

THE MAGIC

Circular

Magazine of The Magic Circle SEPTEMBER 2017

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Jon Marshall: Resurrecting Sideshow

Jon Marshall: Resu

By Will Houstoun MIMC

Jon Marshall MIMC has had a long and varied career in magic performing, consulting, programming a venue and running a theatre company. For a little over a decade Jon has also been bringing classic sideshow illusions back to life and he kindly spent some time telling me about how this happened and the fruits of his labour.

Will Houstoun: One of the areas you have moved into, more and more, is producing sideshows. Can you tell me a bit about where the idea to do this came from?

Jon Marshall: I was a great friend of Jon Gresham, who was a Member of the Magic Circle, a fire-eater, a sideshow proprietor, a cinema proprietor, a museum proprietor and a magician, for many years. I met Jon through Hull Magicians' Circle in the late 1960s so I knew him for a long time, though sadly he died

over 20 years ago. In the 1950s and '60s he toured all over the country with his sideshows. He had them at many parks and resorts including Bellevue in Manchester, at Dreamland in Margate, at the Pleasurelands in Rhyl and also in Great Yarmouth at the Pleasure Park. Those were the days when you would pay sixpence, or a shilling, to go and see a Headless Lady, a Girl in a Goldfish Bowl, or Miranda, the girl entombed in two tons of water.

I remember going to see shows like this, and a couple of Jon's shows, in the late '60s, and that it was great fun. Every fair had a row of live shows. Some were real and others were illusion-based and it made a big impact on me when I was a youngster. Later on, after Jon had died, I was talking to Pat Gresham and Eddie Dawes and we thought maybe it'd be an idea to resurrect one of Jon's shows for the Hull Magicians' Circle Annual Dinner.

Will: Did Pat still have any of the props?

Jon: Pat had mentioned that all the props and scenery were in her barns in East Yorkshire. Jon put some of the shows in storage in 1969 because the market for sideshows

was really dropping out. People were going on package holidays to Spain rather than stay in the UK. Well, in the barns, some open ones with pigeons, rats and other rodents, stuff had got moved around, and there's dust and there's dirt... its not like we were going into a storage place where stuff is neatly flight-cased, labelled and beautifully arranged! It became a search to try and find things that might be associated with a show.

Will: What did you find?

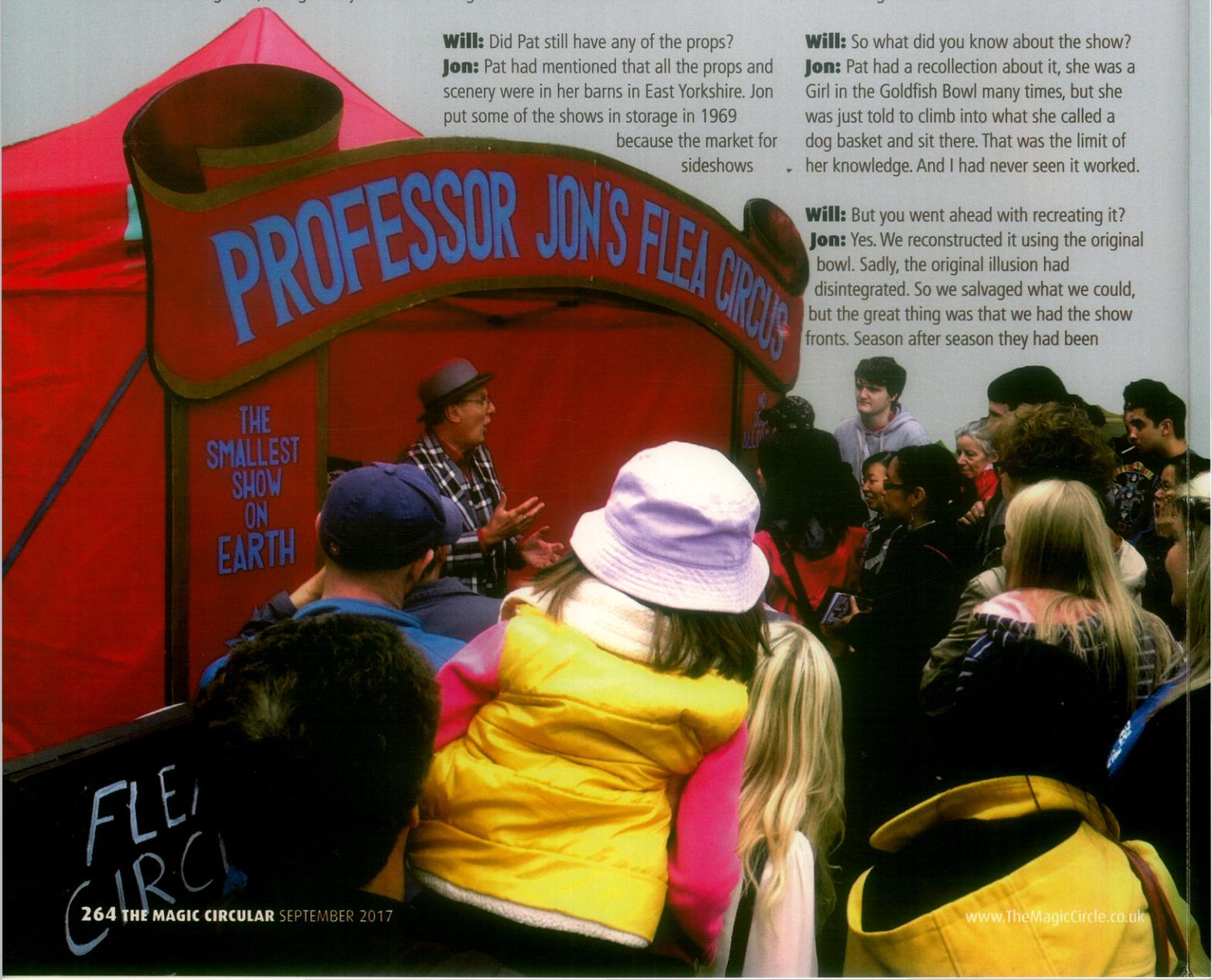
Jon: The Girl in the Goldfish Bowl. Well, we found the original goldfish bowl, with a slight crack in it, and the original show fronts, painted in 1960 by a show-land painter, called Claude Bradley. The fronts are called the flash, and the flash is the most important thing. The saying is: "It's not the show that gets the dough, it's the flash that gets the cash."

