

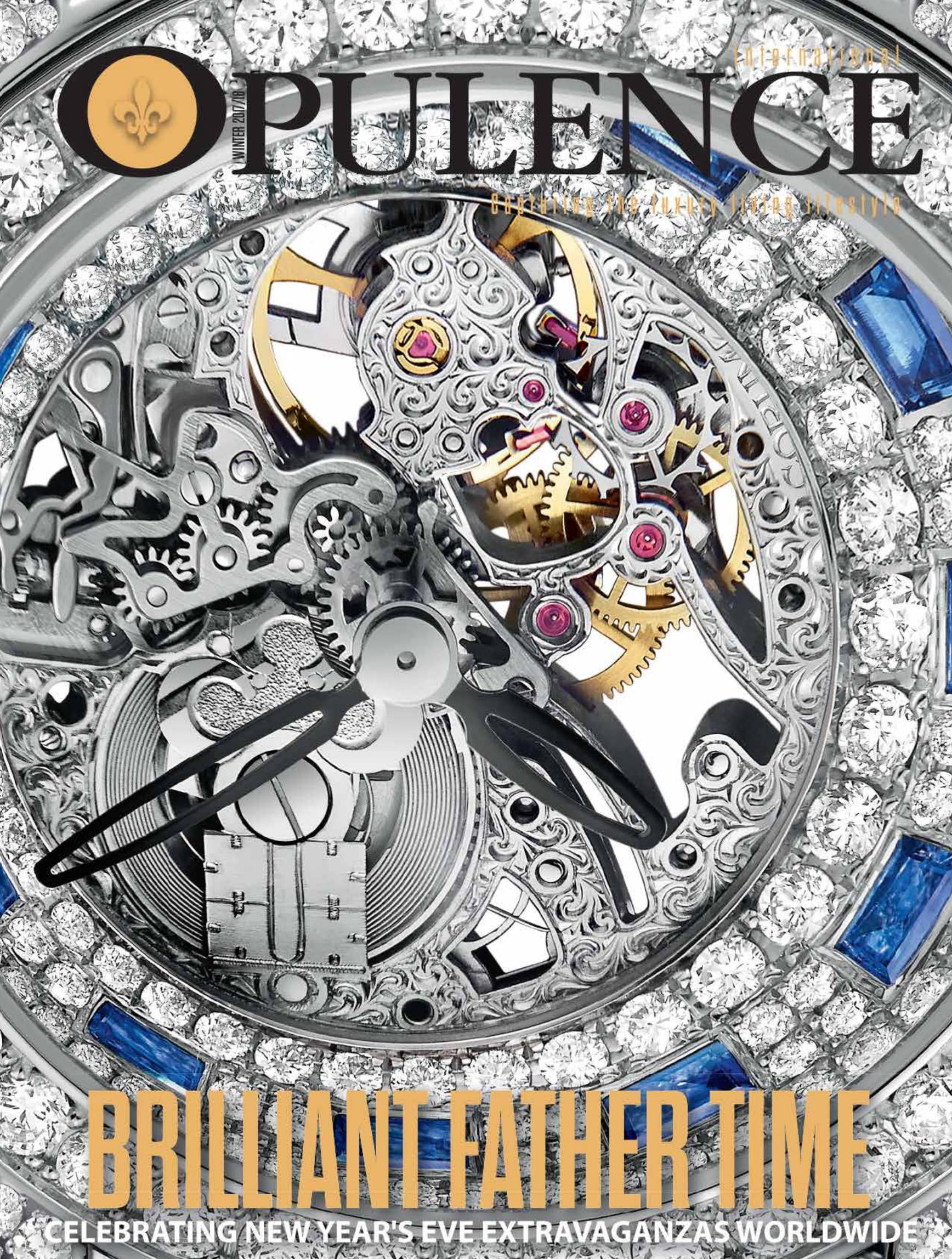


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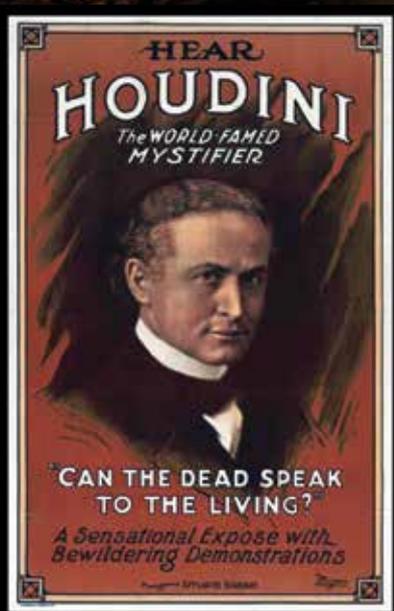


BRILLIANT FATHER TIME

CELEBRATING NEW YEAR'S EVE EXTRAVAGANZAS WORLDWIDE

The Houdini Séance

BY DALE KING & JULIA HEBERT



Perhaps more than any human being, master magician and escape artist extraordinaire Harry Houdini wanted to communicate with the dead. He even struck a pact with wife Beatrice "Bess" Houdini that whoever passed away first would desperately try to contact the other from the Great Beyond.

Harry died of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix on Halloween 1926. For 10 years, on the anniversary of his death, Bess conducted a séance on the roof of the Hollywood Knickerbocker Hotel, hoping to reach her late husband across the spiritual divide.

Sadly, her efforts went unanswered. But her decade of trying sparked a global tradition of holding séances annually on Halloween to determine if Houdini's spirit had outsmarted the Grim Reaper. Ceremonies known as Houdini Séances have kept the famed escapist's name and fame alive for nearly a century.

The Magic Castle in Hollywood, California, conducts several such séances each night, in a room appropriately called the Houdini Séance Chamber. Three mediums stand ready to take 10 to 12 visitors per show on a spiritual expedition.

Misty Lee, a medium, illusionist and voice actor, shares séance work with Leo Kostka, a Magic Castle stalwart for some 30 years, and magician/medium Rob Zabrecky. Misty says Leo is "very informative, a proper historian" while Rob is "kind of funny." Lee describes herself as "a little more intense."

Mystical ceremonies unfold in a room decorated in Victorian style that was once the bedroom of the home's original owner. "He died here," says Misty, amping up the chamber's goosebump factor. The space that strikingly resembles Sherlock Holmes' drawing room is also a repository of much Houdini memorabilia.

"My séance," she says, "is not about creeping people out as much as it is to give them an experience and making them wonder, 'Wait a minute. How could she have done that?'"

