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M U M

**Michael
Tulkoff**

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M-U-M • Volume 96 • Number 4



- 8 **EDITOR'S NOTES** John Moehring
10 **PRESIDENT'S PAGE** Andy Dallas
17 **M-U-M ASSEMBLY NEWS**
30 **ASIA WATCH** Steve Marshall
32 **CONVENTION SPOTLIGHT**
34 **SENSATIONAL YOUNG MAGICIANS** Hope Anderson
40 **MARLO'S TWO-BIT TRICK** Jon Racherbaumer
42 **HOCUS FOCUS** Jay Jayaraman
44 **ROY BENSON'S LAPEL POCKET** Levent
44 **VISIBLE MATRIX** Shoot Ogawa
46 **REMIX** Edward Marlo - David Solomon
50 **MAGIC MICHAEL TULKOFF** John Moehring
57 **THE BROOKLYN WONDER SHOW** Richard Lane
62 **S.A.M. CONTEST OF MAGIC** Paul Critelli
63 **PRO CLOSE-UP GALA** Richard Hatch
64 **BARGATZE'S BOYS** John Moehring
66 **ALL-GAL GALA** John Moehring
67 **MAC KING HOMECOMING** Steve Bryant
68 **SPEAKING OUT** Steve Spangler
74 **THE NIELSEN GALLERY** T. Nelson Downs
77 **WHAT'S BEHIND THE CURTAIN** New Product Reviews
88 **SOME THOUGHTS ON PRESENTATION** Roy Benson
90 **I'VE BEEN THINKIN'** Norman Beck
92 **LEARNED PIG EN PAPEL** Marko
94 **BEYOND SECRETS** Jay Sankey
96 **THE DEAN'S LIST** George Schindler
96 **BASIL THE BAFFLING & CHLOE** Alan Wassilak
97 **OUR ADVERTISERS**
98 **FAST AND LOOSE** Harry Anderson

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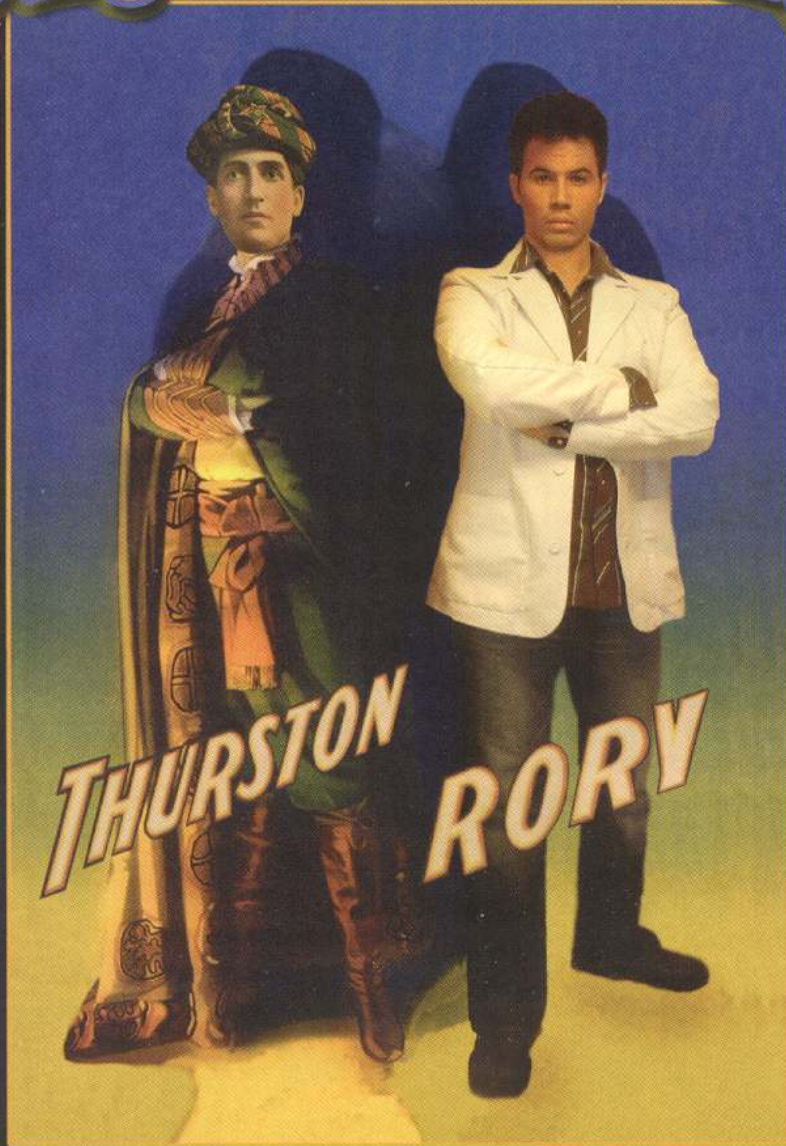
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THE Brooklyn Wonder Show

