

“To see Cardini is like watching a trick film.”

– Patrick Page

“I had the greatest magical experience of my life when I watched him perform.”

– Robert Harbin

“If I had seen him work when I was at the start of my career, I would have scrapped the profession and learned a different trade.”

– Channing Pollock

“The world’s outstanding stage exponent of pure sleight-of-hand.”

– Milbourne Christopher

“The greatest single act that ever appeared in the world to my way of thinking.”

– Dai Vernon



Cardini

~BY JOHN FISHER~

Magicians today acknowledge that the examples set by the legendary Cardini — in technique, in suavity, and in career achievement — shone the light for them. It is probable that Cardini has still not been surpassed as both an entertaining and an artistic exponent of pure sleight-of-hand within the limitations of a short vaudeville act.

There could be no greater contrast between the level of sophistication which Cardini's act came to epitomize and his early background. He was born Richard Valentine Pitchford on November 24, 1895, in Mumbles, a small fishing village close to Swansea in South Wales. His one link with show business was a father who played fiddle in the local variety theatre, but by the time he was five, his ever-bickering parents had separated. His mother opened theatrical lodgings in Treharris, but before long the young Richard, now nine years old and desperate for attention he could not find at home, ran away on a picaresque adventure that embraced spells as a butcher's apprentice, a pageboy in a Cardiff hotel, and an exhibi-

nipulate the cards at all without gloves. So he practiced with them on and laid the groundwork for the exquisite skill and sensitivity that would come to form his act in later years. Indeed, in 1916, having recovered consciousness after being invalidated during the second battle of the Somme, he found it difficult to perform his sleight-of-hand without the gloves. In later years, they would become as much a part of his total image as his top hat, cape, and monocle. Another quirk of wartime fate led to one other development in card technique. In the extreme conditions of the trenches, his cards inevitably became sticky and dog-eared, and it proved impossible for Cardini to emulate a feat that had been attributed by some to

Houdini — the ability to produce one-at-a-time a whole pack of cards skillfully concealed behind the fingers. Cardini could manage to produce the cards only in bunches or small fans. Today, when magicians do the same intentionally, we should not forget the straitened circumstances in which Cardini, by default, pioneered the technique.

Turning to magic as a career on the cessation of hostilities, Pitchford changed his name several times before finding the label that became synonymous with his style. Possibly his first experience on a stage, in an army concert party, was as Madame Juliet, the transvestite receiving-end of a second-sight act! Once demobbed,

he became variously Val Raymond, Professor Thomas, and Valentine, until in 1924 an Australian booker suggested, "Get a name like Houdini." "Why not Cardini?" asked Pitchford. It was as simple as that, although the act that would become immortalized with the name in years to come still had to find itself.

Touring Australia, he found it was the custom for managements to hold over an act for as many weeks as the performer could vary his presentation. So, for the first week, he performed with cards and billiard balls; the second, cigarettes and silk scarves; the third, rabbits and flags; the fourth, liquids;

the fifth, thimbles and fire. The digital dexterity was present throughout, but he still persisted in being a talking magician upon whose lips jokey asides like, "There is nothing in my hand except my fingers" clung uneasily.

In 1926, he arrived in the United States, and by March of the following year was playing New York's prestigious Palace Theatre. Cardini was a success, but he wasn't satisfied. He claimed in later years to have placed himself under the guidance of a professional stage director, and when he was rebooked at the Palace the following December, the results showed, as the reviewer of *Billboard* made clear: "In two seasons, Cardini has improved his act many times over. From a fumbling, faltering lad using a fair line of chatter he emerges on this ace-house date as a finished product of the magician's art." Billed as "The Suave Deceiver," Cardini had now put his patter days behind him. In October 1930, he was reviewed at the Palace once again: "Cardini is grace and suavity personified."

The characterization that Cardini developed for his act was as memorable and as important as the manipulative skill. Teetering on stage in full formal attire to the tentative strains of "Three O'Clock in the Morning," every inch of his body contributed to the portrayal of an ever-so-slightly tipsy English reveler plagued by hallucinations on his way home from a night on the town. Audiences first saw him trying to focus his attention on a newspaper. From the opposite side of the stage came a pageboy — played unobtrusively throughout his career by his wife, Swan — shouting the only words spoken during the entire act, "Paging Mr. Cardini! Paging Mr. Cardini!" Tipsy as he is, he is glad for the boy to take the paper from him, only to find a moment later that a fan of cards has appeared at his gloved fingertips in its place. Exasperated, he throws them away into the newspaper now held by the boy as a tray, only for another fan to appear, and another. He is as bewildered as the audience by the seemingly wayward independence of the objects around him. Unsteadily, he attempts to insert a cigarette into the holder clenched between his teeth. After considerable effort he succeeds, only for the cigarette to vanish and then reappear back in the holder. The holder is too much trouble and is discarded. Then a lighted match appears in his hand. He lights the cigarette, puffs it, throws it away. The lit cigarette comes back to his fingertips or between his lips, and again, and again, and again. By now the monocle has dropped from his eye in amazement, only for a lighted cigar to present itself. As he walks towards the wings the cigarettes still persist, until a large, smoking meerschaum pipe cues his final curtain. Along the way his bouton-



PHOTO: CAROLE CARDINI

tion billiards or pool player. His contact with the card-sharpers who also frequented the billiard halls reawakened an interest in magic and manipulation dormant since the days when, while very young, he had watched the impromptu tricks of the magicians who stayed at his mother's boarding house.

On the outbreak of the First World War he joined the King's Shropshire Light Infantry Regiment. Soldiers were allowed to carry a pack of cards on their person and the challenge they presented kept Cardini this side of sanity. In the trenches, the weather was so excruciatingly cold, it was impossible to ma-

niere has spun around in his lapel, a knotted handkerchief has untied itself, billiard balls have appeared and changed color. But the most important thing of all is that everything that has occurred has been part of an invisible conspiracy against the performer.

A priceless moment of comedy occurred when Cardini went to adjust his monocle. Blowing smoke at it in the process, he could not fathom how the smoke went through the lens. At moments like this, no eyebrow had ever been raised to more telling effect. He was such a master of pantomime that he could register the slightest movement of this kind in the largest of theatres. He played Radio City Music Hall, one of the largest theatres in the world with 6,200 seats, on at least five separate occasions. Happily, he would boast that to do so he needed only a pack of cards, a few cigarettes, and a billiard ball or two. In point of fact, his props must have been invisible to at least half the people there, but the aura surrounding him compensated.

