

# ORGAN-IZING A MAGIC SHOW

by Harold R. Richman

The organ as an instrument of music is not only renowned for its forcefulness in setting the mood for worship, but as we know it, also a capricious side in setting the mood of an audience. In addition to its invaluable contribution in orchestrating the silent film, the classical organ, reconstructed as an orchestral instrument for the theatre, radio and television, remains to this day a major component in supporting a live performance. In some forms of entertainment the organ is instrumental not only in lending life and structure to the performance but, as in a religious setting, establishes or guides the emotions and mood of the audience. In this connection is the unique ability and role of the theatre organ to enhance as it controls or shapes moods, adding spice to live entertainment. Its quality depends not only on the scope and credentials of the instrument, but also on the versatility of the organist who must constantly adapt and keep with the performance. Nowhere is this audio-visual partnership better illustrated than in the necessity for the close and exacting teamwork required between the organist and the magician.

Watching a good magic show is

like reading an intriguing mystery story. In a magic show there is an additional fascination. You know from the beginning "who done it," but the magician never reveals how an effect was achieved, for once the answer occurs, the effect loses its appeal. The magician must constantly vary the way in which an act is performed. This complicates the work of the organist and forms the basis for our story.

On two occasions recently, Potomac Valley Chapter member, the genial Todd Strickland, veteran professional organist/magician, performed for our chapter meetings a magical blend of theatre organ and conjuring, renewing in me a dormant interest in magic, (one of the hobbies of my youth.) Since Todd's talents and expertise included working both sides of the footlights, I talked to him to find out more about this absorbing avocation and share with you what it takes to produce and musically accompany a magic stage show. As a guest of the Stricklands, I later attended the 33rd Annual Christmas Show of the Yogi Magic Club in Baltimore, Maryland. Todd, a member of the Yogi club, served as general chairman for the extravaganza. He also played a half



Todd Strickland, veteran professional organist and magician.

hour pre-curtain concert of show tunes and a complete organ score throughout the three-hour variety production.

Accompanying the Yogi magic show was not a first for Todd. Years ago he played organ or piano music for his four and five-year-old daughters who had their own magic show in western New York at the Palace Theatre, Olean, N.Y. — "an amateur effort in a professional setting on the stage." Todd and his daughters also played for the Knights of Columbus, Elks and other charitable organizations. "The girls did some outstanding magic," he recalls. He also played pipe organ for Harry Blackstone, Sr.'s magic extravaganza in western New York back in the 30's and, additionally, rink organ, night club stints and solo piano and organ theatrically. Todd also played for dance routines at Army air bases during World War II. His introduction to piano came at the age of four, organ at eight and theatre organ at 14, playing for silent movies and intermissions. He started in magic with his father at age 12 and has since produced, directed and been a part of many magic and variety shows and minstrel shows across the country.



Where there is Todd Strickland you will always find his equally talented wife, Marie, who has worked as his able helper in all magic shows for about four years. This engaging couple does several bewitching tricks, which include Marie materializing from an empty cardboard carton or Easter basket, and a unique, one of its kind, suspension act in which Marie "rotates" horizontally in midair. There have been several husband/wife and larger family teams recorded in the history of the magicians' craft. For example, Harry and Bessie Houdini and Dash, in the 1890's, and the Amazing Marvels of the *Black Art* shows of Billy and Dot Robinson. Madame Adelaide Hermann, the Queen of Magic, was the first woman magician in the history of the art. Madame Hermann followed in the footsteps of her husband, Hermann the Great, after his death in 1896, successfully continuing her headline show for 25 years.

While researching for my story I was impressed with the similarity between the theatre organ and magic. Music and magic, like literature, are universal and make excellent missionaries. Each is capable of communicating in a language understood and enjoyed by all nationalities. Adherents are fervently trying

to keep traditions alive for those who follow. The attributes of the organ and magic craft when combined equate to something special. Both had their beginnings in antiquity.

Magic (conjuring, legerdemain, or by whatever name), is very aptly described in *The Encyclopedia Britannica* as, "The Art of Entertainment by Pretended Performance of Those Things Which Cannot be Done." Its beginning also dates back to Biblical times. Earliest meaning related to tribunal culture — spirits, the devil, unholy powers; used by pagan priests, with illusions and images, to enhance their power over others. In addition to priestly magic, on the other side of the coin, were the highly respected and popular conjurers who performed "theatrically" in the courts of kings, for royalty, and in the streets for other classes. The famous Cups and Balls (shell game) manipulation was their basic feat. About 5,000 years ago the Pharaoh of Egypt called upon a legendary wizard for advice. The story is told that the illusionist demonstrated his prowess for the monarch by restoring the "severed" heads of animals. Although Egypt is considered the cradle of magic, it was performed in the same era, by the Grecians, Romans, Indians, Chinese and others.

