

John Bundy... Undead and Unstoppable

BY MARK WALKER

This October, when the whisper of dead leaves rustles mysteriously down darkened streets and pumpkins are transformed into grinning Jack-o-lanterns, the Worlds of Fun amusement park in Kansas City will welcome back its old friend, *Spooktacular*. Standing behind the footlights of the Tivoli Music Hall is its creator, 52-year-old John Bundy, a quiet, unassuming illusionist from South Plainfield, New Jersey, about 30 miles from New York City.

Inspired by his love of old horror movies, monster make-up, and Bill Neff's *Madhouse of Mystery* [see *The Second Best Show I Ever Saw* page 62], Bundy's Broadway-style illusion show and dance extravaganza has blossomed into a wonderful magic career. This year marks his 12th Halloween season at the Tivoli, and very soon patrons will be lining up once again at the 1,500-seat theater to experience new thrills and chills.

Spooktacular could best be described as a modern-day family ghost show. As the audience enters

the theater they discover two body-shaped cages hanging over their heads. Inside are two animatronic skeletons who greet the crowd, tell horrible jokes, throw in a few commercials for other activities in the park, and generally bicker among themselves. The show begins when a large portrait of Wacky Dracky explodes and a flying ghost shoots out, circling the audience a few times as lighting flashes purples and greens, and dramatic music fills the room. The ghost flies back to the stage to an archway where Wacky Dracky appears in a huge cloud of smoke. "Miss me?" he asks. Those who have seen the show in past years respond enthusiastically. They have, indeed, missed him.

Stone gargoyles break loose from marble columns and drag a giant crystal ball on stage. It fills with fog, and Morgan, the Diva of Darkness, appears within. She is folded into a "Horrorgami" box, designed to resemble the puzzle box from the *Hellraiser* films. A young volunteer joins them in Wacky





Dracky's Costume Shop to select a costume that he or she would like to see Mom in. The costume is put in an ancient trunk and an assistant immediately steps out wearing it. As a thank-you, the helper is presented with a custom-designed magic kit, which features such tricks as an Eyeball in Vase and Sponge Bats. Next, "things go bump in the night" as odd creatures appear from inside an empty mausoleum. That's followed by Vampire Vivisection, a Modern Art illusion re-imagined as a coffin.

