

The Magic Castle



In the 1980s, when Bill and Milt Larsen looked into the old crystal ball to ascertain the future of the Castle, Brother Bill (left) is reported to have said, "I predict that Max Maven will write a story about the Magic Castle for MAGIC Magazine sometime in the 21st century."

By Max Maven

Where else but Hollywood? After all, the city has long been known as "The Dream Factory." And, for all intents and purposes, it began as a dream; a grand idea that existed only on paper.

The trail begins in the February 1952 issue of *Genii*, where Editor William Larsen Sr. promised "an announcement of more than usual importance...." In his editorial for (appropriately enough) April 1, he revealed his ambitious idea: "A new international magical order, dedicated to the betterment and promotion of the magical arts; designed to bring about closer relation between the devotees of the conjuring crafts. It is called: *The Academy of Magical Arts & Sciences*."

Every subscriber was automatically a member. The plan was to "do much to publicize magic and magicians." Maybe there would be some sort of clubhouse — an idea that Larsen had suggested as far back as a meeting of the Los Magicos group in 1939. There would be various categories of membership and annual awards. There had, in fact, been awards in the magazine since 1942. But these were his personal choices for the best tricks and books of the preceding season; this was a loftier objective: awards with a stature comparable to the Motion Picture Academy's Oscars.

Had anyone else made such a grandiose proclamation, it might have been met with skepticism. However, Larsen had an impressive set of credentials. He was a trial lawyer by profession, with magic as an avocation (although at times those relative positions were reversed). In the conjuring world, by the early 1920s he was established as a prolific writer and inventor (most often in partnership with T. Page Wright, who died in an automobile accident in late 1930), and a respected performer. He was active in the California magic scene, boosting the Pacific Coast Association of Magicians from its 1933 inception. In 1936, with the help of his wife Gerrie, he started *Genii*, and even found time to take over the Thayer Magic Studio in 1945.

So, when several "Interim Awards" were bestowed in the June issue, there were reasons to be optimistic about this "Academy" evolving into a substantive organization beyond the pre-

Celebrates Forty



PHOTO: MILT LARSEN

Hollywood's prestigious landmark at 7001 Franklin Avenue.

liminary printing of membership cards and stationery. It might really happen, perhaps even with that clubhouse he'd envisioned.

Thirteen months later, William Larsen died of a sudden cerebral hemorrhage. He was 48 years old.

Somehow, despite their overloaded schedules, the Larsens managed to raise two sons. At the time of their father's passing, Bill Jr. and Milt were in their early 20s. As kids, they had assisted their parents in magic acts. Both had worked on the production of their parents' magazine; Bill took over the editorial helm.

Television came into its own in the 1950s, and all three members of the family got in on it. Gerrie starred in her own series as "The Magic Lady," Bill became a producer at the CBS network, and Milt started writing for gameshows. Too, they had been involved in mounting live shows. In 1957 Milt, with Oliver Berliner, produced *It's Magic!*, revue that ran for two nights at the Wilshire Ebell Theater, starting an almost annual tradition that continues to this day. Bill began producing lectures for his subscribers in the L.A. area.

Such activities were frequent reminders of their father's idea. Perhaps it was the magazine's silver anniversary in 1960 that spurred them on to start planning an actual club.

As the new decade commenced, contact was made with Thomas Glover, who owned most of

the hill extending up from the intersection of Franklin and Orange, a block behind the famed Chinese Theater. A specific building at the front of the property caught Milt's eye. It resembled a fairytale castle — albeit one that was falling apart.

When construction got going in 1908, the Rollin B. Lane mansion was a magnificent edifice. The Gothic Renaissance design by the team of Dennis & Farwell was essentially what they'd devised in 1897 for the Kimberly estate in Redlands, California (which still stands). For Lane they used the same blueprints, but reversed.

When completed in 1910, it was one of the most majestic houses that the youthful city of Hollywood had ever seen. Curiously, it may be that it was never a home per se; some reports indicate that Lane never lived there; rather, it was a luxurious guesthouse. By the 1940s the mansion was in new hands. The dignified interior was brutally subdivided into rental duplexes, then further truncated into smaller units. (Legend has it that in between Lane's ownership and its apartmentalization, in the late 1940s, the place was an upscale brothel. That's probably just wishful thinking.)

