Dai Vernon and the Harlequin Act

The Chinese fan used in the Harlequin Act was given to Vernon in 1938 by Charlie Miller, and is now in the author's collection.

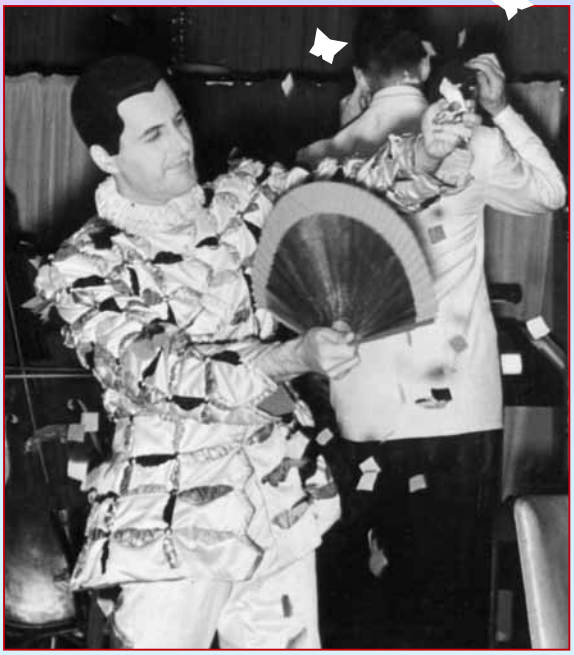
Over the Rainbow

By David Ben

The year is 1937. Dai Vernon is a resident of New York City, and he is trying, at the urging of his friend and patron, Garrick Spencer, to develop a stage act.

As Vernon continued to waffle and drift, some of his staunchest allies started to waver. Paul Fox, whose personal life had taken its own turn for the worse with the onslaught of arthritis in the hand that guided much of his engraving work wrote to Faucett Ross, "I think it smells to high heaven the way Dai has been about the 'act' with all the splendid backing from Spencer." Fox suggested in his missives to Ross that history indicated that it is not what you do, but how you do it.

The most successful performers, performers like Malini and Rosini, performed standard effects, but mesmerized their audiences with personality. Fox's



pessimism may have been rooted in his own lack of confidence, the notion that he and Vernon were, in many respects, two of a kind — magicians who believed that the magic should be just as mesmerizing as the personality of the performer. Spencer did not waiver, however. He believed in Vernon and continued to offer his support.

And then came an epiphany…

One evening, Spencer and Vernon found themselves discussing the merits of the Cups and Balls. Both men loved the effect but agreed that it was not a suitable trick for a nightclub floorshow. First, it was now over-exposed; many contemporary performers featured the trick. Second, the trick, according to Spencer, was simply too confusing for a nightclub audience, a crowd that would often talk and drink throughout a performance, to follow. It would be much more effective, he suggested, if it could be performed with just one cup and one ball. The audience could then follow the sequence of effects with ease.

Spencer's comment prompted Vernon to canvass his encyclopedic knowledge of magic for a routine that could be performed with just one cup and one ball. Tom Osborne had just sketched out such a routine in his then-recent book, *Cups and Balls Magic,* published by Kanter's Magic Shop of Philadelphia. Vernon recalled reading its predecessor — an effect published in 1909 by another New York area performer, Burling Hull — in a booklet titled *Deviltry*. Hull's notion was quite simple: the performer would vanish a billiard ball and then make it reappear beneath a paper cone that had been, moments before it had been placed on a table, shown to be empty. Hull reprinted this sequence the following year in a more elaborate work, *Expert Billiard Ball Manipulation*. Two variations on this theme appeared in *The Sphinx* shortly afterwards. Vernon remembered that one of the variations, a contribution by Scottish magician De Vega in the January 1911 issue, was particularly interesting. De Vega offered a novel way of making the ball vanish. He would place the ball on the back on his right hand and then, in the act of covering the ball with the cone, secretly remove the ball without any false moves or difficult sleights.

Vernon forged a cone from paper and, with one of the billiard balls he had acquired from Floyd Thayer years earlier at hand, experimented with the technique. The magic flowed from his fingertips like a jazz musician extemporizing on a standard. In this case, however, the piece could hardly be called a standard. The melody had been abandoned for over 25 years. It was a theme buried in the recess of his mind. Vernon discovered that he could not only make the ball vanish and reappear but also, magically, penetrate the crown of the cone. He could even make the ball change color and, if need be, shape. Spencer, enthused, suggested that the cone become a motif for the act. What costume or character they asked, did a cone conjure up?