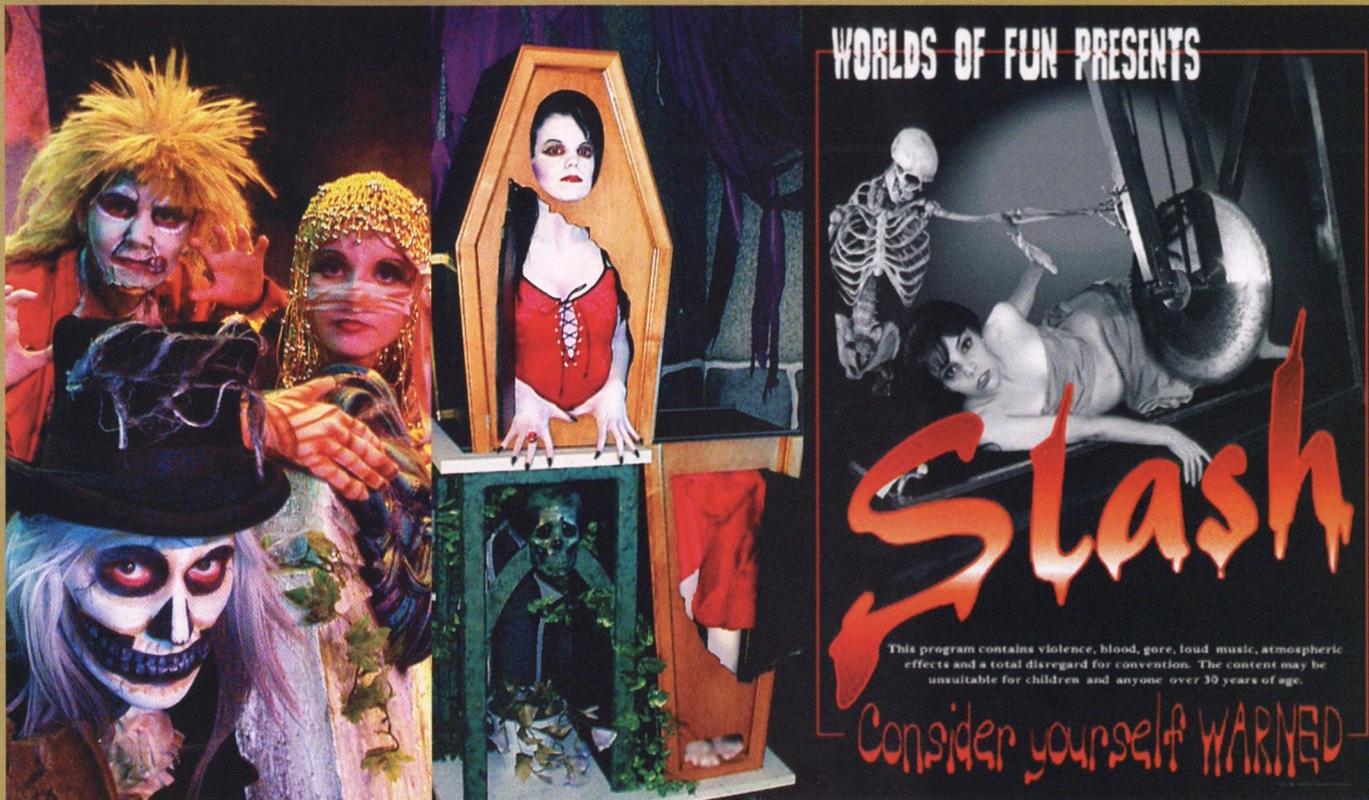
Other highlights of the show include a truly frightening moment followed by a comical one — a character named Amadeus gets his head cut off with a guillotine only to have it bounced around to the tune of the Harlem Globetrotter's theme song, "Sweet Georgia Brown." Morgan is granted a solo spot as she attempts to learn a new magic trick, mistaking a banana for the required bandana. As she concludes, Amadeus is back, his head now zippered to his body. Angry at

being beheaded, he stakes the female vampire and cremates her until nothing is left except a skeleton. Wacky Dracky returns, taking the ring off the skeleton's finger. "She would have wanted me to have it." Amadeus, still angry, straps his boss into an Assistant's Revenge. Dracky immediately switches places with him, then puts the ring back on Morgan's skeletal finger, restoring her to the living — or perhaps *undead*. Thus the show ends, happily ever after.

Sprinkled throughout the show are dance numbers, one of which is "Shake, Rattle and Roll." This black-light, dancing-skeleton act has become John's signature piece. In a darkened theater, glowing, animated skeletons — sporting red gloves, bow ties, and blue hats — cavort across the stage in the most amusing manner to lively Calypso music.

The large stage illusions vary from year to year. In any given season audiences may also see an Asrah or Aga Levitation, Battle-Axe Broom Suspension,

Light Bulbs Through Girl, Tip-Over Trunk, and the Thin-Model Sawing. Last year, my personal favorite was the Mad Doctor's lab or "Let's Make A Monster" routine. Although I certainly wouldn't describe it as a great illusion, it was a campy audience participation number whereby a young volunteer portrays Baron Frankenstein and creates the legendary monster which sneaks up behind him in spite of the audience's attempt to warn him. The set was filled with all types of weird science fiction gadgets and gizmos, which John loves to build, and the routine included some priceless bits and gags. This year that trick will be replaced by the "Motley Monster" illusion. In this routine a young volunteer from the audience is shown four boxes stacked on top of one another. On each side of the stacked boxes is a painting of a different famous monster: a vampire, mummy, werewolf, and Frankenstein's monster. The kid gets to twist each of the boxes every which way, forming an



Facing page: Wacky Dracky (John Bundy) suspends the Diva of Darkness (Morgan) on a headsman's ax balanced on a tombstone. Above, from left: The Spooktacular dancers; Morgan divided in a coffin-style Modern Art illusion; poster for *Slash*, the more gruesome, late-night show at Worlds of Fun.

entirely new creation, an amalgamation of the others. The cabinet door opens and out steps a creature with the head of the Frankenstein monster, torso of Dracula, shroud-wrapped legs of a mummy, and hairy werewolf feet. This season there is talk of opening the show with *Amadeus* still strapped in the Assistant's Revenge, covered with cobwebs, as if he'd been there all year.

