

**IN HIS TV SPECIAL *LOST MAGIC DECODED*, Steve Cohen brought together a dream-team of magicians and magic historians—John Gaughan, Eddie Dawes, David Berglas, Bill Kalush, Peter Lamont, and Ken Klosterman—to explore and perform vintage magic tricks from years gone by. The two-hour special premiered on the History Channel on October 18<sup>th</sup> and was viewed by an audience of 1.5 million nationwide.**

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# Lost magic

**BY STEVE COHEN**

**THE QUESTION I'M MOST OFTEN ASKED** by magicians these days is, "How did you manage to get a national TV special on the History Channel?" The answer: hard work, perseverance, networking, and a bit of good luck too.

But the process took time: I've been working at it for the past eight years. Each time I gave a live performance of *Chamber Magic* at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, I secretly hoped that someone in the TV industry would be sitting in the audience, would think highly enough of me and my work, and would offer me a chance at the big time. Along the way, numerous producers, bookers, and big-time agents did show up, but they uniformly informed me: "I can't see how your live show would translate to television." Clearly, you can't simply drop a camera in the middle of an interactive parlor magic show and expect the home viewer to feel the same excitement as a live audience. There's just no intimacy when they're not in the actual presence of the performer. I knew I needed a hook, so I decided to become more proactive.





Cohen lifts Robert-Houdin's  
"Light and Heavy Chest"  
at Ken Klosterman's  
Salon de Magie



Early on, I worked with David Regal, Gabe Abelson, and my long-time collaborator Mark Levy to brainstorm some TV concepts, a few of which I presented to my agent at ICM. Though we came up with some catchy ideas, none were quite good enough. I had the feeling that the chances of making my own TV show were pretty slim. Over the years, I nearly gave up. It was like waiting for a white knight to appear with a TV contract in hand, which was highly unlikely.

In 2010, a well-connected friend introduced me to someone who works at the Hearst Corporation, the international media conglomerate. Little did I know that this “someone” was the president of entertainment and syndication. As a courtesy to our mutual friend, he invited me to their New York City headquarters for a brief meeting. He asked: “Why do you want to be on television? Do you want to become rich? Do you want to become world-famous? What is your motivation? You don’t have to give me an answer now, but you need to answer that question for yourself.”

Before doing anything on his end, he said he’d like to attend my show *Chamber Magic* at the Waldorf. And in the meantime, he advised me to work on a television script or treatment, and send it directly to him.

Things were looking up.

The Hearst executive came to the show with his family a few months later and wrote to me the next day. He wanted to come again, he said, this time with the president of the History Channel.

I realized that this might be the chance I’d been waiting for, and decided to give it everything I had. I brought in a new friend, television producer Peter Greenberg, and in turn, he brought in Sharp Entertainment, a New York production company. Together we created a treatment for a TV series titled: *Lost Magic*. The big concept was that I would travel the world on a quest to find vintage magic tricks, effects that haven’t been seen for hundreds of years. During my travels I would meet with older, experienced magicians—secret-keepers who may be the last ones alive who know how these effects are accomplished. Once I gained their trust, I would implore them to teach me their secrets so that I could recreate the tricks for a modern audience. No secrets would be revealed to the home audience, just the finished effect.

The Hearst executive read our treatment and liked it. As promised, he brought the History Channel president to my Waldorf show and we sat together downstairs at the hotel bar for about an hour, discussing ideas.

The next morning I received an email saying, “We like what we heard. You’ve got yourself a special.” First they offered me two one-hour specials, but then decided on a single two-hour special.

All the years of live performances at the Waldorf—thousands of hours of stage time—finally seemed to have paid off. But now I was entering a world in which I was a complete novice: reality television.

The History Channel is known for unscripted reality shows such as *Pawn Stars*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *American Pickers*, and





Cohen's parlor performances are woven through The History Channel special

*Outback Hunters*. Like many cable networks, it has drifted from its original concept, and ironically doesn't air many programs that focus on pure history. However, historical accuracy was of the utmost importance to me and I didn't want to dumb down the show in any way. Would it be possible to blend my refined brand (performing as "The Millionaires' Magician") with the History Channel's manly brand of macho programming?

Fortunately Sharp Entertainment brought in a brilliant filmmaker who helped to bridge the gap between our brands. Robert Palumbo is the writer and director of the Emmy Award-winning biography of Ronald Reagan, and he had the keen artistic sense needed to make this work.

I compiled a list of over 20 historic tricks that I wanted to explore. Together we decided on the most dramatic magic effects to include in the show. We narrowed the list down to four items we termed "Super Tricks."

