

# RORY FELDMAN

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# MAGIC

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Juan Mayoral



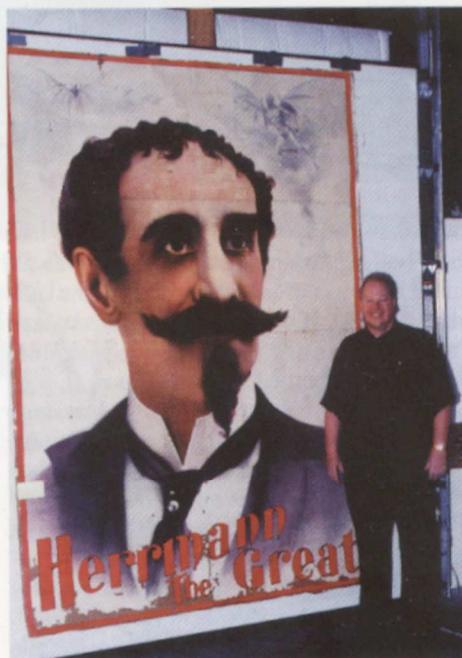
Auctioneer Mike Caveney [at the podium] sells off a Kellar portrait at the Egyptian Hall Museum Auction & Sale, held September 23-24 in New Oxford, Pennsylvania.

# A MOVEABLE FEAST

By John Moehring

As the clock on the wall neared half-past-five on Sunday afternoon, the last item listed for the Egyptian Hall Museum Auction was about to be moved out. Lot 211 - T. Nelson Downs Billiard Ball Stand, nickel silver, holding seven white balls, needs some restoration. Estimate: \$2,000/\$2,200. The bid was at \$1,600. Auctioneer Mike Caveney scanned the room. "I'm looking a bid of \$1,800. Yes, over there. I have \$1,800. Do I hear \$2,000 for the T. Nelson Downs Billiard Ball Stand? How about a bid of \$2,000? A perfect way to end the Egyptian Hall Auction of the year 2000..."

Anyone with a pocket calculator who had been keeping tabs on the bidding activity could see that the aggregate receipts for the afternoon were going to be over \$435,000. Combine this figure with the monies realized from the preceding day's "open sale," where some 5,000 items of magical memorabilia were offered, and it was apparent that Mike Caveney and George Daily, recent purchasers of David Price's Egyptian Hall Museum, were happy with the results of their sale. An estimated 150 magic enthusiasts showed up over the weekend and the hundreds of thousands of dollars they spent provided strong evidence that collectibles of the art — especially lithographs, playbills, and vintage posters — are sustaining their values.



David Stahl stands beside his eight-sheet Alexander, a purchase that he says he dreamed of the whole week before the sale.

Merely a minute or so after the doors opened for Saturday's sale, David Stahl had acquired the eight-sheet Herrmann poster with a \$28,000 price-tag. Within an hour, 19-year-old Rory Feldman from New York had

cornered just about every Howard Thurston lithograph in sight, running a near-six-digit figure at the check-out counter [see page 54, "Big Bucks from Brooklyn"]. Sunday's auction had its expected moments of spirited bidding. Mario Carrandi and Byron Walker vied for Lot 55 - Catalog. M. Hartz's *Illustrated Descriptive Catalogue of Conjuring and Magical Apparatus*, 1870. Near Fine. Rare. Toole Stott #1074. Estimate \$1,200/1,500, with Byron taking it home for \$5,500.

That last-lot Downs Billiard Ball Stand did go for the two grand asked for. With a final crash of the gong, Caveney pronounced it "Sold!" He thanked all for coming. "Your purchases must be picked up, paid for, and removed from the building as soon as possible. Egyptian Hall will be closed in an hour and 30 minutes." And, yes, that sounding of the "gong" happened — instead of the traditional hammer slamming down when a sale was made, Mike struck a temple gong that stood on the podium.

