

# 500 YEARS OF MAGIC \*\* IN A \*\* 16 POUND \*\* \*\* \*\* BOOK

BY ALAN HOWARD

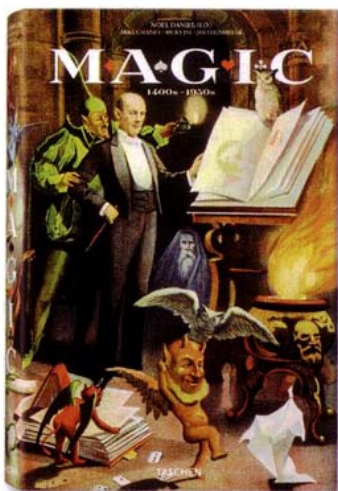
Last year, circus fans reveled in the publication of a new pictorial history of their favorite spectacle. That book, *The Circus, 1870 – 1950*, provided readers with a look at circus treasures rarely viewed, and largely unseen by the public at all — posters, playbills, and photos, reproduced in glorious color, often filling the entire page and sometimes even spilling over onto fold-outs. Approximately 11 x 17 inches, the hardcover book came packaged in a special cardboard box with a plastic handle — that was the easiest way to carry the book, since it weighed *sixteen pounds*. Published by the German-based Taschen company, *The Circus* lived up to the old joke of a coffee table book being the size of a coffee table.

The driving force behind *The Circus* was editor Noel Daniel, who next turned her attention to the world of theatrical conjuring. *Magic, 1400s – 1950s*, is an equally massive illustrated tome, set for publication on November 1.

“I came up with the idea to do *Magic* while I was doing the circus book,” Daniel says. While doing research in archives across the US, she kept seeing magicians “in the periphery.” They rarely appeared in the circus ring during the pre-

1950s period she was studying, but were seen occasionally in sideshow banners or photos.

“It piqued my interest,” she says. “I thought, *Wait a minute, who are these guys?*”



It was while delving through the massive files at the Library of Congress that Noel really realized that magic was “a special topic” she needed to pursue in book form. She received uncommon permission from the curators to examine circus artifacts in the back rooms that the public rarely gets to visit. “The magic repositories in those collections are right next to the circus ones, so I had a chance look through them as well. In my mind, it was one of those *eureka* moments. *I don't know what this is, but it is really inspiring!* It really struck a chord with me.”

She was drawn to the subject because of concepts she wished to explore, and *Magic* led her down a path to those explorations. The history of performance attracts her by the way in which individuals create their own shows, and mold their own personas, against all odds. Noel finds this especially true in magic history: “The way in which people followed their own instincts, and maybe were looked down on or criticized

or perhaps even deemed a threat to religion.” Yet they continued against those odds in their quest to become great entertainers.

“That is the story of what it means to be an individual,” Daniel feels. “These people traveled with literally tons of equipment to all corners of the earth to drum up enough of an audience to make a living. It’s quite a rigorous history of what an individual can do. That drive inspires me.”

When she saw the extraordinary imagery of magicians’ posters, she was spurred to learn more about the creative minds and personalities behind those fantastical scenes and effects. Returning home to Los Angeles, Noel pitched the idea of a magic book to her publisher, Benedikt Taschen. He green-lighted the project, once she finished the *Circus* book, and gave her an unusual amount of freedom to pursue it as she thought best. But there were limitations: she had to stick to an assigned budget and complete the massive project in just fourteen months.

