

Harry Houdini! The name is still magic. The most popular vaudeville performer of his era, he died on October 31, 1926 - Halloween of all days - but his reputation has been enhanced rather than diminished by the passing years.

He is best known and famed as a master magician, a man you could walk through a solid brick wall or make a live elephant disappear; And as the greatest escape artist the world has ever seen. He could get out of anything, whether manacles or milk cans, coffins or crates, strait jackets or jail cells.

But dynamic and extremely talented, Houdini has other claims to fame besides being a master magician and the greatest escape artist. I would like to focus my speech on Houdini's other claims to fame which are often under emphasized and not known. I will look at Houdini as a pioneer aviator (the first to fly in Australia); as a daredevil actor in the days of silent film; and as an unrelenting crusader against fake spiritualists.

Lets look at Houdini - The pioneer aviator first. The following information regarding Houdini, the pioneer aviator was gathered from an article titled "Houdini's Australian Flight" by Manny Weltman that appeared in *Escapism*, a newsletter for practitioners and admirers of the ART OF ESCAPE MAGIC and from the following Melbourne Christopher's books: "The Illustrated History of Magic" and "Houdini - A pictorial life."

While playing at the Hansa Theatre in Hamburg Germany in November 1909, Houdini bought a Voisin biplane after witnessing a short flight by a pioneer aviator. Within a month the thirty-five-year old showman had learned to pilot the plane. He had followed the development of aviation with fascination for six years, ever since the Wright Brothers made history near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Harry knew no one had yet conquered the air above Australia, and he was bound to be the first. The crated Voisin was stored in the hold of the ship 'Malwa' with his heavy luggage when he sailed on January 7, 1910, to fill contracts Down Under.

Twenty thousand people lined Queen's Bridge and the banks of the Yarra River on February 18th to watch the manacled daredevil jump into the murky water to publicize his engagement at the New Opera House in Melbourne, Australia. But few were present one memorable morning

less than a month later at Digger's Rest, a field twenty miles from the city. Eager to take advantage of any period of good flying weather, Houdini went to Digger's Rest after his nightly shows and slept in the tent that served as a hangar for his Voisin.

Ralph Banks, an Australian sportsman, kept a Wright plane at the same field. Banks got his machine twelve feet off the ground on March 1 - then crashed.

On March 16, 1910, at 5 A.M., Houdini's Voisin was wheeled out on the wooden planks that served as a take off area. Harry put on a pair of goggles and a cap and climbed up the seat behind the steering wheel of the machine. He waved to Bess (his wife) as the propeller was spun and the mooring line was cast off. The engine roared, and the plane shot forward and up. It soared gracefully in the morning sky, skimmed the uppermost branches of a tall gum tree, then circled the field at an estimated speed of fifty miles an hour before heading back to the runway. From nowhere clusters of people appeared on the field and cheered wildly as Houdini came in for a perfect landing after the first sustained flight in Australia.

Hailed by the Aerial League of Australia with a winged trophy

set on a mahogany plaque for
"the first aerial flight in Australia,"
Houdini was positive that future generations
would remember him best as a pioneer
airman. He wrote to one of his correspondents,
"Even if history forgets Houdini, the
Handuff King, it must write down my
name as the first man to fly here!" Then
he added characteristically, "Not that it
will put any jam on my bread."

When Houdini left Australia on
May 11, 1910, he left behind several
unfilled engagements, a new record
as an aviator, and his desire ever to
fly again.

Show pictures from Houdini a Pictorial Life
pg. 68, 69

Next, lets look at another aspect of Houdini's career which is often under emphasized. And that's his role in the early days of film. The following information was gathered from Doug Hennings book "Houdini - the legend and his Magic" and from David Copperfield's comments on the TV show "The Search for Houdini" that was on Channel 5 Halloween night.

Houdini had a uncanny ability to take advantage of any situation and make it work for him. And in the early twentieth century which was marked by the introduction of the greatest entertainment invention to come on the scene to that date; It was Houdini you foresaw how millions could share in his magic at one time in a thousand different places

Its due to complete film record of his exploits that exist to this day that were fortunate enough to be able to relive the genius of Houdini. And when we see the sure physicality that Harry used in his act, it becomes even more amazing that he was well into his forties when these films were being made. Harry's first film venture, a 15 episode series entitled the "Master Mystery" may have been the best. Not only was it a box office success, but a whole new generation of Houdini fans were able to see the master performing no less than one major escape

per episode. Not to mention such super human feats as dispatching 6 villains every week. As well as defeating the movies first robot in "The Final Episode". His next two pictures "The Grim Game" and "Terror Island" were made for Paramount Aircraft Pictures. Neither was memorable except for a rather spectacular accidental mid-air plane crash that was written into the script of "The Grim Game" and became the films most exciting sequence. Unfortunately or fortunately for Harry, a double was used and he was denied another brush with death.

