

The Ghost Maker

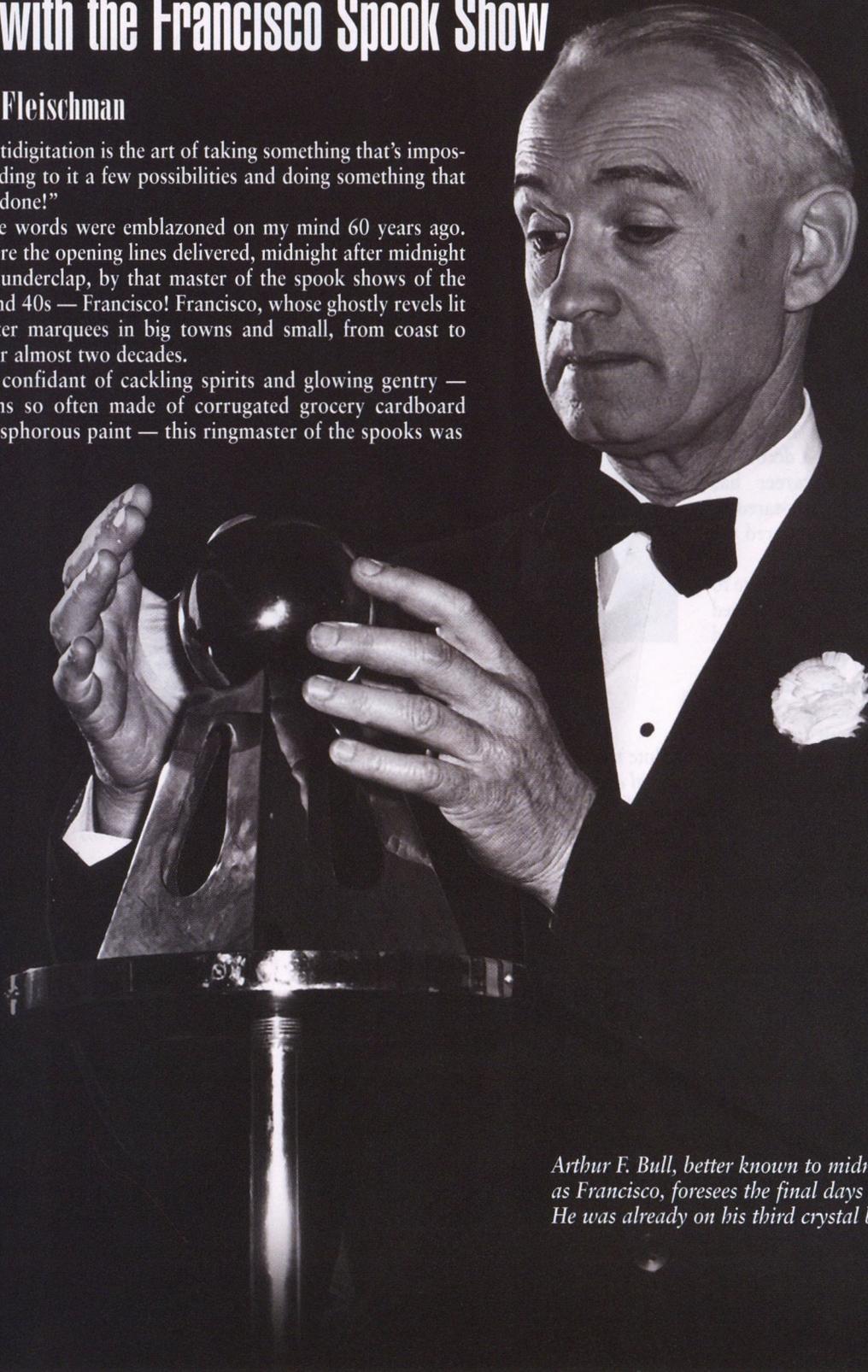
Life with the Francisco Spook Show

By Sid Fleischman

"Prestidigitation is the art of taking something that's impossible, adding to it a few possibilities and doing something that can't be done!"

