

THE

Those who impacted the art in America

CENTURY

We begin a year-long review of significant people on the American panorama of magic during the 100-year period known as the 20th century.

It is by no means a chronology of the successes, failures, or the evolution of the craft within this time frame. Instead, it is a month-to-month enumeration of those people who — in some eventful or consequential way — have influenced, shaped, or impacted the performing art of magic in the United States of America. Embodied will be the celebrities as well as the amateur, trailblazers and style-setters, teachers and artisans, the inventive, the literate, and the legendary, as well as an eccentric or two. Certain contemporaries have had insufficient years to assert their influence, therefore, they will not likely appear.

Each month, ten or so of magic's significant will be saluted. There will be no ranking of the file as each cadre proudly passes in review. As the year's end nears, and when the procession of 100 reaches its culmination, top honors and decorations will be bestowed. Our readers will be invited to select the *ne plus ultra* of those who most impacted the art in this century.

It has been written that the history of the 20th Century actually begins in the 1870s, with the advent of the Technological Revolution. If true, it's conceivable that *Modern Magic*, first published as a volume in 1876, is prologue to magic literature of the 1900s.

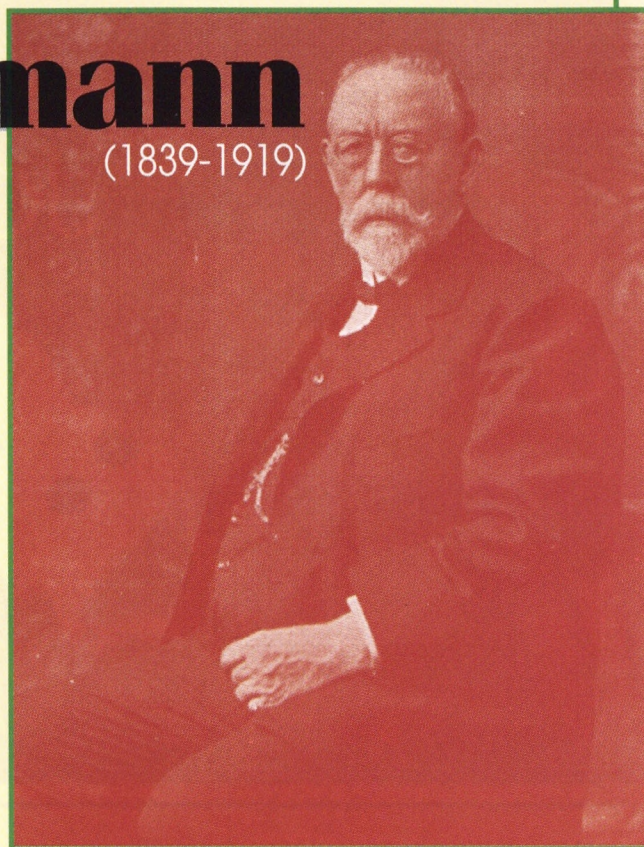
Professor Hoffmann

(1839-1919)

The first edition of 2,000 copies of *Modern Magic* sold out in Great Britain within six weeks. Its author, barrister and amateur magician Angelo John Lewis, with the adopted *nom be plume* of Professor Hoffmann, ceased the practice of law to write magic books. Undoubtedly influenced by the French works of Robert-Houdin and Ponsin, with about £100 worth of apparatus purchased for research from dealers, and the knowledge gained from magic lessons taken from Robert Hellis, Hoffmann created the tome his publisher subtitled *A Practical Treatise on the Art of Conjuring*.

The whole contents of *Modern Magic* originally appeared in part as a serialization in *Every Boy's Magazine*. These columns, filled with magic secrets and explicit illustrations, were perceived by conjurers of the period to be scandalous exposures. Yet, when the Magic Circle was formed in 1905, Hoffmann was offered the first presidency. The Professor declined and the honor was accepted by David Devant; however, Hoffmann very soon became an Honorary Vice President and one of the first Members of the Inner Magic Circle.