In 1961, arrangements were made with Glover, and Milt began working along with Don Gotschall to renovate the battered mansion. Vital to this was John Shrum, Art Director for the NBC network. Milt had a knack for acquiring odd antiques. Shrum was able to take those materials and put them together as a faux-Victorian wonderland. Over the course of more than a year, walls were stripped, floors were carpeted, and fixtures were installed.

And what fixtures! Stained glass windows that had graced stately tabernacles were rescued from the wrecking ball. Elaborate facades discarded by movie studios were recycled, now

as new-old-new antiques. Portions of floors, saved from demolition, were baptized in varnish and reborn as counter tops. Venerable oak doors and pressed tin ceiling panels were rescued and put to use, often in ways quite unlike their crafters' original conceptions. Somehow, it all seemed to coordinate.

While this was underway, Bill was immersed in developing the organization that would inhabit this abode, soon to be dubbed the Magic Castle. In his February 1962 editorial, he announced that "The Academy of Magical Arts has been officially formed as a non-profit corporation dedicated to the advancement of the art of magic... The membership will be limited to magicians and magic enthusiasts. It will, in essence, provide our local magi a convention every night...." Forty members had signed on.

The complexities of legal paperwork delayed the opening of the club more than once, but preparations continued. In July, Bill reported that Jay Ose had been hired to be the club's host and Resident Magician.

Originally from Minnesota, Ose was an engaging entertainer who, after years on the road, moved to Hollywood in 1948 where, in addition to performing, he did the occasional acting role and advised on film and television projects. (If you want to see him work, track down the 1967 movie *The Flim-Flam Man*.) He had a keen memory, and could remember people's names and details of their lives. This made return guests feel exceedingly welcome, and did much to enhance their experience. Without question, Jay Ose's charm was one of the key ingredients to the club's early success. He remained in residence until his death in late 1967.

Finally, on January 2, 1963, the Magic Castle opened its doors.



The initial success with 151 members on its opening day, to the current status of over 5,000 members, is attributed to the hard work of Bill and Irene Larsen — forever presenting Milt with the happy challenge of expanding the Academy of Magical Arts clubhouse, the Magic Castle, where “nothing is impossible.” [Top] Hollywood’s Lane Mansion in 1961, at the time when Milt Larsen reached an agreement with owner, Thomas O. Glover, to convert the house to an elegant private magician’s club, thus realizing the dream of the Larsen brothers’ father, William W. Larsen Sr.

One of the comments frequently heard from first-time visitors to the Magic Castle is that, mysteriously, it’s bigger on the inside than it looks on the outside. That wasn’t true in 1963. Then, the functional space was limited to the main floor. (The second floor, in what is now the Dante Room dining area, was where Jay Ose lived. When carpentry encroached upon that space, he moved up to the attic level, where today the offices are located.)

The club was open every night except Sunday, from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. By mid-February there were approximately 100 magician members and another 80 non-magician members. The joining fee was \$35.00, with annual dues of \$12.50 after that.

Amid the rococo trappings was a bar — smaller than what’s there today; the original was only large enough to accommodate six stools. There was film projection equipment, and some tables where sporadic close-up shows took place. Magician members were welcome to perform, but Ose was the only booked artist.

Well, in fact that’s not completely true, because then as now, a popular Castle feature was “Invisible Irma,” a capricious ghost who played requests at a grand piano. In an early newsletter it was revealed that the set-up “required the combination of two

complete pianos and enough special tubing to have built 37 player pianos.” In those days, Irma’s piano was where the Close-Up Gallery is now located, and the performing tables were in what’s now known as Irma’s Room. (They swapped locations that June.)

This by no means was the only non-human attraction; every nook and cranny held something lovely, or peculiar, or both. In 1968, a charming display of miniature skeletons performing tiny stage illusions, crafted by Robert LaPlaine and Jim McKee, found a niche near the ghostly piano, where they still reside. Around every corner were posters and paintings, ranging from superb historical rarities to portraiture bearing only slight resemblance to the human face. (Somewhere within this range are the

many donated paintings by Salvatore Salla. Of particular interest is a still life, currently hanging near the Parlour, depicting a classic magic prop in a condition that is technically impossible to achieve. It’s not obvious, but worth looking for.)