A great deal of the appeal of *Spooktacular* comes from its two likable stars: Wacky Dracky and Morgan. The geriatric vampire character was originally created for *Tricks 'n' Treats*, a small illusion show that ran in 1986 and 1989 at Six Flags Great Adventure, New Jersey. He proved so popular that the show expanded and became *Wacky Dracky's Side Show of Horrors* from 1990 to 1992. The year after that "W.D.," as he's sometimes referred to, moved to a 1,500 seat indoor theater, starring in *Thriller*, a dance and illusion show. In 1994, John introduced his character to Worlds of Fun and renamed the show *Spooktacular*.

As for the character's name, the magician recounted that he conjured it on the spot while being interviewed by the press. The aging spook seems to resemble Grandpa from the old '60s television show,

The Munsters, except he has a rather large prosthetic nose and Transylvanian accent. Bundy disputes the Grandpa connection and sees Wacky as having deeper, traditional, comedic roots. "Much like Mr. Punch, of *Punch & Judy*," John explains. "W.D. is self-centered, bombastic, and totally over the top."

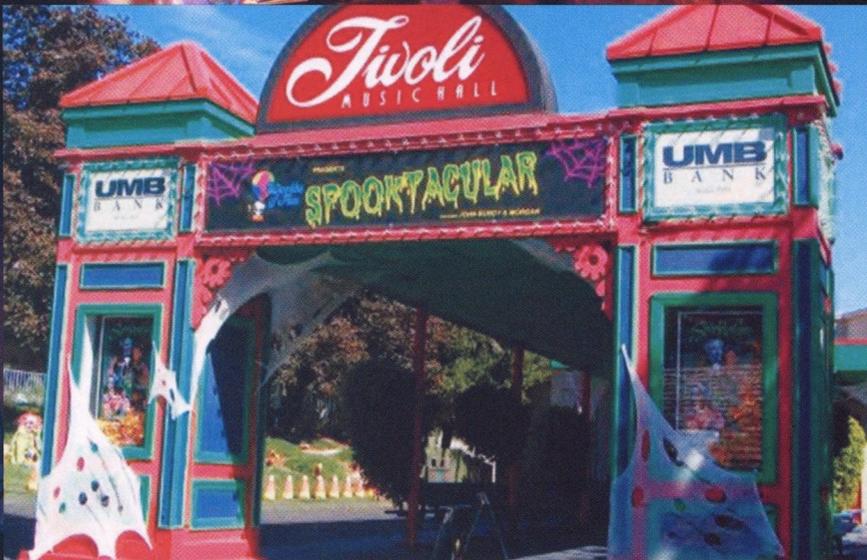
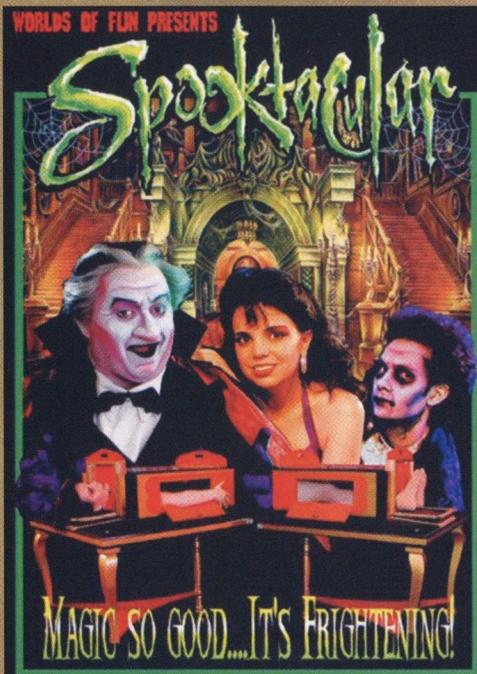
Every leading man needs leading ladies. John has his wife, Susan, a Registered Nurse, Case Manager. Susan was his onstage partner in the early years, traveling across the country, mall to mall. Having "done her time," she now runs the business, and John considers her his greatest asset in keeping him anchored to the real world. They have two children, daughter Kaitlin, a theater major at Ramapo College, and an 11-year-old son, Ryan. Both work for Dad behind the scenes on school holidays.