Modern Magic, *More Magic* (1890), and *Later Magic* (1902) comprised what was called the "Hoffmann trilogy." Yet, it was *Modern Magic* that became the classic to which many magicians — amateurs and professionals alike — would owe their start in magic. At the beginning of the century, a few who expressed an indebtedness to that first encyclopedic work by Professor Hoffmann were Harry Kellar, Charles Bertram, Horace Goldin, Harry Houdini, David Devant, and Howard Thurston.



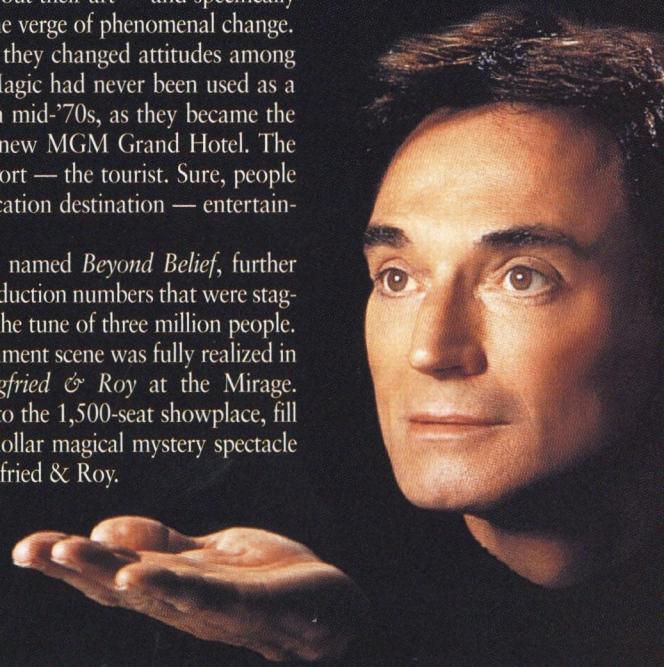
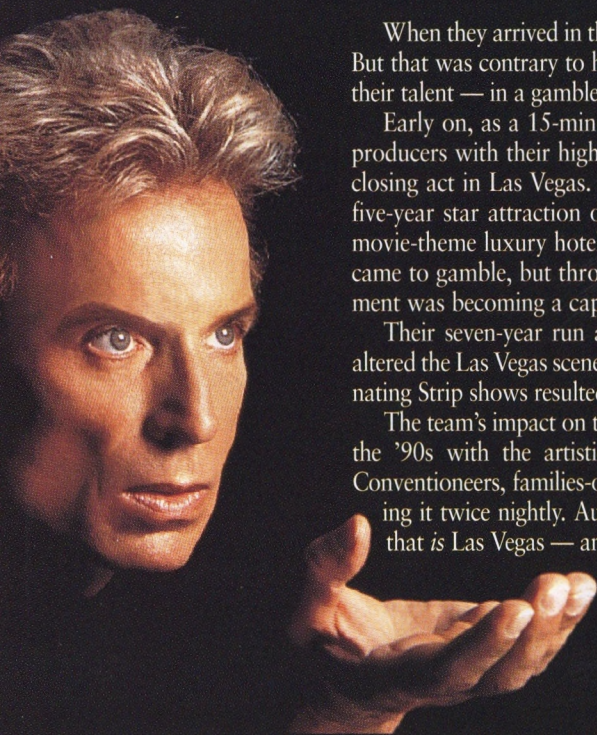
Siegfried & Roy