The answer: a harlequin. Harlequin or *arlequin,* a character whose *Comedia Dell'Arte* dramatic roots are often connected to the comic representation of a medieval demon, had become, by the early part of the 20th century, a visual icon for playfulness, mischievousness, and devilry; in short, it was the perfect character for performing magic. Vernon now had his theme, a thread from which he could weave a tapestry of magic.

Vernon performing the Cups and Balls at New York City's Kit Kat Klub in 1936, two years prior to the creation of the Harlequin Act.

Performing as harlequin had other advantages. First, the character and the type of magic he would perform were far removed from the manner and magic performed by Cardini and his imitators. Harlequin was also a universal icon, one that transcended many cultural boundaries and one that, when combined with music, Vernon was confident could usher his audience into a world of wonder. Best of all, from Vernon's perspective, the harlequin created an alter ego; Vernon was not required to be the harlequin off-stage.

Separating an off-stage character from an on-stage persona, particularly in the variety arts, was difficult. Most were expected to be *on* at all times. Often the performer himself promoted this. Alexander Herrmann and Max Malini were rarely off-stage, electing to perform magic on the street and in restaurants in order to draw attention to their work. Houdini, although he did not perform escapes at the drop of hat, made sure that those around him were aware that they were in the presence of *the man*. William Robinson, who had achieved fame as Chung Ling Soo, a Chinese conjuror, maintained the fiction off-stage, speaking at press junkets through an interpreter in order not to risk alienating the affections of his audience by disclosing that he was an actor playing the part of a Chinese magician. Vernon could remain a nondescript New Yorker by day and transform himself into a harlequin, a society entertainer or any other character, at night. He enlisted his wife, Jeanne, to design the costume. It had been years since she had been inspired to attack a task with such relish. She welcomed the opportunity to conduct research into *Commedia Dell'Arte* and tap her talent as a visual artist.

The magic flowed from his fingertips like a jazz musician extemporizing on a standard.

Jeanne set off to design the costume and Vernon and Spencer continued to muse about the structure and content of the act. The Chinese Linking Rings had always fascinated Vernon. As a boy, he had seen William Hilliar, the founder of *The Sphinx*, perform the trick on the grounds of the Canadian National Exhibition.

Vernon had even fabricated his own rings out of iron before acquiring a set from a magic supply depot. His interest in the trick had never wavered and he continued to develop original twists and turns with the trick, prompting Faucett Ross to write about them in 1932 to friends within his circle. Although the harlequin character precluded him from performing his most recent routine, one performed in Chinese robe and mask, Vernon was confident that he could choreograph elements of it into a new sequence, one suitable for the new character and costume. Much would depend on the music. It had to be perfect.

Vernon and Spencer considered music an integral element of the act, one just as important as the magic or the personality of the performer. Few magicians worked entirely to music and most of those who did performed their magic to snippets of popular songs or original music written for their turn. Spencer suggested that Vernon choreograph magic to classical music and Vernon embraced the idea. He remembered the thrill he experienced as a child at concerts he attended in Ottawa, and imagined that people would be just as intrigued by a Harlequin that performed magic to great music as he was as a boy by the man who waved the baton in front of the orchestra.

It helped that both men were interested in music, Vernon primarily in ragtime and jazz and Spencer in the classical repertoire. For the rings, Spencer suggested Vernon compose a routine to the "Carillon de Westminster," the closing movement of the third suite of Louis Vierne's *Pieces de Fantaisie*. Vierne was, for much of his career, the resident organist of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, and was known for his virtuoso skill and ability to compose ethereal, impressionistic symphonic works for the organ. "Carillon de Westminster," inspired by the Chimes of Westminster Cathedral in London, was his most popular composition. Vierne wrote the piece in 1926 for his inaugural tour of the United States. Spencer provided Vernon with a 78-rpm recording of the work and Vernon set off to develop a routine, the linking and unlinking of solid bands of steel, to the recording.