The 105-year-old Egyptian Hall Museum has seen its share of relocations, as recently recounted in *MAGIC* ["Egyptian Hall," October 2000]. Mike and partner-in-acquisition George Daily transported the entire David Price Jr. collection from Brentwood, Tennessee to New Oxford, Pennsylvania, only two days after purchasing it from David

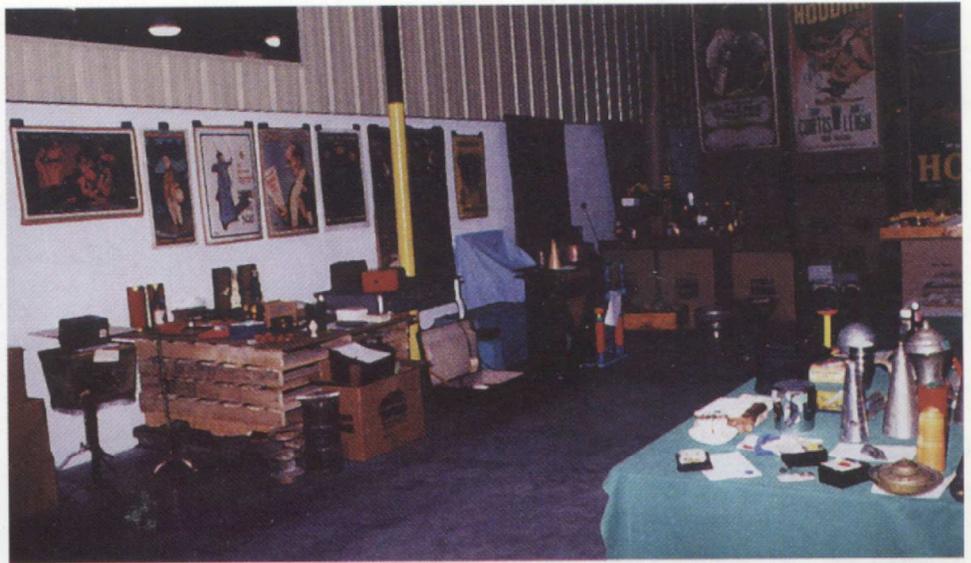
Price III. For six weeks, the warehouse facilities of Yazoo Mills, a cardboard-tube manufacturing company in New Oxford, served as temporary home for Egyptian Hall. During its sojourn, the six tons of the Price collection was methodically divided up by the new owners. Caveney and Daily determined what pieces they would retain to augment their own collections. Reportedly, they kept a ton apiece, then decided what items of the remaining four tons would be made available to other collectors. Yazoo owner, Earl Noel, a friend of George Daily's, and a collector as well, granted George and Mike the complete run of his spacious facilities to organize and eventually conduct the sale and auction.