Those words were emblazoned on my mind 60 years ago. They were the opening lines delivered, midnight after midnight like a thunderclap, by that master of the spook shows of the 1930s and 40s — Francisco! Francisco, whose ghostly revels lit up theater marquees in big towns and small, from coast to coast, for almost two decades.

This confidant of cackling spirits and glowing gentry — phantoms so often made of corrugated grocery cardboard and phosphorous paint — this ringmaster of the spooks was



Arthur F. Bull, better known to midnight thrill-seekers as Francisco, foresees the final days of the spook show. He was already on his third crystal ball.

tall, courtly Arthur F. Bull, of San Francisco and Oakland, California. He was then already graying, in his 50s and launching himself upon a second career, this time as a magician.

His first began while a teenager in San Francisco when he was apprenticed to a maker of — wooden legs. This specialized skill, in great demand during the First World War, brought him to Finland and then to Russia and Romania, charged with expediting supplies. He's the only man I ever knew who told wooden leg jokes.

Arthur was by instinct and long experience a businessman, which may explain his staying power as a midnight showman, even as others, facing penurious box office receipts, abandoned the ghost-raising trade. As late as the very early 1950s he was touring with his *Francisco Spook Frolic*, now freshened with a Frankenstein's monster impersonator and a real live but ill Bela Lugosi, reprising for the last time his Count Dracula persona.

Where do I come in? 1938. Fresh out of high school, I joined the show and traveled as one of Arthur's two assistants, costumed in a bell boys fire red jacket with brass buttons and a snap-on bow tie, for two breathless years of one-night stands.

How did I get so lucky? Someone has said that chance favors the prepared. Boy, was I prepared.

My baptism into magic came at the age of seven or so when I saw Adelaide Herrmann in person. This was at the Orpheum Theater in San Diego. I vividly recall a somewhat buxom woman corseted in an emerald green evening dress doing a vaudeville turn. She rolled out a kind of butler's cart with her props and, to my boyish astonishment, poured a pitcher of plain water into glasses that flashed into colored drinks. What I remember most clearly was her bemused presence and her smile, accompanied like a musical score by a soft humming, almost a chuckle under her breath, as she worked. No wonder I remember her. She was incandescent. The word hadn't yet been invented, but she had charisma.

I speculate that it was Madam Herrmann because indeed the real Adelaide turned up in California in 1927 to play the Orpheum circuit with her vaudeville act, exactly when this event occurred. I have not been able to discover, during that period in vaudeville, any other woman of middle age doing a solo magic act — in a corset.

For me, it remains a handshake across the centuries.

I was geographically well situated for a career as a magician, or at least, a magician's assistant. Although unaware of it at the time, I had tickets to one of magic's golden ages, for I was soon able to spend fabled Saturday afternoons at that great bazaar and Mecca and crossroads of magic — Floyd G. Thayer's Magic Studio. With white stucco walls and red tiled roof, this Camelot rose in Spanish Colonial splendor at 929 Longwood Avenue in Los Angeles, now the Larsen residence.

Here, under the high beamed ceiling, I saw Blackstone in person. Here I just missed Chester Morris. Here I rubbed shoulders with The Great Leon and Glen Pope and Mardoni and Jack Gwynne and Tenkai and Think-a-Drink Hoffman, whom I did not much like, and Bert Kalmar and Mrs. Houdini, whom I adored. No one seemed to notice that I was just a teenager in his best suit. If you were magic, you were in.

And here began close friendships with Haskell, Bill Larsen Sr., Lloyd Jones, Jim Conley (who later took out a spook show of his own), and Charlie Miller. I did not meet Arthur F. Bull at Thayer's. I knew him already.