Vernon's approach to the trick was fresh. Just as the Cups and Balls begat the cone and ball, Vernon distilled the Chinese Linking Rings down to its essence, reducing the number of rings in the routine from the eight, ten or even twelve rings manipulated by most magicians, first to five, and ultimately to four. It was a minimalist approach, one that emphasized grace, elegance, and beauty rather than the brute force most exhibited by clanging one ring against another.

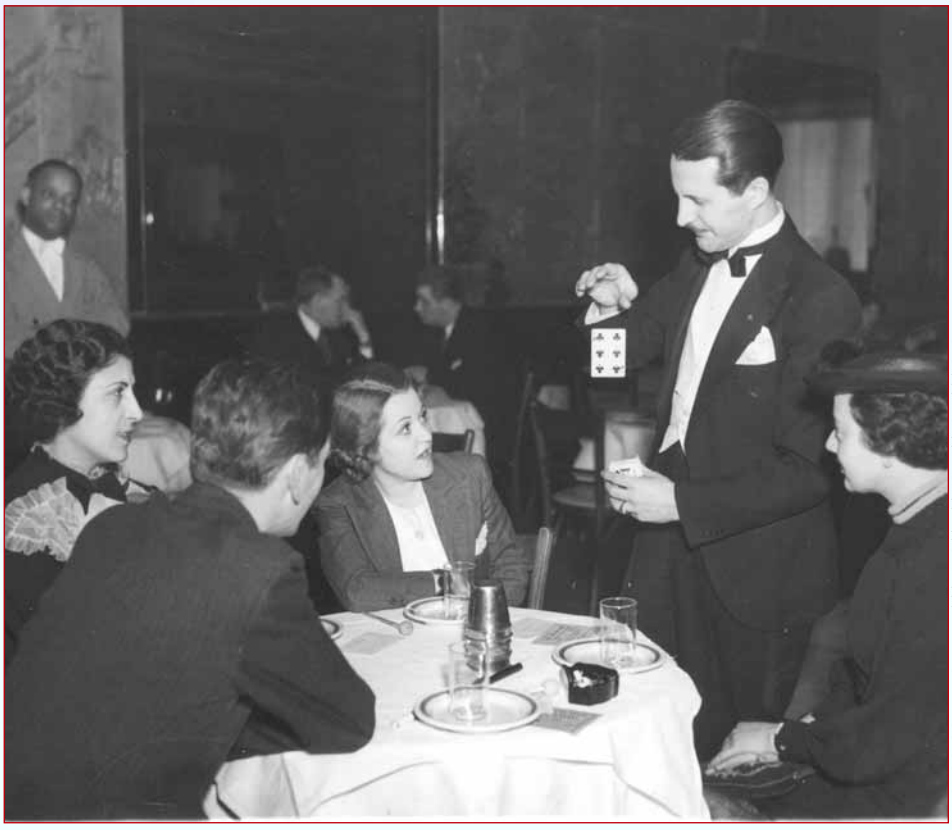
As the routine was choreographed to a specific score, one that required Vernon to weave the tonality of the rings with the chimes in the original score, Vernon was forced to redesign the apparatus used for the trick. Traditional Linking Rings had a tinny sound, not at all in character with the chimes of Westminster. Fortunately, Paul Fox had a solution: hollow rings — tubular bells. Vernon used 3/4-inch Shelby tubing, a pure steel tube with extremely thin walls, and found a firm that was used to handling Shelby tubing in the manufacture of dirigibles and could weld two hollow tubes together without plugging the ends. (Plugs would dampen the tone.) The firm made Vernon a set of five rings, each one twelve inches in diameter.

With the ring routine in progress, Vernon focused on the act's opening sequence, the one with the cone and ball. Advantage players had always stressed the importance of transitions — how do you get "into the move" and "out of the move." The same issue applied to magic — How could Vernon make the transition into and out of the trick with the ball and cone? Fortunately, another Tom Osborne manuscript, the *3-1 Rope Trick*, caught his attention. The trick, the magical transformation of three cords into one, was simple and direct. Vernon would display three sash cords, sometimes red and other times green, of equal length and then gather them together in his left hand. After a suitable magical gesture, he would take hold of two ends, separate his arms, and display that he had fused the cords together into one long piece. It was, he thought, a terrific opening number and it created an opportunity to move into the routine with the ball and cone by gathering up the cord in his left hand, stroking the bundle with his right, and producing a billiard ball at his fingertips.