There were gimmicks hidden throughout the establishment. Over the years these have varied. One early favorite was an “elevator shaft” at the side of the stairs where the Mezzanine Bar is now. At first, it contained a stationary gorilla that would intermittently spring to life, startling passers by. Later, a “corpse” named Dora, dressed in a bloody negligee, would come hurtling down the chute.

Other gags over the years have included the sliding bookcase through which one gets from the foyer into the Castle itself; a rotating cocktail table; a muttering skull; a painting with moving eyes; a scale-model of Michelangelo’s statue of David as a notorious soap dispenser in the downstairs ladies restroom; a telephone booth with an unexpectedly osseous reflection, and many more. Some are gone, and some are still up and running. (When you visit the Castle, you’ll have the fun of discovering these for yourself.) Many of these gizmos, including the first Irma, were jerry-rigged by Spencer Quinn, and later Jim Williams (who recently became the club’s General Manager).

From the outset, lectures were presented for the magician members. Some were held upstairs in a cleared-out space that has since become the Main Dining Room; others were held off-property for reasons of space, at Brookledge, the Larsen home, or at the nearby Masquers Club. The first lecture was by a young man who’d been managing the magic shop at Disneyland, Leo Behnke, on the evenings of February 22 and 23. Behnke was booked for the week preceding those dates, and became a regular part of the burgeoning Castle community; for a time, he was the resident magic bartender.

(While all of the club’s bartenders seem to possess magical skills, there have only been a few who both mix drinks and shuffle cards. In the 1980s, Bob Jardine held court in the Hat & Hare Pub next to the Wine Cellar, of which we’ll hear more. Currently, Jim Patton tends bar regularly, although his card-handling expertise is only rarely revealed. In 2002, Doc Eason and Eric Mead came out from Colorado to perform at the “Hello Dolly!” bar in the new Inner Circle area. The response was so good that there is now talk of once again having a magic bartender working full-time. As for lectures, the Castle continues to present them several Sundays a month, under the benevolent care of “Kaz” Kasnetsis. There is no door charge for these, one of the better perks of regular membership. And now, back to 1963.)

Of course, Southern California was home to many well-known magicians, including Arnold Furst, Gerald Kosky, Aubrey, John Daniel, and

Marvin Levy. (The latter changed his name to Marvyn Roy and added electricity to his act. Of course, I'm referring to Carol.) There were literary lights such as Fred Shields, Bascom Jones, and Sid Fleischman. Not all were natives: Kirk Kirkham, Carl Ballantine, Channing Pollock, Bev Bergeron, Mark and Nani Wilson, and John Gaughan had grown up elsewhere, and moved to Los Angeles for work opportunities.

The warm climate inspired the inventive Joe Berg to move his magic shop from Chicago to Hollywood in the 1950s; he was a Castle supporter from its earliest days. Several famous performers had relocated to the area upon retirement, including Dante, José Frakson, and Harry Blackstone Sr. Dante passed on before the advent of the Academy, but his son, Alvin Jansen, was on the original Board of Directors. Frakson and Blackstone were very much a part of the club during its infancy. The area where Blackstone often sat is now called the Blackstone Alcove, featuring portraits and a sculpture of the famed illusionist (and now, after his untimely death in 1997, additional pictures of Harry Blackstone Jr.).

In March 1963, an East Coast magician got a phone call from his old friend Jay Ose, who told him he ought to come out to see this new place. He arrived in April, and everything changed.

When Dai Vernon arrived, Bill Larsen raved, "Everything we had heard about this man was true, and after the lecture the members were torn on whether to take lessons from Dai and really become magicians or to give up magic completely and go into glass-blowing or less difficult hobbies."

Vernon, a spry 68, camped out in Ose's second-floor digs. Bill wrote, "We hope we can keep him here forever." And, of course, he stayed; for the rest of his long life, he lived just down the street from the club he came to call home.

Justifiably known as "The Professor," Dai Vernon had moved to New York from Ottawa, Canada back in 1916. Within a few years, he had achieved legendary status. His revolutionary approach to magic reverberated throughout the world (as it continues to do even now).

It's as simple as this: When The Professor settled in Hollywood, it made the Magic Castle the center of the magic universe.

By July 1963, the membership had risen to 350. Now, the chronology gets a bit disjointed. The Castle was becoming a hotbed of activity; a lot was happening all at once.