By Richard Lane



Rory Feldman's New York neighborhood is well off the radar of sharkish Manhattan real estate brokers or speculative homeowners. The 25-year-old magician, who's seemingly more than full-time collector, has lived here all his life. This is a district of close-knit families and business that are proud to be passed down to future generations. At the end of his block is the elementary school where Rory and his brother, Morgan, walked to classes. It's still a short commute for his mother who now teaches at the school. And while only a subway ride into heady Manhattan, this is also an insulated world that can seem far removed from the city's shadow.



One of Feldman's display cabinets devoted entirely to Thurston memorabilia, 20-sheet "Bestowing the Mystic Degree" billboard, rare half-sheet "Book of Wonder," and two of Thurston's earliest posters, used mainly in India in 1905

Over 90 years ago, Harry Kellar, Houdini, Okito, Servais Le Roy and other giants of magic, alit from liveried cabs or subway cars to an unfamiliar and ignored residential neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. They came to witness the homegrown "Impossibilities" of Dr. Samuel Hooker and his extraordinary rising cards. It was an evening's entertainment that inspired and amazed. Now, decades later a fortunate few have ventured out to a far more obscure corner of Brooklyn to visit a new kind of wonder. It's an ever-growing mini-museum that showcases one of the largest and most comprehensive collections ever devoted to a single magician. And without a doubt it's the finest tribute ever assembled to honor master magician, Howard Thurston. For the first time visitor, as incongruous as it is to find such a collection in an unassuming apartment building, how it was created is just as surprising.

When Rory's apartment door is closed to city life, it is the spirit and memory of Howard Franklin Thurston that truly comes to life — in thousands of images, letters, and manuscripts, hundreds of original posters, and an ever growing inventory of personal items that are a monument to one magician's passion to preserve history and champion his hero. It is never prudent to speculate over the "best" or "biggest" in the community of magic collectors. Historians are long familiar with the testy feuds over magic libraries. But after 15 years of collecting Thurston, Rory's predominantly hidden collec-

tion has become impossible to ignore in its scope, size, and biographical importance.

Preserved by archival quality protection systems, scrapbooks, folders, and boxes are bulging with history. One may contain the original typescript of Thurston's autobiography or the original photographs and even negatives from his card pitch books. Rory owns never-publicly-viewed film reels, a premiere collection of throw-out cards, plus gifts from Harry Kellar to his new successor. There is Thurston's tuxedo, cane, top hat, and the personalized nameplate



Rory Feldman's promotional brochure.

the magician affixed to each theatre's dressing room door. The costumes of Jane Thurston and other assistants vie for attention with *Wonder Show* props and blueprints. And the voluminous files of letters contain unpublished and unknown thoughts, ambitions, and confessions that comprise a hidden magic history.

Thurston wasn't always Rory's primary muse. His interest in magic began early, like most budding magicians, and by seven years of age he had worked out an "act" he could

impress friends and family. By 11, these skills helped him parlay his way into a summer job as a magic demonstrator at Zak's Fun House, a now-defunct Brooklyn magic shop. With local bookings and magic shows, Rory was flush with the carefree funds of childhood to buy the usual tricks and books. He came of age during the VHS boom and devoured the video catalogs. This was a young man with a vision of a performing career.