Wacky Dracky, on the other hand, has leading lady Morgan, a sharply-drawn Halloween character who seems to truly enjoy being cut in half, set on fire, and getting poked full of holes. Morgan, who goes by her first name only, is also John's business partner and production manager. She made her magic debut as an assistant traveling with a Philadelphia-based magic show before

appearing in the *Bourbon Street Follies* at the Showboat and *Tivoli Pier* at the Tropicana, both in Atlantic City. Shortly thereafter she became the head writer for a Philadelphia children's television show, *Ritzzy the Wolf*, and even won a local Emmy for her work. In 1994, while studying at Jim Henson's Creature Shop in New York, she auditioned as a last-minute replacement for an assistant who had dropped out of one of John's illusion shows. Two days later she was onstage with him. She never left.

Unlike most wizards, Bundy wasn't bitten by magic at a very young age. His introduction began in his sophomore year of college while studying theatre and set design. It was here where he met another student who was a weekend birthday party entertainer. This spark turned into a flame when illusionist André Kole performed at the school. Realizing he could fuse magic and theatre together, Bundy quickly entered the world of stage illusions and never looked back.

After graduating with a B.A. in Theatre from Rider University in New Jersey, John worked for two magic shops, *Abracadabra Magic* and the *Magic Palace*, both in New Jersey, both since closed. Following his work as a counter



Top: Poster for 2005 rendition of Spooktacular; *Things That Go Bump in the Night*. Bottom: A volunteer helps create a monster; the entrance to the Tivoli theater at Worlds of Fun in Kansas City.

demonstrator and art director, he designed magic sets for a Hong Kong firm and freelanced for Bill Schmeelk at Wellington Enterprises. His conceptual renderings and artwork allowed him to work on magic projects for Doug Henning and Harry Blackstone, Jr.

Working as a booking agent for a noted theatrical agency was a turning point in John's magical career. Booking acts to a variety of corporations, he noticed that the shopping center industry based sales on every holiday they could think of. "I realized that was a way to make a living out of magic," he says. "If I could sell them a show for every season I could keep working." During the next two years he secretly designed concepts for bringing his own attractions to shopping centers as promotional events.

In 1982, he formed John Bundy Productions and began touring with magic

shows for shopping centers and malls. His company also packaged shows for amusement parks including Fantasy Island, Six Flags Great Adventure, Dorney, Worlds of Fun, and Riverside Park.

Often his shows had themes. *Toon Labs* featured over-sized cartoonish props and sight-gag magic. *Professor Nimbus Rainmaker* was a turn-of-the-century show centered on a rainmaking machine. Others included *Papa Gepetto's Magic Toy Shop*, *Magic Circus*, and the *Western Medicine Show*. John has also created shows with nautical, ragtime, sword and sorcery, and safari themes. In fact, he has over 30 different theme shows in his 2,500 square-foot storage facility that houses over 85 major stage illusions.

What makes these shows stand out from others is that they are character-driven theatrical productions. With make-up, wigs, costumes, and dialects,

John becomes someone completely different for each show. He is such a strong character actor that if you caught this "Lon Chaney of Magic" offstage, you probably wouldn't even recognize him. For his nautical show Bundy created an old sea captain, the type of figure you might see hanging around a fisherman's wharf. In *Toon Labs*, his character is the spitting-image of magician Abb Dickson — intentional or not, the resemblance is uncanny.

Set and prop design are also important. Every illusion is custom-built to fit in with the desired theatrical atmosphere. "What I always thought was lacking in magic shows was that nothing tied together," he explains. "I wanted to make everything blend thematically, in a natural setting. Unless you know a magic trick is coming, you don't expect it. We try to avoid the idea of *here comes a prop*."



The many performing characters of John Bundy. Top: a sea captain; an inventor of cartoon jokes and gags in Toon Labs. Bottom: Papa Gepetto in a magic toy shop; ringmastering a circus of fleas; and as himself... with an old friend.

John's success has necessitated duplicating his attractions to play in multiple theme parks and he has had shows with different casts playing in four different venues concurrently. Since Wacky Dracky is tied up with Worlds of Fun, John created a new host for the *Side Show of Horrors*. "Dr. Morbios," a southern gentleman who wears a fez, was influenced by Philip Morris of Morris Costumes, who played a similar character named Dr. Evil in his ghost and television shows in the '60s.