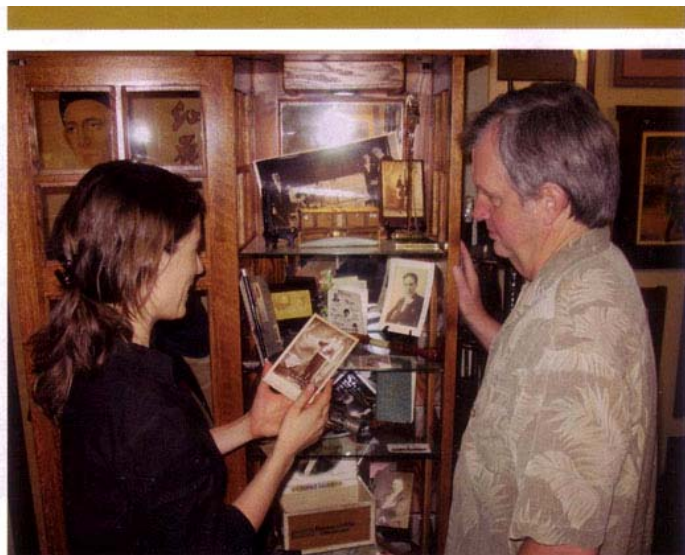
Having spent two-and-a-half years on *Circus*, Noel had a good idea what she would be in for. “Oh, my gosh,” she now laughs. “This is where I get pangs of post-traumatic stress disorder!” *Magic* had to be done in half the time and would tap nearly twice as many sources for information and images. “In the circus book, we covered basically eighty years of history. *Magic* is a far more complex subject with a longer history; we covered 500 years, we used 200 more images in it, and overall it’s much more ambitious.” The book consumed every moment of her time for more than a year. “It becomes your life,” she admits.

A book such as this became feasible largely because Noel Daniel is in the unusual position of being “a one-man show” as its editor, deeply involved in and approving all aspects of the book-making process. Managing a select core of people, such as contributing writers, a designer (her husband, Andy Disl), translators, a copy editor, and a proofreader, Noel does the text editing and the picture research, the contracting and financials, and is also heavily involved in the art direction, design, and layout. The day-to-day operations of putting together this massive project required working with over 125 outside people along the way.

The first magician Noel approached about working on the book was Mike Caveney, back in 2007. As a performer, historian, collector, writer, and publisher himself, Mike provided an invaluable resource. They discussed the idea several times, and when the Taschen deal came together the next year, Mike gave permission for his Egyptian Hall collection to be used. Mike also recommended Jim Steinmeyer for the project and the trio began to meet frequently to workshop ideas and specifics for the book. Noel says that from the beginning she was also in conversation with Ricky Jay, who wrote the introduction to *Magic*.

Noel recalls, “My first meeting with Jim and Mike together, knowing that we would be doing this book as a team, was in April 2008. I approached them with ideas of what I, as a layperson, thought would make a great magic book. Obviously, I am not a magic historian; I am a book editor. What I bring to the project is an understanding of what I think readers are interested in and a sensitivity to how to pull together this kind of project. I would present to them ideas that I thought would be interesting, and we would workshop it together. They would give me their feedback and suggest areas we could expand on, and what they were interested in themselves. It really was a wonderful coming together of three different perspectives. The book is a materialization of each of our interpretations of the subject.” Steinmeyer and Caveney wrote the essays for each chapter as well as the extensive captions for each of the images, which really form the bulk of the text in the book.

There is a big difference between a *text* history and an *illustrated* history, especially one that is trying to unify over sixty different collections between its covers. “I had to think through what



Noel Daniel and Mike Caveney examine items from Egyptian Hall. Noel helps Ken Klosterman and Sean Owens unfurl a sideshow banner.

was possible, where I could get the images, and how we could expand magic history to appeal to a general readership that maybe has no idea about magic and won’t understand the technical terms when they open the book. I really appreciate that Jim and Mike worked with me on framing magic for an uninitiated audience.”

Daniel began to contact different collectors. Once they heard about the scope of the project and the uniqueness of bringing together all of this material, people were usually supportive. Seeing how the *Circus* book turned out helped them to understand how she would treat their images and how the images would live on the pages.

Immersing herself in research, Noel returned to a few of the collections she had recently visited for the circus project, this time to examine all of the magic material. The curator of the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, told her she was the first person to ever look through every single magic poster and engraving they had. Noel spent five days there, searching through the entire collection. Different archives have their own guidelines as to the accessibility of their collections. At the Ransom Center, Noel was not allowed to handle the items herself. She had to be accompanied by the curator, who would gingerly pick up each of the many artifacts for her study. It made for a lengthy procedure, but the curator withstood the process, and Noel saw everything. And she recorded much of it.



