

# Shimada DRAGON

BY JAQ GREENSPON

**E**ntering the home of Shimada and his wife Keiley, you're immediately taken in by its unassuming nature. There are few clues that he's one of the most famous magicians ever to emigrate from Japan. There is precious little memorabilia to illustrate a life devoted to the art of manipulation. With the exception of the large gong hanging on the wall, there is nothing to separate this humble apartment from the others surrounding it. Then you hear the soft cooing, doves in the next room, hidden but ready to appear at a moment's notice ... and you know that the man who has spent his entire life working out new forms of misdirection is very much present.

Like so many of us, his interest in magic came unexpectedly.

In 1955, 15-year-old Haruo Shimada was attending school in Tokyo, Japan. On his way home on a winter afternoon, just before Christmas, on a whim he stopped in a department store and found himself standing in front of the Tenyo counter, where a man was demonstrating the Color Changing Handkerchief. Shimada was

PHOTOS BY ZAKARY BELAMY



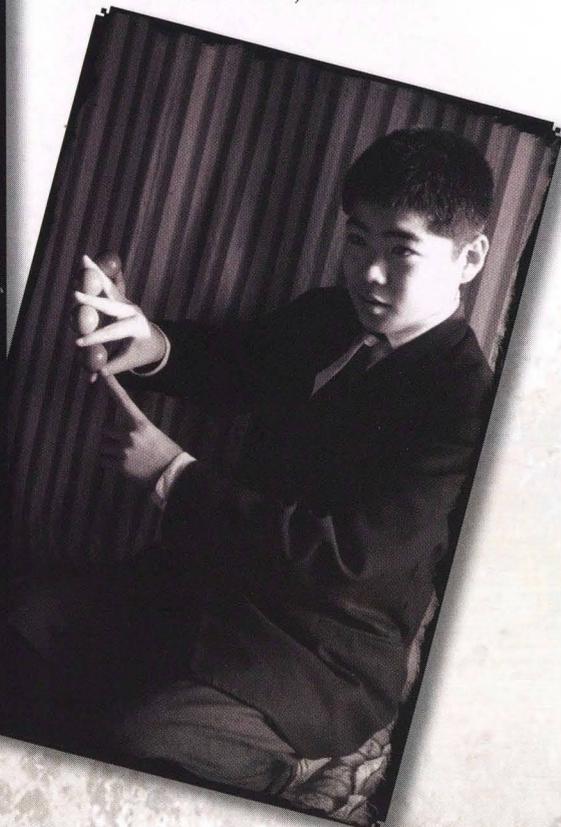
intrigued and he returned to that counter day after day, trying to figure out the method. He had no money, so purchasing the secret was out of the question.

Eventually, during the summer of 1956, when he could contain his interest no longer, he went to his mother and cajoled her into giving him the money. He immediately returned to the counter and purchased the trick. The demonstrator recognized the young man and took his money in exchange for revealing the secret of the thumbtip. Shimada went to the Tenyo counter again and again on an almost daily basis. Shimada smiles faintly as he says in his heavily accented English, "I was bitten by the bug." We all know the feeling. He watched and learned,

practicing with the thumbtip until he could do it well. Well enough that he was able to convince his mother to finance his next major purchase, a set of Multiplying Billiard Balls.

The demonstrator at the Tenyo counter did the only logical thing and offered the young magician a job. "I worked the holiday season delivering for Tenyo. I would wrap at the counter and fill in as a demonstrator when they needed me." At the time, Tenyo had magic counters in six stores and Shimada worked at all of them. "I start going around to all the magic shops as a demonstrator. So little by little I start to master everything." This was not as difficult as it might sound. "In Japan, it's kind of a third world ice age, not like in America or another country, no tricks coming in. Everything's exclusively made in Japan. Because there were hardly any books. 1955, let's face it, is 10 years after the war. We had no access to that you know. Whatever we had you just had to do it."

Magic consumed him, changing his life and his way of thinking. Everything became about the trick, mastering the illusion. "By then I was 16, but I wasn't smoking cigarettes. Because they have the disappearing smoke [trick], I had to practice in the toilet, and I almost passed out. Because I'm trying to learn this trick, it was fascinating to smoke. I was outside the department store, it was lunch-



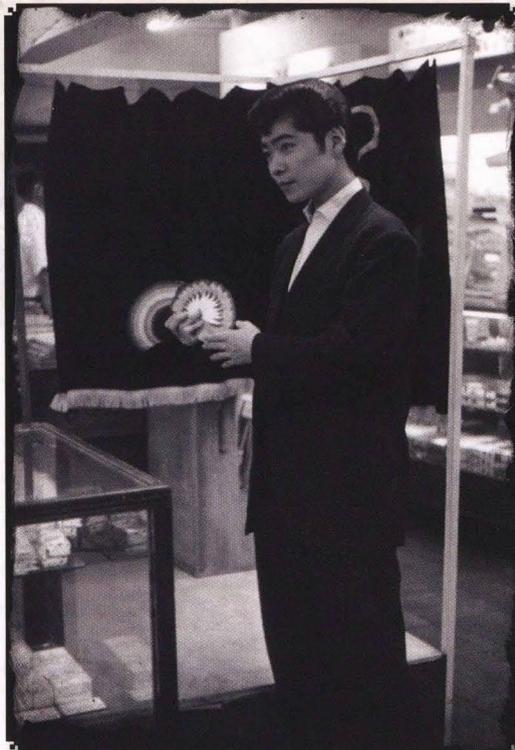
Above, Shimada's 1958 debut of the Billiard Balls at age 17. Right, practicing at age 15

time. And there was a subway, so I was sitting in the subway chair and smoking, and a policeman came up. Obviously, I look so young, under 18, and they don't allow smoking—obviously I'm under age. They took me to the police station. [I explained that] I work around the corner in department store and a demonstrator in a magic shop. So that's when I started to smoke. But the policeman told me please don't smoke in public. That was my first time in a police station."

This became the routine—Shimada didn't have time for anything else. "I was a very good boy. Magic kept me straight. I work all day at the magic counter, then I go home and I practice till two or three in the morning." He would feign sleep in order to get more time by practicing in bed. "If you practice on a futon, the ball doesn't roll off. That's good." By this time, he was starting to put

together what would become his award-winning billiard ball routine. He would practice all night long, never getting much more than a half hour's worth of sleep. "It wasn't just learning the technique, so I couldn't go back to sleep. And then mom was sleeping, so I had to put the light off. I didn't want to make a noise. So I was doing all these move without the billiard ball, and mom told me later she thought that maybe I had gone funny in the head, because can you imagine, I'm just moving the hand like this [he demonstrates a sleight], then start to move the hand again you know? She was watching me, in the dark you know? She told me later, 'I was worried'."

From the beginning, Shimada was working on the art of close-up deception. Illusions didn't hold the same appeal that performing a miracle directly in front of someone did. For the next year, he perfected as much of the art as he could while working for Tenyo himself, who became a friend. But learning from the master could only go so far. "My teacher Tenyo was actually an illusionist and was not very keen on sleight of hand." At this point, Shimada fell into a bit of good luck. "In 1957, Tenkai came back to Japan. Tenkai had stayed in America for 30 years, and so naturally he wanted to come back to his own country to spend the last years of his life. I was much more interested in sleight of hand than illusions. And Tenkai is a sleight of hand specialist. So immediately he [Tenyo] said why don't you go to Tenkai to learn. So, Tenkai became my



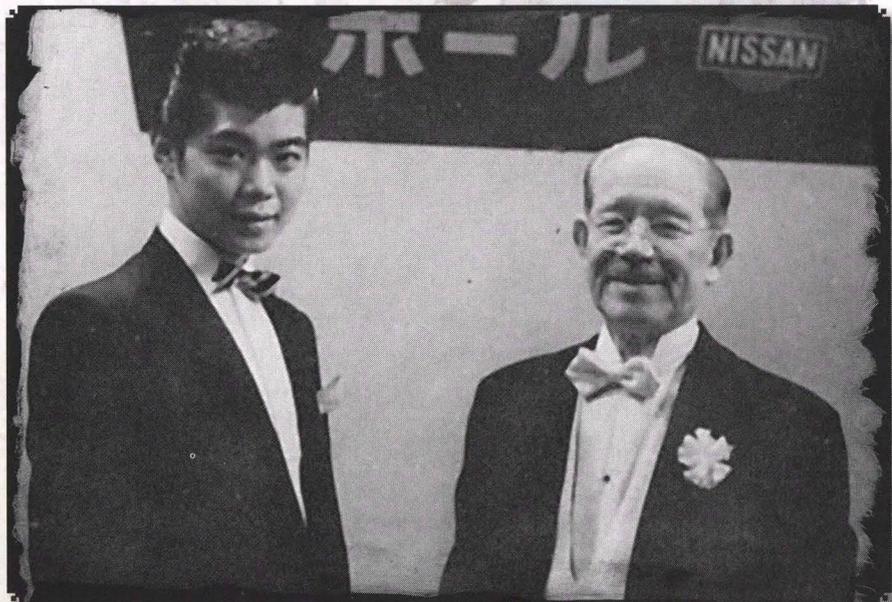
Shimada, 18, at a Tenyo counter in Tokyo, 1959

teacher. Once a week, I'd go to Tenkai's house to learn sleight of hand, which is very, very lucky, you know?" Shimada was 17.