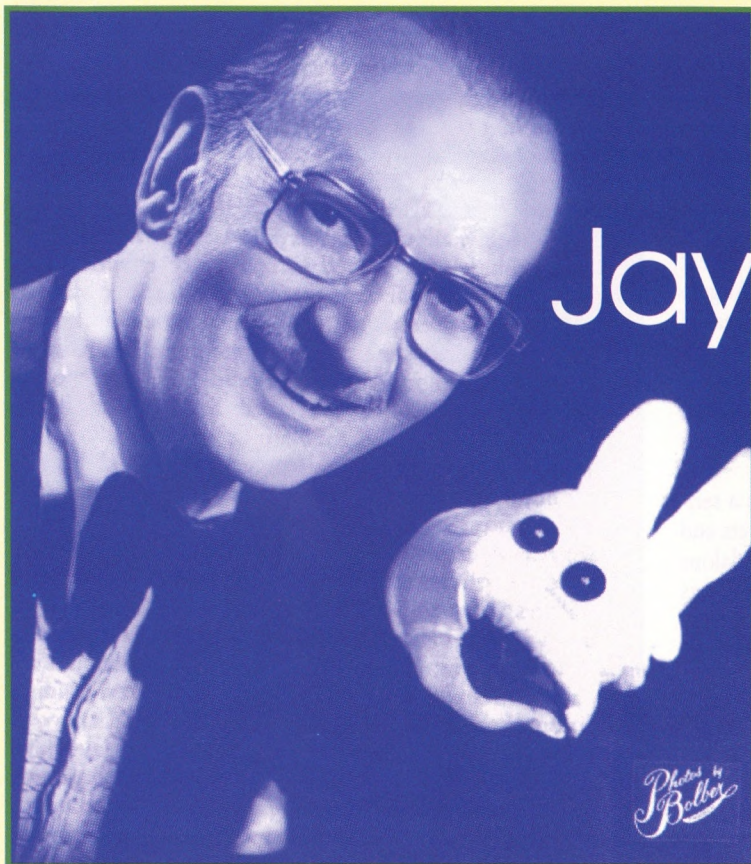
When they arrived in the '70s, they were flatly told, "Magic doesn't work in Las Vegas." But that was contrary to how the German-born duo felt about their art — and specifically their talent — in a gambler's town they perceived was on the verge of phenomenal change.

Early on, as a 15-minute specialty act at the Stardust, they changed attitudes among producers with their high-energy, innovative approach. Magic had never been used as a closing act in Las Vegas. Siegfried & Roy changed that in mid-'70s, as they became the five-year star attraction of *Hallelujah Hollywood* at the new MGM Grand Hotel. The movie-theme luxury hotel brought visitors of a different sort — the tourist. Sure, people came to gamble, but throngs were making the town a vacation destination — entertainment was becoming a capital thing.

Their seven-year run at the Frontier in the '80s, aptly named *Beyond Belief*, further altered the Las Vegas scene. Eliminating the glitzy, nudie production numbers that were stagnating Strip shows resulted in sell-out, family audiences to the tune of three million people.

The team's impact on the evolution of the city's entertainment scene was fully realized in the '90s with the artistic and financial triumph of *Siegfried & Roy* at the Mirage. Conventioneers, families-of-four, and jet-setters are drawn to the 1,500-seat showplace, filling it twice nightly. Audiences witness a multi-million-dollar magical mystery spectacle that *is* Las Vegas — and Las Vegas *is* quintessential Siegfried & Roy.





Jay Marshall

“My name is

one of the better...”

Most of us know the rest... not only the legendary opening line, but the entire act — and that includes each and every lyric of “If I Had My Way,” with all asides and belches thrown in by Lefty.

Over the years, Jay’s magic, much like his comedic timing, has been honed to the nth degree. Who else would you rather see perform the “Vanishing Cane,” “Serpentine Silk,” “Torn-and-Restored Newspaper,” or “Linking Rings”? Heck, he’s the one who made them “old favorites.” Pardon me, it’s time to stand. Seems that Jay has stopped another show.

“My fourth year at Yale was just as busy and successful in the field of magic as in sports. I was getting as much as \$100 a night with my act, and that gave me the capital for other ventures in magic.”

— page 83, *The Man Who Lives in Paradise*

A.C. Gilbert

(1884-1961)

He was giving magic lessons on campus and wanted to sell a box of simple tricks to his students. In 1907, A.C. Gilbert approached John Petrie, a mechanic who had built some apparatus for the Martinka Brothers to assemble a package of simple effects. Gilbert was most successful in selling it.