Audiences became won over by the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice”-style whimsy of his scenario, the wit and sophistication of his characterization, and the technical originality of Cardini’s manipulative skill. To purists he was not, in fact, the first performer to manipulate cards with gloves on: an ambidextrous British magician called Paul Freeman had established that claim as early as 1913 when causing five cards to vanish and reappear singly using the back and front palm. Likewise, Cardini was not the first magician to perform with lighted cigarettes: the continuous production of such objects had been introduced to American vaudeville by the Spaniard José Florences Gili around 1915, as well as made into a feature by his descendant, the Spanish magician Frakson, billed as “The Man with 1,000 Cigarettes” and a contemporary of Cardini. Cardini’s achievement, however, transcended that of his rivals. By placing his rare skills in a dramatic context, he was able to raise them above the basic level of the showing-off process. Few would dispute that by so doing he made them his own. The point to remember is that with Cardini there was never any suggestion of *manipulation*. Objects just materialized or dissolved to his total dismay.

He died at his home on Long Island, New York on November 12, 1973. In his lifetime, he had received virtually every accolade a magician could have achieved, performing for presidents and kings, and being generally acknowledged among his peers as the standard by which perfection in his kind of magic should be set. He was quite simply the Fred Astaire of sleight-of-hand.

Excerpted from Paul Daniels and the Story of Magic by John Fisher, published by Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1987.



A late 1920s portrait of Cardini [facing page]. Cardini with fake mustache in the 1920s. Working with canary at Ciro’s nightclub. Rehearsing on set for the Festival of Magic. Swan Sunshine Walker, in a glamour portrait and in her role as bellboy.





PHOTO: CAROLE CARDINI

A MAGICIAN FOR HIS TIME

Orson Welles, who knew a thing or two about magic and magicians, once said that nothing ever succeeds in show business unless it corresponds with a particular moment in time. By a logical process, the magician who most vividly represents the time in which he performs will become the outstanding success of his day. Robert-Houdin in mid-19th-century France combined a restrained elegance with a newfound informality that was exactly right for the period. More than a century later, Doug Henning, with his affinity with the flower-child culture, resonated beguilingly with a more recent audience. Between the Frenchman and the Canadian, no magician more successfully epitomized the age in which he worked than Cardini. All three redefined the public perception of the wonder worker, but no one did so with a sharper edge than the performer who billed himself as “The Suave Deceiver.”

It could be said that he touched a nerve. When he arrived in America in the mid Twenties, a sense of fun was in the air. People were oblivious of the stock market crash to come in 1929. Prohibition, already in force for half the decade, would not be repealed until 1933, but nothing would stop those with money in their pockets from finding an outlet for intoxication. If Cardini had not existed, P. G. Wodehouse would have had to invent him, this ever-so-slightly tipsy but always elegant clubman about town, to whom playing cards were a nuisance like wasps at a picnic, cigarettes their own persistent will-o'-the-wisp, and billiard balls, whatever their color, as irksome as so many pink elephants. As his characterization fell into place, he would come to define a yearning for a more carefree lackadaisical world, while providing for a large proportion of his vaudeville — as distinct from nightclub — audience a peep into a place of entertainment and privilege that many could not afford to enter.

To have observed the development of the Cardini act during his early years in America must have been akin to seeing style invented. Until Channing Pollock appeared in the Fifties, possibly no magician ever wore formal evening clothes with more complete assurance than Cardini. He was a fashion plate. At a sartorial level alone, the analogy with Astaire is more than relevant. Dai Vernon was fond of repeating the story — confirmed by Cardini to his friend Donald Smith in later years — that the idea of wearing tails that were extra

long was acquired by Fred from Cardini on the vaudeville circuits of the late Twenties. When Cardini first specified the length he required to his tailor, he was told in no uncertain terms that such a cut would look vulgar. The customer won the day. The magician had the easy access of billiard balls in mind, the dancer just loved the way the tails swirled through the air as he glided across the floor.

At another level, Cardini's looks and cool composure conveyed a subtle hint of Douglas Fairbanks, Ronald Colman, John Barrymore, and the whole Hollywood dream. Indeed, if it can be said that nobody had looked quite like Audrey Hepburn or Elvis Presley before the Second World War, then no magician had ever looked like Cardini before the Thirties, even if he had taken the liberty of replacing a cigarette holder for a wand. He never achieved Hollywood celebrity in his own right. The irony was that had he done so, his own name of Richard Pitchford would have been perfect for Thirties cinematic stardom.

Cardini came to develop an intuitive understanding of the importance of branding for an entertainer. Comedians, especially alert to the increasing commercialization in entertainment, had been ahead of this particular game for years. Think of Chaplin with his toothbrush moustache, bowler hat, and crinkly cane; Keaton with that pancake straw hat and initially impassive face; Laurel & Hardy with their contrasting sizes and bowler hats in duplicate. The Marx Brothers, early companions of Cardini on the vaudeville circuit, owned up to a whole armory of visual trademarks, as if they came to have the monopoly on the store from which they were issued. The early British music hall, in which the roots of film comedy are to be found, boasted Little Tich with his big boots, George Formby Senior with his shrunken suit, Harry Tate with that cranked-up propeller of a moustache, George Robey with his demeanor of an unfrocked curate, Chirgwin with the white diamond eye make-up set within his otherwise black face. It is an almost endlessly fascinating parade. There could be no mistaking who these people were.

Once the complete Cardini characterization had crystallized, there would be no mistaking Cardini, either. In the process, he not only reinvented the image of the magician; in the public consciousness, his visual identity would linger on into a later era dominated successively by Henning, Copperfield, and Blaine.

The defining item was the monocle, a portable exclamation mark with the dot of the lens attached to the stroke of the string, to be relaxed in amazement and replaced at will. Cardini would joke that the hardest part of his act was being able to keep it in his eye without letting it fall in the first place. It was worth the trouble. A symbol of poise and flamboyance, it immediately underlined the social class from which his character had emerged. It also spelled out his country of origin.

The moustache came later in the day, after unsuccessful attempts to sport a fake stick-on attachment, more worthy of a bit-part player in a Mack Sennett movie than the habitué of a Mayfair saloon. John Mulholland in *The Sphinx* for December 1952 chronicled the moment when, much to the delight of the crowd, half of the moustache came adrift along with the lighted cigarettes he had palmed in his hand. In their scrapbook, Swan puts the time of the incident at 1928 or 1929.

It is hard to believe that Cardini was attempting a burlesque approach, the success of his comedy relying so much on the earnestness of the character he was portraying. When he made the sacrifice of growing his own moustache in the early to mid Thirties, it provided additional charisma and facial definition. The image was complete. Paradoxically, in order to make a similar breakthrough in public acceptability some twenty years later, Channing Pollock would find himself reversing this process. Only when Pollock shaved off his pencil-thin attachment did his undoubted star quality come shining

through to maximum effect. In the words of legendary agent Mark Leddy, who helped to mastermind his career, until that point he had looked “like a gigolo.” Cardini never had that disadvantage.

The gloves, the first element in Cardini’s working wardrobe to fall into place, did more than underline the difficulty of his manipulations. They attracted attention to his hands, described by an admiring journalist in the *Morning Oregonian* for June 10, 1931 as “sinuous and sensitive, like those of a Russian violin master.” The props he used, like the bow and fiddle of Heifetz himself, were trademarks, too. They also constituted another level at which Cardini was right for his times.