Other well-known magicians were moving west to become part of the Castle community, such as Johnny Platt, the wily Chicago bar magician. Tony Slydini took up residence in the late 1960s, although in time he returned to New York. Kuda Bux, the Pakistani mystic, became a regular. Charlie Miller, the whimsical scholar of sleights, had long been working out

of L.A., but traveled constantly. Now, he had a home base, as would other seasoned pros such as Loring Campbell and Francis Carlyle. Still other magicians, not yet as well known, began arriving. These included Jules Lenier from New York; Ron Wilson from Scotland via Detroit; Eric Lewis and his son Martin, from England.

When it became known that Dai Vernon was in Hollywood to stay, a number of young magicians pulled up stakes and moved out to L.A. to study at his feet. The first was a cardman from Michigan, Larry Jennings. He hit it off with Vernon and, when he realized that The Professor was willing to open up, he contacted his friend Bruce Cervon and encouraged him to move out from Ohio to get in on this extraordinary opportunity. Others would follow.

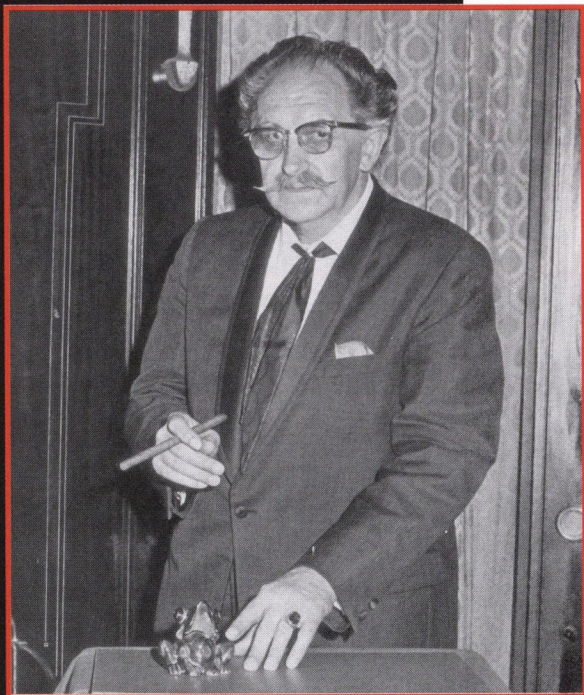
Magicians already based in Los Angeles, such as Dick Zimmerman and Chuck Jones, built reputations amplified by their association with the club. Diana Schultz moved out from Arizona, and ended up marrying Zimmerman in 1968; the wedding was at the Castle, and the couple walked down the aisle flanked by rows of magicians holding aloft Appearing Canes.

The news media began to document this intriguing place. As a private club, one could only gain admission through a member, and this built a strong mystique. Adding to that, celebrities began to hang out at the Castle. The link with some was through members who were established in non-performing roles in entertainment, such as television writers Snag Werris and Lou Derman, movie producer Jan Grippo, and sound pioneer Leon Leon. Another who straddled magic and film was Tony Giorgio, a skillful close-up magician who frequently performed at the Castle in between acting engagements.

Television and movie stars made the place even more interesting to the outside world. Cary Grant became so enamored of the club that for years, beginning in

In the beginning, Invisible Irma [far right] occupied the round room that's become the Close-up Gallery. Singing along with Irma during those glorious opening nights are [left to right] Jay Ose, Bill Larsen, Leo Behnke, Gerrie Larsen Baker, Art Baker, and Milt Larsen. [Bottom] In 1964, Dai Vernon presents the first lecture at the Castle, in the first dining room that's still under construction.





Clarke "The Senator" Crandall was invited to become the head host at the Castle in 1969 — his newly printed business cards simply read "In Charge." [Top] Movie actor/magic enthusiast Karl Malden joins first Castle host, Jay Ose.

1966, he was a member of the Board of Directors.

There was a tremendous spirit of camaraderie at the Magic Castle. More than anything else, this was due to President Bill Larsen and his bride (as of November 1963) Irene. They were at the club almost every night, and went out of their way to make everyone feel included. From the beginning, the idea was that it should feel

like an ongoing cocktail party. And it did.

When a magician walked into the Castle for the first time, it felt like coming home. And for a non-magician, the feeling was of having been allowed to temporarily join in a warm and convivial community.