Arthur — and we all called him Arthur, not Mr. Bull — was a business casualty of the onset of the great Depression. He had segued from wooden legs to selling mechanical violins and other coin-operated musical contraptions to saloons. Today, these early jukeboxes would be worth a bloody fortune. He stumbled into the mail-order business in Chicago, selling trusses. When collections dried up, and he needed to find a more profitable enterprise, he turned to his hobby of magic. He joined with Carl Zamlock in mounting an illusion show that worked the San Francisco Bay area. Who, you might ask, was Carl Zamlock?

He bore one of the great names in magic of the Victorian years, a name now sadly forgotten. Carl was the son of Professor Zamlock, a



A return to the scene of the screams. When the author and wife visited the Orpheum Theater in San Diego in 1946, the restless ghost of Zemora turned up to cavort about the balcony.



Here I am modeling the latest style, circa 1938, for assistant ghost maker. All show clothes were carried in a wardrobe trunk. We were in such perpetual motion doing one-night stands, that only when we wintered over did the costumes get a cleaning and a pressing.

California magician once important enough to be included in H. J. Burlingame's dress parade of performers in his 1891 *Leaves from Conjurers' Scrap Books*. Wrote Burlingame: "The leading conjuror of the Pacific Coast is Prof. Zamlock, who travels continually through the extreme Western States and Territories... He is very popular."

The professor's son, Arthur told me, had served as a spy during the First World War. The magic partnership of the ex-spy and the ex-wooden leg maker lasted only until young Zamlock, who had managed to become a major league first baseman along the way, accepted a public relations position with a West Coast oil company. Not only could Carl back-palm cards, he could spell.

Arthur kept the show going and turned up doing five shows a day at the 1936 World's Fair in San Diego, where I met and came to know him. He was using an assistant, Lloyd Jones's nephew, 16-year-old Harold Agnew. Harold was the first of many Francisco assistants to put their own names in lights in the magic world. He was soon followed by Victor St. Leon, a.k.a. Arthur Gross, who is still alive and still magicking in Sacramento, California, where an IBM Ring is named after him. Caswell Boxley built a highly regarded illusion show of his own, and was hospitalized when a chimpanzee in the company attacked him in a fit of jealousy over Cas' beautiful wife, Marie. Francisco's last



What the well-dressed black art worker wore in the Francisco Spook Frolic. That's me.

stage assistant was Pete Biro, then just out of high school, who became a magic convention headliner.

Early in the summer of 1938 I received a telegram from a boyhood magic buddy, Buddy Ryan, who had joined the show only a few weeks before. He wanted to leave. His girlfriend left behind in San Francisco was threatening to dump him if he didn't catch the next bus back to the Golden Gate.

So I jumped on the next bus to Denver and filled in. I arrived on a Saturday night. Francisco and his equally tall wife, the gracious and unflappable Mable, met me at the bus depot. We rehearsed on Sunday so that I wouldn't bump into the props before resuming the tour on Monday. I found the show easy to learn, for it was made up largely of catalogue magic, and I knew my catalogues. But I had never been in a "Sub Trunk" before — I was to work the trick with Arthur — and if I felt a gulp at first being locked in, I didn't confess it. After all, there was a trap door and in my pocket I had the gimmick, something like a hex wrench, to open it.

We were off. I have written briefly about these first Colorado days with the show in a memoir for the general public a few years ago, *The Abracadabra Kid, A Writer's Life*. Listen to this:

"I thought the show was so bad I was almost too embarrassed to venture onstage. It

was just a bunch of mechanical tricks. Anyone could do them.

"We packed up the show and performed the next night in La Junta. Wild jubilation. Trinidad. Shouts for more. By the time we crossed into Kansas, it dawned on me that this might be the best magic show on the road. The box tricks were knocking the audiences dead. The theaters rocked. Hands applauded. No one missed the subtle and exotic sleight of hand that I had contemplated instead of my navel. I began having the time of my life."

Arthur F. Bull's stage name was plucked from his own. The "F" stood for Francisco. His father, a German-born tailor, insisted that he be named after the city of his birth — San Francisco. Indeed, Arthur was across the bay carving wooden legs when the great earthquake and fire of 1906 struck.