- Robert-Houdin's "Light and Heavy Chest"
- The chess-playing automaton "The Turk"
- "The Indian Rope Trick"
- "The Bullet Catch"

The History Channel insisted that I also perform "street magic" segments—short and punchy shots that would appeal to their outdoorsy demographic. It's hard to tell network executives that they are wrong, but I chose to confront them. I wasn't only the host of the show, but also an executive producer. My contract provided me with creative control so I had the right to offer alternate solutions in moments of dispute.

I suggested that we perform all of the live performance segments on a stage, where I could invite small groups to participate. I envisioned a committee of audience members, *a la* Nate Leipzig.

We lucked upon a historic theater in downtown Manhattan that was the spitting image of the theater used in Edward Norton's film *The Illusionist*. I was excited to perform there, but we came to realize that organizing 300 participants to fill the orchestra and balcony seats would be a monumental task.

I suggested that we replace the live theater show with a parlor magic show—and we could film it at my suite in the Waldorf-Astoria towers. The network accepted the idea of putting me in my element—the parlor—but we needed a different backdrop. The Waldorf suite is bright and regal; we were looking for dark and mysterious.

I remembered a wealthy friend of mine who owns a six-floor gilded townhouse on the Upper East Side. The brownstone is gorgeously decorated in historically-accurate Victorian style and contains paintings and artwork by past masters. Before my friend bought the house, it used to serve as the Smithsonian's New York headquarters. I asked if we could use his front parlor rooms as a set for the TV shoot, and he graciously agreed.

The next step was finding an audience for the parlor show. Fortunately I have a large email list, compiled over many years of performing at the Waldorf. We sent out invitations and received hundreds of responses from my fans. Each guest was instructed to send a recent photo and a short blurb about why they wanted to participate. I worked with the production company to hand-pick 20 people and we instructed them to follow the same formal dress code enforced at my Waldorf shows.

The parlor setting enabled me to drop some old standbys into the show: "Think-a-Drink" (or Any Drink Called For) and the Malini brick in hat trick. Those two items were natural fits, and tricks I've performed for years. But I needed to work on new material too, since we planned to include recurring parlor segments throughout the show. I brought in two consultants: Mark Levy and Adam Rubin, two of the most creative men I know, both in and out of magic.

The three of us worked together as a magic team to select and design performance pieces for the parlor show, as well as for the larger Super Tricks. Mark and Adam helped me write compelling scripts for existing tricks, ones that we found while researching older magic books. But we also planned to include new tricks that have not been seen before, especially in the case of the Super Tricks, so we had to put our heads together and come up with fresh methods that would withstand the rigorous demands of television.

Probably the most dramatic and drawn-out episode involved how we attempted to devise a method for "The Indian Rope Trick."





## THE INDIAN ROPE TRICK

**EARLY ON**, executive producer Peter Greenberg offered us his travel expertise to arrange a trip to India at little or no cost to the production. For the past 20 years, Peter has served as travel correspondent to both NBC and CBS television and has forged relationships with all major airlines and hotel resorts. In an attempt to simplify things, the History Channel convinced our production company that a trip to India would not be necessary and that we should figure out a way to recreate “The Indian Rope Trick” closer to home—preferably in or near New York City.

This led us on a wild goose chase. To create the exotic allure of India, you have to go to India. You can’t capture the country’s charm and unique cultural milieu in your own backyard. Nevertheless, we were deadlocked into either coming up with a method or dropping “The Indian Rope Trick” from the show altogether.

Adam Rubin suggested some very clever methods, ranging from black art to trompe l’oeil panels that would be secretly positioned between city lampposts. I also called Richard Wiseman in Scotland who suggested an idea that relied on a fixed camera angle. All of these methods were clever, but proved more difficult than originally anticipated. So we engaged a special effects company in New Jersey whose past clients included Madonna and Lady Gaga. Over the course of several weeks, they worked with us to create a pyrotechnic version of “The Indian Rope Trick”

in which the rope would levitate, the boy would climb up to the top, I would light the bottom of the rope on fire, and the boy would vanish in a large fireball.



We took several trips to a secluded lot in rural New Jersey to work with the special effects company. Although we discovered a way to make the limp rope rise vertically into the air, this exercise was, frankly, a waste of valuable production time. All along I knew that we would never be able to convey the mystic aura of the legendary trick if we were filming in New Jersey.

I insisted that we perform the segment in India; there was simply no other way. And, better yet, I knew there was one Indian magician who could perform and deliver the Rope Trick to us. His name is Ishamuddin, and he came highly recommended by Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman. He has appeared on several television programs in the past, including Penn & Teller’s

2003 documentary *Magic and Mystery Tour*. No matter how good or bad Ishamuddin’s rope trick would look, it would certainly be better than the alternative we had back home. My production company reached out to Ishamuddin in desperation and we were relieved when he agreed to appear on the show.