Distinguished man of letters Edmund Wilson, writing in *The New Yorker* for March 11, 1944, summed it up best: “It is significant both that conjuring should never have died out, and that, recovering today from a period when it followed the tendency of the age by going in very heavily for machinery, it should have reverted — like painting after its photographic phase — to something both more primitive and more impressive; so that the conjuror’s public today asks for nothing better than to see Cardini stand silent in an opera cloak and impassively produce from bare hands an endless quantity of cards and billiard balls and cigarettes.”

Although his stage name was founded upon the commonest of all magicians’ props, his act was most readily identified by his production of lighted cigarettes from the air, the motif that sets it most vividly within its time. It has been theorized that the magic of each civilization is predicated on the dreams of its people. There must be a common thread from the wine and water, loaves and fishes of biblical record, through the production of rice and water by the Indian street magician for an audience to whom hunger represents a stark reality, to the capitalist crowd in today’s Vegas showroom who will settle for nothing less than the production of the latest Mercedes. Nowadays, the cigarette is seen as a fiercely glowing instrument of lingering death and it would be almost impossible to present this segment of Cardini’s act outside of an historical context.

As a universal device, the cigarette connected Cardini — and many another magician — with the public in the most telling of ways. Besides, people handled these objects every day and subliminally at least must have appreciated the difficulties involved in producing and manipulating them. In 1930, Chesterfield ran a campaign that might have been inspired by Cardini himself: “In a magician, it’s skill — in a cigarette, it’s taste.” Only in Cardini, there was taste and skill.

There can be no question that he was the most photographed magician of his day. This embodied a two-way process. The glossy magazines in which he was featured added to his allure, but to his credit he had already achieved the style that dictated he would not be incongruous within their pages.

In this respect, he was certainly the magician in the right place at the right time. The use of the photographic image in mass-circulation newspapers and magazines was in acceleration. When on August 18, 1935 the rotogravure section of the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* published a full-page photo spread devoted to one portrait and thirty-nine individual shots of his hands manipulating playing cards in immense technical detail, magicians raised their customary alarm cry of exposure. They overlooked the importance such a feature endowed upon the art of magic, the prestige it gave the individual performer, and the simple fact that in no way would the appreciation and wonder of his audience be diminished as a result.

Several of the photographs taken of Cardini were masterpieces of the photographer’s art. Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair* and habitué of the Algonquin Round Table, spurred on by his admiration for Cardini as an artist, personally intervened with the magician’s representative, S. Jay Kaufman, to secure the photo



PHOTO: TODD KARR



PHOTO: JOHN FISHER

Cardini in 1934 [top]. A classic pose of the master manipulator and his dutiful assistant.



spread that appeared in his magazine for February 1935. To place this in context at the level of prestige, it should be stated that in this particular issue, the photographer, credited simply as Nelson, also had images published of orchestral conductor Arturo Toscanini and film actor George Arliss. Graphic artists with original work published in the same edition in competition for the

visual attention of the reader included Salvador Dali and Modigliani. In this way, the Condé Nast publication lived up to its subtitle, "The Kaleidoscopic Review of Modern Life."

A MYSTERY!
Opening Monday Evening, September 30th
ONE WEEK ONLY — PRIOR TO BROADWAY

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THE ASCENDING DRAGON

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Settings designed by DONALD CRISP

Cardini Speaks Out Loud

CARDINI, famous magician who has played command performances before royalty everywhere, will realize a long cherished dream when he makes his legitimate debut in "The Ascending Dragon," by Frederick Jackson, at the Plymouth tomorrow night.

Heretofore, when Cardini appeared on the vaudeville stage, he never spoke a single line while doing his famous act.

NEW STAR AND PLAY AT PLYMOUTH

Magic, Acting Mixed in "The Ascending Dragon"

... a new play made with Theatre

More for Its Magic Than Its Mystery

"The Ascending Dragon" with All Sorts of Tricks By Cardini

MYSTERY and sleight of



There were five photographs published under the caption "Cardini: Master Magician," of which the four smaller images entertainingly chronicle expressions of "moderate amazement," "growing alarm," "incredulity," and "sheer terror." A study of the feature photograph, however, provides an insight into the world behind the iconic image. It has been said that the quality of a great portrait photograph is that it enables you to see into the soul of its subject. All the signposts to the performer's identity are present with the exception of the playing card itself, but for a moment Cardini is timeless as he stares in contemplation toward the horizon in a way that can only suggest the truth behind the style, the years of craft and sacrifice, of pain and disappointment before success was achieved. The pointed reflection in the monocle, so cleverly captured, is its own cheeky clue that the photographer is dealing here with two separate realities.

In later years, Swan would recount how Nelson took hundreds of shots to arrive at the final result. It received an award as best photograph of the year, a fact unknown to its subject and his wife until by chance they found it on display in the window of a shop specializing in photographic supplies in Paris a year or two later. One can only wonder at their amazement as they strolled along the boulevards of the most fashionable city in the world to discover that Cardini himself had in his small way become an icon of fashion.

To be at the height of style at any time is an accomplishment. To be there still a decade later is something else again. Ten years after the *Vanity Fair* coverage, *Esquire* would step into the frame. This time inclusion carried a stipulation. They wanted the magician and his assistant, but they did not want Swan. Any disappointment at Swan's exclusion in favor of the more conventional glamour model Pat Ogden must have been dispelled by the impact the full-page picture made when the magazine hit the newsstands in January 1945. The photographer on this occasion was Anton Bruehl. The attempt to impart to Cardini a sexual mystique is not entirely satisfactory, but the result remains significant for being the pioneering color photograph of a magician at that time. After the restrictions of the Second World War, it ushered Cardini and magic into a less grim, new Technicolor age and as such survives in countless magicians' scrapbooks across America.

The Cardini image was not confined to glamorous magazines. Among the myriad aging newspaper cuttings in the care of his daughter, Carole, are shots of him performing, albeit awkwardly, to children in the hospitals of the towns he played on tour. Even Cardini could not entirely escape from the dictum that a magician could always be relied upon to supply "something for the kids."

And certainly, in the cause of publicity, anything goes. In recent times, his image has surfaced on greetings cards, without acknowledgment, while its most bizarre manifestation came as late as 1996 when the October issue of *MAGIC* magazine published a unique three-dimensional portrait of the sorcerer carved and hollowed out from a pumpkin and lit from within by a candle. If nothing else, it re-emphasized that Cardini had the branding right. What other magicians would be instantly recognizable through such an interpretation? Or through that magnificent photograph from the early Fifties by *Life* staff photographer George Karger in which his hands alone hold in delicate alignment two billiard balls at the full extent of their precarious roll together along those slender fingers?