When I joined the show, assistants were paid four dollars a performance, with hotel and restaurant taken care of. With travel days lost, we could generally count on three or four shows a week. But occasionally, there came along a meager eight-dollar or four-dollar paycheck. Somehow, I had just spending money enough to get by.

When, during my second season, Arthur raised the bounty to six dollars a show, I felt so flush that I bought myself a Homburg hat. I regarded myself as show biz.

For theater managers the spook show's appeal was seductive and unique. Like no other, these entertainments were found money, for we performed when the theater would be otherwise dark. Following the evening's last movie fadeout, the manager let the theater empty, then opened the box office again and charged fresh admission for the live fright show, plus a scary movie. We often carried the movie with us: Boris Karloff in *The Mummy* or Bela Lugosi in some Dracula epic. Ticket prices, during the 1930s, ranged from as low as 15¢ to a high of 35¢ in the occasional large city.

I can remember working the entire show for a snowbound audience of six people in a small Minnesota theater, and one of them drunk. But generally we had good houses, and on rare — very rare — occasions midnight revelers turned up in such gleeful numbers that we did two shows a night.

This was managed by sending the overflow to another theater, generally across the street, and showing them the Boris Karloff fright opera while we performed live at the first theater. Then we would bicycle the audiences between theaters, and do our show again.

We traveled by car, in a 1936 Plymouth, hauling the show behind us in a two-wheeled trailer, tied down with a canvas tarpaulin. The trailer was packed like a "Nest of Boxes." The "Sub Trunk" was filled with show props before being loaded aboard. The supply of Mason jars for the "Rat Bottle" was padded by the rolled-up backdrop. Like pulling the wings off a but-

terfly, the splashy illusions were taken apart for travel.

Four of us filled the car, with Mable always in the front passenger seat, as she did not drive. The rest of us took turns at the wheel. Wisely, with two teenagers at the wheel, Arthur had set a 55-mile-an-hour speed limit.

Our worry was not the speed limit. Arthur had a wonderful knack of being able to refresh himself with brief catnaps anytime while sitting upright. Sometimes even during a pause in the conversation you'd discover he had dropped off for 40 or 50 seconds. Well, he drove sitting up, didn't he? We kept a nervous eye on him.

The *we* at that time included the other assistant, Bob Muse, whose father, Ray Muse, later become president of the SAM. Bob was more show biz than I. He wore spats.

During my first days with the company, Arthur opened with a tall bowl of fire whisked from under a foulard. The flames were sparked by a flint, as I recall, and sometimes it lit on the first try. Sometimes, like a cigarette lighter, it balked. And balked. Those moments were art imitating life. I don't know if you've ever worked a "Fire Bowl," but they get blowtorch hot in a hurry. Arthur would display it, hanging on with asbestos fingers before tripping the bouquet of Spring Flowers that simultaneously smothered the flames.

Well might you wonder what Spring Flowers were doing in a fright show. Or the "Miser's Dream." Or the "Torn-and-Restored Newspaper." Or the "Kellar Rope Tie." Or the "Rat Bottle." The answer was barely concealed. A spook show was a magic show traveling under false pretenses.

Except, except for the big finish — the blowoff. The ten-minute blackout. The ghost laundry flitting through the air. The deafening sound effects, the screams, and manic laughter. That's what brought the teenagers out for an excuse to hug their dates in the dark.

And clearly, the show was an invitation to whistle in the graveyard; an invitation, for a few coppers, to thumb one's nose at that lurking uninvited guest, the Grim Reaper.

In daylight, our company of skeletons was a limp and forlorn sight — cloth banners and stacks of cardboard with phosphorus painted on. But when floating about the theater, the skulls and bats were gussied up in a pale greenish-white phosphorescent glow.