Ishamuddin summons a 20 foot rope

Peter Greenberg arranged our accommodations at the five-star Taj Mahal hotel in New Delhi. In exchange for complimentary rooms for me and my crew, I presented a complimentary *Chamber Magic* show for the hotel's VIP clients. Everything was first class all the way, and I even had a private butler. The General Manager of the hotel personally escorted me to dinner, and a professional photographer snapped photos of us eating in their flagship restaurant. The luxurious surroundings of the hotel did not prepare me for the abject poverty I was to experience the next morning.

This was my first visit to India and I didn't know what to expect. My friend, magician Bill Herz told me that there is one word you must know to survive in India. The word is "Patience." Nothing will happen at the speed you expect it, he warned, and without patience you will be endlessly frustrated.

I awoke at 3 a.m. and drove with my crew to a small village located one hour outside of Delhi. The plan was to avoid the scorching heat (which would approach 115 degrees in midday) by setting up early and shooting "The Indian Rope Trick" at sunrise. The temperature at dawn was already 85 degrees and there was no breeze. Just hot soupy air.

All the villagers gathered in an open square to watch Ishamuddin's performance of "The Indian Rope Trick." There were no trees, tall buildings or structures that could be used

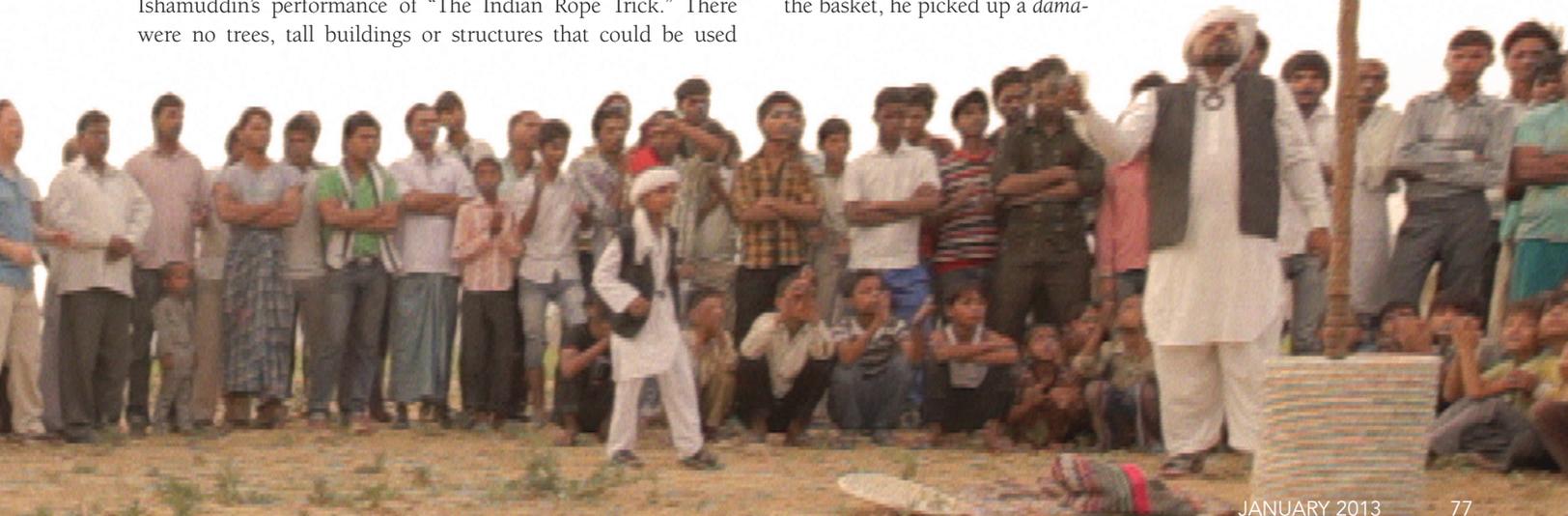
to pull the rope skyward. The performance space was a dusty plain of dirt adjacent to a field of marigold flowers, a local cash crop used for religious offerings. On the other side of us were the dilapidated tents the villagers lived in. The complicated method we had devised back in New Jersey would never have worked in this stark environment. I became even more intrigued.

Ishamuddin entered wearing a long *kurta* shirt, black vest, and white turban. The black amulet around his neck complimented the heavy black eyeliner under his eyes. He cut a figure of authority among the villagers and they seemed as eager as me to see his act.

When the cameras started rolling, Ishamuddin introduced his nine-year-old son Amman. The boy was dressed like his father, with one main difference. Instead of a turban, he wore a red fez. I thought that this costuming detail was well selected, since the color would later attract the audience's eyes when he climbed into the bright sky.

Ishamuddin showed the assembled villagers a 25-foot length of hemp rope. It was *really* thick—the type used to tie a boat to a dock. He flicked one end of the rope and showed how it rippled loosely along the ground. There couldn't be anything inside the core of the rope—it moved too freely.