### The Sale: September 23, 2000

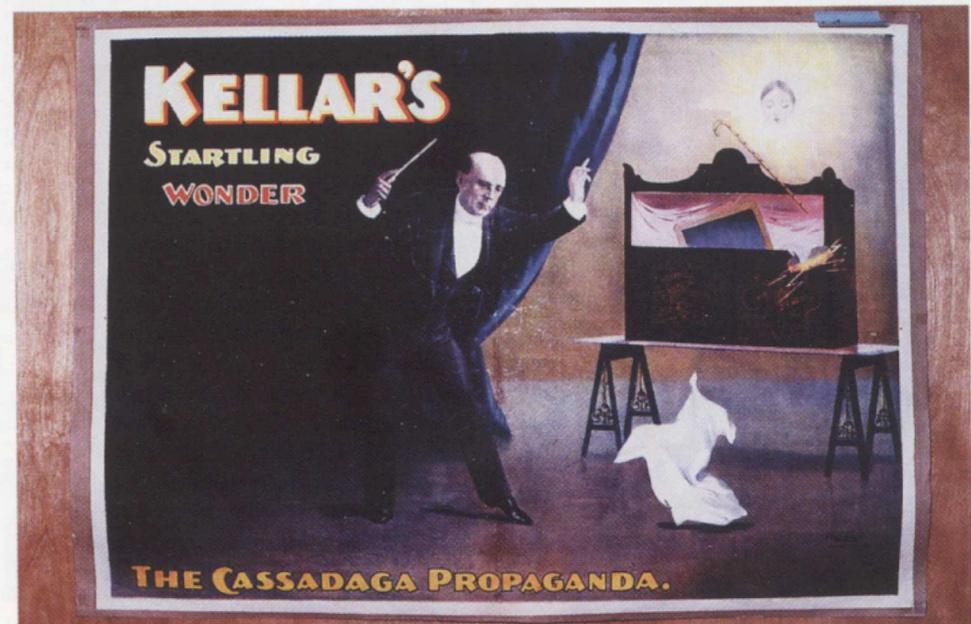
Stretched across a top corner of the building was a sideshow bally panel. "It's a carnival magician." There was a flash from a rolled-down car window and the canvas image of a bygone era was captured on digital film. "You think that one's gonna be for sale?" Gray skies and a drizzle couldn't hamper eager spirits. The sale was scheduled to start at 2 p.m., yet by early a.m., the remote Yazoo warehouse had been found. Collectors milled about the parking lot. "I hear everything's laid out like a supermarket, first come, first served." A few were predicting mayhem. "Could be mob violence... you know how these guys are when it comes to antiquarian magic stuff." Some claimed they'd come not necessarily to buy, just watch. "Hey, if I find a Blackstone lobby card for a decent price, I'm outta here tonight." Intending to take home much more, one big buyer had rented a mini-cargo van.

Open Sesame... the doors of Egyptian Hall were actually unlocked a minute or so before two o'clock. The orderly crowd of slightly less than a hundred was admitted into the warehouse bay that would serve as the next day's auction gallery. There were folding chairs, a podium stage, and a previewing area with the auction lots on display. Those so inclined could take a look at such items as a Martinka-crafted "Two Enchanted Vases and Mysterious Balls," Willard the Wizard's "Vanishing Birdcage," or the nickel/silver "Cannon Ball Trick" created for Alexander Herrmann. There were exquisitely illustrated magic catalogs from Prof. W.J. Judd and Carl Willmann; an extremely rare Ingleby's *Whole Art of Legerdemain* laid next to a scarce Jarrett *Magic and Stage Craft*. Hanging behind the podium were two eight-sheet Strobridge lithos of Thurston's Noah's Ark and Balaam the Donkey. Today, however, the focus was on the items visible beyond the cordoned-off auction area, the untold treasures scattered throughout the rest of the spacious warehouse.

The anxious crowd patiently listened to Caveney's buyer instructions, awaiting the invitation of "Gentlemen, start your engines."



*The calm before the storm. An aisle of the Yazoo Mills warehouse that was devoted to apparatus [above] for sale from the Egyptian Hall Museum collection. For posterity, David Williamson videotapes the contents [shown below] before the crowd of buyers are admitted.*



*The Kellar one-sheet that was won by the man with bidder card #1, Norm Nielsen.*

Then, suddenly, it was run don't walk. The sensory-overloaded shopping spree of the century had begun.

Hundreds upon hundreds of posters, pencil-marked with prices, were stacked atop cardboard-box tables. Cell phones buzzed: "That Carter poster you wanted is \$7,000, and I have it in my hand if you want it." The rare and more desirable stone lithographs were taped to warehouse walls and makeshift columns of stacked cardboard shipping boxes. "I almost bought Thurston's Out of a Hat, but I turned my back and somebody

nabbed it." Tag-team buying was a breeze for one couple with walkie-talkies: "I found the Thurston/Kellar's Successor half-sheet you wanted, but hurry and look at the Germain I just found." A dozen or so of Caveney and Daily's friends helped with crowd control, verification of prices, and provided Post-its to tag desired items.