How do you make phantoms float about the theater? Largely, with boys. Included in Arthur's advance sheet of instructions to each theater manager, stood a request to provide about 15 boys for rehearsal. They would be given free admission for conspiring to help out during the blackout. Each was handed a phosphorus skull painted on a square of corrugated cardboard, and told to parade down the darkened aisles. There they'd flash the death heads. Since, in the dark, we lose depth perception, the incandescent noggins

**ON STAGE
IN PERSON**

MYSTERY
LAUGHS
THRILLS
CHILLS

THAT UNCANNY
MYSTIC

**FRANCISCO AND HIS
BIG MID-NITE
SPOOK FROLIC**

THE SHADOW
MYSTERY!

SAWING A HUMAN
BEING IN HALVES!

THE ENIGMA
FROM TIBET!

SPIRIT
MESSAGES

ZOMBIES
AND
GHOSTS
COME
INTO THE
AUDIENCE

FIRST TIME ON
ANY STAGE

IN PERSON
ZEMORA
THE RESTLESS
GHOST
UNHAPPY IN HIS GRAVE
HE ROAMS THE THEATRE-
MAY TOUCH YOU!

ENTIRE
NEW
SHOW

ONE PRICE FOR ALL AGES

Zemora makes his debut. He worked cheap!

appeared to be near, far, and everywhere.

This procedure was not without its hazards — and its humor. As often as not, kids seated on the aisle would sense the passing boys, snatch the cardboards and attempt to put on their own ghost shows.

But the real mischief might occur on return engagements. By that time, the conspirators had let their friends in on the secret. Then, as the lights went out, some adolescent humorist would tie a trip rope across the aisle about a foot off the floor. Here came our fresh troop of boys. There's the rope. See the pile up.

Meanwhile, on either side of the stage Arthur and I would float out the cloth goblins from fishing poles. For a finale, we'd each attach our poles to the corners of a wide banner, and fly out a huge, fluttering bat.

Daytimes, we'd lay our company of phosphorescent goblins outside the stage door to recharge in the sun. In bad weather, a strong stage light was substituted. But the ghosts in that night's performance would not have the

astral magnitude of those energized by the sun.

Our biggest problem was in keeping the house dark, for a single match will light up an entire theater. Arthur would warn the audience in advance that the moment a match or flashlight popped up the curtain would fall and the show would end. But not even that caveat could keep some adolescents from playing with matches.

The theater's red exit lights were a more persistent problem. Arthur would kill them for the blackout — unless the fire marshal, who may have seen these ghost shows before, turned up and dared anyone to throw the switch.

While being among the first on the scene, Arthur Bull cannot be credited with originating the genre. He was not a man given to original insights. Stage ghosting appears to have been less invented than a Darwinian flowering. Its DNA may easily be traced back to Etienne-Gaspard Robertson and his *Phantasmagoria*, a ghost-making flim flam in 18th-century France. It was followed in the 19th century by Black

Art in Germany, Pepper's Ghost in England, and assorted spiritualistic diversions everywhere. It remained for "El Wyn," or Elwin C. Peck, a magician of no other great distinction, who provided the missing stroke of brilliance in 1933 or so. Evidently, it was he who came up with the midnight hour that made the whole conceit so easily bookable.

It needs to be said that not always would we lift the curtain at the witching hour. Midnight was part of the hype. These were go-to-bed-early small towns. Once the audience was seated, even as early as 11 p.m., we hauled out our spooks.

And hype didn't trouble Arthur's conscience as long as it was cheeky but harmless, that is, tongue-in-cheeky. Thus, he would advertise a Faint Pass. If you fainted, you could come to another performance, and presumably swoon again free of charge.

We carried a plywood headstone with the name Zamora painted on it. The management would build a scruffy grave in front of the theater. There lay a spook, claimed our ads, who would obediently leap up during the performance and roam the aisles.

Arthur had no close-up skills — I never saw him do a Double Lift or even the French Drop. But what he needed to do, he found a way to do. In his "Miser's Dream," he used a Coin Wand. For a "Coins Across" routine with two spectators, he used a Coin Tray. And while he was not a natural comedian, he got as much physical comedy out of the "Kellar Rope Tie" as anyone I have ever seen.