He knew he had to do something immediately to get his master's attention so he decided to show Tenkai the billiard ball routine he had been secretly practicing. All those long nights, causing concern to his mother, were about to pay off. "When [Tenkai] saw my billiard ball [routine], he was very impressed. Because by then, I had developed a double shell billiard ball from one to four, and I was doing [it] only in my right hand. Tenkai was very impressed, but at the same time he asked, because he was a left hander, and he told me, 'Shimada, why don't you use the left hand? It would be nice if you could use both hands.' So, I see, maybe it didn't occur

to me because I'm not left handed. So I said 'maybe I could do eight balls'? And Tenkai said, 'Yes, that's right. You end up in both hands. So that would be great.' You have one ball in each hand, then suddenly you have eight. So I started to practice left handed. That was because of his suggestion."

The routine he ended up with involved a grand total of 35 billiard balls with multiple color changes. He used techniques he had invented, adjusting principles he learned and twisting them into new forms and new config-



Shimada and Tenkai, 1958

urations. Rather than just flipping one shell at a time, his routine involved taking "the balls one way then the other way. Because color changes use this finger [indicates his pinky] for one to four." Even today, at 66, the hands are still as nimble as they were at 17. "You can imagine, a 17-year-old boy, when you do one to four billiard balls that was at the time [unheard of]. That was my debut. So naturally it was sensational." Shimada's Billiard Ball Routine is fully described in the November 1985 issue of *Genii* (Vol.49, No.5) and can also be seen on the DVD of *The Greater Magic Video Library*, Vol.3.

you know? I just made up my mind, I would not stop. I was very stubborn. And finally she says 'I have to talk to your teacher.' She came into the office and talked to Tenyo. She ask him 'he wants to be professional, but is he really? Can he be good enough to be professional as a magician, you know? I'm so worried.' Actually as a magician, there is no such thing as a guarantee. 'But what I can tell,' my teacher told my mom, 'of all the pupils I have, he is the most talented.' So, that's all he said. And besides, I'd made up my mind I wasn't going to do anything else. So finally mom gave up."



Shimada at age 17

But the road from department store demonstrator to professional magician is not always easy. Shimada still had the biggest hurdle in the world to overcome: His mother.

Haruo was the only son in a small family. His father was out of the picture so his mother raised him and his sister. "My mother had life separate from my father. She had a little business. And whenever she had money she put a little into my business. I'm lucky you know. [She made] just enough to support us. Then, naturally, at Tenyo, I earned very little money." But not earning money didn't deter the young magician when he knew he could be successful. But his mother wasn't convinced. "So I ask my mom, 'I want to become a professional magician,' and my mom said 'No way.' I was determined. I had to be,

Eventually, Shimada convinced her that this was the only thing for him to do and that he would triumph as a magician. The art of deception continued. "Naturally she was worried, because to other Japanese people at the time, no one understood what a magician was ... as an occupation." As things would pan out, Shimada wasn't scheduled to make money at magic until he started doing the dove act, which was still years in the future.

At 17, Shimada made his professional debut when he hit the road as Tenyo's assistant performing big illusions. "Whenever he was performing on the stage, I traveled along as his assistant, and I performed my billiard ball routine. But I could hardly do my own show, because, first of all, [there was a] time limit. And of course I added a



Shimada relates, "In about 1958 I performed live on the first ever TV commercial for Nintendo. Back then Nintendo had a contract with Disney to produce playing cards with the Disney characters on the back. Nintendo thought the best way to market them was to include them with a magic trick. Tenyo ordered the fanning cards from Nintendo and they asked for the best magician for sleight of hand and Tenyo put my name forward, and so I did the advert. I traveled to Osaka every week for three months before Christmas to do the advert live on TV."

card trick too. But then I only had six minutes, the cards and the billiard balls."

Six minutes was not long enough for an act and Shimada knew it. But, in the meantime, he was working as a magician and getting noticed for it. Sometimes the wrong things were noticed: "Night clubs and cabarets were starting to [book] the show, but there were people, many people, in the front, but also on the sides and [my act] wasn't really angle proof yet. So I really couldn't function as a professional."

Shimada knew it was going to take something more than he was currently doing. He had spent four years working for and with Tenyo, he had been taking lessons from Tenkai, and had even developed his own routines, but it wasn't enough. He needed more, but finding material wasn't easy in post World War II Japan, where there were government limits on what could and could not be imported. Magic textbooks were not high on the list of things needed for the rebuilding. "We had no access to that. You had to make it all up yourself. What ever you had, something like this [he gestures to where his billiard balls are laying on a nearby table], you just imagine ... and that sounds great. And by then you know how to think about magic a little bit? No example: nothing to

copy. Just only have to work your imagination to make it up. And that is what I think most Japanese magicians did at the time. That's why I came up with the 35 billiard balls routine." For an instant, the master magician snaps back to the present and ponders the current availability of teaching materials to up-and-coming magicians, then he sadly shakes his head. "Sometimes it's good not to watch too much, because you read into it too much. It's good to read a book sometimes, you know? Instead of watching the picture or video or movie, it's good to read a book because you create it in your own imagination. We had to do that in Japan."

It was here that Shimada's own philosophy of magic began to evolve. He mixed bits of Tenkai and Tenyo with a lot of himself and came up with a different way of looking at what sleight of hand is. "I did learn sleight of hand from Tenkai, which is great because what I learned from Tenkai was really sort of subtlety. Subtlety of sleight of hand, because he told me, 'Magic is different than juggling.

You don't show your technique, because your technique is hidden underneath. So don't make flashy, meaningless movement'." When you hear Tenkai referred to as the Dai Vernon of Japan, this is what is meant—be natural, keep your technical ability a secret weapon. And when you watch Shimada on stage, you see these thoughts put into action. There are no unnecessary movements. Everything is clean. "When you make too flashy movement," he explains, "then they get to ... know, this guy, what's he going to do. You have to take for surprise. So unnecessary movement is meaningless movement."

Also around this time, government restrictions started



Shimada and Tenyo, 1978

easing and suddenly, Shimada had access to American magic books. He was introduced to the card work of Dai Vernon. "[Shigeo Takagi] was the first one to translate Dai Vernon's book. And from that I started to learn card tricks. I really went crazy for that book." But even with masters like Tenkai and, in print, Vernon (their face-to-face meeting wouldn't come for a few more years), Shimada still wasn't completely convinced close-up was the path to success for him. "At this time, still my main thing was manipulations on stage. I'm still kind of interested, you know, performing on the stage. Close up, you can create a miracle, but on stage it is different, because stage performance is a typical type work. Not just sort of creating the fake, you have to [be there] ... the moment you step onto the stage, you have movement, because basically your body language is involved, and your expression is involved, facial expression. That's all sort of, you know, part of everything. And I kind of like performing on stage."

Others liked his performances as well. In 1960, Emperor Hirohito, who had seen the country through the Great War, was celebrating his 60th birthday. In Japan, this special birthday is known as Kanreki, and the cause for much celebrating. It is a rebirth of sorts, a chance to relive your childhood as you embark upon the next stage of your life. For Hirohito, part of this celebration was a command performance by Tenyo and his talented assistant. "I did a show for the royal family, with my 35 billiard ball routine." But still, he was only performing with Tenyo. There was no solo career in the offing.

As far as Shimada was concerned, there were two paths

open to him in Japan at this point: He could be the next Tenkai and concentrate on small miracles or he could follow in the footsteps of the great Tenyo and make grand illusions his life's work. Neither seemed especially satisfying to the 19 year old. He'd been performing magic for four years, doing six minutes a night, but still, really, no further along the path. That was all about to change.