Will: So what did you know about the show?

Jon: Pat had a recollection about it, she was a Girl in the Goldfish Bowl many times, but she was just told to climb into what she called a dog basket and sit there. That was the limit of her knowledge. And I had never seen it worked.

Will: But you went ahead with recreating it?

Jon: Yes. We reconstructed it using the original bowl. Sadly, the original illusion had disintegrated. So we salvaged what we could, but the great thing was that we had the show fronts. Season after season they had been



Correcting Sideshow

coated with thick layers of varnish, to protect them from the elements. So the paintwork was absolutely magnificent. With a little bit of woodwork we managed to save the entire show fronts.

We put the show on at the Hull Magicians' Circle Dinner where one of the guests was Professor Vanessa Toulmin. She saw the illusion and invited us to go to a Conference of Visual Delights at the University of Sheffield. From then on, there was more interest in the shows. So thank you, Professor Vanessa and the National Fairground Archive, for that initial interest and support.

Will: When you say there was more interest, was this interest from the public or from people with a particular interest in this kind of entertainment?

Jon: We had all sorts of different people saying "Oh, my goodness. We've never seen sideshows." There aren't any more and I got a bit of a bug for it so we decided to have a go at another one.

Will: Before you tell me about the next one, what do you think makes a good show piece?

Jon: According to Jon Gresham the ideal sideshow must have three essential elements. It must have horror, the bizarre and



Jon Gresham

sex. If it has those three elements, you have a perfect show and it should be a winner. With a Girl in a Goldfish Bowl there is a tiny person, that's bizarre. There isn't a lot of horror in it, but there's certainly sex. If you were a 12 or 13-year-old boy in the 1950s, there was no Page Three, and there was no internet, so you would pay your sixpence and go in to see the bikini-clad girl in the goldfish bowl.

Will: Which sideshow did you decide to work on next?

