



Houdini's Inescapable Influence

By Peter Goddard

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One can understand why TV fans of a certain age might think — hope, even — that *The Cape*, a new NBC series premiering Jan. 9 might be about a magician. Once upon a time the caped swirling magician with mysterious powers of prestidigitation and escapology made for a rare superhero: a living one.

We learn instead that NBC's is about a caped crusader, a comic-based character; we should have known. TV killed the magician long ago. It didn't give away the tricks as much as it conjured up bigger and better magic of its own design. Today's few famous magicians — David Copperfield, James Randi or David Blaine — maintain their high profiles despite TV. They're wonderful curiosities from another era, like pilots of hot air balloons.

Then there's Harry Houdini whose reputation is very much alive among today's magicians such as Penn and Teller and with contemporary artists such as Americans Matthew Barney and Raymond Pettibon and Brazilian Vik Muniz.

At the Jewish Museum, on Fifth Avenue in New York, Houdini's extraordinary impact on his times and ours is chronicled in "Houdini: Art and Magic," a modest show with broad ambitions that strives, not entirely convincingly, to frame Houdini's hold on the contemporary artistic imagination.

The exhibition curated by Brooke Kamin Rapaport also places Houdini's career — and those of other magicians and early show business stars — at the heart of the U.S. Jewish immigrant experience in the early 20th century. Just count the number of show business giants who were, like Houdini, the sons of rabbis or cantors, starting with Al Jolson, George Gershwin and Irving Berlin.

Magicians see Houdini, who died in 1926, as a role model for the magic business more than for his sleight of hand mastery. Penn and Teller's shtick of slowly divulging the trick while being up to their ears in increasing real danger — a bit shown in a video loop — is classic Houdini.



Houdini in chains (for now), as seen at the Jewish Museum.

Yet for all his love of tricks and trickery, Houdini loathed charlatan spiritualists, table knockers and conduits for fairies from the great beyond (although he and wife Bess fell back on spiritualist tricks when they were hard up). Houdini's debunking reached new heights in the early 1920s when he suggested that Lady Conan Doyle, the spiritualist wife of the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was in fact a fraud. (Lady Doyle had used the sign of the cross to channel the magician's "sainted mother" — who was, of course, Jewish.)

To contemporary artists Houdini is a muse and a font of visual culture, from his many posters to the familiar movie character of "the magician." To them, Erich Weiss — Houdini's name at birth in 1874 in Budapest — is also precursor to today's performance artist from Paul McCarthy to Marina Abramovic and the others who take bloodletting risks.

Barney's installation, *The Erich Weiss Suite* — a sealed-off room in the show where a number of strutting Jacobin pigeons preen, fight and poop on a replica of Houdini's coffin — encapsulates the theatrical potential inherent in the death wish, as Houdini did himself. Dying was always central to Houdini's highly publicized con jobs. Norman Mailer gets to ham it up thoroughly while recreating Houdini's riveting stage presence in a clip from *Barney's Cremaster 2* clip.

Pettibon's fluid drawings channel the morose outsider in Houdini, the existential loner despite enormous fame and success. "With each fading breath he (Houdini) vomited up another skeleton key," reads the letters above the darkened outline of a tortured face. (The California artist is recalling the "needle threading" trick — one of many Houdini borrowed from other magicians — where the performer seemingly swallows a pack of needles only to pull them out tied together by thread that was also swallowed.)

"Today's magicians and magic scholars point out that Houdini was not revered for typical stage magic," notes Kamin Rapaport. "Rather, Houdini catapulted to fame as an audacious escape artist." She continues: "His liberation from an immigrant past into celebrity culture resulted in his choice of everyday objects as stage apparatus."

Indeed, the vintage object in the show of some 163 items — mostly heavy and clunky like an outsized milk can, things untouched by technology — further the exhibition's narrative far better than do the various vintage newsreels and film clips as Tony Curtis staring in *Houdini*, the 1953 George Marshall biography. Magic works best the more real things seem to get in its way.

Houdini's famous Metamorphosis Trunk was the key prop in the trick that established his reputation. On loan for the museum show from the Fantasma Magic Shop in New York, the trunk once facilitated the famous body-switching illusion where, in a matter of seconds, Houdini and an assistant — most often the diminutive Bess — would change places, her ending up inside the trunk while he was outside and unencumbered. (Bess Houdini is perhaps the most under-studied figure in American show business. If nothing else, she kept him from going off the deep end in his adoration of his mother.)

Then there are the handcuffs, rows and rows of them, particularly hugely heavy ones, ideal for weighing down Houdini to make underwater escapes happen all the more rapidly. There are sinuous cuffs, crude ones and ones that look nasty and lethal. Growing up in Appleton, Wis., Houdini worked in a locksmith's shop and for pleasure, so legend has it, would go up and down the empty main street reopening the doors of the shops.

Like any great visual artist, Houdini's real genius was reading the temper of the times and finding the means to crystallize it. He used magic's illusions and its paraphernalia to explore the needs of his audience.

Relations between audience and performer were highly formalized when Houdini first began performing in the 1890s. But the influx of so much new media — radio, movies, mass circulation newspaper and photo magazines — brought a new intimacy and immediacy to show business. Houdini understood this better than most. He often had himself dangled upside down in a straitjacket high above the street but in proximity to newspaper office so his death-defying picture could make the late edition. (One TV monitor in "Art and Magic" shows a digital video of Sara Greenberger Rafferty's *De/Feat* (2005), the American performance artist's feminist riff on Houdini's escape.)

The new media at the beginning of the 20th-century level the playing field, allowing all the weirdoes, the fringe crazies and knockdown funny people from far away places — many parallels can be found between the Marx brothers and Houdini and his family — into the centre ring of show business.

Nevertheless Houdini's popularity and cash flow baffled his contemporaries and rivals. A few rival magicians felt he bullied his audiences where he should have seduced them, as was their practice. Houdini once drove reigning world heavyweight champion Jess Willard right out of an auditorium because the champ wouldn't go along with an illusion. This "decision" over Willard, he said, "makes me the Newspaper Champion of the World."

He had to seem bigger than life. Houdini became "one of those little men — physically small, metaphorically powerless — who were to dominate popular entertainment," writes Ruth Brandon in her book *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini*, which covers much of the same territory as "Houdini: Art and Magic."

"Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse had their distinctive ways of triumphing over authority. Houdini did do in the most direct way it is possible to imagine — by literally breaking free of his shackles."

"Houdini: Art and Magic" is at the Jewish Museum until March 27.

Peter Goddard is a freelance writer. He can be reached at peter_g1@sympatico.ca