At Worlds of Fun, every season poses new challenges. This year, management asked Bundy to create a second, "more shocking," illusion show for older thrill-seekers. For these *Theatre de la Morte*-type performances, the magician utilizes gruesome illusions such as the Buzz Saw, which is a bit over the top for most amusement park crowds. Late-night

patrons will also witness the Table of Death, a Spirit Cabinet, Razor Blades from the Mouth, Broken Bottle Russian Roulette, and other surprises. Based on a theme of twisted tales, the illusions all have bizarre deviations from the norm. Interlude, for example, is based on the Dick and Jane reading primers. "See Dick. See Jane. See Dick cheat on Jane. Die, Dick, Die!" Then Jane bursts through Dick's torso, clutching his heart in her fist. "It's become a bit of a joke for us," John says. "Now they want us to do all the stuff they wouldn't allow us to do for 12 years." The show, dubbed *Slash* (a take-off on the Vegas show *Splash*), will be offered twice a night, after dark.

Spooktacular will also undergo some modest changes for the 2005 season. In previous years, the show ran 45 minutes. This year, management has requested it be

cut by ten minutes to give park patrons more time to see other events.

Starting September 23 and running through October 30, John, Morgan, and a cast of seven will do three performances of *Spooktacular* and two of *Slash*, daily, arriving just after noon and finishing a little before midnight. It's hard work making things go bump in the night. ♦

Mark Walker is the author of The Master Illusionists and Ghostmasters: The Trials & Triumphs of America's Midnight Showmen. Working full-time for Johns Hopkins Medicine, he performs his Punch & Judy act at birthday parties, festivals, and other events throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.

best show i ever saw
second

By McCarl Roberts



Dr. Neff's Madhouse of Mystery

IN 1952 HARRY BLACKSTONE, SR. WAS BOOKED FOR TEN DAYS AT THE HIPPODROME THEATRE IN BALTIMORE — 40 SHOWS TOTAL. I CUT CLASSES AT THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY AND SAW 37 OF THOSE PERFORMANCES; I DON'T KNOW WHY I MISSED THE OTHER THREE. THAT STILL IS MY FAVORITE MAGIC SHOW OF ALL TIME. BUT THERE WAS ANOTHER SHOW I'D SEEN A FEW YEARS EARLIER THAT WAS, IN MANY WAYS, EVEN MORE ALLURING AND FASCINATING.

For most of his life, Bill Neff lived in Indiana, Pennsylvania, a town where he first put on shows with a boyhood friend, Jimmy Stewart. Once, while they were doing a church benefit, Jack Gwynne, who was appearing at a local theater, came to the church to offer help. Gwynne and Neff remained friends. After college, Stewart went off to New York and Hollywood, while Neff took his show on the road.

Designed to emphasize the supernatural and the macabre, *Dr. Neff's Madhouse of Mystery* was a greatly under-rated theatrical experience. The magician was not a dynamic personality, nor was he good looking, but his show was extremely entertaining. I saw it at the Hippodrome in 1949 for the first time. He was booked for a week doing four 50-minute shows a day in conjunction with a motion picture — the typical vaudeville format. Silkini (Jack Baker), the most successful of all the Spook Show operators, did not carry a lot of equipment, but Bill Neff had a large illusion show. The show I saw was essentially the same one I described to Mark Walker for his book, *Ghostmasters*.

After a stirring overture, the curtain parted to reveal a mummy case. Dressed in Egyptian costumes, several assistants showed the cabinet empty. There was a puff of smoke inside the sarcophagus and then Neff appeared instantly. Wearing a full-dress suit and white gloves, the illusionist walked briskly towards the footlights.

While doing so, the magician removed his gloves and tossed them into the air, where they were transformed into two doves. As the birds flew about the theater, a series of livestock productions and vanishes immediately followed. The opening sequence was climaxed with a parasol trick.