As the decade progressed, the Castle continued to grow. Toward the end of that first year a library of 300 books was opened for the magician members. At first this was in a room off of the dining area. A few months later, it was moved upstairs, and its former home was turned into a private dining chamber.

(In early 1969, that evolved into the Houdini Séance Room, adorned with valuable pieces of Houdini memorabilia, much of it from the Manny Weltman collection, as well as some audacious counterfeits. Here, groups of 12 are joined by a post-prandial 13th guest, and spooky events ensue. This is a joint effort; the room is heavily gaffed — originally by Tom Heric; the current version by Jim Williams — but it's up to the "medium" to create the mood, augmented by his own effects to lead into the blackout sequence. The inaugural medium was E. Raymond Carlyle, later joined by Sandy Spillman — who also served as a host and manager. These days, the medium is played by Leo Kostka.)

As for the library, it's grown to over 4,000 volumes under the guidance of Gordon Bean (preceded by Sammy McKay, Bill Pol, T.A. Waters, and Hal Hale), located downstairs just off the Inner Circle — a place that didn't even physically exist in 1963. But again, we're getting ahead of our story.

In October, the kitchen became functional and the dining room was opened, with seating

for up to 40 people. A filet mignon dinner cost \$4.25, beverage included.

Membership had topped 500, and the Board of Directors considered putting a moratorium on accepting new applicants, to avoid overcrowding.

In early 1964, an irresistible close-up magician from Brooklyn came through L.A. on a lecture tour. His name was Albert Goshman, and he found the Castle to be a perfect fit, hence he stayed. He became hugely popular, polishing his act through literally thousands of performances.

A Dutch fellow arrived in the fall of 1965, booked on that year's *It's Magic* show. This was Peter Pit, another who ended up a resident. In time, he became the club's Secretary, and also handled much of the booking.

As the Castle continued to expand, so did its operation. Additional staff members were hired. Formal showtimes were introduced. The basement area was opened as a "Haunted Wine Cellar" piano bar. In early 1968 it was converted into a theater, and stand-up magic was finally viable at the Magic Castle. The room only sat about 30 people. Despite the size limitations, acts such as Haruo and Deanna Shimada, who'd just arrived from Japan by way of Australia, worked that tiny stage. (Now that there's a full-sized theater upstairs, the cellar is a place for impromptu shows. On one wall is a display of exquisite miniature sculptures by Katlyn Miller-Breene that were donated in the early 1980s.)

As the decade waned, the veranda in front of the Close-Up Gallery was enclosed, enlarging the waiting area and thereby enabling more shows per night. In 1968, Ted Salter presented the Castle with pen-and-ink caricatures of Dai Vernon and Al Goshman, which were put on display in the Gallery. Over the years, there were pictures done of just about everyone who had worked the club—dozens and dozens of them, still distributed along walls throughout the building.

Also in 1968, the Larsens were able to bring their father's plan to fruition with the first annual Academy of Magical Arts awards banquet, held on November 9 at the Century Plaza Hotel. Six hundred revelers paid \$17.50 apiece to attend the black-tie affair, emceed by TV gameshow host Bob Barker. The banquet was produced by Jules Lenier. (In later years this was handled by Dick Zimmerman and Peter Pit; more recently, by Dale Hindman and Mark Nelson.) There were celebrity presenters, inside jokes and, of course, the awards. The original form was a cast of Dai Vernon's hands; unfortunately, from a distance this had a somewhat excremental appearance. Not long after, the design was changed to a beautiful magic wand and presentation case made from rare woods, crafted by John Gaughan.

In 1969, a new and vigorous presence arrived. Clarke Crandall came out from

Chicago to emcee *It's Magic!*, and decided to stick around. In April he became the head host, and put an iconoclastic spin on the Castle experience. Known as "The Senator" for his loquacious and opinionated wit, his acerbic comedy was ahead of its time. Having reached his dotage and no longer interested in the rigors of the road, the Castle was an opportunity to stay in one place and let the audiences come to him. And they did: His special late-night "X-rated" shows were eagerly attended. Crandall's business card simply read "In Charge," and although others may have handled the actual managerial work, he was very much that until his death six years later.

The club was thriving. In January 1970, it was announced that as the membership had reached 2,000, there would be a waiting list for those who wanted to join. (They later changed their minds.)