Hand over hand, he gathered the rope inward and coiled it into a straw basket. The basket was empty and had a solid bottom. Once the rope was entirely loaded into the basket, he picked up a *dama*-





Peter Lamont

ru hand drum (the type with beads and short strings), shook it rapidly, and called forth to the spirits to raise the rope upward.

I stood no more than 10 feet away from the performance. As Ishamuddin continued to chant and bang his drum, I saw the tip of the rope peek over the top edge of the basket. The same excitement I felt when I had witnessed John Gaughan's performance of the "Hooker Rising Cards" began to well up inside me. There is nothing in magic quite as magical as the animation of an inanimate object, since the audience experiences magic at the moment it is happening. And this was no rising cards. It was "The Indian Rope Trick"! I saw the rope rise up: one foot, two feet ...

But Ishamuddin called out and halted the rope in order to add a clever convincer. While the rope remained rigid in an upright position, the fakir lifted the basket off the ground to prove that there was no connection from below. The earth below the basket was solid and the rope had clearly risen unassisted from inside the basket. This performance "beat" proved that Ishamuddin had thoroughly examined the psychology of what makes this trick work. When the rope begins its animated ascent, the audience begins grasping for a method. Clearly nothing is pulling the rope from above, so the only remaining solution is from below. When Ishamuddin lifts the basket off the ground, he cancels out the only conceivable theory.

After replacing the basket onto the ground, the fakir stuffed the rope back inside the basket. For a moment, the entire audience wondered if the trick was over. The rope had risen, but not very high. I had traveled halfway around the world to see "The Indian Rope Trick," and was hoping for much more.

Ishamuddin began to beat his drum again, more strongly this time, and the rope continued its ascent to the heavens. Five feet, 10 feet, 15, 20 feet up. It was solid as a wooden rod, and swayed slightly as it rose. When the rope reached its full stature, it stopped. Amman stepped forward and climbed up the suspended rope like an acrobat.

When he had shimmied close to the top, his father told him to stop. The boy acquiesced, and waited. There was an awkward pause—the villagers and I waited to see what would happen next.

Would his son vanish into the sky? Would Ishamuddin climb after him and slash his body to pieces with a machete blade?

The original tale of "The Indian Rope Trick" included the dramatic mutilation and resurrection of the boy. I was eager to see if it would be included in this version of the trick.

Fortunately for the boy, Amman obeyed his father's command and slid down the rigid rope to the ground. Once the boy was clear and out of harm's way, Ishamuddin beat the *damaru* drum a final time. The rope seemingly obeyed his chants and became limp on cue, falling to the ground. The crowd clapped in appreciation before dispersing back to their village jobs.

Later in the afternoon, Ishamuddin invited me to his home in a nearby slum called Kathputli.

If you have seen the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* you can begin to understand the abysmal living conditions I found there. People live in windowless huts with no running water or basic sanitation. This slum is a colony dedicated to street performers—magicians, jugglers, acrobats, puppeteers, and musicians. Over 2,800 people live in very close quarters. During the day these performers leave the slum to exhibit their skills at arts festivals and private shows in five star hotels. But at night they return to their colony. It provided a lesson in contrasts, and one that rattled me especially since I was sleeping in a fine hotel.