Vernon then placed the cord aside, removed a handkerchief from a pocket, and performed a series of feats (inspired by J. Warren Keane) with the billiard ball and handkerchief. He eventually produced a leather cone, six inches in height, from beneath the handkerchief and embarked on his minimalist version of the Cups and Balls, a bewildering series of manipulations with the ball, cone, and handkerchief. He concluded the sequence by producing a saltshaker from beneath the cone.

Once the cone had been handed off to Jeanne, Vernon poured a large quantity of salt from the shaker into his clenched left fist. He then magically made the salt disappear as he threw it into the air. Moments later, it rematerialized, Vernon snatching it out of thin air with his right hand. He removed a small decorative tray from his pocket, held it in his left hand, and allowed the salt to stream forth from his right hand on to the tray.

The Salt Pour was an unusual effect. It exemplified how old chestnuts are altered over time as many minds attempt to simplify technique and clarify effect. Vernon had first read about the trick in 1909 in Downs' *The Art of Magic*. The trick was performed close-up rather than on a stage and relied on pure sleight of hand and unflinching audacity. Emil Jarrow, a vaudeville performer and sleight-of-hand expert, adapted the trick for the stage in the 1920s, substituting tobacco for salt. In 1931, at the annual conclave of the International Brotherhood of Magicians



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That seemingly amazed nightclub patron watching the Rising Cards is Vernon's wife, Jeanne, who had assisted onstage even before their marriage in 1924.

held that year in Columbus, Ohio, a magician from Minneapolis named Henry Gordien performed the trick, again with salt and close-up, but with a new method. Faucett Ross approached Gordien for the secret; Gordien readily acquiesced and showed Ross the appliance he used to perform the trick, giving him permission to perform the routine. Ross wasted little time in relaying the information to Paul Fox and was surprised to learn that Fox had already turned his inventive mind towards improving the trick years earlier. Ross also communicated his findings to Vernon. Now, years later, Vernon put it all together, choreographing a sequence with salt that was suitable for the stage. It became the final segment of his opening mélange of magic for the Harlequin Act, a sequence he performed to, at Garrick Spencer's suggestion, the Overture to Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*.

Vernon now had his opening segment (sash cord, cone and ball, and salt) and the middle segment (the Chinese Linking Rings). He needed a grand finish, something unusual, graceful, and spectacular.

The character and costume of the harlequin did not permit him to elongate his body pursuant to his original intention. Vernon then became intrigued with the idea of scaling playing cards that would explode, unfurling a snowstorm of flowers and confetti over the heads of his audience. The cards, loaded with confetti and paper flowers that would spring to life, proved difficult to construct and had an unreliable release mechanism. He knew, however, that he was on the right track. Fortunately, Vernon was a student of magic, all magic, and had witnessed great performers from a variety of cultures as they toured North America. He recalled a Japanese magician, possibly the great Ten-Ichi, staged a beautiful piece in Montreal with a butterfly and a fan.

The performer created a butterfly out of paper, and then appeared to bring it to life through the skillful flicks, twists, and turns of a fan. Traditionally, in the hands of a master Japanese magician, the butterfly would then settle on a potted plant and discover a mate. The two butterflies would then dance in the air and come to rest near water, where one accidentally drowned. The other, a mate for life, next took its own life. The performer then transformed the butterflies into a torrential snowstorm of paper that cascaded over the heads of the audience. The Butterfly and Fan was, and remains, a poetic and visual landmark for the art. Vernon thought he could distill the trick down to its essence and eliminate the love story while still retaining its visual strength, one with the same emotional arc that David Bamberg employed in his routine with a bear: gaiety followed by sadness followed by surprise and wonder.

Vernon researched the flight of butterflies. Charlie Miller sent him two beautiful fans, one

Vernon's grand entrance as the Harlequin.

The 3-1 Rope Trick performed with a colorful sash cord.