After graduation from Yale, and with a \$5,000 loan from his father, Gilbert, with Petrie as his partner, formed the Mysto Manufacturing Company in Westville, Connecticut. A.C. took to the road, marketing the line of Mysto Trick Boxes. Taking orders from toy buyers in department stores, Gilbert was carving his niche in the toy industry.

When Gilbert developed his Erector set, he needed more plant space to manufacture the new toy. Petrie’s only interest was in the magic, and by 1913 — in what was far from an amicable deal — Gilbert had bought him out.

In 1916, the year that Mysto sales went over \$1 million, the business name changed to the A.C. Gilbert Company. Chemistry sets and electric trains were on the horizon. But Gilbert himself continued to design Mysto Magic Sets, and over the next three decades, 96 different sets were marketed.

“Earn Money Giving Shows!” “Here’s Fun that Puts Dollars in Your Pockets” Advertising always emphasized that “learning magic was a youthful enterprise,” and sets included a poster to publicize shows and a fake mustache to lend professional authority to performers’ lips. If there was ever an American product in this century that was the sole inspiration for youngsters experiencing success as a magician, it was A.C. Gilbert’s Mysto Magic Set.



Circa 1911

"I take-a dee cigarette, and you watch-a me closely..."

Your eyes watched him slowly tear the cigarette in half.
Your ears heard him warn of each move that his fingers made.

"Come-a closer or you not-a gonna see..."

Your nose smelled frayed tobacco from the broken halves.

"Watch-a close. You not-a gonna believe..."

With a gentle rub of his graceful fingers, the shredded ends fused. The whole cigarette was mischievously tossed in front of you.

"Now, that's-a pretty good, heh?"

Dumbfounded, you nodded yes.



Slydini

(1901-1991)

Born Quintino Marucci in Poggia, Italy, Slydini was raised from childhood in Buenos Aires, thus greatly influenced by the culture of Latin America. Immigrating in 1930 to New York — as the Empire State Building was emerging on the skyline — he first played fairs and carnivals in flamboyant Spanish costumes as "Tony Foolem."

Not until he moved to Boston and became friends with Herman Hanson would Tony Slydini be recognized for his flawless close-up. He was the talk of every magic convention he appeared on. His mastery of sleight of hand was secondary to his skills of manipulating the minds of his audience. Slydini's understanding of misdirection was on a level few had seen before.

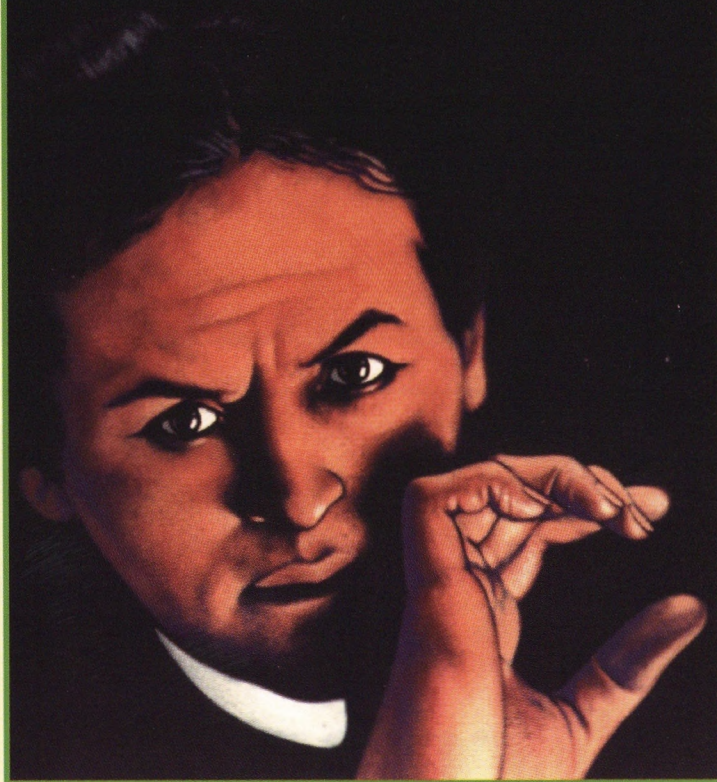
In 1947, Slydini moved to New York and spent four decades doing what he loved most — teaching his close-up magic. Example of a lesson was his "Coins Through the Table." Learning this routine, move by exact move, gesture for gesture, a serious student soon realized what made this magic beguiling was the misdirection — but more importantly, that innate misdirection of Slydini.