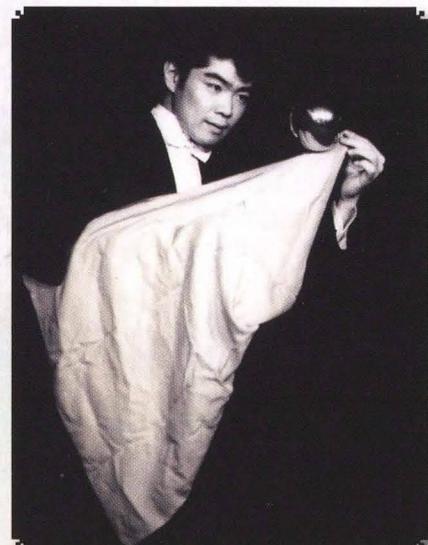
"When I was 19, a movie called, *European Nights* came to Japan. And when I saw Channing Pollock in that movie, I could not believe it. He just totally changed the image of a magician. At the time I was thinking that the trick was the most important, I went to the movie nine times in the theater. Because no video at the time, you have to go to theater to see it. Four and a half minutes to watch his act, and I saw it nine times. For me it was a lot of money to go to the theater. Not just me, many magicians went, you know? The more I watched it, I guess something, a new thing came to me. When I saw Channing, I didn't look at him as a magician would, he can be such a romantic, you know. He was more like a movie star doing magic. Charisma, personality, everything, elegant, he was more like an icon. And I had never seen that in Japan. I was actually one of the few young magicians that came out, because, at the time, most of the magicians in Japan were very old. And I learned from him, how important what you call personality, charisma is."

That movie was instrumental in changing the direction of the magic Shimada would perform for the rest of his life in two ways. The first, obviously, is that he began to work with doves. The second was the idea of character.

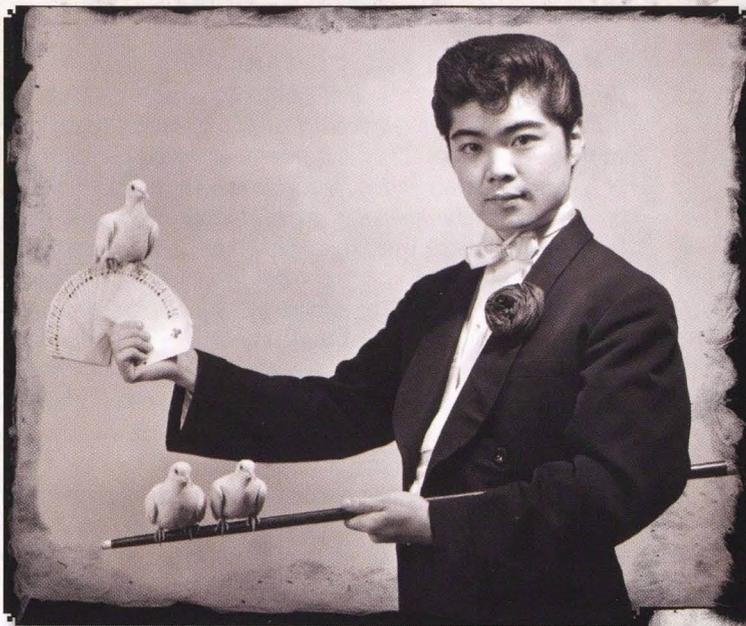
"After watching the movie, I developed my own 10 dove production. I had no idea how Channing did it, but it didn't matter. But as I was saying, we had no access to anything at the time, so gimmick and everything, you had to pick up your own. I ended up with something quite different than Channing's dove act. In a way, this was lucky, because by 1962 I already had produced my own bare



NHK TV, Tokyo, 1960



Demonstrating the Zombie in Asakusa, Japan, 1958



Shimada's first Dove act at age 19 in 1960



Shimada in  
Osaka, Japan,  
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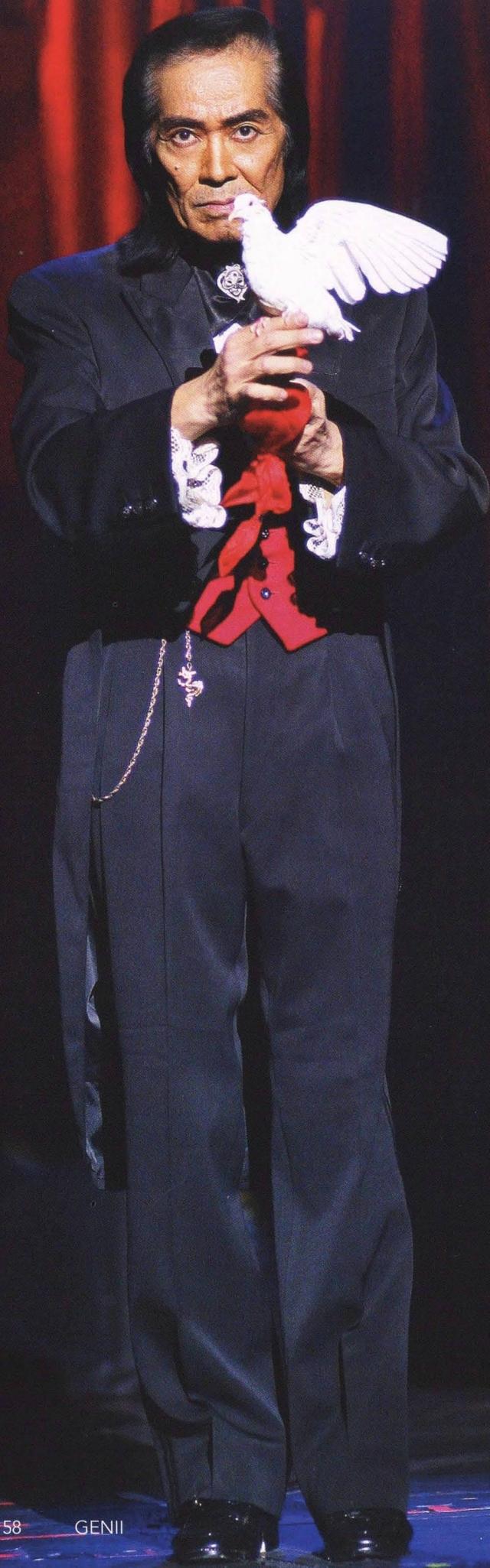
handed production: dove on a cane. First one who ever did it ... bare hand production of any kind. And I'm the first one to do the splitting dove, and dove appearance on fanning card, you know? When I saw the dove magicians at the time, everybody just produced and gave to the assistant. So I also start to train the dove to come back to me. So that was the same time in 1962."

Pollock would become instrumental in the second aspect of Shimada's big change as well, the addition of a character, but in a way the 20 year old could never have expected. "When I start to do my dove act, I just want to be more mysterious and elegant because that's how I saw Channing in the movie. The uncanny thing was, after idolizing Channing for long time, when I finally performed in America for the first time, it was at *It's Magic!* 1971. Channing was the one who saw me and approached me about becoming my personal manager because he was already retired from performing. I couldn't believe it! Anyway, to be a successful entertainer, you have to find your own personality. Of course Tenkai had a personality too. Naturally, all the great ones had a personality. But only Channing became my manager. So I start to think. How am I going to do it? Separate it? Because at the time, I knew I loved Channing, but I'm not a Pollock. How can I separate my character from his because I'm doing a dove act?"

It was this thinking which led to another revelation for Shimada. It wasn't about the trick. "We don't want to be like trickster, [just] do trick. Which is what many magicians think, only about the trick, because then if another magician does the same trick, there is no originality. I don't want to be in that petty situation. That's why I truly taught my dove act on video with my routine. I wasn't worried about it. I can teach technique as good as they can do and it doesn't worry me, because I do my own way of it. And Channing taught me that."



Shimada relates, "When I was 19, I did the Pollock double dove production, but with four birds instead of two. As far as I am aware, I am the only one who ever did this. The reason why was because, back in 1959 when I started to put my dove act together, my teacher Tenyo told me that if I wanted to be in the concert for the Mistkoshi Theater 1960 that I would have to do a dove act better than Channing's. As Channing was producing seven birds, Tenyo told me I had to produce 10. With only the possibility of having one bird up each sleeve, I had to put eight birds in my jacket. Channing did the double dove with two birds, so I did it with four. Not that producing more birds makes it better than Channing's, but at the time it was good because it satisfied my teacher."