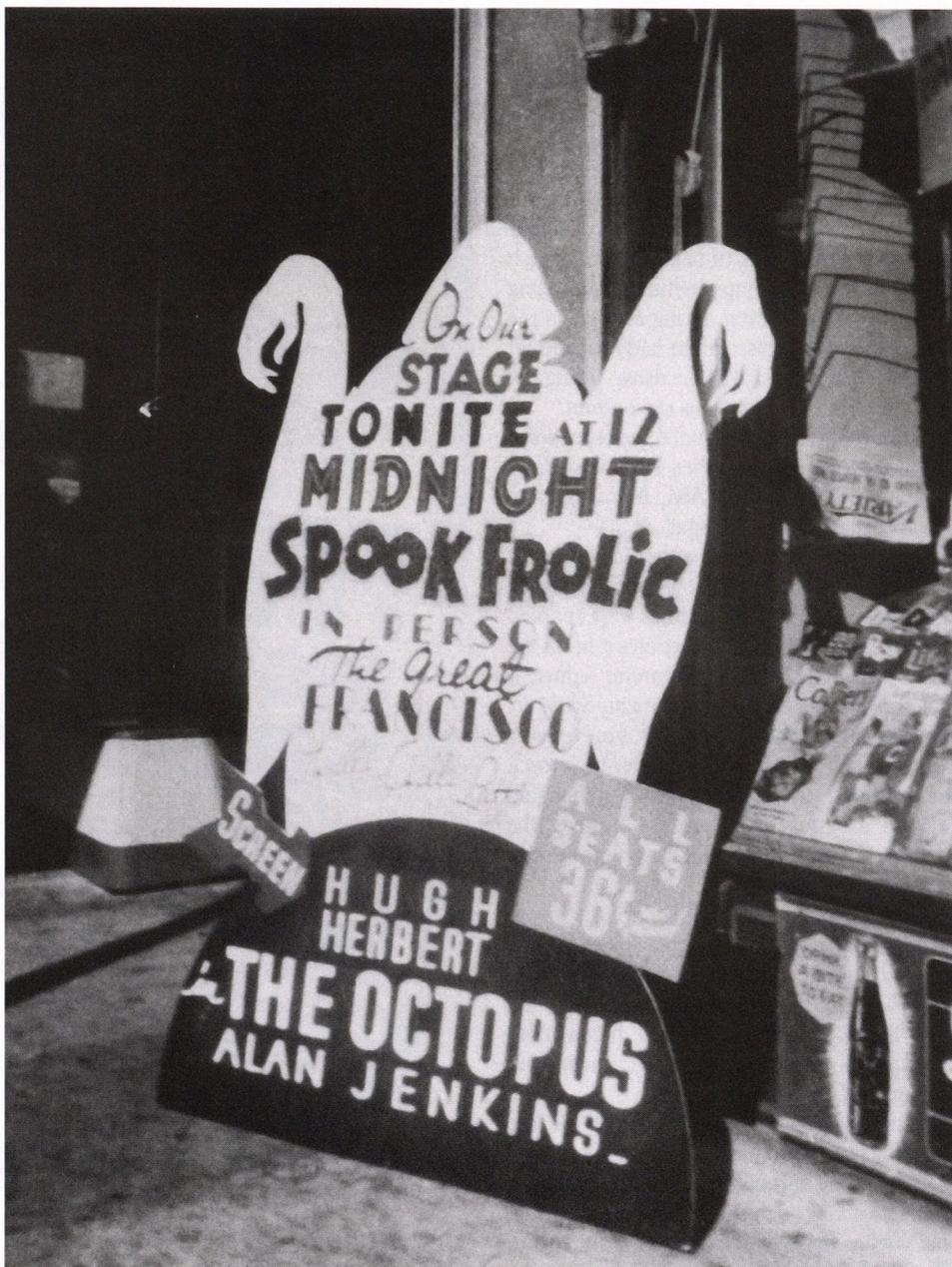
Comedy, in fact, was the *zeitgeist* of the show. His mind-reading pretensions were designed for laughter. Before the show, his two assistants would pass out slips of paper with pay envelopes to the incoming patrons. Sealed questions would be openly placed in a fishbowl kept on display in the lobby. But not before we'd each palmed out a dozen or so and stuck them under our jackets. Backstage, Arthur would tear open the envelopes and load audience names into a Thayer "Crystal Ball Pedestal," Catalogue Number 1316.