Photographers Phillip Schlegel and Ryan Galloway digitally capture a Raymond poster in Ken Klosterman's Salon de Magie, checked onsite on their computer. [Bottom] The photographers pose with George Daily amid his posters and their specialized lighting equipment.

In the preliminary phase of selecting images to go in the book, Noel made low-resolution photos of the items she found intriguing. *Magic* reproduces images from more than sixty different archives from around the world. After personally visiting 22 separate collections in the US and Europe, she had over 20,000 low-res images in total to choose from, showing posters, broadsides, playbills, photos, cabinet cards, banners, engravings, and more. Taking these low-res digital pictures back to her office, she later culled through them and used those files to piece together the visual history of magic. Ultimately, approximately 1,200 of the images she uncovered would make it into the final book.

Traveling to Paris, she met with Christian Fechner and gained full access to his collection, making three separate trips there. The first was in June of 2008, when she saw hundreds of artifacts and made her photographic notes. The next time she returned, Daniel took several days to pull out the items she wanted from Fechner's archives. She was able to borrow about 200 original photos and paper ephemera, which she hand-carried to the Taschen headquarters in Cologne, so they could be exactly scanned. "He, his wife, and his team of George Proust, Didier Morax, and Pierre Mayer, were extremely generous in trusting me," she recalls, but says it took nerves of steel for her to travel with a suitcase filled with \$100,000 worth of magic collectibles. She carried it by hand for the whole trip, not even putting it up above her seat on the train between Paris and Cologne. She slept with the case under her bed, and while Noel did not go so far as the movie cliché of handcuffing the valise to her wrist, she did wrap a piece of fabric around both her hand and the case. "It was a very dramatic time, keeping this in my possession," says Noel, and quite a relief when she and all the items returned safely to Paris, where she spent a couple of days filing the items back into Fechner's archives.

Having sifted through the preliminary shots she had gathered in her five-and-a-half months of travels, Noel contacted the collectors and asked them to pull out the images she was interested in using. She then sent out a two-man team of photographers to take museum-quality high-resolution pictures of the selections at private collections where she had selected a large number of images for the book. An additional photographer was dispatched from London to do the high-res images in collections in Europe and the UK. Sixty percent of the images that ended up in *Magic* were done this way; the remaining forty percent were photographed or scanned from images that Noel received or hand-delivered to the Taschen facilities, or that had been sent in as transparencies made from items in public collections, where an outside photographer would not be admitted.

"When you do a book, you try to get all the originals in-house, but with the size of these posters, that was impossible," Daniel says. "Sending out photographers and having them go into George Daily's home and photograph his three-sheet Houdini poster on the wall — that was a big process. The photographers also recorded the smaller items in the collections they visited; they photographed everything. In some cases, they would have to photograph an object in three or four different frames and then digitally combine the images, because the posters were so big."

Especially important for books that are primarily composed of illustrations is the image-proofing stage. Digital images are worked with to approximate as closely as possible the color of the original when printed. They are carefully cleaned up, but not necessarily so they look brand new. "Many of these artifacts show wear and tear, and it's important not to correct them too much. You don't want to erase the patina of history." Only blemishes that would be distracting to the viewer — water damage, torn or creased paper — were digitally repaired.

Even in high-resolution scans, not all of the images were up to the standards of Taschen, an art publishing house. "You can't

reproduce any image at any size you want. It depends on the size of the original and the quality of the scan. We have to test them, have to make sure they can be reproduced at the size that the designer and I chose for them in the layout," Noel says. "And sometimes you can't do it because of excess pixilation; you have to reduce the size, and that affects the whole design of the page. And maybe you have to lose or add an image. It's a very complex craft to work with these limitations while also trying to accurately present the narrative history of the subject."

She likens the creation of a book such as *Magic* to putting together a museum show; the size and scope of the project and the number of images becomes very much like a curated exhibition. "It's something between a book and an exhibition, where it becomes an experience all its own."

"Part of my job is to be able to midwife this kind of project into a realistic book. It's about making the best possible book you can, in real time and real space. I had a budget that I absolutely could not go over, to cover productions, images, rights and permissions, my travel — all of it. I constantly had to weigh up how much I was spending. I was pinching pennies at every turn, staying with friends where possible or in cheapo hotels, and eating ramen noodles in my hotel room. If I had stayed in fancy places and wanted to eat well every night, I would have seen maybe seven archives, but if I wanted to see 22 archives, it was up to me to make that happen by looking for the best deals, getting the cheapest rental cars and flights, the whole thing. It's just a very large production to make it work."