These and other original mind-skills and hand-skills cultivated by the ancients have been guarded and zealously handed down, through families of magicians, generation after generation. Various versions of the same illusions are still being done to his day, with modern dress, mechanical apparatus and methodology, now purely for entertainment. In the middle ages the practice of some forms of magic (such as black magic and voodoo) was feared, often considered supernatural and treated as sorcery or "witchcraft." Natural magic, in our enlightened times is based on scientific, not supernatural claim. Its fundamentals remain the same, with variations, from country to country, a most universal form of entertainment. The histories of organ and magic make absorbing stories in themselves.

The Yogi Magic Club of Baltimore is to the magician and magic buff, what the ATOS is to the theatre organist and followers. Historically, the club goes back to 1939, carrying on the traditions of the greatest showmen. It has over 300 members from every state in the union, representing one of the oldest and largest independent magic clubs in the world. One of its founders is the "Great Yogi," Phil Thomas, proprietor of the Yogi Magic Mart, 310 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland. Phil Thomas started in magic at the age of six, performs professional internationally and says, as do all magicians, that he is *still* practicing. Honorary members include personalities such as Harry Blackstone (Sr. and Jr.), Thurston and many others who are regarded as the greatest, all of whom have performed on the Yogi stage. Many outstanding acts retain membership in Yogi though not all can attend meetings because of the need to remain on the road.

The purpose of the Yogi club, Phil Thomas told me, is to "promote the art of magic among the members and give them an opportunity to perform on stage whether they be neophyte or professional." The first Saturday of each month is devoted to a nonbusiness meeting held strictly for the entertainment and education of members. Those who have a birthday in that month are invited to perform one feat on stage as a gift to the club on their birthday.

Performers backstage.

(Anastasi Photo)





"If it is a first time for a beginner, he is before the friendliest of audiences before whom he will ever perform. Yogi people are ever ready to help him with honest advice aimed at improving his technique and polishing routines." Thus, each person, whether beginner or pro, has the opportunity to appear in the course of the year. This experience prepares them for such events as the annual Yogi Christmas show.

The Yogi Magic Club's 33rd Annual Christmas Show was held December 3, 1977, in Baltimore, Maryland (See Potomac Valley Chapter Notes, April-May 1978 issue). Here I found a working model for field research.

The routines offered by members of the Yogi group brought back memories of the good old days of the traditional vaudeville variety shows. This was family-oriented material, appealing to the young of *all* ages. There were stand-up comedians; a sand-artist; puppeteers; magi-clowns who worked in the aisles directly to the children; high-riding, pyramid, juggling unicyclists; levitation and transference, optical illusions galore, and the Amazing Richard. He and his wife do a unique escape act. His wife, Richards proudly told me, is the "fastest strait jacket escape artist in the country. She gets out in eight seconds." Dorothy, "Girl Houdini," is trying for an entry into *The Guinness Book of World Records* for being the first female in the U.S. to perform such an unusual feat. Tom Sikorsky and two young brothers, Albert and Barry, did a fantastic three-man-high juggling, unicycle act which they have been performing since ages eight, six and four. The team is self-taught, routines its own acts and designs its costumes and props. Bob Myers and Sandy offered their Magic Review which included the most ancient and popular Girl Cut in Half illusion. Myers has been a professional for eleven years and began magi-fects at age five.

Acts were accompanied by Todd Strickland on a three-manual Conn organ, donated for the evening by Baltimore's Hammann Music Co., a most capable instrument, with a host of voicings attuned to this particular occasion.

Buck Clayton, a member of the Baltimore Police Department and of the Yogi Magic Club, has indicated

to Todd that the department is very enthused about the potential of the magic craft as a means of "getting the kids off the street, cleaning up their minds and associating the youngsters with down-to-earth solid citizens. It certainly makes a good boy better. He gets recognition and prestige from his buddies, not because he is tough, but because he has an interesting talent that isn't easy to come by, nor imitate. In the process of learning, the novice becomes involved in physics, physical and social aspects, and is taught to stay in front of people and think on his feet."