That performance on *It's Magic!* led to a run at The Magic Castle, but still, Shimada didn't have a character other than the stoic Japanese magician. After those performances, he would sit and overhear what the audience had thought of his show. "Basically all they talked about, besides my technique with doves, mostly they talk about facial expression I use on stage. They said, 'Did you see his face? His eyes? It was great but I was just so fascinated watching his eyes.' That kind of comment I get from everybody. So naturally at that time I start to think about it. I start to play with my eye expression. I never spoke on stage, I never spoke all my life. But I think I should play with expression and movement because I know I'm Japanese, so I should use it."

"American people are really fascinated with Fujiyama, ninja, geisha, and I cannot really be Fujiyama or geisha." Shimada laughs! "I also couldn't be ninja, because they cover the face. What is the point of covering the face? So Samurai is also a fascinating character, because he carries a mystery. People don't know about it. Something they don't know, and that created a mystery. So I went to Samurai character, I put it into my act, so I play with this. And then I start to grow my hair a little bit, longer, like now. And because Samurais were unknown to Western people, it was a mystery, and magic was a mystery... So finally I thought, this is it. So I think that became a piece people identified with."

We've gotten a bit ahead of ourselves here, though. By the time Shimada finally did crack the American border, he had become one of the most famous magicians on three continents and had acquired a wife and child along the way.

Back in the early 1960s, as the dove act was progressing, bookings picked up. "Then, nobody in Japan was doing dove act. All the jobs from the nightclubs poured in. I was the busiest magician." It was here Shimada got his next big break. In 1964, Tokyo played host to the XVIII Olympiad—the Summer Olympics. This was a big time for Japan as it signaled the start of the country opening itself up to the West. Shimada benefited from this influx of tourists and entrepreneurs hoping to exploit the Japanese culture. "A producer came from Australia to do a big Japanese production show over there to tour the major cities. They had a contract with the Toho Company movie company. They owned the Nichigeki Theater right in the center of Tokyo, the best theater. They had like 300 dancers, the biggest revue show. He came to buy an oriental revue show to tour Australia, but naturally they needed a specialty act. So I was performing in a nightclub in Tokyo and this producer came to the nightclub, drinking and watching the show. Then I appeared and he liked me and took me to the Toho Company." Shimada was hired to tour Australia and this was his first experience away from home. It caused a certain restructuring of his career priorities.

"We took the show, 40 dancers and several specialty acts, I'm the magician, naturally, and we toured, premiered in

Adelaide, then Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, the major five cities. Altogether we were there three and half months. Very successful show. We returned to Japan in May. But I have a fantasy because of Tenkai, he keeps talking about America all the time. Then at the same time, I perform nightclub, cabaret, at the American military base. I think of American people, how they live. Naturally, your fantasies grow, right? Especially when I've seen Australia for two or three months. What a difference to the Japanese audiences, who don't applaud at all, hardly, especially in the nightclubs. In the nightclubs they all go for the girls. So I have to move out of Japan."

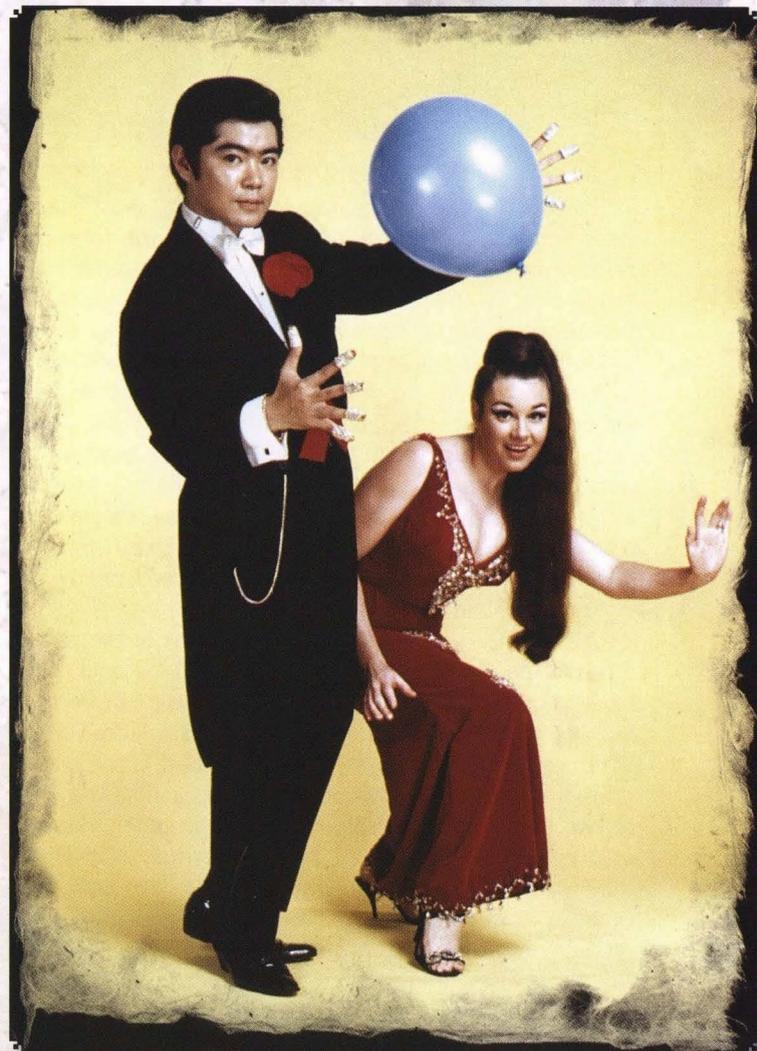


Tokyo Nights, Australia premiere in Adelaide, 1965

For Shimada, though, the path to America was not easy. He decided the best way to get to the U.S. was by way of Australia. He had been there and knew some people. Well ... one person. "When I was in Australia I met Deanna. She was working at one of the theaters." Four months after returning to Japan, Shimada once again found himself on an ocean voyage back to Australia, though this time he was all alone. It took 15 days by cargo ship and in September 1965 he pulled back into Sydney Harbor where his ship was greeted by Deanna. "I needed an assistant so I called her up. She was pretty enough, maybe she could be my assistant. And she came to Sydney. We started to work on the magic, but, I was there on a tourist visa. Australia is such a tough country. To live there you must find a sponsor." And even with a sponsor, it's not an easy path. The immigration rules state you must leave and return before you can get legal authorization to stay. Not the best way for a struggling performer, new to a country, to secure employment and ensure a solid run anywhere.

Shimada and Deanna talked to a local agent to try and solve the problem. "He said 'by the way, what are you guys? You are obviously girlfriend and boyfriend? Are you going to get married?' I answered 'Maybe one day, but I'm not thinking about it now.' I had very little English at that time. He said 'You have to leave or you gotta get married. That's the way, leave or get married. They'll kick you out. But not if your wife is Australian'."

At this point, the 25 year old had a large decision to make. His career was on the rise and Australia was looking like the best place to launch from, but without the help of his assistant, he might end up back where he started. He knew this was not a decision to make on his own. "So I talked to Deanna. I asked her 'what are you gonna do?' It didn't take too long. 'Okay,' she said. 'I'll marry you.' So she saved me. We were married pretty quick, in October 1965—if we don't get married they kick me out."



Shimada and then-wife Deanna, 1968



The marriage, and staying in Australia, was exactly what Shimada needed. Not only was he in top form personally, but professionally, there was no one who could touch him. "I only had the dove act at the time. But to be honest, I didn't have much competition. My sleight of hand was far ahead of them. I had a very good run in Australia. I did all the major TV shows, *Sydney Tonight*, *Melbourne Tonight*, Adelaide, Brisbane ... all over. Back and forth back and forth." And, ironically, he spent a good deal of that first year doing it without the girl who had allowed him to stay. "By then, Deanna was pregnant, so next year, 1966 September, my daughter, Lisa, was born. During [Deanna's] pregnancy, I had a dancer from Sydney working with me."

At the time, as it is now, Sydney was one of the largest cities in the country and as such, provided the bulk of the work opportunities. For Shimada, this meant performing in a lot of "Return Soldier League" clubs, places for the veterans and former POWs, like a VFW Hall in the states, for men to gather over common interests and have a drink or two. And a lot of these guys were a bit older, veterans of a war which had ended 20 years earlier. "Generally, they were pretty friendly. Sometime I did have a problem because mostly they had never seen a Japanese. I was probably the first Japanese entertainer ever in Australia. Of course, they're in their club, so they're drinking. They get drunk and they talk about the war, you know. Some of them start to get nasty, sometimes. Deanna, though, she stick up for me. 'What are you talking about? The war

ended and he was only four years old. What was he supposed to do about it.' It was kind that she stuck up for me, I remember that."