No proof exists, she says, that Harry Houdini ever contacted anyone from beyond the grave. But there also exists no proof that he DIDN'T. And thereby hangs the mysterious conundrum that bedevils Houdini-philes even today. ●





THE MECCA FOR MAGICIANS

The mystical and tantalizing history of the Academy of Magical Arts and its Victorian mansion venue in Hollywood, California: The Magic Castle

BY DALE KING, JULIA HEBERT AND ROBIN JAY

Was it an uncanny coincidence – or something more? At half past noon on Halloween 2011, some 120 firefighters descended upon the 103-year-old Victorian mansion at 7001 Franklin Avenue in Hollywood, California. The attic blaze was extinguished within an hour, no one was harmed, and investigators deemed it accidental. Nothing more to see here, right?

Maybe not, but ponder these facts that didn't make it into the police incident report: The date of the fire was the 85th anniversary of Harry Houdini's death. It was also the 75th anniversary of the last annual séance Houdini's wife Bess held on the roof of the Knickerbocker Hotel Hollywood in an attempt to reach her beloved late husband. And – ready for this? The mansion where the fire took place (located just a mile from The Knickerbocker) is known as 'The Magic Castle,' home to the Academy of Magical Arts, the only private club in the United States devoted to the advancement of magicians. Inside is tucked a room called the "Houdini Séance Chamber." The walls of this storied space display artifacts once owned by the legendary magician, including his famous straightjacket and the only pair of handcuffs from which he was never able to escape. Fittingly, the Houdini Chamber is used nightly for séance performances open to AMA members and their guests. On the very evening

of that notorious 2011 Halloween fire, the venue's annual gala – eerily entitled “Inferno At The Castle” – had to be canceled. Could this coincidental and intricate chain of events have been Houdini's long-anticipated communication from the Great Beyond?