It is the consensus of magicians I have met that constant practice is the key word for attaining success in the mechanics of manipulative magic and illusions. However, the point was also made that success professionally is hard to achieve. Ed Sparrow, after 30 years of performing magic, juggling, puppet shows, comedian acts and designing TV magic kits, told me that there are but five or six individuals in the U.S. able to afford an avocation of full-time magic. Another handful have other types of work and income to fall back on, or do magic occasionally or part-time. Magic is not recommended for young people professionally until they have first availed themselves of a well-rounded formal education. All recommended the basic art as a hobby, one which will provide "fun, experience and the development of self-confidence that comes with the opportunity to perform in front of people." Unlike other performers, the budding magician must be his own booking agent, which requires business aptitude; his own director, lighting technician, stage manager and builder of his own props.

Functional props comprise a large part of a magic act. A magic effect isn't as simple as it is made to appear. It is what you are made *not* to see that is most important. "There are quite a few things a magician can carry in his pockets for close-up performances," Todd reflects, "such as multiplying balls, cards, silks, etc. But when you get into 'stage work' you have to consider quite a bit of an investment and bulk. Transporting and setting up all this becomes a fantastic problem." Big-time illusionist Ra-Mond once told Todd



Clowns with Grand Yogi Phil Thomas.

(Anastasi Photo)

that in his travels in Europe he has had as many as seven trucks or vans just to carry props, scenery and costumes. For example, the main act for the Baltimore, Maryland, Yogi Magic Show needed over two and a half hours to unload props from its van to back stage, excluding time needed to unpack and set up on the stage.

Todd recalls that he was recently prepared to buy the most famous of illusions, A Lady Cut in Half, until the dealer told him that the equipment would require about seven assistants. Todd remarks that the illustrations didn't show anything but the girl, the equipment and the magician. "Oh yes," the dealer explained, "but that's only part of the act. It takes a lot of people to do that thing."

The organist cannot carry his own musical instrument. He must depend on oftentimes poorly-maintained or rarely-exercised and balky organ installations. "The biggest mechanical problems I have encountered over the years relate to the pipe organ pedals," says Todd. "These are often allowed to get all out of adjustment. Some push hard, some too easy, some rattle, pound, and some don't play at all. It's very difficult if you intend to do some fancy pedal work — you might as well forget it." Pre-concert pedal adjustments or repairs often require hours of work. "Many times in-theatre swell shades won't work properly," he continues. "As a result, you play with open shades or closed shades, losing your direct





Bob Myers and Sandy, in two pieces.

(Anastasi Photo)

means of expression such as can be accomplished with varying the amount of open or closed organ. Sometimes the swells stick halfway open, or only partway." Ciphers occur when one pipe, because of a mechanical problem, whistles all the way through a program, resisting all efforts of the organist to kick it off. Quite frequently Todd encounters one or more ranks of pipes that won't play at all. These are a few of the things that Todd checks out before a show (and usually alone). If a theatre employs a maintenance man, the organist is all set to go, but many theatres wait until something breaks down so badly that the artist cannot go on with a show. Only then, does the management call in a technician.

Consequently, for a concert, the artist will most always arrive in town the day before a show to prepare the way. On the other hand, the artists who perform for the "self-serviced" ATOS chapter installations need concern themselves with "setting-up exercises," not the status of the mechanical well-being of the organ; assuming a "tune-up" has been done by the experts of the local chapter.

Mishaps sometimes occur even after the most elaborate pre-performance set-up. For example, some years ago, Strickland directed a 50-voice male glee club in the U.S. Air Corps Cadet program at a theatre in Nashville, Tennessee. "We always

closed such a show with a prayer; a cappella — no accompaniment," Todd recalls. "So, proper pitch is mandatory. This night, when I tried to activate the proper piston, to give the pitch, instead of getting a note, I got a tambourine. Of course, I went backstage and gave the chorus the pitch on a grand piano behind the screen. The show closed nicely. Afterward we went up into the organ loft and found that some mice had made a nest in the circuitry, and had eaten through and short-circuited some wires in a cable. Very embarrassing."

The accompanist must be resourceful! Todd knew two weeks in advance who would be in the Yogi Christmas show, but the substance of the acts themselves, as they developed on the evening of the performance, were as much of a surprise to him as they were to the audience. He likens the situation to "playing a silent picture, while watching it for the first time, along with the audience." Silent pictures most often come with a cue sheet and occasionally a composed orchestral score; not so for an unpredictably variable magic show. For professional reasons secrecy of method is paramount to magic, in all its numerous forms. Tricks are rarely played to script, show to show, nor performer to performer. Repetition tends to give away the mechanics of an effect. The ancient and traditional Woman-Cut-in-Half routine

may be done with buzz saw, hand saw, swords, blades, etc. Each performer has his own interpretation and adaptation of a "trick," in his own style, which varies tremendously. Consequently, the musician who provides a background for the magic act must have a fantastically large backlog of memorized melodies to fit any particular situation that comes along.