A new host came on board that December, whose folksy demeanor provided a yin to The Senator's yang. Don Lawton was an ex-dealer from St. Louis, and his laid-back charm made visitors feel like old friends. (His charm was particularly effective on the club's receptionist, Joanie Frieden: She married him.) Don continued as host and manager for many years; he passed away in 1988.

Additional personnel were necessary, because the Castle continued to grow — literally. The Lane manor had a large balcony above its front entrance. In the early Castle days, this was sometimes open for members to sip cocktails as they watched the traffic go by at the bottom of the hill. In 1971, the balcony was enclosed and turned into the Terrace Room, joining the Main, Dante, and Cherub dining areas.

A more complicated expansion was completed in 1976, when the Thomas O. Glover Annex was built on top of the garage in back of the mansion. At last, the Magic Castle had a full-sized theater, the Palace of Mystery, with a raised stage, curtains, lights, dressing rooms, and seating for 130 people. To its left was a baroque new bar. Next to that was a large table for impromptu close-up. (Every weekend that's commandeered by long-time member Bill Joslin.)

Off to the right was a room designated as The Robert-Houdin Museum of Mechanical Curiosa, which housed an antique fortunetelling machine, Maury Leaf's Snake Basket, and an 80-year-old mutoscope. This became the new home of one of Milt's most impressive acquisitions, a huge 1910 Imhof-Muckle orchestra, taking up almost half the museum. Contained within this mighty machine were ten musical instruments which, upon the insertion of 25¢, would produce bombastic melodies. (A few years ago, this space was repurposed. Now closed off to the public, it contains an employee dining area plus a long-needed backstage toilet.)

Just past the Palace was another new venue, the Parlour of Prestidigitation, an intimate space with raked seating for about 60 patrons.

Magicians continued to migrate to Hollywood: close-up workers such as Mike Skinner, Ricky Jay, Steve Freeman, Jeff Altman, Earl Nelson and, for a period in 1975, David Roth; stage acts including Goldfinger & Dove, Whit Haydn, and The Tomsonis; inventors, notably T.A. Waters and Don Wayne. Norm Nielsen, who had spent years working in Europe, returned to Los Angeles. Later arrivals included Tom Ogden, Ray Pierce, Jonathan Neal, Daryl, and Harry Anderson. Too, performers already living in Southern California now had a place to hone their skills. Among these were The Pendragons, Glenn Falkenstein, Joyce Beck, Chuck Fayne, and Tina Lenert.

In 1975 the Junior Society was established. Led by Diana Zimmerman, the group was for kids too young to get into the club. The membership standards were strict (in fact, the audition process was and is tougher than what adult applicants go through). With library access and special lectures, this program bolstered many teenagers who went on to success, such as Dirk Arthur, Ed Alonzo, Larry Clark, Christopher Hart, Scott Cervine, Bill Goodwin, Ray Kosby, and Michael Weber.

Overlapping this was another association of mostly young magicians, the Long Beach Mystics, located an hour south of Los Angeles. As the members became old enough, many got involved with the Magic Castle. Mike Caveney, Stan Allen, Bill Smith, James Hamilton, and Mark Kalin were among those who appeared in the Castle showrooms.

These were heady times for magic. In 1970, a personable young guy from Winnipeg performed at the Castle. He returned a couple of years later with a grant from the Canadian Arts Council that sponsored lessons from Dai Vernon. Those lessons paid off, because in 1974 Doug Henning opened on Broadway in *The Magic Show*, a hit musical that led to years of highly rated television specials.

Famous for its annual Magical Academy Awards events, attending a Castle banquet in the 1960s were [standing, left to right] Kathy and John Daniel, Milt Larsen, Karrell Fox, Albert Goshman, unidentified, Jay Ose; [seated, left to right] Carol Roy, Bill Larsen, Dai Vernon, Irene Larsen, Gerrie Larsen, Marvyn Roy, Channing Pollock. In the roundtable photo at the bottom [left to right] are Joe Berg, Jim Cooper, Dai Vernon, Jan Grippio, Bill Derman, Lou Derman.





This room is off-limits to most diners due to the private séances conducted here. In 1969, one of the four bedrooms of the mansion was converted into the Houdini Séance Room by art director John Shrum, Dr. Tom Heric, and Milt Larsen.

Doug's ongoing connection with the Castle helped elevate the club's profile.