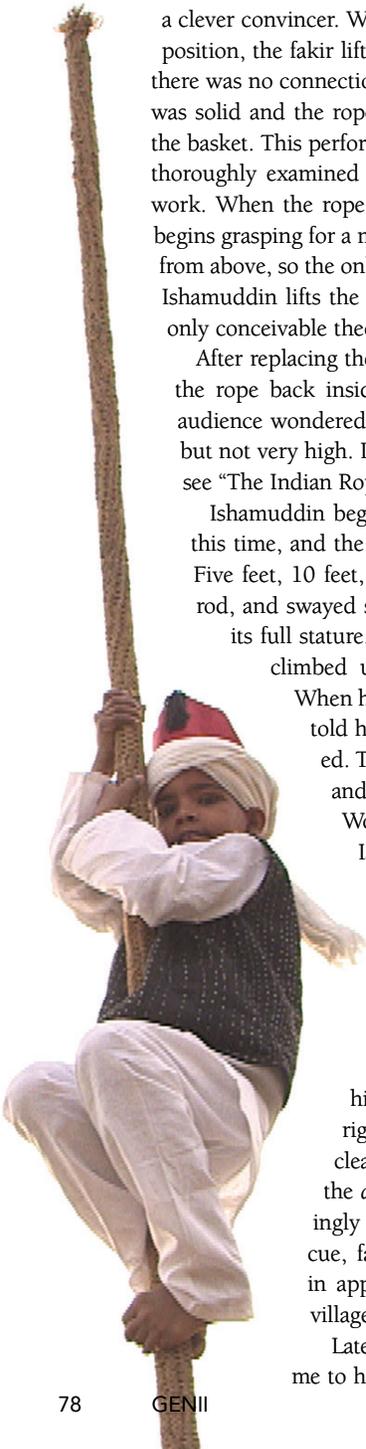


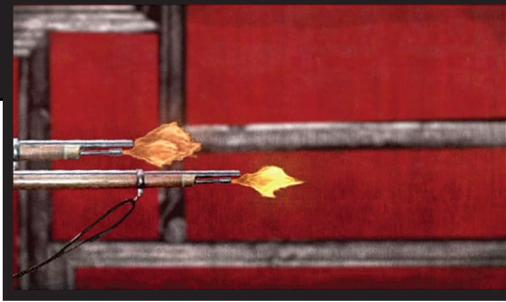
Examining the actual rope used

I attempted to put that out of my head while interviewing Ishamuddin in his home. He was proud of his re-creation of the legendary "Indian Rope Trick." In his mind, he proudly stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the greatest illusionists of all time since he alone has successfully devised a method to perform this heretofore impossible trick. Ishamuddin didn't tip the method to me, but I discovered how it was accomplished. The only clue I can offer is that he and his family had to set up the trick the night before the performance.

My trip to India was punctuated with a life-threatening illness. I contracted a bacterial parasite named *entamoeba histolytica*. Despite the precautions of eating only hotel-prepared foods and drinking only bottled water, every American on our trip ended up contracting this parasite. I was hit the hardest with severe dysentery that lasted three weeks upon returning home. The village and the slum we visited were surrounded by contaminated soil, and we walked right into a breeding ground of disease. Fortunately my manager Holly Peppe had experience with this parasite and connected me with the United Nations' tropical disease specialist in New York.

That was only the first life-threatening event that occurred during the filming of *Lost Magic*.





## THE BULLET CATCH

**"THE BULLET CATCH" TRICK** sent me to the hospital, too. Despite on-camera warnings I received from magicians David Berglas, Eddie Dawes, Bill Kalush, and Simon Drake, I went ahead and performed my version of the trick. Unfortunately I sustained an accident that left me with a chest wound that has still not healed. I am disgusted and regretful that I did not take more precautions to prevent this injury from occurring. Yet I remain grateful that I did not get killed.

The shooter and I were positioned 20 feet from each other on the open floor of an underground firing range. A sheet of tempered glass was hung at the 10-foot mark, equidistant between us. As in most performances, including the version presented by Penn & Teller, the glass is present to demonstrate that a bullet is actually fired from the gun. We used tempered glass because it beads upon impact instead of cracking into larger shards. The beads are supposed to fall straight down.

During my performance, the shooter fired his Glock 19 at my face and the glass shattered as expected, with one exception. One bead of glass flew toward my body and pegged me in the chest, above my right pectoral. It carried a strong impact but did not pierce my skin. The glass pellet grazed my rib, passed under my outstretched arm, and continued its path behind me.



Holding Chung Ling Soo's plate and bullet, at the Magic Circle in London



The shooter aims at Steve's mouth through a glass pane



The glass shatters and Steve recoils backward

The only gear I wore was a pair of protective goggles. I got off lucky with a hematoma—a blood tumor that expanded and swelled over several weeks. My chest turned colors from black and blue to deep purple to yellowish-green. It was awful, and it hurt every time I moved. However I was extremely fortunate. If the glass bead had impacted me just eight inches higher, it could have penetrated my throat and killed me.

Ironically, my director was thrilled that I was injured. As we drove to the hospital, he said, “This is great. This is really

great. Do you have any idea what kind of footage we got?” I was slumped over, writhing in pain, and he was gloating triumphantly over the unexpected footage he captured.

If I hadn't been hit, and if the trick ended as originally planned, the cameraman was instructed to run forward to me after I opened my mouth so that the marked bullet could be instantly verified between my teeth. However, since I was knocked down by the force of the glass impact, the cameraman captured an entirely different scene altogether. He rushed in, keeping the



Dr. Edwin Dawes discusses Chung Ling Soo



Bill Kalush discusses Ted Annemann's bullet catch in the '30s



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Cohen dropped to the ground and spit the bullet (circled) onto the floor

camera running, and found me on the floor, spitting out the signed bullet as I grabbed my chest.

The final televised scene was unscripted and edited together from footage shot at the actual accident scene. The result was a dramatic, unforeseen event.

I have no further plans to perform "The Bullet Catch." It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that I'll never forget. The nerves in my chest have still not healed, and I can feel a dull sensation below the skin's surface when I touch that region of my chest.



A massive blood tumor caused by flying glass



Simon Drake offers advice from his own bullet catch experience



## THE LIGHT AND HEAVY CHEST

ANOTHER “CHEST” that made an appearance on the program was that of the “light-and-heavy” variety.