One of Bill Neff's favorite apron effects was the Passe-Passe Bottle and Glass trick. Many ghosters copied the performer's comedy routine, even though it had nothing to do with a spook show. As a wizard, Neff learned the entertainment value of a whistle. In the Passe-Passe routine, he blew the whistle once to make bottle and glass change places, then blew it twice to make

them return. During this routine, Neff attempted to pour out a drink only to discover that his grandmother's false teeth magically appeared in the glass. Calling upon "the spirits of Martaca-do, Seagrams-7, and Four Roses too," the teeth vanished and the performer concluded his loony presentation. Theatergoers always laughed at this burlesque humor.

The feature attraction of *The Madhouse of Mystery* was a beautifully staged Burning Alive Illusion. In the program it was listed as "Suttee," and it actually was based on an ancient Indian religious practice whereby a Hindu widow was expected to sacrifice herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. In the presentation, a female assistant, wearing a chiffon costume, was hypnotized by the performer. As she rested on a slab, her arm suddenly fell off the board and dangled, whereupon the magician moved it back at her side.

The tray, which held the victim, was finally shoved into a coffin-like box, while Neff picked up a blazing torch and set the interior afire. When the lid was removed, the four sides of the box collapsed revealing a smoldering skeleton on an altar of fire. For a final touch, the skeleton's arm fell off the board and hung loose, as billowing green smoke and crimson flames leapt up around the charred remains. The audience sat there in bewilderment, as the curtains were slowly drawn shut.

Neff revived many effects that had become long forgotten. One such trick involved an Ice Pick, Foo Can, and Funnel. With the aid of an ice pick, the magician appeared to bore a small hole in the top of a youngster's head. Next, a glass of green liquid was emptied into a metal canister and then poured into the youngster's head. Another hole was bored into his chin.

Neff held a funnel and glass under the child's chin, while the other helper moved the volunteer's arm up and down like a pump handle. There was a rousing cheer from the audience as the liquid was extracted from the child's head and filled the glass. Before returning to their seats in the audience, each volunteer was handed a comic book by the performer in which



FILM STAR BELA LUGOSI (ABOVE, RIGHT) TOURED WITH THE NEFF SHOW DURING THE 1947 SEASON; THE FOO CAN/FUNNEL ROUTINE (FACING PAGE), COMPLETE WITH A REAL ICE PICK, WAS A MAINSTAY OF THE SHOW.



NEFF "STARRED" IN THREE DIFFERENT COMIC BOOK ADVENTURES.

he appeared as the star. Over the years Neff was featured in *Ghost Breakers*, *Racket Squad*, and *Red Dragon* comics.

It was a long held belief that the Galetia Illusion, otherwise known as the Frame of Life and Death, was a creation and trademark of the magician. Throughout his career Neff referred to the trick as "Graves Beyond the Galaxy." A volunteer from the audience was invited on stage to place her head inside a small cabinet, which rested upon a thin tabletop. The illusion slightly resembled a television set.

As several dials and levers were twirled, the stage dimmed, the lights inside the box began to glow, and gradually the girl's features began to wither. This action was continued until all that remained inside the enclosure was the bizarre image of a grinning skull. Removing the skull from the box, Neff carried it toward the footlights where it was exhibited for all to see. Finally, he replaced the skull inside the cabinet, where he converted it back into the living girl's head.

One of Neff's most prized effects was the Noma Illusion, an adaptation of the age-old blade box. It was created by his good friend Bob Sherms of Bridgeport, Connecticut, who at times assisted the magician with his spook cabinet routine. Since there was a heavy emphasis on the macabre in most of the *Madhouse of Mystery* skits, this playlet followed that tradition.

Brandishing a silver crucifix, Neff forced Dracula's daughter inside a large upright box, which he locked shut. As the magician thrust steel blades and swords into the cabinet at every conceivable angle, a loud throbbing heartbeat was heard throughout the auditorium. Several times during the act the illusion was turned completely around, providing ample proof to most skeptics that the subject had been truly impaled.

When the last blade was inserted, the heartbeat stopped. Following a dramatic pause, the blades were removed and the pulsating heartbeat sounded once again. As if by accident, the cabinet door swung open, and out rushed the lady vampire. With blood-seeking eyes, she bit the performer with her fangs, transforming Neff into the living dead.