Chapter Nine: Houdini in 1916... "At this moment of middle-aged metamorphosis, Houdini found that his escapes had earned him a degree of fame beyond which celebrity, the adoration of the moment, passes into mythology, celebrity etheralized by historical memory."

— Kenneth Silverman

*Houdini!!! The Career of Ebrich Weiss:
American Self-Liberator, Europe's Eclipsing Sensation,
World's Handcuff King & Prison Breaker —
Nothing on Earth Can Hold Houdini a Prisoner!!!*

[As titled in the Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 1996]



"He made of showmanship a fine art, and he demonstrated its inestimable value not only to magicians but to the theater world. It is not too much to say that Houdini was the greatest showman America has known."

— John Mulholland
The Sphinx

Harry Houdini

(1884-1926)



Mark Wilson

Mark Wilson and wife Nani Darnell first traveled to California in 1958, the same year that New York's Dodgers and Giants relocated to the West Coast. And as baseball spread across the continent, it was television that truly popularized the sport as the national pastime.

When Mark arrived in Los Angeles to pitch a magic show for national television, he was armed with kinescopes of his locally-produced *Time For Magic* show and a station wagon full of presentation materials. But he couldn't get a foot in the door. He was told "magic won't work on TV," and it was suggested that he go back home to Texas. Instead, the determined SMU marketing major went in search of a sponsor. Persistence paid off — Kellogg's finally bought into Mark's pitch — and the next time he knocked on a door at CBS, they listened.

Mark Wilson's *The Magic Land of Allakazam*, which premiered October 1, 1960, became the first commercially sponsored magic series on any American network.

With this landmark program, Mark pioneered the methods for making magic a viable and salable form of entertainment for the tube. He established the ground rule that effective TV magic requires the presence of a live studio audience when videotaping. And he set a standard still used on today's magic specials — everything must be shot so that viewers at home believe that no trick photography is used.

Most importantly, at a time when an emerging electronic media had usurped some of the enchantment of our art, Mark Wilson caused magic to be popular again.

It was published by its author in 1902, as *Artifice, Ruse and Subterfuge at the Card Table: A Treatise on the Science and Art of Manipulating Cards*.

Thereafter, most of the subsequent, and perhaps countless, editions and reprints were titled *The Expert at the Card Table*.

Those who consider it a classic, simply call it...

Erdnase

With the partial-palindromic pseudonym of S.W. Erdnase, Milton Franklin Andrews wrote a slim volume that taught essential moves for cheating when gambling with cards, along with some legitimate deceptions of legerdemain (in this case, card tricks). Over the century, the book experienced minor influence as a handbook for the hustler. The most impact has been on the student of sleight of hand with cards.

The Expert at the Card Table is not so much a book about techniques, as it is an important work on the principles of deception with cards, with its emphasis on the motivation of every action, the attention to detail, the uncompromising stress for naturalness, and the psychology of uniformity-of-action. The book is frequently called "the cardman's bible." In the aptly titled *Revelations*, Dai Vernon's annotated version of Erdnase, The Professor writes: "Surely no one, before or since, has written as lucidly on the subject of card-table artifice."