There were stacks of Blackstone, Kalanag, Virgil, Dante, Levante, Kio, Alexander, et al. Signs identified the different piles: "Posters \$25 and Less," "Panels all Prices," Posters \$26 to \$100," "Spook Show." A mound of

"Miscellaneous" lithographs was marked with prices from \$500 to \$5,000. You could flip through a box containing 300 alphabetized window cards and lobby cards. There was an aisle of apparatus, a shelved-wall of hardbacks and bound periodicals, tables loaded with more books, and boxes full of catalogs from the past century.

Stretching back into the manufacturing area of the building were Kraft-paper-mounted three-, six-, and eight-sheet posters, taped to the fronts of shelving units. Walkways were cleared to accommodate huge 12-, 20-, and 24-sheet billboards. A 28-sheet (over 9-foot high by 25-foot wide) Frederick Bancroft Prince of Magic poster was duct-taped to a humongous stack of poly-wrapped mailing tubes. Priced at \$35,000, Bancroft looked as if he'd be hanging around Egyptian Hall for a while.

Major purchases were made early on. Those familiar with items in the Price collection, having visited Egyptian Hall over the years, were methodical in their shopping. John Gaughan went straight for the Astarte "Maid of the Moon" floating rig. Deep-pocketed collectors, and certain dealers "buying for their customers," took their picks and choices to the holding/check-out counter within the first two hours. By 5:45, George Daily asked Mike to announce that Egyptian Hall would be closing for the day in 30 minutes. Payment was to be made by check, cash, or credit card (with a 3% surcharge) and goods were to be removed from the building that evening.

Pieces of most collections, be they books, apparatus, playbills, posters, photographs, scrapbooks, or ephemera, are perpetually on the move. Sometimes, items find a resting place in a collection only until they can be profitably sold or traded. In today's era of electronic trading, collectibles can conceivably find a home on a web site for merely moments before sold and forced to move on. Within 48 hours, items purchased in New Oxford had surfaced on the internet.

## The Auction: September 24, 2000

Doors opened at 11 a.m. for registration and previewing of all lots listed in the 12-page catalog handed out. Bounteous remnants of the previous day's sale were also made available for further browsing and purchasing. New faces not seen at the sale had arrived.

Sunday's start time of 1 p.m. neared, and 92 numbered bidder cards had been signed for. Mike Caveney, as the self-appointed pitchman, welcomed all and asked for "a moment of thanks." He said everybody should express their profound gratitude to his wife, Tina, and George Daily's wife, Sandy. Without their blessing and approval, Mike and George would not have bought the Egyptian Hall Museum. More importantly, there never would have been an auction/sale

# BIG BUCKS FROM BROOKLYN

Some collectors had knowledge of Rory Feldman from his poster purchases on eBay. He's still in college, but says he "really wants to pursue a career in magic," and become a performer. His older brother, Morgan, is a personal trainer, who also lives in Brooklyn and he's gotten into collecting, too. While their father died 17 years ago, their mother, a schoolteacher, encourages her boys to "keep bringing home the posters."

The Feldman brothers stormed the Egyptian Hall Museum Auction & Sale. They bid on and bought just about anything with Howard Thurston's name on it. What they spent at the Saturday sale wasn't confirmed, but guesstimates were \$90,000 to \$100,000. After the Sunday auction, at which time their bids had tallied up to \$38,300 for the day, Rory and Morgan paused long enough to talk about their passions for posters.

**MAGIC:** How old are you guys and how long have you been into magic?

**RORY:** I'm 19 years old, and I've been doing magic since I was about eight years old. I used to get *MAGIC* Magazine, and I'd see all of Norm Nielsen's advertisements.

**MAGIC:** Blame it on us. Morgan, how old are you?

**MORGAN:** I'm 21. My interest started with the George posters. Then, we were trying to get Thurston.

**RORY:** Now, we probably have 50 Thurstons...

**MORGAN:** I'd say more, with all the different images and variations.

**MAGIC:** How many did you pick up at this sale?

**RORY:** Probably 30 or 35. We got practically every Thurston in the sale, and every Thurston in the auction that we didn't have. We got all the billboards and the eight-sheets.