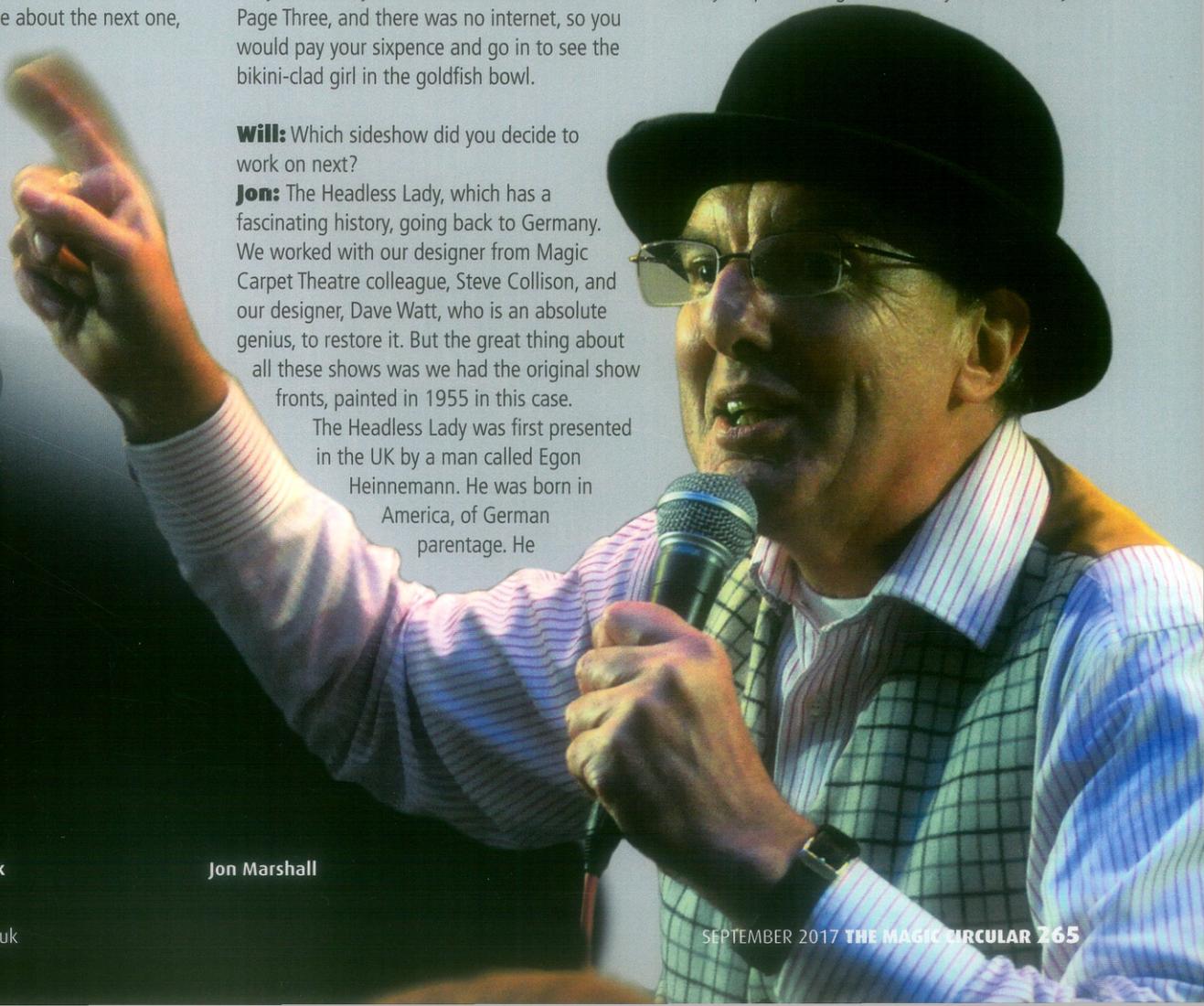
Jon: The Headless Lady, which has a fascinating history, going back to Germany. We worked with our designer from Magic Carpet Theatre colleague, Steve Collison, and our designer, Dave Watt, who is an absolute genius, to restore it. But the great thing about all these shows was we had the original show fronts, painted in 1955 in this case.

The Headless Lady was first presented in the UK by a man called Egon Heinemann. He was born in America, of German parentage. He

entered a partnership with showman Vic Jeffries to present the Headless Lady at Luna Park in Blackpool. That's where it was seen for the first time. I don't know where Heinemann got the show from, whether he was the inventor or the originator. That would be fascinating to investigate.

Anyway, he arrived, and they put the show on, and they took it to London. It was recorded in the showman's newspaper, *The World's Fair*, and there are photographs of Egon Heinemann and Vic Jeffries with the Headless Lady from the mid 1930s. Jon Gresham was a great friend of Vic Jeffries and that's where our Headless Lady came from. From there, it was widely copied and, if you look in *Greater Magic*, there is actually an illustration of the Headless Lady published in 1938.

So the Headless Lady has fascinated me and we wrote a presentation for it, based to some extent on Jon's lecture, the spiel inside was called always called a lecture. We use lots of medical apparatus. Pat Gresham said that when they first presented the show in the 1950s they always kept smelling salts nearby because



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IF SHE
IS NOT
ALIVE

people would faint when they revealed the body. We haven't had anybody faint yet...

Will: You talk quite a lot about the fact that you've got original elements, like some of the original props or the original show fronts, in your shows. How important do you think that is?

Jon: I think it's important that these old sideshows are preserved. And the fact that they are going out, and new audiences are seeing them, and seeing the original shows, I think that's important. I suspect not all our audiences realise that they are looking at the actual show front that their grandparents would have seen in the '50s when they were on holiday but sometimes it happens. In Blackpool, when we presented the shows in Showzam!, a guy came in on a bus from Burnley. He was in his 80s and he said, "I remember going to see that show when I used to come and stay with my aunt in

her boarding house, next to the promenade in Blackpool. I saw the Headless Lady and it always impressed me that she had blood around the junction where the tubes go into her neck." I went back to the original photos with a magnifying glass and sure enough there are specks of blood. And that afternoon our Headless Lady was suitably bloody!