"A Smith is reaching me," he would declare onstage. "A Clem Smith. He wants to know where he can find his ring. Sir, you will find it exactly where you left it — around the bathtub."

"Maybelle Finch is curious to know if the watch her beau gave her is brand new. No, it is used. I can see its second hand."

These and other joke lines were arthritic with age, but they nevertheless filled the theaters with laughter. Arthur was a pragmatist. He was constantly reading his audiences. If something worked, he used it.

But the greatest laugh the show ever got came out of the audience itself. When the unsuspecting Arthur divined the question, "Is Helen true to me?," a man in the audience shouted out, "I can answer that!"



Francisco freshened the show each year, including a new lobby display. Note that all seats were an inflationary 36¢.

To be true to his billing, he attempted to give the ticket buyers as much spooky magic as they expected. I remember handling the black thread offstage for the Blackstone "Floating Handkerchief," which was as spooky as the grave. Arthur never had the handkerchief go limp of a broken lifeline. Not only did he use thread coarse enough to pull a plow, he added the precaution of stringing new thread for each performance.

Popular with theater managers, for Arthur delivered the goods, the show often played the same towns, as I've mentioned, year after year. He booked the show himself, with an upright typewriter at our feet in the car. Checking into hotel after hotel, he'd carry the machine up to his room, and while we slept he would spend the late hours writing ahead for dates. He was tireless.

On nights when he didn't need the Remington, I would sometimes borrow it. I was transfixed by that fabled magician/writer, Walter B. Gibson, who seemed able to shake a new novel out of his typewriter every week. I had begun to write stories. But I hadn't a shadow of a clue how to do it. All I was able to shake out of Arthur's typewriter were rejection slips.

Arthur was ever on the lookout for new material, especially creepy stuff, with which to redecorate the show for the repeat bookings. During my second season we did a black-art routine that was an awful nuisance to set up and a pain in the neck to take down. A proscenium arch had to be tediously assembled with many dozens of wing nuts, only to be broken down after the show, when we were tired. Since then, I have had a Pavlovian aversion to wing nuts.

At first, and according to tradition, we put so



The portable grave we carried and set up somewhere in Nebraska.

many blinding lights into the eyes of the audience, that folks needed seeing-eye dogs to watch the show. Gradually, Arthur reduced the lights to just a couple at either side at the foot of the proscenium, and that worked just as well.

Bob and I would slip into black head-to-toe gowns to become invisible in the black-art set. We'd float the scimitar and work the decapitation and the other traditional black-art wonders. Mable handled the lighting cues from the wings. I saw her truly angry only once in my travels, when a confused stagehand in the balcony turned on the spotlight. He lit us up in sudden, freeze frame.

During my second season, Arthur, who was literate in German and searched for material in two languages, built an illusion from plans he bought from Conradi, the Berlin magic dealer. This appears to have been the source of Thayer's "Triangle Illusion" as well. It was a vertical Spirit Cabinet with two doors that met in front and a (not so solid) back panel.

I'd hide inside while Arthur and Bob spun it around. Just before they pulled open the doors, I'd step out the back onto a small, spring-hinged platform. Once the front doors were closed, I'd step back inside where I'd shake a tambourine, throw out a hand bell, and cause the usual spirit mischief. It seemed foolproof.