**MAGIC:** So, it's safe to say Thurston paper is your specialty?

**MORGAN:** Yeah. We also got about 1,250 Thurston letters...

**RORY:** ...actually that makes two to three thousand letters that we've got.

**MAGIC:** How long have you concentrated on Thurston?

**RORY:** About a year and a half, two years tops.

**MORGAN:** Hopefully, we'll have every Thurston there is. There was one image here at the auction that now we've got five different versions of, a three-sheet, half-sheet, one-sheet, a window card...

**RORY:** ...and we got this billboard here, a 20-sheet, that I already have one of in my house.

**MAGIC:** So, you're into duplicates, as well?

**MORGAN:** Since there are only two copies of this billboard, we bought it... just for the sake of kind of dominating the image. I figure we should have both of them.



Morgan [left] and Rory Feldman.

**MAGIC:** What are your collecting plans for the future?

**RORY:** Actually, I hope to start collecting other collections and open a museum. Hopefully, I can get every single collection that exists, Copperfield's, Klosterman's, and put them together and eventually open a museum, just like the art museums in the city.

**MAGIC:** That sounds pretty ambitious... if money is no object... which leads to a final question about the spending you've done this weekend. You two dropped some pretty big bucks. Where does that all come from?

**RORY:** Like I tell everybody else who asks that same question, "It's just a little secret."



Yet another bay of the Yazoo warehouse covered with cardboard-box tables full of posters and books.

of the duplicates had it not been for the encouragement of both Tina and Sandy.

Of the first three numbered-lots offered, all lithographs, each received winning bids under their catalog estimates: Lot 1 - Kassner poster. 1 sheet Friedlander. Portrait in globe. Estimate \$500/600 went for \$300; Lot 2 - Kassner poster. 2-sheet Friedlander. Levitation. Estimate \$900/1,000 went for \$400; Lot 3 - Great Raymond poster. Half-sheet. Girl in cage. Estimate \$1,200/1,500

sold for \$800. At first, this seemed indicative that pre-sale estimates might have been placed too high. Yet, by the time Lot 9 - Fu Manchu poster. 1 sheet portrait with hands. Estimate 1,000/1,200 came up, bidding seemed to get more on target. Lot 9 went for \$1,600. Lot 10 - Okito poster. Extremely rare 3-sheet. Signed by Okito. Estimate \$8,000/9,000 was the first "passed" lot of the day. When Caveney couldn't find a bid for \$4,000, Daily yelled, "Pass it!"

There were less than a dozen lots passed on and removed from the sale. Several of these were multiple-sheet posters. "I couldn't buy those eight-sheets," said one collector, "unless I had someplace like a museum to hang 'em." With the exception of the eight-sheet Thurstons and Kellars, the multiple-sheeters sometimes went for less than half of their low estimates. Lot 177 - Jansen poster. 8-sheet. Cannon Illusion. Estimate \$6,500/7,000 and Lot 178 - Dante poster. 8-sheet. Thurston-Kellar Mysteries. Estimate \$6,500/7,000 sold for \$3,000 each.