People take up collecting for various reasons, from financial speculation, to ego, to the thrill of the chase. The very young Rory took a cue from Houdini, who counseled that the ultimate magician needed to also be an historian and collector. Rory's magic obsession found another avenue to explore. He was consumed by magic magazines and the catalogs of Mario Carrandi, Norm Nielsen, Peter Monticup, and Fred Jurgensen. He announced his new passion to local magicians who were eager to meet a new collector with fast and loose money to spend. And magic history began to collide with his current skills in a most remarkable way.

A number of young magicians may have been inspired by Bruce Elliott's writings to learn the Benson Bowl routine. Rory is the only one to have learned using Roy Benson's *actual* bowl. Others may have loved to perform a Vanishing birdcage, just like Thurston. Rory was the only one to learn with Thurston's *actual* birdcage. This scenario was repeated with Houdini's handcuffs, Thurston's Phantom Tube



Wall of Thurston posters in Feldman's apartment turned museum, [top right] Kellar's Demon's Club hat and Society of Osiris memorabilia, [lower right], eight of the three-dozen personal scrapbooks in the collection, [far right] display cabinet with Thurston's Fire Bowl, Floating Ball, more scrapbooks, films, as well as some Blackstone pieces.



and other props he began to accumulate. Props that many collectors would have kept encased in glass cages, Rory used and shared. As a 12-year-old he made a school presentation on Houdini and Thurston, performing Thurston's



A 1908 Thurston window card by Strobridge Litho.

Eggs Extraordinary, propping Thurston's very own top hat on his then too small head. A perplexed teacher asked if these were props similar to ones used by his vintage predecessors. After explaining these were original items, the shock, praise, and admiration of a trusted adult, helped further ratchet up the youngster's enthusiasm.

By 16 Feldman noticed his attention was continually being drawn back to Thurston. He had long believed that Thurston was, for him, the greatest of all magicians. And with a new focus and no little regret, he began selling off non-Thurston pieces to fund his new direction. "I wish I never had to sell anything," Rory says echoing the sentiments of any seasoned collector. However, Houdini handcuffs can be traded into a large collection of Thurston ephemera. And from such beginnings, a life's mission grew.

For a teen to accumulate such choice items, he obviously required the patience of a compassionate mother. Necessity pushed Suzanne Feldman into the role of front person for numerous transactions. The teenager gave his mom the cash and she dutifully paid by check or credit card — a methodology that made it impossible to hide the often shocking cost of his purchases not to mention the number of display items that began encroaching, then consuming, the family living room. She still shrugs off the sacrifice with a smile. "We're used to it," she says with

the special understanding of a parent.

Snapshots of Rory's early teenage years show shelves bending under the apparent entire catalog of L&L Publishing and items no longer in his collection. Gone from the archive are a card index of Arthur Lloyd, Sevais Le Roy's Vanishing Birdcage, Al Flosso's bow tie, and props of Raymond, Cardini, and Blackstone. Once Rory realized that he could often sell one item and buy ten Thurston pieces, a mini-industry was born. This revelation coincided with the birth of the electronic marketplace and in particular, eBay. Rory's computer savvy and focus means he constantly haunts the auction site. Sometimes buying for his holdings, sometimes for resale, picking plum items he knows he can easily sell to his select network of fellow collectors.

Close observers have been puzzled by the quality of his finds, wondering how he could have accumulated collectibles not offered through the usual channels, such as auctions by Swann Galleries, or Mario Carrandi or Martinka. A collection such as this could not be created by simply waiting for unique items to fall under the auction hammer. Rory's matrix of friends and contacts help him connect with willing and potential sellers. He has often shown interest in an item, leaving word that if



Rory holds Kellar's "Walk in the Woods" top hat and cane, which was given to Thurston in 1908, Thurston's Robert-Houdin clock that was a 1922 gift from Houdini, 1905 "Spirits" one-sheet by Strobridge, Thurston's wallet recently acquired from writer and novelist D. Keith Mano.



they ever decide to sell, he's willing to buy. It is no exaggeration to say that years later he has received the call saying that it was finally time to sell. Many owners understand the pangs of parting with magic ephemera they've lived with for years, but often the knowledge that their favorite items are not going to be flipped for a higher dollar helps any second thoughts when they send their props off to Brooklyn.