Peter Greenberg and I were ready to book a flight to Algeria so we could film my version of the “Light and Heavy Chest” in the actual country where Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin originally presented it. As most readers are familiar, Robert-Houdin was summoned in 1856 by the French government to put down an incipient revolt in the French colony of Algiers by demonstrating

electromagnetism and without the need to travel far. Adam Rubin suggested that I perform the “Light and Heavy Chest” in a power gym, since bodybuilders are the modern-day equivalent of warriors. Instead of a wooden chest, the bodybuilders would become unable to lift up barbells, kettle bells, and other gym equipment. Adam and I worked with Brad Henderson and devised a routine that would strip bodybuilders of their strength.

We filmed the routine in a CrossFit gym in Brooklyn. CrossFit members are intensely serious about fitness and strength training. Some would say it borders on the obsessive. Several of the elite bodybuilders who were present on the shoot date were international champions.

In the routine, I asked one of the bodybuilders to lift a 240 pound barbell over his head to prove his strength. After replacing the weight on the ground, I touched him on his forehead and said, “Weak. You are now weak. As weak as a three year old child.” Moments later, he attempted to lift the same barbell off the floor but was unable to. He exerted his full strength but could not budge it. He was not a paid actor, and no one was stooged. I proceeded to touch the bodybuilder on his ear, and said “Strong. You now have your strength back.” At that point he was able to again lift the barbell.

We repeated this process with kettlebells, placing them down not on the floor but on raised platforms to prove that magnetism was not the method.

I handed the bodybuilder an antique wooden box and asked him to verify that it was empty. He checked it, put his hand inside and said it looked “okay.” Then I commanded him to hold the box in front of him with two hands. When I touched the weak spot on his forehead, the box suddenly became heavy. So heavy, in fact, that he could no longer hold it in front of him. The box sank to the ground as it became heavier and heavier. He eventually placed it down when the weight became unbearable.

My favorite part of the routine was unfortunately edited out. After he could no longer hold the wooden box, I said, “You look exhausted. You’re sweating—maybe you need a drink.” I handed him a 16-ounce bottle of water and told him to open it. However, just before he attempted to remove the cap, I touched his forehead and said, “Weak. You are now weak.” Sure enough, he was unable to unscrew the cap. After a brief struggle, I touched his ear and returned his strength to him. He instantly opened the bottle and took a long, well-deserved drink.

Although I never did get to fly to Algeria, a shorter trip to Cincinnati, Ohio more than made up for it. Ken Klosterman graciously invited me to his home to examine his collection of antique magic memorabilia. Among the notable pieces in his underground Salon de Magie, Klosterman owns the original “Light and Heavy Chest” used by Robert-Houdin. This prop is considered one of the Holy Grails of magic apparatus. At



Ken Klosterman's Salon de Magie

that he could achieve control over the strongest rebels. Through the secret use of electromagnetism (only recently discovered), he effectively proved that French magic was stronger than that of the Marabouts.

My magic team worked to devise a method without the use of



An experienced weightlifter struggles with Steve's light and heavy chest



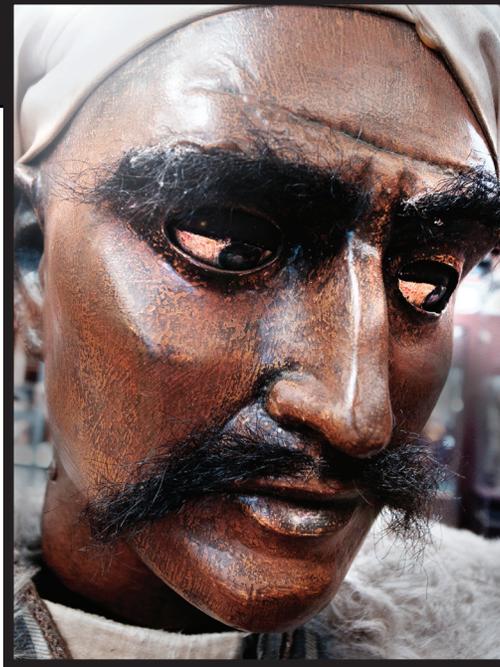
one point it was owned by Samuel Hooker of Brooklyn, New York, and later transferred to the Circus Museum of Sarasota. Klosterman clearly traced the path and provenance of the chest, and explained how it ended up in his collection.

In addition to allowing me to examine the “Light and Heavy Chest,” Klosterman led me through the Salon de Magie and invited me to handle any props that caught my fancy. I felt like a kid in a candy store. Over here was Thurston’s “Floating Ball,” over there Karl Germain’s “Flowering Rosebush.” I sat down to take a rest, and Klosterman alerted me that I was sitting in Alexander Herrmann’s own chair. My admiration for Johann Hofzinsler was satisfied when I had the chance to examine the Viennese conjuror’s actual “Cap and Pence,” his handmade gimmicked cards, and his “Crystal Casket” which magically produces a copious

amount of colorful balls in an instant.