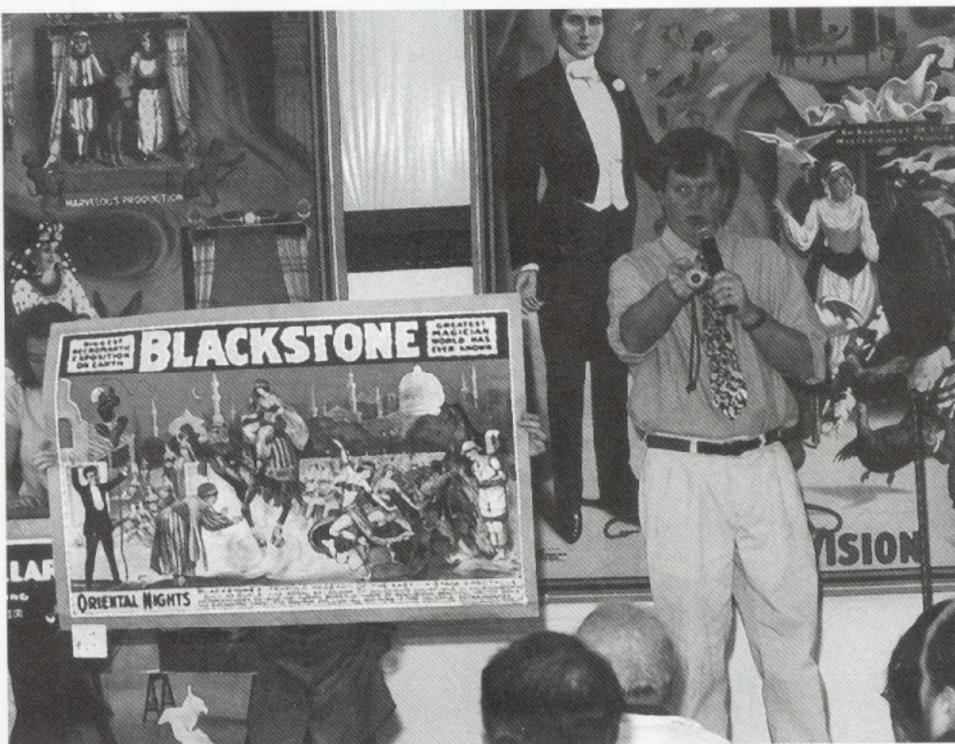
Prices on Thurston paper skyrocketed with Rory Feldman's aggressive bids. In a consecutive run of 12 lots, he bought 11, all at over-the-top prices. Notable was Lot 42 - Thurston poster. Panel. Indian Rope Trick. Estimate 1,500/2,000 for \$5,250.

Values always hold on anything Houdini. A half-sheet Houdini King of Cards sold for \$8,500. The first edition, German-text *Mein Training und Mein Tricks* by Houdini went for \$3,500. Two three-sheet Houdini posters, catalog estimated at \$1,000/1,200 each, were bought by Dorothy Dietrich, who operates the Houdini Museum in Scranton, Pennsylvania, for a combined price of \$9,250.

What was the most exciting moment of the day? How about when Caveney sounded the gong at precisely 3:07 EST, and Norm Nielsen finally lowered his bidder card #1 and smiled. After four-and-a-half intense back-and-forth minutes between Norm, bidders in the room, and finally a shoot-out with a "to order" absentee bidder, Lot 80 - Kellar poster. Strobbridge 1-sheet. Cassadaga Propaganda. Estimate \$9,000/10,000) went to the Nielsen collection for \$23,500. The hearty round of applause for Norm's triumphant purchase was only matched later that afternoon by the cheers Dennis Haney received when he scored Lot 155 - Chung Ling Soo poster. Half-sheet. Suee Seen with vase. Estimate \$8,000/9,000. The bidding just seemed to halt with Denny's spontaneous bid of \$4,500. When Caveney asked for higher bids, there was silence. "Are we going to let Denny have this Chung Ling Soo for \$4,500?" A resounding "Yeah!" came back from the crowd. To the Baltimore performer and magic dealer's ears, the crash of that gong was like a "gift of the gods."

The Egyptian Hall Museum Auction, which took four-and-a-half hours, had its sleepers, its available-for-the-first-time-ever treasures, and some truly good buys, as well as its share of overpriced and unsold items. It was a more-than-successful field day for the colorful cross-section of collectors who traveled to New Oxford. And even if some magicians came just for the camaraderie, or hoped only to take home an inexpensive souvenir of the historic sale, everybody there shared in the glory of an event that was truly unique. ♦

PHOTOS: JOHN MOEHRING



The very Blackstone one-sheet from Egyptian Hall Museum that was reproduced in Charles and Regina Reynolds' 100 Years of Magic Posters book was sold for a top bid of \$3,500.

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