Through his artful movements and imaginative dialogue, Neff subtly reminded viewers that spooks were constantly present. Most spectral practitioners failed to capitalize on this concept, which was a strong point for *The Madhouse of Mystery*. For instance, during the cutting and restoration of a mummy's shroud a monster's hand would appear through the house curtain above a youngster's head. Later on, a skeleton would pursue a screaming lady across the stage. Such theatrical touches added a mysterious and comic mood to the overall program.

The Spirit Cabinet had been a favorite of Bill Neff's since he first learned the routine from Punjab back in the late 1930's. It was included in practically every performance. Eight spectators were invited up on the stage to sit on chairs that were placed on both sides of a gray-colored cabinet resembling a mausoleum. Once the magician's hands were tied behind his back, he entered the spirit booth and the curtains were drawn shut by two female assistants dressed as devils. Immediately, bells would ring, and tambourines and whistles would sound from within the depths of the medium's cabinet.

During the routine, a gorilla would creep from the stage wings and try to grab one of the volunteers. For the finale, a spectator was asked to enter Gnome Man's Land. While the person made his way into the black-lined enclosure and the assistants began to draw the curtains shut, the volunteer's pants would shake. This comical touch drew a big laugh from most audiences. Just then an oversized skull could be seen emerging from the cabinet and the frightened subject would run from the spirit booth with his clothes in disarray.

Some spookers had to feature the dark

GROSS RECEIPTS

MCCARL ROBERTS CAME INTO POSSESSION OF A FINANCIAL REPORT FROM THE EVENING'S PERFORMANCE IN WHICH HIS WIFE PARTICIPATED:

DOOR RECEIPTS	\$1,481.00
LET'S SAY	1,500.00
LESS 20% FEDERAL TAX (300.00)	1,200.00
LESS THEATER OPERATIONS AND ADVERTISING (350.00)	850.00
50% THEATER	425.00
50% NEFF	425.00
50% NEFF SHOW	425.00
LESS SHOW OPERATING EXPENSES (50.00)	375.00
LESS 50% NEFF'S MANAGER (187.50)	\$187.50
50% NEFF	



A VOLUNTEER'S HEAD VISIBLY TRANSFORMED INTO A SKULL; BURNED ALIVE, PRESENTED AS "SUTTEE" (FACING PAGE), WAS THE FEATURE ATTRACTION OF THE MADHOUSE OF MYSTERY.



séance because these suitcase-style performers had little else to offer in the way of a real show. In contrast, Neff had a full arsenal of stage magic and illusions with which to sell his program, so the blackout was never overemphasized.

With a colored spotlight on the performer, Neff spoke of his experiences as a professional ghostmaster. All lights were then turned off and, in total darkness, a random group of customers experienced a shower of spiders and fireballs which descended upon them. Elsewhere in the theater, skeletons danced to the accompaniment of spooky music, while intangible forms, bats, and grasping hands were airborne. In short, Neff's

dark séance was enough to give anyone a bad case of the willies.

To conclude his ghostly entertainment, Neff wished everyone "pleasant nightmares," and then a horror motion picture started.

My favorite illusion of those described above was the very effective cremation illusion. I also enjoyed Neff's comedy, which was situational and plentiful. In the *Passé* *Passé* Bottles, he blew a whistle to make the bottle and glass change places. To this day I use a whistle to make the *Hippity Hop* Rabbits hop; influenced by the master.

Bill used a real ice pick in his *Ice Pick*, *Foo Can*, and *Funnel* routine. He would

drop it, sticking it in the wooden floor, then switch it for a fake. There was a small board on his table with a beveled hole in it, so that he could stick the fake ice pick into it.

With painted backdrops and special sets, Neff presented a show that put other ghost shows to shame. The bulk of his apparatus came from Abbott's in Colon, Michigan. For a number of summers he appeared at Abbott's *Magic Get-Together* and, while he was there, took the opportunity to have his show repaired, painted, and refurbished.

Film star Bela Lugosi, made famous by his role as Count Dracula, toured with the Neff show during the 1947 season. He proved difficult to work with, how-



PHOTOS: COURTESY WILLIAM KING, JR.

ever, due to a heroin addiction.