Will: Have you ever made a show from scratch?

Jon: Jon had a show called The Butterfly Girl which he presented in Rhyl and Scarborough. He claimed it wasn't one of his most successful shows, he said it was too pretty-pretty. Basically it was a girl's head on a Sphinx Table with a butterfly body and wings. Well by now we'd already recreated Jon Gresham's Living Half-Lady with the original show fronts so already had something with a table and the idea of doing another version of that didn't appeal to me.

All we had was a photograph of the outside of the show so we wondered how we could recreate this show without using a Sphinx table or something like that. I was around at Eddie's house and he has a stock poster of Dr Lynn's Thaumia, a Living Half Lady on a swing, in his magic den. I was looking at it and I thought, "Crikey, could we use that image, that Victorian black-art effect, as a Butterfly on a swinging perch?"

Will: ...and could you?

Jon: We could! We were commissioned to create a new show by the Blackpool Council. A great friend, called Mark Copeland, who is a brilliant artist, designed and painted the frontage and our team constructed the rest of the apparatus. It has to be suspended and we have ships' chandlers in Hull, so it was the perfect place to be. We had great help in finding the thinnest possible wires to suspend the girl safely.

Will: Did you make any changes to the method as it developed?

Jon: Well, if you have a black art effect and you've got bare light bulbs shining as a blinder into the audience, I think it's always a little bit crude. Well, in Sam Sharpe's book, *Optical Secrets*, he describes a more subtle method of using blinders. We thought we'd try that.

The problem was that part of the apparatus was being made in Bury St Edmunds, part in Bradford, part in Hull, part in Caterham and Daisy, the girl who was coming up to perform it, lived in Margate. All this had to come together in Blackpool for the Showzam! festival and I had no idea whether the illusion would work. Would it be deceptive? How would people react? Luckily it did work and people reacted well.

Will: What happens to the performances you give today, in a society that is very different to the one in which the illusions originally appeared and in which sexism is an issue of which people are aware?



Butterfly Girl Showzam, Blackpool



Above left: Headless original. Left: Headless Jon and Tim Cockerill outside. Above right: 1937 Headless, Egon Heinemann left and Vic Jeffries right.

Jon: Well, we present things a little bit tongue-in-cheek and acknowledge that the shows are from a different time. With our Living Half Lady, though, I thought we perhaps ought to redress the balance a little. Whereas, in the original show, it was just a walk round show where you viewed a half-girl in a low-cut top, we decided to dramatise it. We made the Presenter character rather pompous and he's trying to be quite posh. For the half-lady we decided that we'd dress her as a sort of strong Bet Lynch, Coronation Street type character in a beehive blonde wig. She'd have a cigarette and a Gin bottle and she wouldn't notice that the show had started. And then the show would turn into a dialogue, a row, between the presenter and the lady in which he tries to be in charge but it is clear to the audience that actually she is the person who runs it all.

Will: Something else I find interesting is the line between exhibiting people who are genuinely unusual and illusions that make people seem fantastical. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Jon: In Victorian times there were unusual people who exhibited themselves and there were midgets and giants in fairgrounds even in

the early 1970s and then they virtually died out. There might be a way of doing it today but just at face value, you wouldn't do it now. The real issue though was the holiday market in the UK dying out and there not being enough visitors to these places to support the shows. I suspect that had more to do with it than anything else. Showmen preferred rides to paying live performers.

Will: You once told me that the flea circus has gone through a move from real to illusion, as the performers became less and less available.

Jon: Yes. I absolutely adore doing the flea



Mummy Sideshow

circus. It is obviously a small thing but, over the last few years, my show and presentation has become quite a big production and it fits in brilliantly with the sideshows that we do. I have to really thank Danny Hunt for his help with that because he gave me my flea circus as a birthday present. It's sensational, the amount of work that goes into making that prop, so I'm forever grateful to Danny. The legitimate flea circus was killed out by three things though: cleanliness, DDT and hygienic homes.

Will: And what do you think the relationship of all these things to magic is?

Jon: Our sideshows are entirely based on magic illusions. The Living Half Lady is based on the original Sphinx. The Butterfly Girl is based on Dr Lynn's work. These are classic Victorian illusions that have been adapted and used in the fairground for many years. I suppose it's a slightly different presentation, I use my theatre hat to make them entertaining for modern audiences rather than them just being about paying sixpence, going in, looking and coming out again. It still has to be clearly immediate and live though... particularly today with so much CGI and people knowing about special effects – that is perhaps the main challenge. I get a great kick out of watching young teenagers running, terrified and laughing, out of our Mummy show having just witnessed an illusion created in 1862.