

Abracadabra

Five centuries of magic pulled out of one handsome and erudite volume



Magic

1400s-1950s

Ed: Noel Daniel with Ricky Jay,
Jim Steinmeyer and Mike Caveney

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Magic is a feast from the high table of “magic’s visual culture”, full of amazing images of magicians commanding devils and imps, witches and ghosts amid flurries of body parts and flying objects that presumably indicate poltergeist activity as they advertise levitation, sawing in half, capturing a bullet, or vanishing an assistant from a cabinet of swords...

The contributors are erudite historians of their subject, and their nine essays cover the creation of wonder by what today we call PR; the antiquity of three-card trick or cup and balls; the great magicians and their rivalries; the famous touring shows; magic in vaudeville and nightclubs; tricks involving chains, bullets, blades and fire; and, of greater interest to fort-eans, two chapters on magicians’ annexation of popular lore about black magic, spiritualism and the supernatural.

Innovating magicians not only scoured exotic cultures for their tricks, they adopted the personæ and styles of Indian, Egyptian or

Chinese masters of mystery. They adapted discoveries in electricity, and the mythology of hypnotism and animal magnetism. The new-fangled séance was taken over with its disembodied voices, raps and explosions, floating luminous objects, tilting tables and mediums secured inside cabinets. They pretended to “consort with the devil” and, at the same time, “bend the laws of nature”, cultivating a demonic appearance and using pseudo-scientific terms.

Ricky Jay admires them for their pioneering curiosity, technical virtuosity, inventiveness and physical skill. They had “a hustler’s control of the cards, a thief’s understanding of locks, a physicist’s command of the elements”, allowing them to “throw their voices, resist poison, defy gravity and read your thoughts”. For Daniel, they are the pioneers of special effects. Georges Méliès, in the late 19th century, translated his illusions to the new medium of film, creating many of the techniques (including stop motion, models, time-lapse and multiple exposures) that filmmakers still employ today.

More than 1,000 posters, photos, bills and ephemera covering over 500 years of performance magic are seen together for the first time outside the collections of the authors, their colleagues and specialist museums. At 8kg (18lb) and measuring 30 by 45cm (18in), this must be the mother of all coffee table books...

Otto Minyak

Fortean Times Verdict

YOU WON'T WANT TO LET THIS
BEAUTY OUT OF YOUR SIGHT...

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