His last two films were made for his own company. That leads us to understand the multi-talented nature of Houdini as writer, director, editor, camera supervisor, etc. He created one of early films most exciting action sequences, a wild trip down and over niagara falls. But the film also revealed the tragic flaw in his acting career. A man capable of great action, but painfully weak in the acting department. Whether it was the lack of applause from a live audience or the lack of stardom that led to Harry's disillusion with the movies, we don't know. But we do know this, thanks to the heritage left to us on film, we have a better picture of the man who's had a profound influence on the world of magic and most likely always will.

② Lobby Card from "The Master Mystery"
This 1918, fifteen part serial was the first
film starring Harry Houdini. It was also
the first motion picture in history to feature
a "robot"

③ Lobby Card from "The Grim Game"
This 1919 film was Houdini's first feature
length, Hollywood movie. "Look Him in the Strangest Cell"

④ Show Picture of Houdini locked in the strangest cell

① Houdini's Picture Corporation Stock
Certificate. 5 Shares

And last but not least, let's look at Houdini - the crusader against fake spiritualists. The following information was gathered from a pamphlet from the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame which is located in Niagara Falls, and from a Houdini Souvenir Program from my personal collection.

As Houdini matured he became increasingly perplexed with death and the world beyond. He was not convinced that communications with the after-world were possible and he became vindictively intolerant of Spirit Mediums who professed their ability to communicate with the spirits of the dead. Houdini loathed the advantage that mediums took of people who were grief-stricken with the loss of loved ones, and whose susceptibility placed them at the mercy of the medium's tactics. His mother's death was a factor in the attitude he developed during this stage of his life. When she died, Houdini was greatly grieved and unable to resist his desire to communicate with her spirit.

As one would expect, he began to consult mediums for assistance, but his extensive knowledge of their fraudulent methods disqualified them all and he became extremely angry with such mockery.

His crusades in exposing fraudulent mediums are credited to a large extent with the elimination of fake spookery.

We should note that Houdini's campaign against the mediums of his day was not accentuated as greatly by his desire to disprove the possibility of communicating with the after-life as it was with his relenting effort to establish whether or not it was possible to contact spirits - He never discarded the notion that conversation with the spirits of the dead was possible, and in his own case, he concerned himself with the plausibility of contact with the world, after his death.

① Houdini and his class of Detectives at the New York Police Academy, 23rd Street and Lexington Avenue. Teaching them the trickeries of fraudulent medium, and demonstrative misdirection

Read ② Letter to Houdini from police department

Read ③ Challenge to any medium in the world.

To summarize, I have talked about the Master Magician and Escape Artist other claims to fame. ① He made the first successful airplane flight in Australia in 1910. ② A star of the silent films, he wrote and produced his own feature films. ③ A relentless exposé of fraud, he more than any physical researcher of his era alerted the public to the deception practiced by supposed mediums in darkened rooms. Harry Houdini was truly a multi-talented individual.

An INFORMATIVE SPEECH EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK FORM

Speaker Joe N Performance points 92 A-
 Topic Houdini Outline points _____
 Speech Time _____ Total points _____

I. Introduction of Speech 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Attention: engaged interest
 Thesis statement: clear
 Fairhearing: significance 20
 Overview: main points stated

II. Body of Speech (2X) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Structure: organization
 Development: appropriate use
 of supporting materials and
 adequately cited. 20
 Transitions between main points clear
 Message adapted to audience appropriately
 Message was stimulating/interesting

III. Conclusion of Speech 1 2 3 4 5 6
 Review: main points restated
 Effective concluding statement 20

IV. Voice and Language 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Rate Pauses
 Volume Vocal Variety
 Word Choice: accurate, appropriate,
 sufficient repetition, vivid
 language, grammar 15
 Pronunciation

V. Delivery 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Use of notecards (preparedness) 11 12 13 14
 Spontaneous/extemporaneous
 Rapport with audience
 Originality/creativity/personality
 Enthusiasm/involvement 17 18
 Facial expressions Eye contact
 Hand and arm gestures
 Posture and movement

VI. Visual aids: pertinent, accurate, clear, usage 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

VII. Outline
 Introduction 1 2 3 4 5
 Body 1 2 3 4 5 (3X)
 Conclusion 1 2 3 4 5
 Complete Sentence/Tech. plot 1 2 3 4 5
 Bibliography

Comments:
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Joe Natans

Houdini's lesser known talents

excellent intro

source material fine

- a bit dependent on notes - but audience contact ^{is th}
- reading ~~to these~~ style used dynamics of blurbs between pauses. At times it's very effective, but its overuse is a bit redundant

good use of story (air-flight/Australia)
excellent vis-aids

I Aviator

II film

III Crusader against fake spiritualists

Concl

— Clarity of style is exemplary.

Joe N.