Essentially, Cardini was like no other magician. He had a knack for making magic appealing to an audience who had not paid particular attention to it before. And in the process, he credited his audience with an intelligence that was rare. Having created a

Clippings from The Ascending Dragon, a 1935 play in which the magician was an actor, playing a magician. Poster for the 1929 IBM convention [facing page].

unique persona, he never broke out of character for a moment. He knew that to do so would be to break their concentration on his endeavors. As with another master of pantomime, Marcel Marceau, the more effort you put into watching Cardini's act, the more you gained. And yet he never ceased to be one hundred percent commercial for his time.

It is ironic that the greatest magician of his day should achieve that distinction by disdaining the role of the all-powerful wizard. By adopting the part of the ever-so-slightly intoxicated man about town to whom magical things happened, he cast a hazy veil over his own skill. In spite of all the accolades that lauded that skill down the years, the public probably never fully understood what an outstandingly brilliant technician he was. Cardini knew full well that it was the "showing off" process that constantly kept magic back from fuller public acceptance.

To borrow Clayton Rawson's phrase, "Cardini's look of utter astonishment at his own conjurations" was the ribbon that provided the bow around the whole package of his branding exercise. It also provided the safety valve for any antagonism felt by an insecure and resentful audience. "The Suave Deceiver" might have been a character who had walked out of Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, harassed and beset by the prankish ghosts conjured up by Madame Arcati, albeit they took on a curiously unlikely form in the shape of cards and billiard balls and cigarettes.

Besides, the standard member of the hackneyed hocus-pocus set was someone who was absolutely *persona non grata* within the walls of the club in London's St. James, of which Cardini's character was a member. With canny intelligence on his own part, by appearing to be ever-so-slightly aloof and out of control, he made his audience feel subconsciously superior to himself, unless, that is, they happened to be as intoxicated as he pretended to be. In the process, Cardini was able to welcome every person within his audience to membership of his own private world. When one recalls that he was lionized by presidents, royalty, film stars, and leading figures in the arts and the intelligentsia, it was almost certainly as exclusive a membership as any to be found along St. James.

However much he placed the emphasis upon his characterization, at no point did Cardini forsake the need for mystery. In a letter to our subject dated November 3, 1931, Faucett Ross recalled a recent conversation with Ade Duval about his early days in Chicago: "Ade told about the time that someone rushed madly into Felsman's one day where the 'gang' were assembled saying, 'For gawd's sake, [get yourselves] over to the theatre. There's a guy named Cardini and he's doing stuff that's impossible!'"

The journalist Bert Ross, writing in 1934 in *The World's Fair*, a British entertainment tabloid, placed Cardini within the public perception of magic at that time when he declared that the highest compliment he could pay the magician would be to remark that "the fabulous Indian Rope Trick would not appear so mystical after all, providing one had first seen a session of magic by Cardini." The British press was currently preoccupied by the challenge to track down the monster myth amongst illusions. Performers in loincloths might pose in desperation alongside suspiciously erect ropes and cables, but Cardini remained the quintessential image of the magician pure and simple. There was no greater mystery than when a full fan of cards appeared in his hand or a profusion of cigarettes multiplied between lips and fingertips.

Quite simply, he became the definition of a magician in the Thirties. The downside is that to his chagrin, he became the most copied act in the history of vaudeville entertainment. However, not one of his imitators approached the level of style and perfection, the grasp of dramatic unity, or that touch of entertaining insouciance that hallmarked the original.

CARDINI

A
DEFT MANIPULATOR

INCREDIBLE



ASTONISHING

KEITH'S GREAT HEADLINER
I·B·M· CONVENTION
LIMA, O. JUNE 5·6·7.

PHOTO: NORM NIELSEN

THE BIG TIME

Cardini and Swan made the big time. In terms of status, there was nowhere bigger to play than the Palace, the jewel of the Keith-Albee empire, recognized at the crossing of Seventh Avenue and Broadway as the "Ace Music Hall of the World."

"Vaudeville's hall of fame where all great artists aspire to appear: Palace approval sets the entertainment standard of vaudeville everywhere," was how the theatre perceived itself. The Cardinis' first booking here took place during the week commencing Monday, March 21, 1927, less than a year after Cardini's arrival on North American shores. Their marriage was still a month away.

In his autobiography, *Much Ado about Me*, Fred Allen, vaudeville's most caustic wit, summed up what it felt like for a humble variety pro to be summoned to this Holy Grail amongst venues: "It was like God bending from His empyrean throne and summoning an ant into His presence. I had no choice. If I turned Mr. Albee down, I might as well have started pricing brine and gone into the pickle business."

Sharing the bill with Cardini on this occasion were the Mongadors, "French Comedy Jugglers"; the Dodge Twins with "Their Own Ideas in Songs and Steps"; Ray and Dot Dean presenting "Alpheus Pure and Simple" (whatever that was!); Jack Norworth and Dorothy Adelphi in the comedy classic "The Nagger"; Hector and Holbrook, "Dancing as Usual"; Miss Elsie Janis, "America's Star of Stars, World's Greatest

SEPTEMBER 9, 1933

15 Cents
20¢ in Canada

The Billboard

The World's Foremost Amusement Weekly

CARDINI
The Suave DeceiverDAVIES
PORTLAND, ORE.

Girl Entertainer"; Raymond Hitchcock, "King Comic's Royal Return"; and Vivian and Walters in "Artistic Athletics."

That was the running order. Cardini, already billed as "The Suave Deceiver," followed the jugglers at number two spot. He was allocated sixteen minutes. Of the established stars, Janis was given forty minutes, Norworth and his wife thirty-two minutes, and Hitchcock, to whom Cardini bore a striking resemblance, sixteen minutes.

He was in strong company, and *Zit's Weekly*, a theatrical newspaper with a convoluted method of reporting on the opening nights of vaudeville bills as if they were sporting events, placed him sixth in the pecking order. Janis came first with a clever start and a strong finish, securing six bows. Cardini rated a clever start but only a good finish and took three bows. The description was to the point: "Cardini, a card manipulator extraordinary, is clever, speedy, and smooth, which makes his performance a delight to watch. A quick hand has Cardini, who is making his first appearance at this house. He ends his act with a cigarette-out-of-the-air trick that reminds of Frakson, not so long ago at this house, Cardini, for a finish, pulling a lighted cigar out of the air."

The mention of a rival, who had played the theatre ahead of him the previous year (ironically during the November 22 week of Cardini's New York debut at the less prestigious Regent Theatre), would have taken the gloss off this notice, but in the long term Cardini could hold his head high. With Houdini and Long Tack Sam, he would eventually share the record for the greatest number of weeks — seven weeks in all — played by a magician at the Palace in its glory days between 1913 and 1935. Frakson was a wonderful performer, but he played it only three times during these years.

Other reviews garnered on this debut did him proud. *The Morning Telegraph* described him "as clever and smooth a worker of this style of act as vaudeville has ever offered"; *Variety*, "A wonder at card manipulation had all eyes upon him"; *Billboard*, "Cardini proves his title to 'The Suave Deceiver' with his card tricks. His palming is superb and his manipulation of eight billiard balls and his stock of lit cigarettes, which he takes from his mouth, are very cleverly done." *Variety* added, "A girl aide in bellhop's uniform looked cute." These were not sycophantic magic magazines, but hard-nosed journals whose accumulated comments could make or break professional careers.