For the next three years, this became routine; traveling among the largest cities in Australia, working club dates, and caring for a newborn. Then, just before 1968, "A Mexican singer came to Australia to do a show in the theater. I had been booked to do the show as a guest and the Mexican consul was watching the show. Afterward he came backstage and I was introduced. Obviously, he must have enjoyed it, he gave me compliments." The two men soon became friendly, meeting often for dinner or coffee. For Shimada, this was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. "I came to Australia because it was an English speaking country, but it was so far away from

action. Naturally, I was always targeting America. How can I get to America?" The answer came in the form of his Spanish speaking friend. "Mexico is so close, the next country to America. I asked the Consul: 'Do you have any contacts in America?' And he said 'actually I don't, but if you'd like to try Mexico, I will give you visa'." At last, Shimada thought, I'm getting close to where I want to be, but it was not so. The Consul was only able to offer him a tourist visa, something to allow him entry into the country and nothing more. But still, it was closer than he was now. It didn't take long for Shimada and Deanna to make a decision. "After three years in Australia," he reasoned, "I'm able to understand English. I can make conversation with other people. So Deanna and I ... we're gonna try. She said okay, we go to Mexico."

In March of 1968, with doves and little Lisa in tow, they bought a ticket to Mexico City. Of course, 40 years ago, international travel was not what it is today. There were no direct flights to get the family from Sydney half way around the world. "It was a hell of a trip at that time. Fiji to Tahiti, Hawaii, Los Angeles, Mexico City." It was a two-day trip, including a layover in the Los Angeles airport. This was Shimada's first experience in America ... stuck for eight hours in LAX. Not an auspicious introduction to the promised land.

Of course, finally getting into Mexico City wasn't much better. "We arrived four o'clock in the morning in Mexico City. Pitch dark, very quiet. And suddenly it hits me: nobody understands English here. They all speak Spanish!

Gosh, what am I going to do. Naturally, no contract. We check into a hotel ... we asked the taxi driver—any hotel. I was so tired. Wake up the next day—now what are we gonna do?”

First, he knew they had to find work. Shimada had the number of the singer he had met in Australia, so this was the first call he made. And his first question asked was, “Do you know any agents?”

A negative response led to Shimada showing up on the doorstep of the Japanese Embassy. “I explained I was an entertainer, a magician, and asked ‘do you know any theatrical agents?’” While they didn’t have any special contacts, what they were able to do, finally, was put Shimada in touch with a Mexican singer who loved Japan, had been there several times, and spoke English. All three things

were rated as huge plusses in the magician’s book.

“He introduced me to one of his agents, who had a contact, an impresario in Mexican theater, the Teatro Blanquita, which is where every major star performed. It was like the Olympia in Paris. The top theater in Mexico City. He told me I had to audition, so I say okay, I’m ready. At the theatre? No, at his casa, in his house. Okay, it didn’t matter, I would do it. So I went to his house. He has eight kids and there was a servant, there were about 15 people all sitting around. It was a big house, so we set it up and I did the dove act. The kids loved it, so naturally, there was no reason to say no. He gave me a contract. I did six weeks at \$80 dollars. For seven days a week this was \$560. Big money in Mexico, top money for an entertainer. This was a lucky thing.”



PHOTO BY ZAKARY BELAMY

But it still wasn't getting him any closer to the United States. Successful, yes, and closer than he was in Sydney, but still this wasn't America. Shimada spent two years in Mexico, doing everything from traveling the rural back roads with the circus to performing in his own weekly television show, but professionally, he was no closer to performing in America than he was when he'd left Japan some six years earlier.

There had to be a way to break through, he just wasn't sure he knew how to find it.

Thankfully, he was making friends within the magic field who, he knew, might be able to help. "I met Slydini and Goldfinger in Mexico City. And I ask them, 'I want to go to the United States—which way is the best way to go?'" The best they could do was offer a small bit of information, coupled with a bit of advice: "Milt and Bill Larsen,



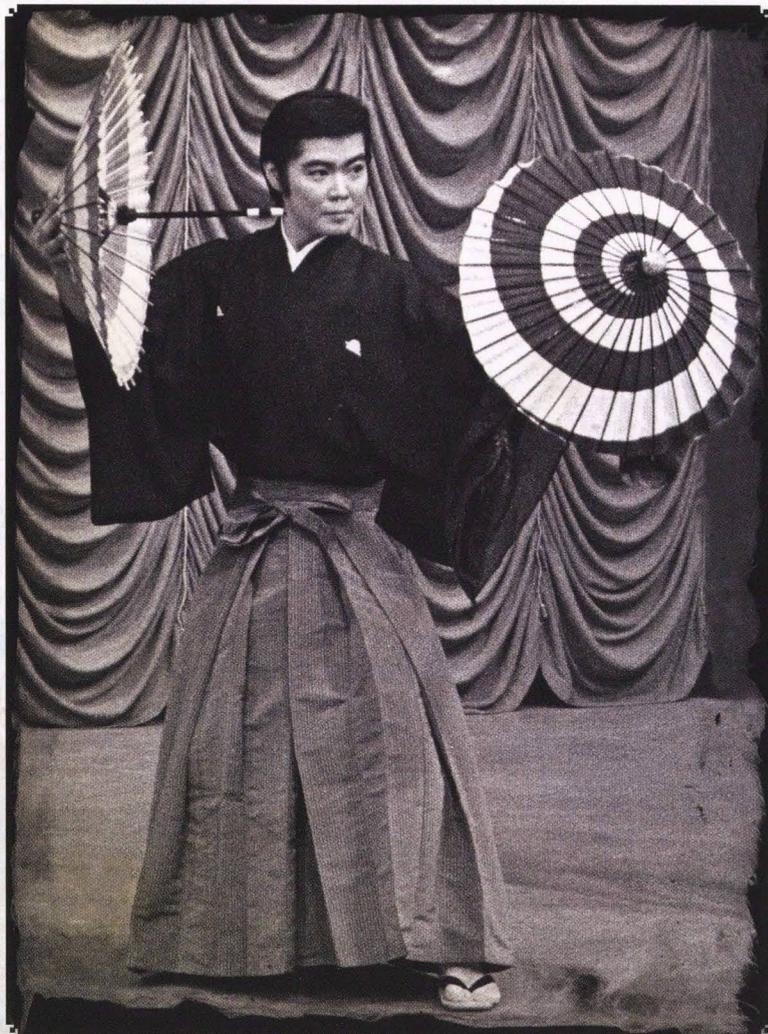
Teatro Blanquita in Mexico, 1968

from The Magic Castle, once a year they do *It's Magic!* Why don't you write to them?" And like he'd been waiting for his own personal magic words, Shimada finally understood how he was going to break into the American magic scene.

In order for you to understand what was about to happen, though, we need to take a slight step back. For Shimada, the time in Mexico was broken

up by a year and a half in Japan and a three month detour to London, where he had hoped to make a break into a larger, English speaking market. And he thought the dove act, which had seen him through two continents and the start of a family was going to see him through in London as well. "I went to the agents, and they wouldn't look at me because I looked Japanese. 'Why don't you wear your clothes. Can't you wear a Kimono or something exotic?' So

Below and lower left: Mexican TV show, 1970, the debut of Shimada's parasol act. Left: Shimada performing in *It's Magic!*, 1973



just, you know, they don't give me the opportunity." For the first time, his heritage, and his tuxedo, had become a hindrance.

"Three months I was stuck in London. I start thinking: what I gonna do, what I gonna do? Maybe look for something, parasol I thought. Anyway, I go to a Chinese shop and bought three parasols. I don't know how to do it yet. But I bought it. Now three months, no job, my money is going out. So finally, I keep enough money and return to Mexico City. The first time I did okay. The second time, maybe because Mexico is close to the United States. So close, but so far away. It's a different world you know?"

With parasols in hand, Shimada returned to a land where he had already established himself. There, he started to figure out what to do with his umbrellas. "Slowly, I was practicing with [the parasols on] TV programs. I have to explain how a parasol can appear out of nowhere. See my act wasn't finished yet. I needed something unique, you know?"

Necessity being the mother of invention, Shimada put himself in a position where he would have to come up with something unique; he sold the parasol act to the Larsens for *It's Magic!* "It was my first magic performance in America. I've never done this act before. I was nervous as hell. But I closed the first half, I think. Amazingly well received, because it was something new. I made a big parasol from thin air, which is something they've never seen. And I had a confidence."