Not quite. It was somewhere under the Canadian border that the theater floor was so warped that upstage sloped downward. When I stepped onto the back platform, the shift of my weight tipped the illusion backward, off its legs. For an instant, a man's shoe and ankle



Francisco standing in front of his entire spook show, including Black Art and "Sub Trunk," packed into the two-wheel trailer.

flashed into view — mine. I needed to stop the illusion from toppling over on me. By then, Arthur saw what was happening and righted the box. I'm sure that some in the audience were as fooled by the appearance of that disembodied leg as anything else in the routine.

Mishaps are a part of theater life. I recall an occasion, coming into St. Louis on a rainy morning when Bob Muse, at the wheel of the Plymouth, made a sharp turn to avoid an accident. Our trailer was tipped over on its side. Once at the theater, Arthur checked the shaken props. He drove in nails where needed.

Inside the "Sub Trunk" later that night, I attempted to open the trap door. It wouldn't budge. Arthur had nailed it shut. After yelling to him, he closed the small curtain around us, sat down and kicked the trap open.

Pete Biro tells a happier tale about a breezy night in San Francisco. Arthur was in the middle of the "Asrah" when someone opened the stage door. Such a gale of wind cut across the stage that the form floated out over the audience. It was stunning. With a prideful gesture of his arms, Francisco accepted full credit. Thurston would have been jealous.

Hecklers in the audience were rare. Arthur was not a man of ad-libs. He armed himself with a stock put-down line for all such occasions. "The bigger the mouth," he'd declare, "the better it looks shut."

On the road, among the passing sights, I remember seeing paper hung by Will Rock with his Thurston show — either coming in or already departed, like footprints peeling off the town billboards. And then, suddenly, we began seeing the paper of an upstart ghost maker, Silkini, with his *Asylum of Horrors*. We were "Sub Trunks" passing in the night.

These travels not only put six dollars in my pocket on good nights, but I gained admission to the magic world of that day. I met Laurie Ireland and Joe Berg in Chicago, Percy Abbott in Michigan (he agreed to publish a thin magic book I had written in high school), and Max Holden and Al Flosso in New York.

But where was Walter B. Gibson? When the season ended for us, as the highways iced up

just before Christmas, I left the show. I wanted to go to college and become a fiction writer like Gibson. Or Clayton Rawson. Or Bruce Elliot.

I never did meet Walter Gibson. But I came close. Some years later, I saw him across the room at a magic convention. He looked shy. But not as shy as I felt. I couldn't find the boldness to approach the great Shadow himself and say hello.

My years as an apprentice ghost raiser were not lost to me when I finally began publishing. I did some phantom making in three books: *The Ghost in the Noonday Sun* (turned into one of Peter Sellers' final films), *The Ghost on Saturday Night*, and a tall tale, *McBroom's Ghost*. I discovered that any time I put ghost in the title, the sales tripled.

Francisco never retired. When vaudeville died during the Second World War, the spook business wasn't far behind. By that time, Mable Bull was tired of living in second rate hotels. I remember how often she'd lay newspapers over the carpets in rooms she regarded as too unscrubbed, even for show people. She and Arthur retreated to their spotless home in Oakland, and he revived his mail-order truss business. This was not unlike Dante who, when he retired to his Los Angeles ranch, turned Billiard Balls on a wood lathe for Thayer, just to make sure he could still do it. Imagine, there are magicians who own Billiard Balls hand turned by Dante, and don't know it.

Francisco would ratchet up the show on weekends in the San Francisco Bay area and for bookings up and down the Pacific Coast. A man who'd never experienced a headache in his life, and couldn't imagine what they felt like, he seemed imperishable. Arthur's vitality never flagged. When his ghost making ended, at almost 80 years of age, suddenly, on June 3, 1964, it seemed the most astonishing trick of all. ♦

"The Ghost Maker" is expanded upon from a speech that Sid Fleischman presented in May at the 32nd Annual Magic Collectors' Association Weekend in Schaumburg, Illinois.