He was given his first repeat engagement at the Palace by the end of the year for the week commencing November 14, in the company of adagio dancers Gaston and Andrée, and one of the greatest singing sister acts, Vivian and Rosetta, the Duncan Sisters.

At the end of 1927, he celebrated by taking a full-page advertisement in the December issue of *The Sphinx* to share with the world of magic some of the accolades he had received from the American press. Of the review from the *Union-Star*, he would have been especially proud: "He is known as the card king and the crown rests securely on his head, for he has it all over the average card manipulator like a circus tent." Many made the point that he performed his card manipulations while wearing gloves.

Things were looking up when he was featured on the cover of the September 9, 1933 issue of *Billboard*. The issue of *Vaudeville* for September 1, 1934 reports, "Cardini has found the last season the best of his career, despite the fact that it was another depression spell for the industry. His salary is in the \$600 class, whereas it was in the \$400 neighborhood. Besides, he has been grossing as high as \$1,000 a week by doubling with clubs." In his scrapbook, Cardini has penned: "Here is one reason why so many imitators" against the last clipping.

His third engagement at the Palace began on December 31, 1928 on a bill headed by Paul Whiteman and his Band. It would be almost two years before he returned for the week of October 11, 1930. To help to promote his fourth appearance, he staged a blindfold drive around Times Square. When a policeman intervened to insist that he

remove the eye-covering, claiming that it was difficult enough to face the heavy traffic even with your eyes open, the incident gained even bigger publicity. The stunt made the newsreels and served as testimony both to his versatility as a magician and to his growing fame.

Nevertheless, he was probably more at home inside the theatre. *Billboard* commented, "Cardini improves at a compound interest pace every time we catch him... he leaves a superabundance of gab to lesser lights of the black art battalion. When he took his bows, one might have thought by the clamor Al Jolson paid the house a surprise visit."

Top of the bill were Groucho and his siblings. The *New York Herald Tribune* said that Cardini rated "next to the Marxes in the value of entertainment presented."

A quick return ensued for the week of January 24, 1931. The *New York Telegraph* was not impressed by the overall bill, but it made some exceptions: "There is an opening act of more than usual merit (*Large and Morgner, an acrobatic novelty of two men who overcome a mutual physical handicap by sharing their two single legs between them*), and Bill Robinson and Cardini to thrill you by their first-rate efforts on a bill which is a decided disappointment."

The week of January 2, 1932 saw Cardini return with the Marx Brothers. Fred Keating, in his listing of magicians' appearances at the Palace in *The Sphinx* for December 1931, gives the date of his seventh appearance as April 12, 1933, but between February 11 and April 29 of that year, the house was experimenting with an all-film policy.

By the time Cardini returned, the Palace was screening films alongside vaudeville acts. A review in *Variety* on April 17, 1935 says everything: "Cardini — headliner — is a swell act." He was still sharing the bill with Bill Robinson, but not in person. The motion picture *The Little Colonel*, starring Mr. Bojangles and Shirley Temple, dominated half of the program.

The Palace, of course, was not the only theatre of distinction worth playing in New York. It was also far from being the largest, its audience of 1,800 being small by comparison with the figure just short of 5,700 accommodated by the Hippodrome and the 5,300 seats offered by the Capitol. In addition, there were the Paramount, the Manhattan Music Hall, and Loew's State Theatre. All featured either straight vaudeville or an "acts and movie" combination, although the pendulum was swinging more and more in the direction of the latter.

In July 1933, Loew's was the scene of his first outing with Burns and Allen. At the Capitol in May 1934, Dick had the equal honor of appearing alongside Jack Benny. Today the names of these legends are embedded not only in the history of comedy but also the consciousness of a nation; back then, they were new and fresh and the brightest stars of the time. That Cardini was sharing a bill with them at all was indicative of his own level of prestige, one characterized by the fact that he seldom failed to stop the show.

In *The Sphinx* for February 1931, Max Holden adroitly summed up what this means: "*Stopping the show* is a theatrical expression used where the artist at the finish of his act receives so much applause that the next act is unable to go on until the artist comes back and acknowledges the applause." At this time, Holden never wasted an opportunity in his various columns to boost Cardini as quite simply the best sleight-of-hand artist "that we have seen of this or any other day."

THE MAGIC BOX

Of all the scientific advances seen by Cardini in his long career, none had a greater impact upon performers of his kind than the arrival of television. It is impossible to gauge the part he might have played in the new medium had he belonged to a later generation. It is unlikely that a television career, as distinct from simply having a

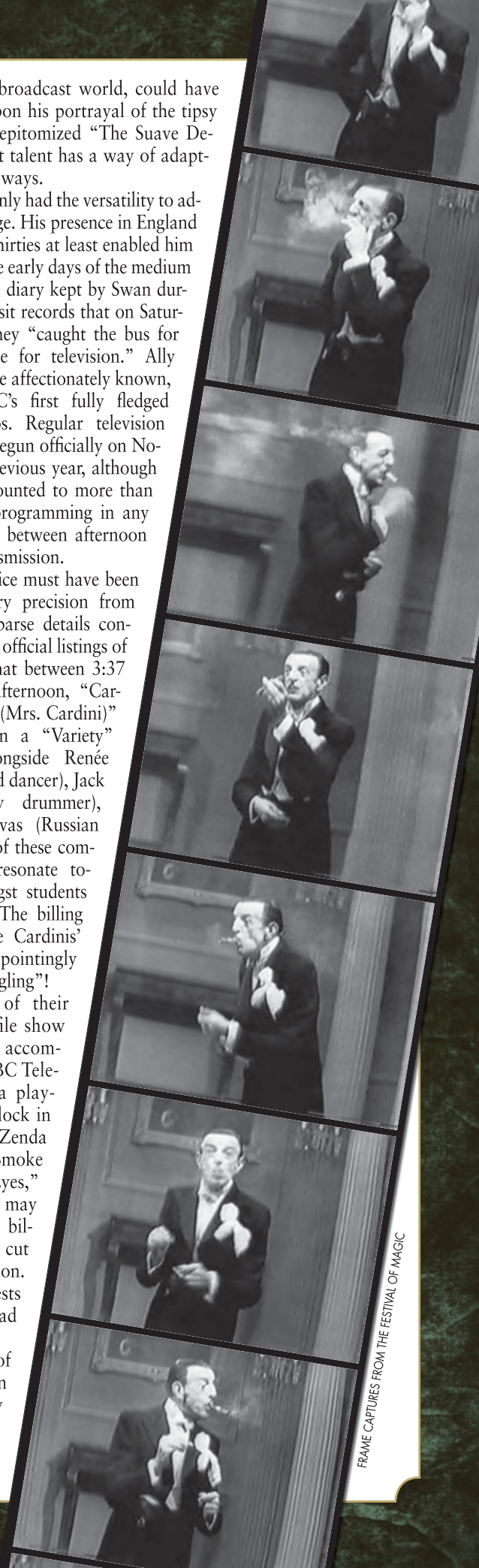
presence in the broadcast world, could have been founded upon his portrayal of the tipsy gentleman who epitomized "The Suave Deceiver," but great talent has a way of adapting in surprising ways.