Neff returned to the Hippodrome in 1950, this time for one show only, at midnight. The house was half full and Neff was drunk. In his opening, when two ducks he produced got away, he chased them around the stage saying, "Quack, quack, quack, you S.O.B.s!" Although his assistants helped him make it through the show, Neff fell off the stage into the orchestra pit during the finale blackout. When the lights came on he was climbing out of the wreckage of the drum, his tails split up the back, and a truly dead ghost on the floor next to him! It was said that Bill Neff's Spook Show was one of the few that could play return engagements. Even intoxicated he was superior. Once, after I saw him perform

inebriated, I was asked how I liked the show. My reply was, "Neff is better drunk than most magicians are sober."

In 1952, Neff returned to Baltimore, traveling in a truck and one car, with two girls and one male assistant. The show was booked at the State Theatre on Monument Street, the F.H. Durkee chain's only vaudeville house. I was in college and my date for the show was Betty, who is now my wife. We were seated, waiting for the show to begin, when Vin Carey, operator of a Baltimore magic shop, came down the aisle. He told us that Neff was short one female assistant and asked if Betty would like to work the show. Sure enough, when the curtain rose, Betty was in a costume holding a gong. She appeared in two other spots including one *Hellzapoppin*-style

comedy moment when Neff fired a pistol and a duck fell from the sky. Later, she told me she was surprised to discover that the other two female assistants changed their costumes at the side of the stage — no time for dressing rooms.

Speaking of assistants, one of my favorite publicity photos from *The Madhouse of Mystery* shows Neff and eight female helpers. At one end of the line is Virginia Neff, his wife and at the other end, Evelyn Mack, his girlfriend. Neff later left his wife, and from then on he lived with Evelyn Mack. Evelyn became a desk clerk in a New York hotel, where she was provided a room in which she and Neff lived. He died in 1967 at age 61.

The Neff show emphasized the grotesque, the strange, and the weird. Neff said it was the "scariest, screwiest, and screamiest" show in the history of magic and the theater. I'm glad that I was there when audiences shivered with suspense, trembled with thrills, and shook with laughter. For me, it was the second best magic show I ever saw. ♦

McCarl Roberts is a United Methodist minister and former Executive Director of the Maryland Bible Society. For many years he served as business manager for the George Goebel Illusion Show.

Mark Walker's Ghostmasters excerpt courtesy of Philip Morris, Morris

IF YOU CAN'T BRING THE MOUNTAIN TO MOHAMMAD...

Circuit after circuit was convinced that the Neff show had sufficient merit to go into "A" houses for a full week, rather than a single-night engagement. Whereas other ghosters had to hit and get out of town that same evening, many exhibitors felt that the style and theater of Neff's show increased business the succeeding nights. Proof of this was the number of consecutive years he performed in our nation's finest movie or presentation houses and even legitimate theaters up through Canada. Neff was once booked for a solid week at the 3,750-seat Missouri Theater in St. Louis. He broke every existing house record and was held over for a second week. His number of return dates was an enviable one.

Advance ticket sales for Neff's show were so great that neighboring theaters were frequently called upon to handle overflow crowds. Since it was impossible to "bicycle" his show due to its size, the audience was moved instead of the show to keep customers happy and avoid a huge loss in sales.

This is how the system worked: As soon as the scheduled theater was full, they started a horror film. An announcement informed the mass of people standing outside to make their way down the street to another cinema — which could in fact be blocks away — to buy their tickets. This particular motion picture house delayed the begin-

ning of its program through the sale of concessions and by using fillers such as coming attractions, newsreels, and short subjects.

Feature presentations were on 18-minute metal reels and, as each roll of 35mm film was finished, an usher ran it down the street to the projectionist of the second cinema. This was repeated until the entire film had been transported from one auditorium to another. Just when the stage show started at the first theater, the movie started at the second house. Most midnight stage attractions lasted an hour or less, and therefore finished up well before the second cinema completed the fright picture.

Afterwards, a group of 2,000 or more people made their way back up the street for the stage show at the first cinema. During World War II this was a sight to behold, because people naturally thought there was an evacuation when they saw a mob walking down the street. Prior to the war and right afterwards, theaters were already doing all the business they could handle. Ghost shows were extra profits, and bicycling enabled them to have two box office grosses on the same night.

Reprinted from Mark Walker's Ghostmasters, courtesy of Philip Morris, Morris Costumes, Inc.