But of course, now that Shimada had made it to America, he didn't want to leave. The problem he faced was the same problem he faced every time he entered a new country: he had come in on a tourist visa and had no legal right to work. "So I ask Bill Larsen, can you book me for Magic Castle? Of course at the time it was different, not the Palace they have now. Bill said 'Of course Shimada, I love your act, but you think you can perform on our stage down there?' He means parasol act, you know. He had no idea that I had a manipulation act. And then, a few weeks later, Bill booked me for dove act. 'Okay, Shimada, so opening night I will introduce you.' He introduced me and he stepped off to the side. I did my dove act. So Bill, he almost fall down, 'Oh my god! It's amazing. You had this act? I never think any dove act is as great as you are,' he said."

But performing at The Castle was not going to be enough to keep Shimada and family in America, and truthfully, America is where he needed to be. He was gathering notice from names in the field. Even outside the magic community people were starting to take notice. Johnny

Carson booked him for *The Tonight Show* in December, 1971. "Dove act. National Television. And Carson himself liked it, naturally. That was really an exciting thing that happened to me. Then I got confidence. So he and I get comments from all over America; especially from magi-



PHOTO BY ZAKARY BELAMY

cians. Telephone calls and letters, all [asking] who is this Shimada? Maybe now I can really stay in America. By then I ask Bill, I can no longer stay on a tourist visa, and I have to get working permit. Can you ... How can I get working permit?"

Bill Larsen helped as best he could, getting Shimada on the books at Yamashiro as a sushi chef. He never cut a piece of fish there, instead he put in his time down the hill at The Castle, doing his dove act on the Palace stage whenever there was an opening. This ruse worked for a



Shimada in a promotion photo for his Dragon act in 1975

little while, but a slip up at the immigration office landed Shimada and Deanna on the deportation list. By this time, Shimada had met a lawyer who was also a member of The Magic Castle, Ronny Hecker. After seeing Shimada perform, he offered his services and devised a plan: he was going to prove Shimada was alone in his field as an oriental magician. He started by accumulating letters of support from the magic community, including Dai Vernon, Magic Castle Board member Cary Grant, and even Johnny Carson himself. "Then, he start to find all the books: Chung Ling Soo, Fu Manchu, David Bamburg, Okito, everybody. The file, you know? 'So do you know these names, Shimada?' Yeah, they're oriental magician, but they are all Caucasian."

The plan worked and the deportation was halted,

but he still couldn't work in America until the green card came through, which was scheduled to happen in 1973, two years after the whole process started. He was, however, able to leave the country without fear, which he did in the fall of 1973, accepting an invitation to perform at the Olympia in Paris, one of the top theaters in Europe. With Shimada, though, nothing ever goes smoothly. "The second month of the contract, August, came and suddenly the lawyer called me. 'Shimada, your immigration interview is coming. Interview means you are getting Green Card.'

"'But I am doing a contract.'

"He said, 'Screw the contract, come back here! Otherwise you're not going to get it. You're going to jail instead of getting Green Card.' So I said, 'okay.' I explained to the Olympia Theater, and he said, 'Okay, I let you off for one week. Can you come back?'

"'Okay, I will.' Then they put another French magician, who took my place for one week.

"I came back to America. Eight o'clock in the morning, first thing, I went to immigration. I picked up the three of us: Deanna and Lisa, and I go to the Green Card interview. Same afternoon, I jumped on the airplane and went back to Paris and finished the rest of the contract."

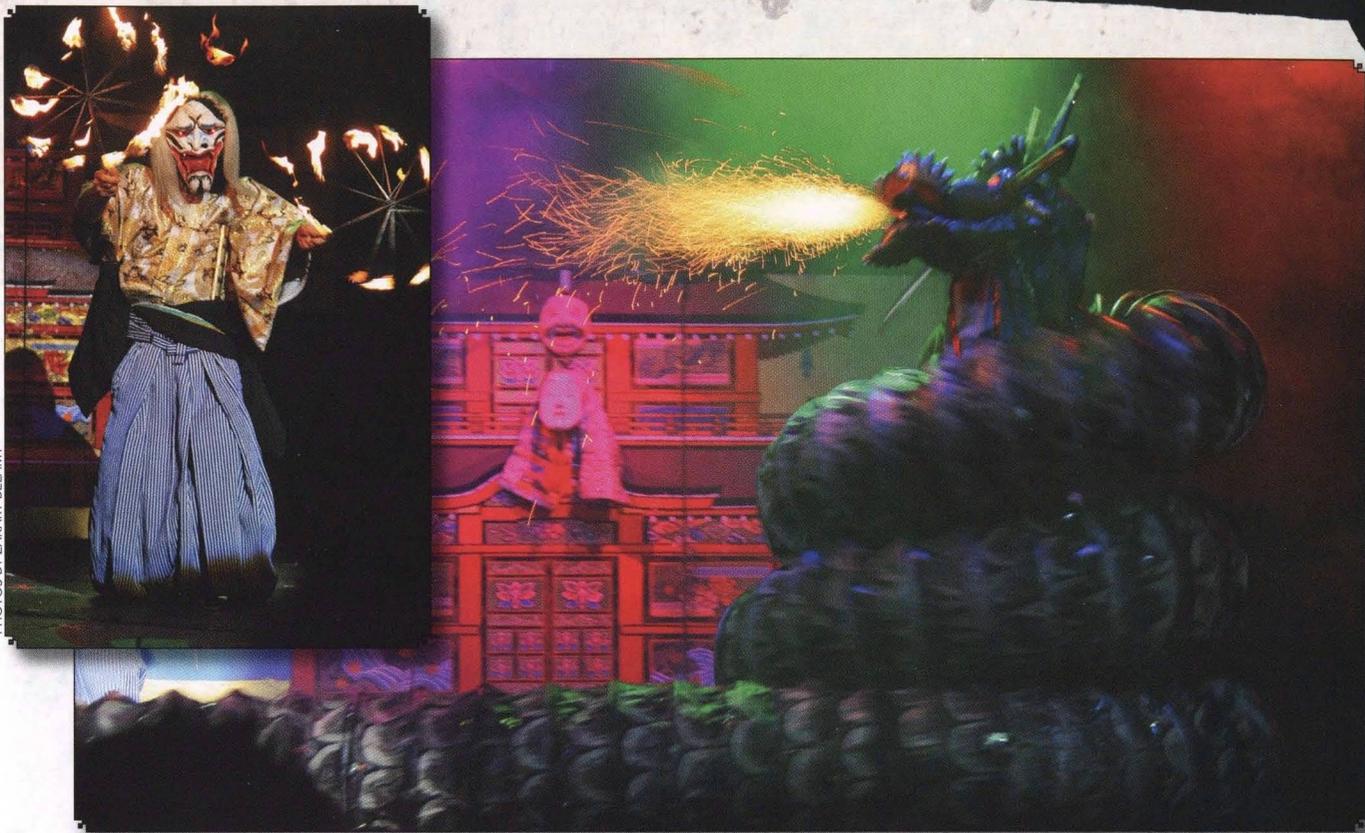
Coming back into the United States, en route to a second *Tonight Show* appearance. Shimada got held up yet again. This time, it wasn't immigration stopping him. It was customs. He had no paperwork to import his doves so they were stuck in quarantine.

"What am I going to do without my doves, because, you know, the doves are already trained, especially my opening, and my dove on the cane. One comes back and the other jumps on the cane, so I can't do without it. I talked to Deanna, I said 'I think I'm going to somehow switch those two doves. Can you make me four pockets? Just ordinary, you know?'"

With a hastily improvised coat and doves borrowed from Goldfinger, Shimada headed down to commit the crime. "Deanna and I just went to quarantine at the airport and walked into the office. I said, 'Hi, my name is Shimada and I believe you are keeping my doves. I just came to check on the doves. Can I check?' They have maybe



Left: Back row from left—Harry Blackstone Jr., Shimada, David Copperfield. Front row—Mark Wilson, Richiardi, and Dai Vernon. Above: Shimada and Channing Pollock



two foot by two foot square cage. There are 10 doves inside and he just dropped the trunk onto the counter. 'Here, they are okay. I'm taking care of them. Whenever your papers are ready, we're going to release.'

"He's just standing in front of me. There was nothing I could do. I thought 'Oh, how the hell am I going to do it? There's no way.' I'm just thinking in my mind that I'm going to go crazy, you know? So I just open the cage. I look for the two doves that I want, put in the corner. And each one I start to look slowly, under the wing. Trying to see if there's insect under there. I said, 'Excuse me, look at this. This is no good. Do you have any powder or something?'