Unburdened by profit margins has enabled Rory to pay a lofty price for many items he covets; causing grumblings within some sectors of the collecting world. In 2000 during the auction of David Price's Egyptian Hall museum, Rory came armed with a decade's worth of revenue. A teenage career of buying and selling had turned the boy with spare cash into a self-made man on a collecting crusade. In the Egyptian Hall auction were Thurston pieces that would likely never be seen again. Rory was not prepared to let them escape. As he continually overbid longtime collectors and amassed \$100,000 worth of history, there was confusion and resentment over this 19-year-old interloper. Matters weren't helped by the brief profiles in *Magic* and *Genii* magazines that winked at rumors of a secret trust fund and suggested this was some dil-

ettante kid who had poached away posters from collectors who had been in the community for decades. Over the next few years, as Rory unconsciously isolated himself from the magical social scene, confusion circled this Thurston devotee.

Young magicians may have a skewed impression of Howard Thurston and why anyone would devote so much energy to his memory. The more common images show paintings of an aging, rouge-cheeked vaudevillian. The rare, disjointed surviving film clips show a stiff performer standing by his illusions, less a master magician than an accessory to his own elaborate stage show.



Behind the Eggs Extraordinary top hat is the 1908 show program when Kellar passed the mantle to Thurston.

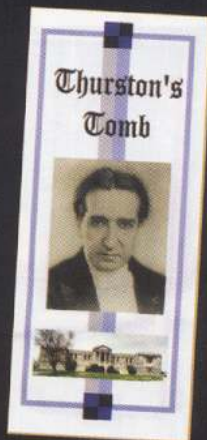
I too was confused by the ballyhoo, until I discovered in a film archive a previously lost film clip of Thurston promoting a radio elocution school. Finally, I saw and heard the impish charm of the trouper that charmed America; the easygoing style that won over children and adults. And as he clowned around on film, ruining the shot, I saw Thurston the rule breaker; the card man who knew all too well, the way of the card-sharp or petty thief; the performer who proudly introduced his African-American friend and assistant, George White to his own segre-

gated audiences.

Thurston continues to prove a much more interesting figure than I had been led to believe. And Rory's collection provides ample ammunition for a revised biographical understanding of the man. Here is Thurston the film producer, who wasn't above asking S.A.M. Dean Frederick Eugene Powell for a loan to help his movie ambitions. There is Thurston the scribe, who tried his hand at dramatic plays, an autobiography, and a novel that draws heavily on his boyhood. There are also relics from Thurston's failed entrepreneurial ventures, like the "Kiss Waltz" thrill ride he owned in Coney Island. A ride so cantankerous Thurston regularly sent Theo Bamberg, screwdriver in hand, out to the amusement park to keep it in working order. And how can one not be amused or bemused by Thurston's Perfect Breather, a tortuous gold nose clamp he claimed could cure snoring. Like Houdini, Thurston was on the look out for worlds beyond being a master magician.

These days, Feldman still receives performance requests from his contacts in some of Manhattan's Fortune 500 companies. His close-up work runs from his personal trademark "dollar burn" trick, to Paul Gertner's Unshuffled, with perfect faros leading to customized messages on the deck edges. But lately, he's been spending more of his time in a concerted effort to encourage interest in Thurston's legacy amongst the latest generation of magicians.