Cardini certainly had the versatility to address the challenge. His presence in England for part of the Thirties at least enabled him to take part in the early days of the medium as a pioneer. The diary kept by Swan during their 1937 visit records that on Saturday, April 24, they "caught the bus for Alexandra Palace for television." Ally Pally, as it became affectionately known, housed the BBC's first fully fledged television studios. Regular television broadcasts had begun officially on November 2, the previous year, although they seldom amounted to more than three hours of programming in any one day, divided between afternoon and evening transmission.

The new service must have been run with military precision from the start. The sparse details contained within the official listings of the day reveal that between 3:37 and 4:02 that afternoon, "Cardini and Partner (Mrs. Cardini)" were featured in a "Variety" presentation alongside Renée Foster (singer and dancer), Jack Powell (comedy drummer), and The Karsovas (Russian dancers). None of these companion names resonate today, even amongst students of variety lore. The billing appended to the Cardinis' names was disappointingly misleading: "Juggling"!

The details of their music kept on file show that they were accompanied by the BBC Television Orchestra playing "Three O'Clock in the Morning," "Zenda Waltzes," and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," from which we may deduce that the billiard balls were cut for the occasion. The timing suggests that much else had to go.

The idea of Dick and Swan making their way to the outskirts of North London by public



FRAME CAPTURES FROM THE FESTIVAL OF MAGIC

transport for such an appearance seems incongruous, but these were “catch-as-catch-can” days. As the pioneer presenter Joan Miller reminisced in later years, “It was rather like ‘covered wagon work’ and we were homesteading as we went along. Every program was a way of finding out how to do the thing. And the cameramen also were finding their way.”

And the magician, too, presumably.

The audience that would have watched Cardini that Saturday afternoon would have been measured in the very low thousands. When television re-established itself after its enforced hiatus during the Second World War, it soon became apparent that the new medium would enable performers to reach audiences of previously unimaginable size.

Magicians were not totally convinced that it augured well for their art. The scope for misdirection was minimized within the more restricted field of vision provided by the small screen, while audience credibility was strained by the scope for camera trickery. Years of practice might be sacrificed overnight by a lack of understanding on the part of the director or the cameraman or both, as close-ups gave secrets away or the wrong shots rendered the magic meaningless. And then there were the economic considerations of giving away the novelty of an act to millions in a single telecast that might undermine the value of that act in performance before live audiences for years to come.

But “the box” was here to stay, and with each successive year, it became less and less of a novelty itself. In the United Kingdom, Robert Harbin, an early voice on behalf of magicians against the medium, became one of the biggest stars of television sorcery, while other names like Al Koran and David Nixon enjoyed a level of celebrity that might not have been theirs had their quiet showmanship been restricted to the stages of the remaining variety theatres.

In America, it was only a matter of time before Cardini would be summoned before the cameras again.

The call came from an advertising agency working on behalf of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer to perform a live commercial during the middle of *The Life of Riley* program transmitted on November 29, 1949. The situation comedy became a major hit on NBC during the Fifties, starring William Bendix recreating his Forties radio success as the working-class hero of the title role. However, for one season between 1949 and 1950, the part had belonged to Jackie Gleason, prior to his *Honeymooners* success.

Cardini’s participation had nothing whatsoever to do with the storyline of the episode, which was broadcast on the old DuMont network. Cardini had known of the engagement some six months previously. On May 6, Percy Abbott was writing to Dick, “I see you want about two dozen Weller Beer Bottles. These retail for six dollars each. Did you take that into consideration? I will send what we have and then you can let me know about it.”

Cardini had one minute and twelve seconds in which to perform the commercial, which took place at the NBC Studios on 106th Street at Park Avenue around the time of 9:45 p.m. Rehearsals had been scheduled at 7:00. Carole Cardini remembers watching the item air and has a vague memory of her father producing several bottles of beer out of a hat and then switching the collapsible rubber goods for the genuine article out of camera range as he walked from table to table to open one and pour himself a drink. The studio prop list for the broadcast survives and included “labels for bottles (to be supplied by art department),” presumably for Dick to customize the trick bottles.

As a postscript to the beer commercial, Carole has a vague recollection of a similar request to advertise cigarettes for the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corporation, one in which her father ultimately refused to participate because of the dangers of the product to children. Her parents were “gung ho” about their own approach to the weed and saw the portrayal of the habit within their act in a different, more sophisticated light. Swan indeed was proud of her own party piece, being able to smoke an entire cigarette without dropping any of the ash to the floor.

A vehicle that promoted the habit to a family audience was a different matter. The times were changing faster than could be imagined, not only technologically but also with regard to social attitudes.

The commercial must have been in the late Thirties and for the cinema. Stills survive of Cardini performing in the special set created for the commercial.

It was Swan who had the unenviable task of making the call that extricated him from the project. In the Fifties, Cardini told Bev Bergeron of the time a cigarette company wanted him to endorse a self-lighting cigarette that it had developed. This may have been the occasion. According to Bev, “He turned them down because he thought it would cause cancer... He noticed a pimple on my nose and gave me a lecture about cancer and told me to allow the matches to burn a while before lighting the cigarettes. Now think of that: 1955 and he was worried about cancer and smoking.”

A more conventional television request came in 1950, when Cardini was invited to appear on the *Ford Star Revue* that aired on September 14. This was a standard sixty-minute variety format for NBC, hosted by Jack Haley of Tin Man fame, with assistance from the singer Mindy Carson. It aired at nine o’clock on a Thursday evening. Dick received remuneration of \$1,000 for the appearance.

Frank Joglar, alias Milbourne Christopher, caught one of the shows and gave Dick a pleasing review in his column in the October 1950 issue of *Hugard’s Magic Monthly*, stating that Cardini’s “routine was a delight to behold. Fellow next to me in the bar wore a happy expression on his face as he watched our Richard on the screen. Finally, he said, ‘Saw that fellow twice in theatres. Was al-

ways too far away. This is the first time I could really appreciate what he was doing, Marvelous!”

It appears that Dick himself was not so disposed. No footage of the show appears to have survived and it is likely that it was not kinescoped, the recording process prevalent in those days, making judgment after the event impossible. He would withhold his services from the cameras for a further seven years before signing another contract for television.

The persuading influence was undoubtedly Milbourne Christopher in his role as consultant to *The Festival of Magic*, the program that aired under the *Producers' Showcase* banner on NBC on Monday, May 27, 1957. *Producers' Showcase* was a prestigious window, more used to presenting such fare as the Sadler's Wells Ballet, the likes of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in theatrical blockbusters, and the top classical musicians of the day under the *Festival of Music* banner. Transmitted once every four weeks in a ninety-minute slot, it was one of the most costly shows on the air.