"He went to check for powder. The moment he turned around I chucked one in there. This is something you can't get caught, you know? One trick I never want to fail at. Then the guy came back next to me, maybe 30 seconds. He said, 'I couldn't find it, but anyway don't worry, I will take care of it; don't worry.'

"By then I'd switched already, so Deanna was saying, 'Go ... go ... go!'

Shimada's luck held out and now, 18 years after he started, the United States was welcoming him with open arms. With a legal right to stay and work in this country, he went back to *The Tonight Show*, and then Vegas came calling. "I was working with Rosemary Clooney at the Shrine Auditorium, and the owner of the Dunes hotel was watching and booked me for Casino de Paris. At the time Casino de Paris, Follies Bergere at the Tropicana, and Lido de Paris were the top three revue shows in Las Vegas. I started at Casino de Paris the same year that Siegfried

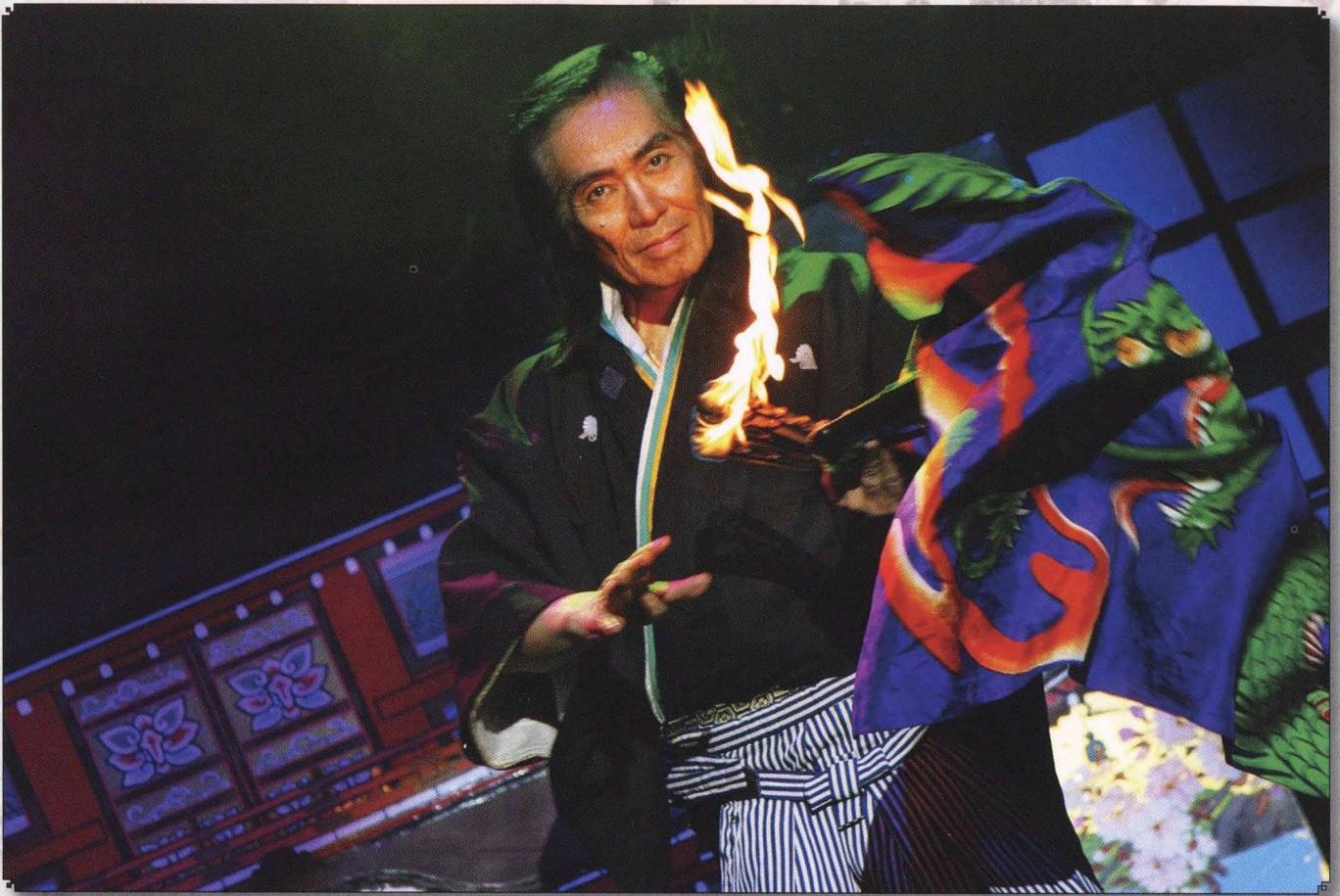
and Roy started at the Lido."

But he was still thinking about improving his act and there was one more big change coming. With the parasols, Shimada had begun to embrace his cultural heritage. The Samurai character dominated his act, but he needed something else, something special. And he found it in the mythology of his birth. 1940, the Chinese Year of the Dragon.

Shimada's fascination with the dragon started in 1970 when he was in Japan watching a show at the Japanese Expo. There, an exhibit of traditional folk dancing, which included the appearance of a dragon, piqued his interest. "The dragon came out; a story of an evil dragon. The village people have to give a sacrifice to the dragon. Then one of the dragon slayers comes out and has to fight the dragon. So that's the story. At the time I didn't think anything of it."

But then, a conversation with Pollock about the parasol act sparked something. "'It's a very beautiful act,' Channing said, 'but there's something missing. I don't know what it is or what it could be'."

Finally, in 1975, Shimada was able to put it into words. "There has to be a storyline." The parasol act needed a bit more drama and he needed something to "create emotion more than beauty. It's not a question of producing more parasols or bigger parasols. We already have enough parasols. This is an oriental fantasy." The Dragon was the answer. It was the perfect way to end the parasol act. It was back to Japan to find a craftsman to actually make the prop, though. In the end, three dragons were



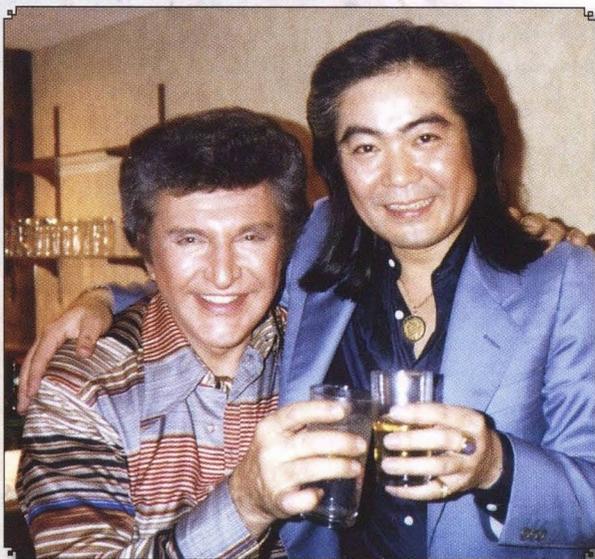
produced, all hand made from Japanese paper and dried naturally in the shadows. Like magic, too much direct heat would ruin the effect.

At last, Shimada had come into his own. "My act is like an impressionist. It's based on Tenkai's technique, influenced by Tenkai. Also I was influenced by Channing. You know, romantic. You have to have a personality. And I'm Japanese. I'm lucky because I'm Japanese in a western country. Automatically I'm different. So I have to use my own heritage, take advantage of it. It is something which

is fascinating to people. So I'm creating my own color. I want to be a specialist."

And being a specialist has paid off. In 1981, Shimada was offered the best contract of his life, to be the specialty act in Liberace's flamboyant stage show. "I did two spots [doves and parasol/dragon]. At the end, in the finale, he wanted his driver onstage, he actually brought out an open car, a Rolls Royce. So when he introduced me, 'My special guest star, Shimada,' I was sitting in the open car, he opened the door for me and I was just going to step out then *pop* I produced one more parasol. He laughed. That was our finale." For the magician, though, this was more than merely the best paying gig he had, it was a reputation maker. After Liberace, Shimada was known throughout the world, a fact which would come back a few years later to ensure he was employed into the 1990s.