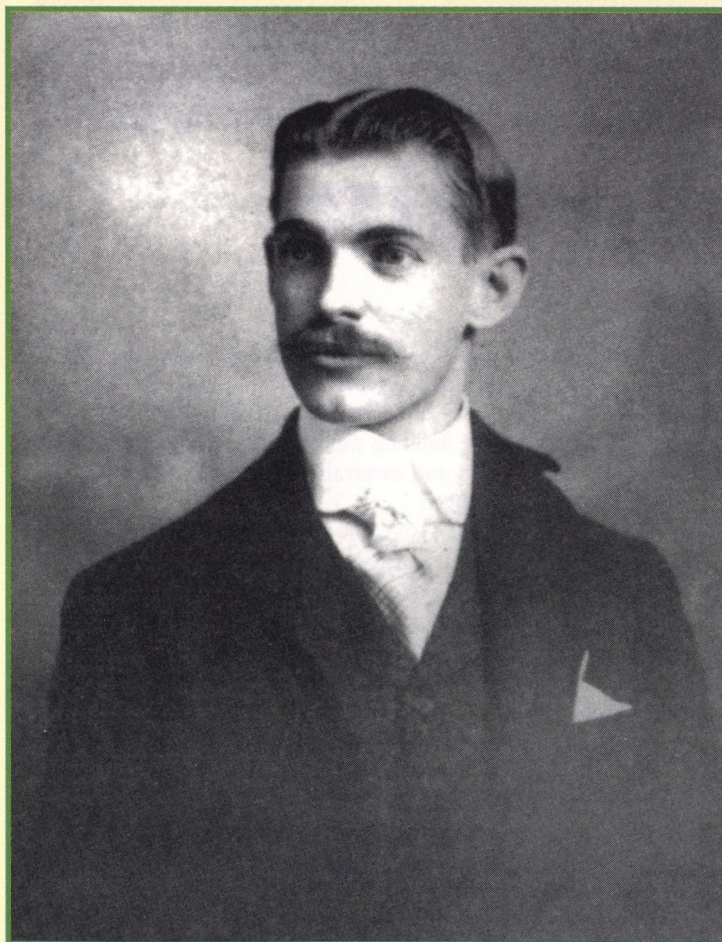


PHOTO: HOWARD FLINT COLLECTION

P.T. Selbit

(1879-1938)



PHOTOS: MIKE CAVENEY COLLECTION

Until Percy Thomas Tibbles changed his last name to Selbit and became an illusionist, women were never cut in half, impaled, stretched, crushed, or maltreated for theatrical purposes. Yet, at age 40, P.T. Selbit had created an illusion — the on-stage destruction of a woman — that was an overnight sensation. His idea was immediately copied, re-invented, improved upon, and, almost as quickly, exposed.

The first apparatus for the “Sawing” was built in Selbit’s London apartment in 1920, and it was premiered on a kitchen table in the home of magician-friend Fred Culpitt. A special performance at St. George’s Hall in London resulted in nine months of bookings covering Great Britain’s Moss Theatres. Eric Lewis and Peter Warlock, both of whom witnessed early performances of the “Sawing,” wrote in their book *P.T. Selbit: Magical Innovator* that the “Great Mutilation of Magician’s Assistants” began with this illusion.

Selbit brought his creation to the United States in 1921, the year after the the ammendment for women’s sufferage



was ratified. Horrified, Selbit discovered that Horace Goldin was already cutting women in half twice-daily on the stage of the Palace Theatre. Selbit sued, but lost when it was determined that Goldin’s method was different. With his legal victory, Goldin sent out five magicians with the illusion. Selbit countered with nine units of “Sawing,” two in England and others in France, Germany, South Africa, and Australia. Soon it appeared in the shows of Thurston, Dante, Servis Le Roy, and Raymond.

In the years that followed the “Sawing” rage, Selbit would go on to invent many new illusions, such as

“Destroying a Girl”; the “Elastic Girl,” later referred to as the “Stretching”; the “Human Pincushion,” precursor to the “Spiker”; and “Avoiding the Crush,” later popularized by Dante as “Crushing a Woman.”

However, “Sawing Through a Woman” is the illusion that is indelibly associated with P.T. Selbit. And just as pulling a rabbit out of a hat was metaphorical of the 19th Century conjuror, “Sawing Through a Woman” became symbolic of this century’s illusionist. ♦