It wasn't easy. But in the end, she was able to get every image that she wanted for the book.

While the main emphasis of the book is on Europe and America, it is an international history. Daniel tried to be sensitive to the influences of the rest of the world. To further rein in the scope of the tome, parameters had to be established. The 1400s seemed to Daniel like a logical starting point, because there was "a slew of magical imagery that emerged in the 15th century." She was able to include one of the earliest known pieces, Joseph von Ulm's depiction of the Cups & Balls from 1404, and is proud of getting that in color from Tübingen University in Germany. "It seemed like a very strong starting point, looking at the way in which the Cups & Balls was beginning to figure in a lot of late-medieval and early-Renaissance manuscripts." Daniel also notes, "There's not a lot that you can show earlier than that."

As for choosing the point to conclude the book, the 1950s seemed to be a logical break, because of the ascension of television. "I felt that, visually, it was a natural place to end. Performing venues changed quite a lot with television; there was a period of regrouping within the magic community, assessing where best to perform, how best to perform, what to perform. And in consultation with Mike and Jim, we agreed that seemed like an appropriate place to stop."

One thing that really struck Daniel was the way in which these artifacts have been preserved. "I was struck by the kind of home museum that exists in the magic community, and how people have museum-worthy artifacts hanging on their wall. It's incredible. The images are so fragile; I've seen what a poster from 1904 looks like

folded up, not backed on linen and not cleaned, with the rips and the tears. So, the very fact that we can open this book and turn to a Thurston poster in pristine condition is a tribute to the real grit and stamina it takes to be a magic collector."

For Noel, creating the book as a physical entity was an important part of preserving this history. While many people nowadays think that whatever they want can be gleaned from a few quick Internet searches, Noel points out, "With most of the images in this book, you can't do that; they've never been seen by the general public." She wants the book to be a reminder that "there is life beyond electronic media, and just because we can't Google it, doesn't mean that it's not something that's book-worthy and important for us to know."

She refers to *Magic* as "the hardest book I've ever done in my life," yet Noel feels she has learned some wonderful things in the process. One pleasant surprise for her was the diversity of the magic community. "I thought that magicians and magic collectors would be of a type, and I don't think that that's true. They're a wonderful mixture of different types, but there is a unifying love of magic. And I learned a lot from that, personally. One of the things that kept driving me to do this book was that personal journey I was on, in relationship to the people I was working with. What was really special to me was the love that these people share for their subjects — the genuine passion and dedication to their interest. That's something that everyone, across the board, can learn from: that magic unifies, and it brings together a very diverse group of people, not only amongst collectors, but in audiences, and in readers as well. It speaks to people on a very human level, and that was very interesting for me to see."



"I have a tremendous amount of respect for anyone who cultivates a genuine interest and a love of a subject. Every single artifact in this book, someone has held it in their hands — whether it's a photograph, an engraving, a poster, or what have you — and said, 'This speaks to me; I need to save this for posterity.' The creativity behind a poster or behind an engraving, a trade card, a well-composed photo — all of that can be considered the best of human creativity. This is what drives me to do these kinds of books, to delve into a community and its subject matter, and become steeped in that subject and try to create something that celebrates the instinct in all of us to treasure what others have done before us."

Daniel believes that the instinct to preserve what one knows and share it with an unknown future informs a lot of what *Magic* is about: "Representing this history to a new generation, to gather it for posterity so it will never be lost. It's a very inspiring process, and I really believe in that very strongly."

"These are little, small steps," she confesses. "This is one thing I can do, and it gives meaning to my life. I guess we all try to find meaning in what we do." ■

*Edited by Noel Daniel, with an introduction by Ricky Jay and essays and captions by Mike Caveney and Jim Steinmeyer, Magic, 1400s – 1950s is published by Taschen and will be released on November 1. Available at bookstores everywhere and via the web.*