Klosterman offered my crew *carte blanche* to film whatever we needed. His collection of apparatus so perfectly meshed with our program’s theme of “Lost Magic” that we could have stayed for many more days and found mountains of supporting material. On the last day of our visit, Klosterman gave me one parting gift, a substantial one. He had called up John Gaughan in Los Angeles and suggested that Gaughan get involved in my program too. He explained that the production was legitimate and that we were treating magic history with the care and respect it deserved.

Gaughan listened to Klosterman, and agreed to invite us to his workshop. Even better, he agreed to demonstrate one of his prized masterpieces of “Lost Magic”: the chess-playing automaton known as The Turk.



# THE TURK

**GAUGHAN** rebuilt The Turk by reverse-engineering the prop from a small clue he had discovered. He owned a single chess piece—the only piece that remained after the rest of the apparatus burned in a fire—and found that it served as a Rosetta Stone. By incorporating evidence from that single piece, he extrapolated how the rest of the prop must have worked. Over the course of 35 years, Gaughan continued to work on this automaton and as his skills as a builder progressed, he became more capable of rebuilding a prop that could execute the full chess routine.

I wanted The Turk to play chess against a grandmaster, and in front of a live audience. Once again, I needed an audience, so we emailed my *Chamber Magic* mailing list and invited fans from Los Angeles to participate. Others who showed up on the day of the shoot included Eugene Burger, Tom Stone, Jonathan Pendragon, and Erika Larsen.

Although John Gaughan had demonstrated his replica The Turk in other places before, it had never played a live chess match

PHOTO © ROBERT PALUMBINO

in the United States. On the day of the shoot, Gaughan's presentation of The Turk was flawless, and the automaton handily beat his human opponent—a three-time southern Californian chess champion. It was an honor to capture this match on film so that people in the modern day can once again marvel at this diabolical device.

Gaughan also took me on an enlightening tour of his museum (you've seen some of his most amazing pieces in his column "The Chamber of Secrets" here in *Genii* each month). I saw Josseffy's "Balsamo" the skull, Robert-Houdin's "Orange Tree," the "Psycho" automaton which had been given to Houdini by Harry Kellar, and the "Harlequin." In a lower case sat Robert-Houdin's "Antonio Diavolo," the trapeze artist automaton. Seeing all of these legendary props in one place will remain a magical highlight for the rest of my life.

In order to contextualize The Turk, I also visited and interviewed two authorities in the field of automata: Thomas Kuntz and author Brian Selznick. Unfortunately time restraints resulted in both of these interviews being cut from the final edit, but I would like to use this article to acknowledge my gratitude for their participation.

Thomas Kuntz is the premiere automaton builder living today. He is an old-school machinist, model-maker, automa-tist, painter, and sculptor who uses only traditional tools to design and complete his projects. I was first made aware of his creations when I visited Richard Garriott's



Camera set-up at John Gaughan's studio



Man vs. machine: The Turk plays against a chess master

home in Austin, Texas. Richard has become a connoisseur of automata, and offered his highest accolades for Thomas Kuntz's work. I visited Kuntz in his Los Angeles studio and learned more than I had ever imagined about the minutia of notching gears, stacking cams, and choreographing figures to tell a story.

Although his interview was unable to be included in the final cut, we did showcase two of Kuntz's most clever automata: an animated floating devil's head and a Pepper's Ghost-inspired illusion.

Brian Selznick also graciously granted me an interview at his apartment in Brooklyn, New York. Selznick is the author of *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, which was later adapted into Martin Scorsese's film *Hugo*. I had hoped to include elements of his story in mine but we simply ran out of time. Nevertheless, Selznick has done much to popularize automata in recent years, and even contributed to the restoration of Henri Maillardet's 18th century draftsman automaton on display in the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

## THE LONDON TRIP

**THERE WERE** others who didn't make it into the final edit of the show, but fortunately appeared in an online web-exclusive video. David Berglas is a hero who I am proud to call a friend. On camera, Berglas led me through the Magic Circle Headquarters in



John Gaughan welcomes Cohen into his museum

London and told stories of his friendship with Hector Robinson, son of William Robinson *aka* Chung Ling Soo. The head librarian of the Magic Circle, Peter Lane, also shared his expertise in the life and demise of Chung Ling Soo. Together, Berglas, Lane and I examined Robinson's death certificate and other related Soo ephemera. This video can be found by clicking on the "watch" button on this page.