MORE INTRIGUING ANTIQUITY OF THE MAGIC CASTLE

Certainly there is no scientific proof of Houdini communicating from the dead at The Magic Castle, but regardless, there's no question the mansion has a compelling history. The home was built in the early 1900s as residence to Rollin B. Lane, a banker, real estate developer and philanthropist, and his wife, Katherine. They called it “Holly Chateau.”

The couple died in the 1940s, and the home remained in the family until the 1950s when it was sold to land developer Tom Glover.

In the meantime, the idea of an Academy of Magical Arts was announced by William Larsen Sr. in the April 1952 issue of “Genii,” an independent magazine of magic, which he edited. “Larsen felt there should be an association for magicians to swap secrets and network,” said Joe Furlow, General Manager of The Magic Castle.

When the elder Larsen died a year later, his wife, Irene and son, Bill Jr., continued publishing the magazine. But the Academy didn't solidify until Larsen's younger son, Milt – a writer for Bob Barker's ‘Truth or Consequences’ TV show – leased and restored the Holly Chateau, which had fallen into ruin and was about to be torn down by Glover for a parking garage.

The refurbished turn-of-the-century structure reopened as The Magic Castle on January 2, 1963. From an initial membership of 50, the Academy has grown to a worldwide roster of 5,300 today.

Over the years, several additions have been added to the original edifice for theaters, bars, a library and meeting spaces. Local celebrities have also found the Castle a draw. Past AMA members include Cary Grant, Tony Curtis and Johnny Carson.

WHAT TO EXPECT

An evening at The Magic Castle can feel entertaining, mystical, supernatural and, of course, magical. “For professional prestidigitators, magicians-in-training and conjuror aficionados, The Magic Castle is their Ground Zero,” said Furlow. “We encourage public interest in magic, with particular emphasis on preserving its history as an art form, entertainment medium and hobby.”

The current president of the Academy of Magical Arts is Randy Sinnott, a former Marine and owner of an L.A. law firm. He has an MBA and is a magician to boot. “This is what the founders wanted — a place where hobbyists can sit down with professionals and have a conversation about magic,” Furlow continued.

Counting dining areas, performance spots and the Houdini Séance Chamber, the elegant structure with semi-circular parapets and plenty of hidden secret passages, holds 540 living people – and perhaps a few spirits – on any given night.

Guests must have an invitation from a member to get in. When visitors utter the words, “Open Sesame,” a bookcase moves aside, exposing a portal to the restored home's Victorian-style interior and vast expanses of historic posters, memorabilia and posh presentations.

TV host Johnny Carson, who dabbled in magic and created comic spiritualist ‘Carnac,’ was a frequenter who donated some of his trickster trinkets.

“One of our founding board members was Cary Grant, who agreed to participate with two conditions. No one would ask for an autograph and no one would ask for a photo. Those regulations still apply today, known as the Cary Grant rules,” Furlow said.

Actor Neil Patrick Harris served six years on the board of directors, three as president. He loved a drink called the Old Fashioned, and the club honored him by offering the beverage and naming it the NPH. Other A-list guests have included Johnny Depp (who entered through the kitchen), Steve Martin, Arsenio Hall and, recently, singer Adele, whose presence caused a ruckus, despite an advance security sweep.

DARING ENOUGH TO JOIN?

Who knows? If you choose to become a member of the Academy of Magical Arts or convince a member to invite you to The Magic Castle for dinner and a show, don't be surprised if a sleight-of-hand celebrity magician drops by your table and says: “Pick a card, any card.”

The Academy of Magical Arts is currently keeping a waiting list for anyone interested in joining the club as an Associate Member. The wait on the list is currently about four months. To be added to the wait list, contact the AMA's Membership Department at member-services@magiccastle.com. Please provide your name, email address and phone number when inquiring. ●