It was also in this period that magic attained a firmer foothold in Las Vegas. A strong friendship developed between Bill and Irene and the dynamic illusion team of Siegfried & Roy, and the duo's visits to the Castle and appearances at the banquets added further luster to the Academy's image.

Lecturers from abroad were visiting the United States with increasing frequency, and the Magic Castle became a standard stop for virtually every tour. Bill and Irene were traveling to conventions in Europe and Asia, networking with magicians from around the world. The result was that the Castle was broadening its scope. On any given evening, one was likely to run into an international "Who's Who" of magic.

And still they came. As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, new immigrants included John Carney, Frances Willard, Jay Scott Berry, and Joel Hodgson. In 1981, Lance Burton drove out from Kentucky to appear in *It's Magic!* And yes, he stayed, taking an apartment down the block until his career transferred him to Las Vegas. Others who came as the '80s progressed included Mac King, Michael Ammar, Jim Steinmeyer, John Kennedy, and Franz Harary. Some had longer routes: James Dimmare and Martin Nash from Canada, Petrick & Mia from Czechoslovakia, and Amos Levkovitch from Israel.

Of course, the Magic Castle is not the only reason that magicians move to Los Angeles. For example, when David Copperfield moved to the Hollywood Hills circa 1980, it was primarily because of television production resources. But living in Hollywood also gave him access to the many creative minds in magic clustered in that city, and the Castle was the nexus.

After having flirted with the idea for many years, in the 1980s Billy McComb became an American citizen. Great Britain's loss was the Castle's gain. The gregarious McComb is a living encyclopedia of conjuring knowledge, and a frequent performer in all three showrooms, with a sparkling energy that belies his age. Let's put it this way: Billy stopped doing the big illusion stuff years ago, when his dinosaur died. He's become a fixture at the Castle — one of the few antiques that *wasn't* scavenged by Milt.

Well, we can make jokes about age, but it's a reality. Time catches up to everyone,

even magicians. When performers such as Kevin James, Nicholas Night, Dana Daniels, Brian Gillis, and Danny Sylvester surfaced in L.A., the word "young" was invariably attached to their names. None of these guys is anywhere near elderly, but they've outgrown the prefix. Young Turks of a previous era, such as Paul Green, Barry Price, and James Lewis, have morphed into veterans who reminisce about the "good old days." Those of the next generation, such as George Tovar, Alfonso, Gregory Wilson, John Lovick, and Tony Picasso, are already starting their own morphing process, supplanted by Andrew Goldenhersh, Enrique de la Vega, Danny Cole, Aaron Fisher, et al — who will soon have even younger Turks nipping at their heels. It's a matter of evolution, slow and steady. But some changes are abrupt.

In August 1992, Dai Vernon passed away at the age of 98. In February 1993, Bill Larsen passed away at the age of 64. Within the space of half a year, the Magic Castle had lost its twin nuclei.

There were immediate problems. A substantial bank loan that would have had years to be paid off was suddenly due. This was precarious; there was a very real possibility that the club might have to close down. Members were asked to contribute funds, then dunned for a dues surcharge. Financial configurations were examined and revised. With the help of several members with in the banking profession, notably Lew Horwitz and Dale Hindman, the club was rescued from the brink of disaster.

While Bill was alive, the Castle was essentially a benign dictatorship. The other members of the Board of Directors were mostly involved in ceremonial functions. Now, things changed. There was some shake-up in the composition of the Board, as it assumed a greater amount of control. The original Board of 1963 had five members; in the '90s it swelled to nine. Over the past decade, there has been a fair amount of bickering between certain members of the Board and some of their constituents. This reached its peak in a rancorous lawsuit that was resolved at great expense, with none of the parties made happy.

And yet.

Four decades on, the Magic Castle is still here. And, as much as some mourn the loss of the "good old days," there's a new wave of immigrants who are creating what, one hopes, will be the good *new* days. Among the more recent additions are David Regal and Gregory Wilson. Long-distance transplants: Aldo Colombini from Italy; Shoot Ogawa from Japan; Paul Wilson from Scotland; Mark Haslam, Steve Valentine, and Mystina from England. (Bonus points for commitment go to the latter; she married the Palace Stage Manager, Bryan Lee.)