In addition to Cardini, *The Festival of Magic* featured an international array of talent, including Robert Harbin, June Merlin, René Septembre, Sorcar, and Li King Si, alongside Milbourne Christopher himself and Ernie Kovacs as an unlikely host with his hit-and-miss comedy style. This time, the sponsors were RCA, Whirlpool, and the John Hancock Life Insurance Company. It aired live, both in black-and-white and color. Transmission to the west coast a few hours later necessitated a kinescope on this occasion.

As film and video archivist Bill McIlhany has indicated, the program represented the first primetime network magic special. Unfortunately, on a strong night, it failed to win its share against an opposition schedule that comprised *Burns and Allen* (Cardini's old friends), *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*, and a rerun of *I Love Lucy*.

Everyone knows that Cardini walked away with the show, leaving all his colleagues at the starting post when the reviews surfaced the following day. Many writers viewed his appearance as that of an old friend whom they recalled from nightclub days. As Bernie Harrison in the *Washington Evening Star* put it, “On two or three occasions, I was close enough to inhale the smoke from his cigarettes — but from two feet or two hundred miles away, he's still the greatest. Television may have added an extra plus to his act.”

The biggest benefit to Cardini in the circumstances came from the clever decision of the art director to place the routine in the setting of a musty English gentlemen's club, a literal throwback to his show at the London Palladium, where the act was billed as representing “Clubland, St. James.” Placing a sleeping club member in the background was a stroke of genius and enabled Cardini to add an even bigger comedy finish when, almost as an afterthought, he switched his own pipe for the larger meerschaum belonging to the old buffer prior to his final exit. One can almost hear the old boy snoring his way through the proceedings.

What one does hear, possibly more clearly than a stage or nightclub environment ever allowed, is the conversation Cardini conducted with himself. The muttering and asides further underscored the comedy of the characterization. Credit should be extended here to the director and sound engineers. It would have been so easy to ignore the potential of the microphone in an act they could have dismissed as working “silent to music.”

Of greater concern to Dick on the night, as he confided later to his friend Don Smith, was the fact that prior to going on, he had burned one of his fingers while lighting the cigarettes for the act. Nor was he happy when he discovered that, in typical television fashion, the orchestra was in another room. But no one watching would have been aware of his worries from the flair and ease of his performance.

The resulting record of his act, although shortened for the occasion, is the principal audiovisual testimony to his skill and showman-



PHOTOS: JOHN FISHER



Between takes on the Festival of Magic with Milbourne Christopher and Sorcar [top]; relaxing at NBC with Sorcar and Li King Si. The telegram to a cruise ship regarding his Festival of Magic salary.

RADIO-HOLLAND N.V.
AMSTERDAM-C. - KIZERSGRACHT 562

RADIOTELEGRAM

TO: P 2 NEWYRK 44 28 1828

FROM: CARDINI ABOARD HOLLAND AMERICAS

TELETYPE: CHATEAUBRADIO

TRYING TO WORK OUT YOUR REQUEST FOR TWENTY FIVE HUNDRED FOR FESTIVAL OF MAGIC WOULD LIKE DISCUSS THIS TUESDAY APRIL TWO WEDNESDAY APRIL THREE APPRECIATE YOUR COOPERATION HAVE EVERY REASON TO BELIEVE WE CAN WORK OUT DEAL

MORT ABRAMS

PHOTO: CAROLIE CARDINI

ship. It is a bonus that as a teaser, the front of the show preserves a brief shot of him performing the rising card with a wrist reel.

For all Milbourne Christopher's personal achievements as a writer, inventor, and performer of magic, it is difficult to think of one aspect of his legacy that has proved more valuable than the inescapable fact that today we can appreciate Cardini all the more as a result of his efforts. Christopher did not merely succeed in getting the show off the ground. He then devoted considerable care to ensuring that Cardini would be best served by the technical departments around him.

In the July 1967 issue of *Genii*, Christopher recounted how several days ahead of transmission, he had gone through the routine with the director and a fully costumed Cardini: "Notes were taken and the action was blocked out so that the best camera could be planned. I had seen him on the video screen only once before. On that occasion, long shots were used and his lifts of an eyebrow and other telling facial expressions had been lost." Christopher was presumably talking about the *Ford Star Revue*.

It has been stated by an authoritative source that Milbourne Christopher did not initially support the idea of Cardini appearing on the show. Christopher was a competitive man and would certainly have been protective of what he would have perceived as his star status on the special. It is significant that in the opening, he was the only magician announced as coming from the United States, something that could be achieved by referring to Cardini as a British guest.

While Christopher was the absolute catalyst in convincing the NBC executives that a magic show was viable in such a prestigious slot, we have little knowledge of who had casting control, although he would certainly have advised on the status of the magicians on offer from overseas. The idea of using only one magician from each country featured would have played into Christopher's hands as the only American, but there is no doubt that Cardini would have been uppermost in the minds of NBC executives for inclusion once the show had been commissioned. Cardini had been a regular attraction at NBC conventions down the years, and in the eyes of many of the top brass would have represented the face of magic in a way that Christopher, for all his knowledge and enthusiasm, would not.

As the vice-president of the company wrote to Dick on one such occasion, "Not only our affiliated stations but the old NBC sophisticates were most enthusiastic about your performance... We appreciated it and we won't forget it."

If the network insisted on Cardini's presence, it was not for Christopher to disagree, and Cardini made sure he realized his true worth. On all "magicians only" shows, he insisted to the end of his life that he should be paid more than anyone else on the bill. On this occasion, he held out for a fee of \$2,500 and got it. Once his inclusion was secure, no one did more to ensure his success than Christopher himself.

Cardini's appearance on *The Festival of Magic* was his last on television in his adopted country. This must raise the question why. Indeed, there are times when his whole career in the medium appears more interesting for what he did not do than for what he did. For example, if there is one show whose stage he should have graced, it was *The Ed Sullivan Show*. It ran for a momentous 23 years between 1948 and 1971, for the first seven under the banner *The Toast of the Town*.

The ability of Sullivan and his team to capture the world's top talent for CBS each Sunday night is now legendary. Ed represented one of Dick's oldest friends, from the time they appeared together on his *Dawn Patrol Night Club Revue* in one of the last attempts to keep vaudeville on track in the New York area in the Thirties.

Carole Cardini remembers the occasion of a big fundraising event at the Waldorf Astoria where Sullivan acted as master of ceremonies. Sullivan's television show was well established by this time. After

Cardini's act, Ed turned to the audience and pleaded, "Don't you want to see Cardini on my show sometime?" They responded as one. Carole surmises that Cardini's refusal may have had something to do with his reluctance to cut his act for time. Like a true artist, he was protective about the integrity of the whole.