I engaged Scott Penrose to perform another "Lost Magic" trick, one that has truly not been seen in generations: the "Educated Fish" by David Devant. We filmed Penrose's handling of this marvelous routine, and I was genuinely disappointed that we





Bill Kalush teaches Cohen in the rare books room, Conjuring Arts Research Center

couldn't include it in the show due to time constraints. Penrose has rebuilt Devant's apparatus exactly as shown in *Our Magic* (Maskelyne and Devant, 1911) but with some modern additions that make it more deceptive than ever. In performance, a school of goldfish swims inside a large tank of water and the fish pluck out letter tiles one at a time to spell out a freely-chosen word.

Peter Lamont took a train journey from Glasgow, Scotland to join me in London and share his expertise on "The Indian Rope Trick." We filmed his interview at The Magic Circle. Lamont contributed a great deal to our research and had my crew in stitches with his wry sense of humor.

Another humorous fellow who greatly assisted in the London shoot was Simon Drake. In addition to providing us with footage of his dramatic "Bullet Catch" from the 1989 broadcast of *Secret Cabaret*, a series produced by Jim Steinmeyer and Frankie Glass, Drake offered me on-camera advice of how to approach this dangerous routine. He warned that he became mentally unstable after his "Bullet Catch," and that I ought to reconsider performing it myself. As a daily reminder of his successful completion of the deadly stunt, he displays a conspicuous plaque in his home containing several bullets that he has caught.

Finally, Simon Drake kindly allowed us to use his House of Magic on the outskirts of London as the set to interview Tom Standage (author of *The Turk*) and Dr. Eddie Dawes. Both Standage and Dawes share the enviable ability of being able to speak in perfect prose. Their articulate descriptions of historic magic effects added true scholarship to the program, and I am grateful for their participation.

## CONJURING ARTS RESEARCH CENTER

**BACK HOME IN NEW YORK CITY**, there was one more magic scholar who served as a recurring expert throughout the show: Bill Kalush. He has established himself as one of the greatest scholars and philanthropists that the art of magic has ever known. When Kalush agreed to sign on, I don't think he realized how often he would appear on-camera throughout the show. However, he did an exceptional job tying together each segment with verifiable fact, spoken with the voice of authority.

Kalush invited my crew into his Conjuring Arts Research Center in midtown Manhattan, and pulled many surprising documents off the shelves for us to film. I particularly enjoyed going through Jean Hugard's personal scrapbook containing information about "The Indian Rope Trick." It became clear that Hugard went through exactly the same process we did in order to devise a semi-workable method for the trick.

On camera, Kalush spoke eloquently about all four of the Super Tricks and worked with me to dramatize each of the journeys I was to take. For each Super Trick, the Conjuring Arts Research Center served as a jumping-off point, a location where I could learn more information from an established master who would send me in the right direction to reach my target.

## DECODED?

**A FEW MONTHS PRIOR** to the end of the production, History Channel executives surprised my team with an unexpected title change. The show was no longer to be called *Lost Magic*. The new title was *Dark Magic Decoded*.

Everyone on my production team was taken aback, and I resolved to avoid what I felt was an offensive title. First, there was no “decoding” going on in this show. I’m a professional magician and had no intention of exposing or revealing secrets to any tricks, old or new.

Second, the idea of “dark magic” was so far removed from the light, engaging style of my own performances that viewers would feel deceived. They would instantly recognize this glaring discrepancy and flip the channel. The network’s rationale for the title change was to capture a macho male audience. Their marketing department had come up with this title based on prior success. I fought it, but could only fight so much. The History Channel has a number of programs on its roster that include “decoded” in their titles. The network said that this word pulls ratings, and that there was no more room for discussion.

So the title *Lost Magic Decoded* was a compromise, and one I can live with.

Regardless of the title, the show’s content and tone were respectful to magic, and in my opinion that was a big score. The show was part-documentary, part-entertainment. By balancing historic information with modern performances, I aimed to offer an intelligent alternative to the short YouTube clips that dominate modern magic on television. Magic is too often rushed when presented on TV because attention spans have shortened. But I feel that audiences can still appreciate the artful texture of longer and more deliberately paced routines. They just have not been exposed to this style.

*Lost Magic Decoded* offered an extraordinary vehicle for me to travel the world, visit three continents, and interact with some of the biggest names in our business. But I hope that the show lives beyond my personal good fortune and helps to elevate magic in the public eye. Nobody outside the magic field is likely to come forth and altruistically raise the status of magic for us. It is *our* job as magicians to show the world what magic *can* be. With every show, whether it’s a live performance or a television show like mine, we have another opportunity to educate the audience into developing a more mature taste for magic. Let’s not forget that this opportunity rests with all of us.

*Lost Magic Decoded* is available in the United States on Amazon Instant Video (\$2.99) and iTunes (\$3.99). DVDs are available through the History Channel website.

The David Berglas video about Chung Ling Soo can be viewed for free on Steve Cohen’s website: [chambermagic.com/lost-magic-decoded](http://chambermagic.com/lost-magic-decoded) •