In 1997, the dormant garage beneath the Glover Annex got a thorough makeover and became the Inner Circle. In addition to the library and bar already mentioned, it has the 50-seat Peller Theater (underwritten by Triny Peller in honor of her late husband, Albert), plus displays of memorabilia including Ed Wynn's bicycle-piano, the gaffed pool table that W.C. Fields trouped with during his vaudeville days, costumes worn by Max Malini, and more. There's a large central area with a dance floor, used for private parties and special events.

Each year there are lectures, swap meets, dealer nights, and holiday festivities. Monthly video nights started a few months ago; organized by Larry Horowitz, these combine archival footage with expert commentary — and sometimes, the commenting experts are the subjects themselves, as in recent evenings with Carl Ballantine and Channing Pollock. For some months, John Carney produced workshops where magicians could try out new material in a supportive atmosphere with follow-up sessions of constructive criticism. When that endeavor ebbed, three of the regulars took it upon themselves to continue using the Peller Theater to work out, and now almost every Friday there's a late show by the "Unholy Three," Rob Zabrecky, Dave Lovering, and Fitzgerald.

The club has a website, *www.MagicCastle.com*, kept up to date by the efforts of Bob Busch. The newsletter is about to get a production upgrade and a new editor, Erika Larsen. Despite recent declines in tourism and restaurant business, the club is holding its own. Most nights, by the Palace Bar, you'll run into Milt, often in the company of Arlene, his wife of just over a dozen years. If you're downstairs at the Main Bar, you're likely to hear those distinctive peals of laughter that affirm that Irene is in the house.

Performers travel great distances to perform at the Castle, despite fees are still shamefully low. It is virtually impossible for an out-of-town performer to work a week at the Castle and not lose money, but there are other incentives. In the past year alone, artists from 16 different countries have performed. They come because the Magic Castle has attained a status not all that dissimilar from Jerusalem or Mecca. For many magicians, it's the one place you *must* visit at least once in your life.

And so they do. Some want to tread the same stage boards as Jeff McBride, Tommy Wonder, and Penn & Teller. Others want to ribbonspread across the same tabletop as Lennart Green, Eugene Burger, and René Lavand. And some simply want to see the small couch by the Close-up Gallery, where Dai Vernon could be found almost every night for three decades.

If you get there, sit the space that The

Professor usually claimed. (It's the one at the far left.) Close your eyes, and wait. If you listen long enough, perhaps through the hubbub you'll make out a jovial voice coming from over toward the right end of the bar. It says, "Hi! I'm Bill Larsen, the President of the Magic Castle, but just call me Bill. Where are you from? Is this your first time here? If you have any questions, just ask." It's there; I swear it.

The preceding pages contain almost 200 names. But if you've ever spent time at the Magic Castle, surely by this paragraph you've thought of important names that are missing. Perhaps one of the missing names is yours. No such omissions are deliberate, but I extend my sincere apologies to those readers who are thinking, What about Guy and Jimmy and Big Ed and Judy? Jean and Ruth, up in the office? How could I not mention the Friday Nite Gang? Or head maitre d' David Aguirre, who looks like he's seen it all (because over four decades, he has)?

And think of the stories that aren't here! What about that time in the '60s when the fire marshall shut the club and the operation temporarily moved into the garage? Or how about that receptionist in the '80s, whose job was to turn away anyone under the age of 21, while she herself was just 19 (with a better fake ID than most)? Whatever happened to the gimmicked swizzle sticks? How could I leave out Benny Roth and film of the Swedish pig?!!

Back in 1937, William Larsen wrote: "Since my youth, my dearest moments have been those which have been spent magically: seeing magic and talking it with others who have the same interest." And really, when you think about it, that's the point. The Magic Castle is the sum of countless dear moments. It is more than a restaurant, more than a nightclub. It transcends real estate and show schedules and name badges. It's about a pageant of people of every type imaginable — artists and hacks, saints and scoundrels — joined together to nurture a shared idea. It's about one dream. It's about thousands of dreams. ♦

Max Maven has spent almost half his life residing within walking distance of the Magic Castle. He is the only performer who has worked every room there, including a couple of years when he was the "back-up medium" for the Séance.

The automobile is older than the Castle. So is Milt, who says: "It's a 1952 MG named 'Marmaduke,' which just had its 50th birthday. Arlene and I poured a glass of champagne in its radiator (and drank the rest of the bottle in Marmaduke's honor)."