In 2000, Rory launched his website at www.ThurstonMasterMagician.com, so he could slowly begin sharing his collection and



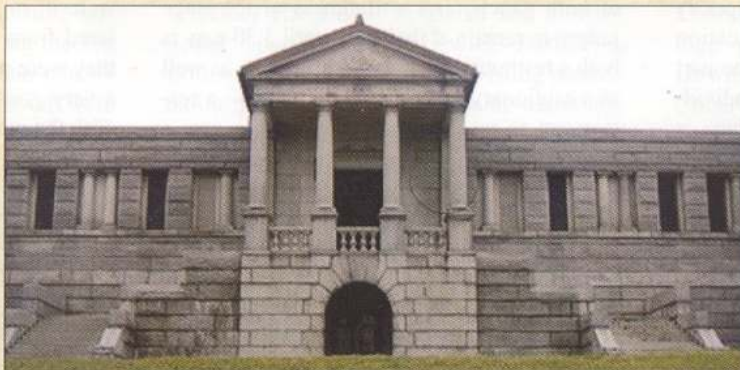
[Left] Rory's table at a recent Columbus Magi-Fest, where buttons were sold to raise funds for the preservation of Green Lawn Abbey, Howard Thurston's final resting place [below]. [Right] The 1907 Strobridge half-sheet used with the Columbus Landmarks Foundation fundraisers.

knowledge online. "I love answering questions about Thurston," he says. "Questions such as 'Who was Will Rock?' or queries like, 'My father has a playing card with Thurston's picture on the back, how did he get it?' I've helped many, ranging from school book reports to collection appraisals." The web site will continue to be updated with new images of the extremely rare posters and his ever growing inventory of unique items. Recent acquisitions include the Robert-Houdin clock presented to Thurston by Harry Houdini in a rare summit of the two legends.

Through his buying and selling, Rory became acquainted with noted magician and collector, Dr. Timothy Moore. This Columbus, Ohio resident has joined forces with Rory and the Columbus Landmarks Foundation to save Thurston's final resting place from the wrecking ball. Unlike Colon, Michigan's legendary Lakeside Cemetery that maintains the graves of the Blackstones, Jack Gwynne and other beloved conjurers, the Green Lawn Abbey crypt that houses Thurston has lapsed into seriously ill repair, lacking funds for security and upkeep. Without financial support, the abbey may be demolished and Thurston's remains would be unceremoniously removed.

At the recent Columbus Magi-Fest, Rory launched a fund-raising effort which helped raise much needed cash and awareness for the landmark's plight. He created a limited edition

run of Thurston buttons featuring rare images from his collection and sold them at a table with the help of Janice Loebbaka from the



Columbus Landmarks Foundation. Feldman continues to sell buttons through his web site. Contributors can purchase buttons and learn more about this project. Further background is available at the Green Lawn Abbey's own web pages: www.GreenLawnAbbey.com. In this very personal mission, Rory has been able to generate a lasting tribute to the hero that has truly changed his life. It also marks a new beginning as a more visible member in the world of magicians and collectors.

Because of the economics of New York living, Rory has confined his purchases to the scale of parlor magic. A Vanishing Birdcage is perfect for a city apartment, but a coveted Thurston illusion is beyond impractical, despite Rory's desire and ambition. That may soon change. Still a big dreamer, no dream has stuck as hard and fast as his childhood ambition to create the New York City Museum of Magic. Already making purchases with one eye on the future, he is steadily accumulating

iconic pieces that expand beyond his beloved Thurston, such as Kellar's actual top hat and cane featured in the legendary 1900 "Walk in the Woods" lithograph. His current focus is on acquiring the most resonant of relics and emblems of the masters, and he has begun talking to real estate experts and possible backers. "I've always wanted to share my collection, but it's just impractical to bring people to my home." Thurston himself, once hoped of creating a magic museum and his spirit may truly have come back to Brooklyn to keep his dream alive.

More information about Rory Feldman's New York City Museum of Magic can be found at www.NYCMuseumOfMagic.com. ❖

Richard Lane is an Emmy award-winning TV producer, documentary filmmaker, and writer. While researching the mystery of S.W. Erdnase as a possible documentary subject he developed a passionate connection to magic history. His current research interests include tracking lost magician footage hidden in film archives, Black Herman, and completing *The Newmann Scrapbooks: An Inventory of Arcana*, a reader's guide to the 200 volumes held by The Library of Congress and Princeton University, collated by magician, mind reader and mentalist, C. A. George Newmann.

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