Todd had about 250 selections ready for that night in Baltimore. "During the show, by my own record," he said, "I used about 130 different tunes or pieces of tunes as the acts went on." The organist is also kept busy changing registration to suit variations he makes in the continuity of the melodies.

Unlike accompanying a silent movie, the organist playing for a magic show, which has no rigid routines, must be ever ready to improvise. Todd cites an example, "So often the trick is over before you are prepared for it to end, so you immediately break into a modulation — give a good, big sound to add spice or encourage applause at that point. You must be prepared to follow a performer whose custom may be to walk on unexpectedly, beginning a trick before reaching center stage." Improvisations may also be in order near the end of an act. Before the organist works into the finale, he may be caught in the middle of a tune as the magician concludes his act. "That's when you have to modulate into a nice close and give the performer a good rounder to sound out a particular act."

Emphasis is not always made by sheer volume. Todd noted that you do not necessarily play a "Big Bombard" to add emphasis, which might be distracting, for something like a placid silk routine or sand picture act. To create the emphasis or atmosphere for such as these the organist plays very softly. This forces constant attention of the audience on what is happening on stage. To accompany the desert scene in a Sand Picture act in the Baltimore magic show, Todd played "In A Persian Market" and immediately the audience related to a Far East setting. Then, during the unicycle routine, "I went right into circus music — "Punch and Judy," "Circus Day in Dixie," and that type of thing, directly from Barnum and Bailey cir-





Sisters Charlotte and Bonnie Jo Strickland, "Magicians" in June, 1947 at the Palace Theatre, Olean, New York.

cus orchestration." The responsibility of the organist is to follow an act and mentally set the pace and the place for the viewer.

Well-known music? Todd suggests that two courses are available. You can use familiar or title numbers, or, use an unfamiliar number or improvisation. Organ set-up doesn't really matter; dependence is on registration. Tying in certain registrations add color or atmosphere to a stage setting. For example, Todd explained, a minor key is automatically a sad tune. A glockenspiel, played rather quickly brings out gaiety. Fast runs and a fast arpeggio create the thought of gushing waters. The minds of people, through the years, have been conditioned to relate to particular sounds. "It's a matter of proper registration, manual or presets, often with only a split second to set it up. On the other hand, many times an organist can go right into a very familiar tune, simplifying quick change procedures."


The prime advantage of the electronic, such as used in the Yogishow, over the pipe organ is the compact nature of, and portability of the electronic. Todd emphasized that he prefers the pipe organ, when available, even though the electronic is equipped with the best of synthesized systems. "The electronic cannot truly simulate the full, rich and vibrant voicing of a pipe organ. The pipes give an invigorating feeling of command. When you are playing

an electronic organ, you are right there on a bench; and that's it. But with pipes you have the command of these big lofts, huge pipes and the fantastically beautiful sounds which can fill a huge theatre — all at your finger tips. You are the director of, and have the capability to reproduce, multiple instrumental effects, essentially, a symphonic orchestra." Todd sums it all up with the comment, "The result is a feeling of accomplishment that cannot be matched by the playing of any other instrument."

Strickland says he prefers a small orchestra or band to canned music — if a pipe or electronic organ is not available for accompanying a show. When the magician uses taped or canned music as a last resort, "he must work under tension to accompany music previously set up. A competent organist, with a simple cue sheet and a good working knowledge of registration makes the music fit and follow the magic — synchronize with it, no matter what changes in format or timing in an act are made from time to time." This

seems to be the more precise management and control. "An organist presents the right registration and emphasis and follows changes in mood at exactly the right time. He follows the magician's lead. The magician is the soloist and should not have to confine his timing to previously recorded music," Todd adds. When a magician sets up his routine to recorded music he can go through his act one way, no 'flubs,' or he must completely remake the recording to fit the change. A small orchestra or band led by an alert conductor is more versatile than pre-recorded music, but it cannot respond to unpredicted changes in an act as readily as the organist who is leader, musician and orchestra all in one person.

With the current level of the vigorous revival of interest in both the theatre organ and magic, and the dedicated support and works of such groups as the ATOS and the Yogi Magic Club, it would appear that their survival and further perfection seem virtually assured for the foreseeable future. □



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