After his time with Liberace came to an end, Shimada found himself in demand across the globe. Even though he was living in Hollywood, he rarely spent much time at home. The three acts he had honed to perfection were now taking him everywhere in style. He performed regularly in Las Vegas, replacing Siegfried and Roy when they left the Lido show, as well as touring Europe several times. But it was in 1988 when he really got the opportunity to settle down. At the Riviera Hotel in Vegas, the show *Splash!* was looking for a new variety spot and Pia Zadora's manager remembered Shimada from the Liberace show and convinced the hotel owner (Meshulam Riklis) to give him a year long contract. That one year turned into



Liberace and Shimada at the Hilton in Las Vegas, 1982

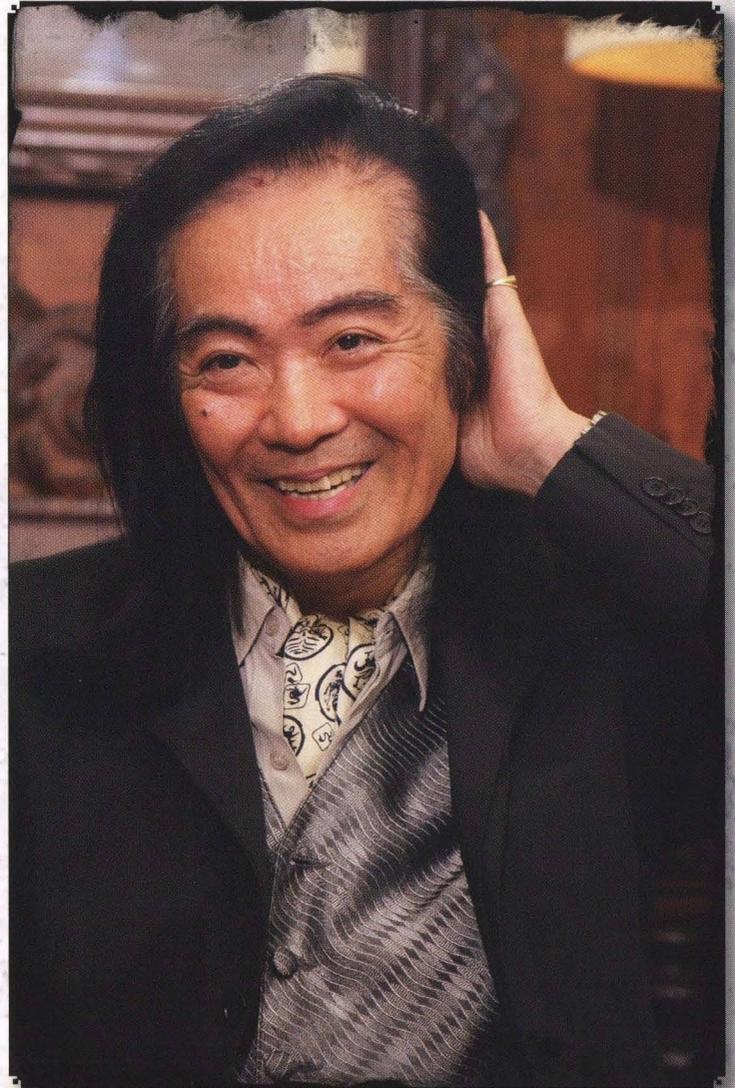
five and Shimada had sealed his reputation.

But by 1993, he was getting restless both in his professional and personal life. The excitement had gone out of performing. "I've been an entertainer all my life, I shouldn't lose that feeling." So he did what anyone in his position would do: he quit. "I decided to go back to Japan to recuperate. Deanna decided to stay in America so I went to Japan alone and we separated, basically, at that point." Once back in Japan, Shimada was welcomed by the entire Japanese magic community who, once they realized he intended to stay for a while, were only too eager to help him with a magic lecture tour. "This was a wonderful time for me. I travel my own country after so many years. All over Japan from Hokkaido to Kyushu." To the Japanese magicians, having Shimada back home was like a dream come true. Most of them had only ever seen his TV specials or watched him on video or heard of his world renowned reputation. "They really treat me like God! Especially after the lectures when they had the parties. Royal treatment all over. I suppose I am the biggest magician returning home after Tenkai. It was really overwhelming. I had no idea they feel like that!" Doing the lecture tour not only brought adoration, it is also what first inspired Shimada to think about teaching magic as a future career move as well as being a way to ensure that his magic legacy would live on.

Being back in Japan, though, proved to be a bitter sweet time. For while Shimada was able to take care of his mother, who was now quite old, he began to feel like a fish out of water with the magic side of things. "There were no more nightclubs for performing here. There were some small jobs which are great for young magicians starting out, but with my name in magic and my reputation I couldn't take them as it would ruin me. So I was stuck." Shimada began realizing that to continue performing he would have to get back to America or go to Europe, but the five years in *Splash!* left him drained, so to get the excitement back he decided to challenge himself in making small changes to his own routines so they would feel like new again. In the meantime, he stayed in Japan near his mother and worked more on the idea of teaching. He tried to make a go of a magic school, but finding a sponsor was difficult and it fell through. This, in turn, led him to change his tactics and Shimada decided it might be better to teach privately, one-on-one. So, in January, 1997, Shimada took his first step into the world of private tutoring. Successfully teaching six students the Parasol act. Since then he has gone on to teach a total of 23 people, amateur and professional alike.

Having his own philosophy on creating a unique routine, he's totally secure in sharing his secrets with others. "You can't perform one trick, you must have a routine, a little story. You need a 'why,' a reason behind what you do. This is what separates you from the others." This is also why he has no problem teaching others his entire dove act. Quite the contrary: he loves it! They spend a week with the master, and get everything, all the moves, props, cos-

tumes, whatever they need. He even gives them the story. "Later they can change it, add in their own things." But just because he has discovered teaching and secured his magic legacy through his students, don't think Shimada has stopped performing. Not at all. In 1998 he finally made his comeback, performing at the Gala Show of the I.B.M. convention. Displaying the Parasol/Dragon act in all its glory, and with his new wife Keiley by his side, he made such an impression that the standing ovation started at



the back of the room and worked its way forward. This put him back on the map and before long he was being booked for all the other major magic conventions as well as performing at The Magic Castle for the first time after 16 years. "You have to teach *while* doing, not used to do." To prove it, he is still in demand as a performer all over the world. "Your last performance is the most important one," he intones, noting that he still hasn't reached his own goals.

The man who has won every major award in magic, including Magician of the Year from The Magic Castle,



both the Tenyo and Tenkai awards in Japan, and the Louis Tannen Award, still has a higher ambition. "Magic is an art form. If you do a trick, you can be a magician, but I want to be an artist."

Those words are what make him stand out. He's got no competition because there is no one else like him. "There is a place for everybody if you do your own thing. One time I had a dream that it would be nice to have my own show, but then you become everything and nobody is that perfect to do everything great. I don't want to show weakness, so I stay a specialist. Magic, of course, has to move with the time. But lately with the magic I have seen on TV, I have mixed feeling about how it is being represented and it worries me a little. I think some of the camera tricks are being taken too far. It's great for shock value but at the same time it ruins the artistry. Even for layman's eye they know it can't be possible to do in reality. With that kind of misrepresentation of magic, what hope will there be for young magicians in the future? If camera tricks and computer graphics become the standard. What will happen to the sleight-of-hand-artist? No one will be willing to learn it. And for me that will be the end of magic. You shouldn't be presenting it on TV if you can't do it live on stage! The classic way is what lasts forever."

For Haruo Shimada life continues. In 2000, he celebrated his own Kanreki and he's now a mere six years into his new childhood (he gave up drinking in 2001 and has just proudly celebrated five years of sobriety). This time, though, he's got all the experience and knowledge accumulated from a lifetime of performing that has been put to perfect use—so now he's just having fun. He hasn't veered far from the path on which he started. He's still manipulating balls, vanishing doves, and producing parasols. And he's still doing it all without talking. "I never speak on stage. Because if I speak then it's possible I won't be international enough. It's better for me. If I speak in a funny English accent, it takes away the mystery from me, which doesn't fit my character." Instead he says everything he needs to with his hands "Sleight of hand is like a language. You know how to make a routine, you put it together to make words."

It is the words his hands speak that have echoed through the last 50 years. It is the classic way and "the classic way never disappears." He knows when those hands go mute it will be time to hang up the tails and retire, but those days are a long way off. You can see it in the way the fingers flex and in the sparkle in the eyes. You can hear it in his infectious laugh. You understand retirement is far from his mind when he answers the last question put to him: What will it say on your tombstone? "Shimada was pretty original, wasn't he?" Until then, the birds in the other room will continue to coo, knowing that soon, they will be called on once again to take up their position in a sleeve, and amaze a new generation. •

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