Carole even senses that he did not want to do *The Festival of Magic*, either, but there he did have nine-and-a-half minutes of screen time and was still able to achieve a token sequence from his billiard balls, a section he had become used to adjusting as the main buffer in his routine.

Swan is known to have voiced the opinion that once you had done the show, you found it harder, as a novelty act, to acquire work elsewhere. The argument did not hold. Attractions like Señor Wences and Topo Gigio became national institutions as a result of their frequent appearances. The careers of magicians like Channing Pollock, Richiardi Jr., Jay Marshall, and Marvyn Roy were enhanced. An appearance with Sullivan added value to an act wherever it might subsequently play, acting as a seal of approval that could only entice more people to see the live performance.

Swan was also known to dismiss the program with the line, "Oh, he doesn't pay!" However, the Sullivan situation was certainly one where money was not the problem. On November 15, 1951, the television host was moved to put pen to paper:

Got a great kick out of the nice note from you and the missus. However, why in the name of heavens don't you want to play any television show? Cameras and lighting have improved enormously and that little rabbit bit would be cute and effective. I'd like very much to have you on the show. The money is available, so please tell me what date you want.

Four years later, the show was still trying to persuade him. On September 14, 1955, Mark Leddy, Sullivan's principal booker, right-hand man, and champion of class magic acts — at one stage, he acted as agent for both Jay Marshall and Channing Pollock — wrote:

Just phoned to learn that you were in Houston and that you will not be back till Thursday. My phone call was in an endeavor to get you to see the rehearsal of the Ed Sullivan Show, any Sunday that you would like to see him... looking forward to seeing you on the Sullivan Show... regards to the family. Call me first chance you get.

Cardini never did the show. It is to the credit of both Sullivan and Leddy that when they could not book the original and the best act of its kind, they did not book any of the Cardini copies. That was the high standard they set themselves and it might conceivably have provided the one argument that could have swayed Dick.

According to Carole, similar resistance on the television front was shown to Jack Paar and all the other talk-show hosts. The money would probably have presented a problem with shows of this kind, adhering as they did to a scale payment structure, but in retrospect a caring daughter, concerned for both her parents' legacy and their wellbeing, feels that they all represented lost opportunities. Financially, Dick and Swan could have used the additional hotel and nightclub work that the television exposure would have generated in their later years. A career that bluntly was in decline could have appeared otherwise.

Their daughter is honest about the situation:

They were paranoid about people filming the act, and I think my mother had a lot to do with this. My father belonged to my mother. She protected him, even from me! As a result, they made some poor decisions. But when you are great and every review is good, the older you get, you worry that this will change and become hesitant to break new ground.

At times, the pressures of artistic excellence have a lot to answer for.

There is one last television appearance to be chronicled. It was recorded in London on February 1, 1961. The whole experience turned into an unmitigated disaster. Perhaps Dick thought he would be less

vulnerable exposed to the cameras of a country so far from home. The \$500 fee was hardly enough to make the trip worthwhile.

Milbourne Christopher reported in his *Linking Ring* column how the night before the Cardinis set sail, Dick called him to pick his brains about the way they had shot his performance at NBC. Christopher located the shooting script and read out the directions to him. Perhaps Cardini was naïve to suppose that the British technical crew would be as accommodating as Christopher and his colleagues.

The program, a Granada production blandly entitled *The Variety Show*, was transmitted on the Independent Television Network. *TV Times*, the listings magazine for that channel, billed his appearance as “the return of Britain’s own Cardini, the master of cards.” Ironically, viewers never got to see the card segment of his act.

Whatever assurances he had been given before he left, Cardini arrived at Granada’s studios in Chelsea to discover the worst. He revealed all to a reporter from the *South Wales Echo*, having retreated to family and Wales to recover from the fiasco:

He was still seething over the fact that he had to compress his act into just four minutes. “I gave them hell!” he barked. “They phoned me at my New York home from London to ask me if I’d take part in the program. I came over with my wife, Swan, and when I got to the studio to record the show, they said I would be on for only four minutes!”

Pitchford had a stand-up-sit-down row with the television executives right there on the studio floor. “It just wasn’t long enough to contain my act. I usually take a character part — doing tricks at the same time. But when the show was eventually recorded, I had to murder the act to get it in the ridiculously short time. And what did they say when I made a fuss? They lamely said that they had paid my fare over and my fee, so there wasn’t any justification in my objections. I almost walked out at that — but I had a signed contract.”

To save face, Cardini later claimed that a compromise was reached whereby Granada agreed to destroy any copies of the broadcast within four weeks. This was not necessarily the case, since that provision appears to have been built into his original contract before leaving America, alongside notification that the contract was subject to permission being obtained from the Ministry of Labour ahead of the engagement: “The Company undertakes to wipe or destroy the said videotape recording immediately after or within twenty-eight days of transmission of the said program and will furnish the said Artist (if required) with a certificate confirming that the destruction has been effected.”

The show was transmitted on February 8, and one assumes that Granada kept to their side of the contract. No copy has surfaced in later years in spite of the efforts of persistent film researchers anxious to find further footage of the maestro. The promise would have been no big deal, anyhow. In those days, shows were rarely kept after transmission. No one could foresee the distant residual potential of satellite channels and home video. The shelf space came at a premium and a tape once used could be used again, and almost certainly was.

Perhaps it is as well. Cardini told Bobby Bernard that, restricted to performing with cigarettes alone, he was pushed into a corner of the studio with scarcely room to turn and no facility whatsoever for throwing them to Swan to catch.

Halfway through rehearsals, when tempers were running high, one of the producers turned to Dick with a line of self-justification, “We’ve had some great magicians in here,” as if to say, “None of them gave us any headaches.” When challenged to name one, the producer replied, “Like Peter Pit.”

Dick went livid: “I felt like going to take out US citizenship!” After all his years in America, he was still coasting along as the married partner of a national.

The Cardinis stayed in Britain for two weeks after the taping, seeing all Dick’s relatives and spending time with old friends Billy and



PHOTOS: CAROLIE CARDINI



Cardini performing aboard a cruise ship in the 1960s. Swan and Cardini strolling along the docks.

June McComb and Bobby Bernard. Bobby accompanied him on his last visit to John Martin, at which the mechanic presented him with an improved version of the Harlequin Cigarette Holder, whereby the cigarette could be locked into place if required.

Having left Martin, Cardini and Bernard retired to a café for tea where Cardini announced that — but for special charity functions and the occasional gala for magicians — he had given his “last professional show,” whereupon he presented Bobby with the aforesaid cigarette holder as a gift to commemorate the happy times they had spent in each other’s company. It was an emotional moment.

Billy McComb felt the same as he bade farewell to his friends at the airport a few days later: “I well remember when he was passing through the barrier to join the plane; he stopped and took a last long look around, with a suspicion of tears in his eyes. I felt I was watching a man saying farewell to the country of his birth for the last time. As so it was.” ♦

Excerpted and abridged from Cardini: The Suave Deceiver, by John Fisher; published this month by The Miracle Factory, 2007.