is lifted, the sword is seen to have penetrated both the box and the ring.

This little marvel of a pocket trick really came to life as a stage illusion when presented in the Suitcase of Wonders. Just having myself, Smallini, there to direct the action and give the apparatus context of size made all the difference. But I was not satisfied with just the standard presentation. I wanted a little more drama so I developed an "Excalibur" routine for it. This was in the days when there was speaking (patter) in my act. The script went something like this:

"I assume most of you are familiar with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. If so, you would recall the magical sword...Excalibur."



A green spotlight comes on illuminating the *Crystal Cleaver* sword sticking out of a moss-covered rock on stage.

"In the legend, the powerful sword was given to King Arthur by the Lady of the Lake."

"Arthur won many battles with the Excalibur, but one thing it could not win for him was the love of Lady Guinevere, thwarted as it was by Sir Lancelot."

"Many years have passed since the Knights of the Round Table, but Arthur's love for Guinevere, as does his anger for losing her, remain."