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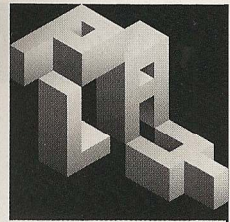


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POOF!

War of the Wands

Behold! Howard Thurston! Harry Houdini's forgotten nemesis!

IT'S THE EARLY 20TH century. You want to take in a magic show. You've got your spats on, your mustache is all waxed and ready. Now you've got to choose between the two preeminent magicians of the age: Harry Houdini and Howard Thurston. "Those guys lived and breathed publicity," says Jim Steinmeyer, author of the new book *The Last Greatest Magician in the World*. "They were scrambling over each other to get the public's attention." ¶ So who to pick? Steinmeyer goes with Thurston. Though barely remembered now, his *Wonder Show of the Universe*, a two-and-a-half-hour extravaganza, captivated a generation. Houdini, however, "was just not an impressive magician," Steinmeyer says. Here's how they measured up.



Houdini (left, with Thurston) wasn't actually a very good magician.

| | THURSTON | HOUDINI | ADVANTAGE |
|---|---|--|-----------|
| Rank in the Society of American Magicians | Vice president | President | Houdini |
| Reputation | The former con artist revised his autobiography to pass himself off as a high-society gentleman with pious roots. | This rabbi's son forged a new identity as a rough-and-tumble miscreant who associated with the criminal classes. | Thurston |
| Cards | His big break came when he dazzled famous New York theater agent Walter Plimmer with his sleight of hand. | A complete failure at card tricks, despite early attempts to bill himself as a King of Cards. He later gave them up. | Thurston |
| Greatest Trick | The Levitation of Princess Karnac, which featured a woman floating in midair. | The Water Torture Cell, in which Houdini escaped from an aquarium full of water. | Houdini |
| Magic Pedigree | Thurston was a protégé of world-famous magician Harry Kellar, who picked him to carry on his legacy. | Houdini was also one of Kellar's acolytes, but the escape artist lacked the showmanship to succeed his mentor. | Thurston |
| Use of Elephants | Thurston developed an appearing-elephant trick for a traveling stage show, but the baby pachyderm got sick and died before he could perform it. | In 1918, Houdini "vanished" an elephant in front of an audience of thousands at New York's Hippodrome Theater, making headlines around the world. | Houdini |
| Spectacle | The <i>Wonder Show of the Universe</i> lived up to its title, incorporating dancers, vanishing automobiles, vanishing girls, duck tricks, rabbit tricks, water tricks, and floating orbs. | Houdini advertised "an entire evening's worth of entertainment" that included a magic act, escapes, and a lecture on spiritualism. The escapes may have been stunning, but the magic was weak. | Thurston |

WINNER: Thurston