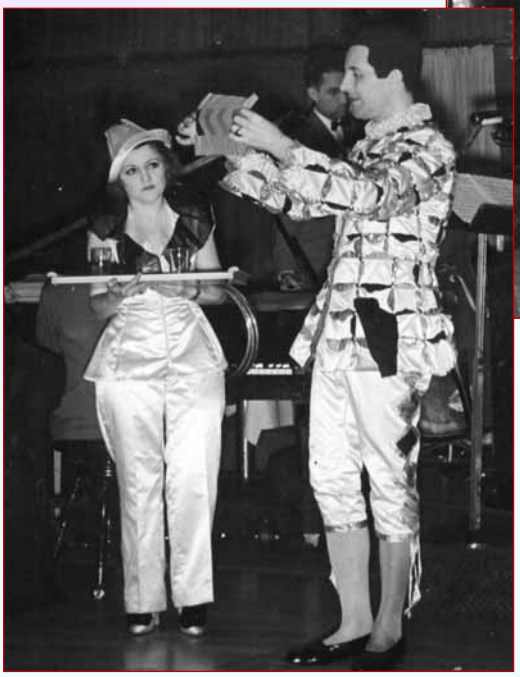
The surprise appearance of the billiard ball for the Ball and Cone routine.

A playful moment when the ball was found not beneath the cone.

A shaker full of salt poured into a clinched fist disappeared.

The vanished salt magically reappeared in a sparkling stream.

The minimalist Linking Ring routine performed with four rings.



Tearing the tissue papers for the Butterfly/Snowstorm finale.

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red, the other blue, both trimmed with gold, which he had purchased in San Francisco's Chinatown, and a metal form designed by Paul Fox that would punch out scores of butterflies from rice paper, so Vernon could create the trick's finish. Vernon discovered, unfortunately, that draughts and air currents made it difficult to perform the routine as envisioned. Not wishing to discard the concept entirely, he visited the Bronx Zoo and explored the possibility of producing live moths, letting them loose for the finale, when they would fly to the lights.

Vernon eventually discarded the notion of using butterflies altogether and turned to an even more simple narrative line, one described superficially by Hatton and Plate in their seminal 1910 work, *Magicians' Tricks How They Are Done*. By 1926, it was part of Lesson Four of the *Tarbell Course in Magic* as the "Chinese Paper Mystery and Wintertime In China." It was also the same routine that Vernon's friend, Stuart Judah, had tried to teach Houdini to use for what turned out to be Houdini's final tour. The performer displayed a twenty-four by six inch strip of white tissue paper and slowly tore it into several pieces that were then folded into a small package. The performer made a magical gesture and then opened the package. The strip was now restored to its original condition. He then repeated the sequence of tearing the strip of paper into small pieces and folding them together. Instead of opening the package, however, he dunked the paper into a glass of water, scooped out the saturated ball with a small stick, and wrung the water out of the bundle. He then picked up a fan and transformed the bundle into the snowstorm of paper, the motion of the fan rocketing confetti-like tissue over the heads of the audience. Vernon choreographed the entire sequence to music suggested by Garrick Spencer: a segment of the acclaimed violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz's 78-rpm recording of Camille Saint-Saens' *Rondo Capriccioso in A minor, Opus 28*.

The Harlequin Act now had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Spencer commissioned Felix Meyer, a friend and acclaimed musical arranger, to orchestrate *Sleeping Beauty, Carillons De Westminster* and *Rondo Capriccioso in A minor* into a single arrangement with enough charts to outfit a nightclub ensemble. Jeanne Verner, by this time, had also completed the rendering for the costume. She tabled two designs: one of Harlequin performing a trick with a handkerchief and a second one of Pierrot performing a trick with a billiard ball. Vernon would be the Harlequin and Jeanne would be Pierrot, his assistant. Spencer handed the renderings over to another acquaintance, a costume designer and theatrical tailor, for execution.

The designer said, "I understand exactly: you have to wear a large cape, you throw it open and they see a beautiful emerald green

silk lining, you swish the other side and it's bright red. This startles people, they sit up, they scream." Initially, Spencer wanted the color scheme to be restricted to black, white, and gray. Vernon and Spencer, however, were swept away by the designer's enthusiasm and authorized him to construct a white satin costume with splashes of color and ribbons, and a cape that was fourteen feet in length. The costume required Vernon to wear hosiery, one red stocking and the other green, green eye shadow, and a skullcap. Jeanne's costume, Pierrot, was understated but elegant, completely appropriate for her role as assistant. It was now time to workshop the act in front of an audience.

In a May 6, 1938 letter to Eddie McLaughlin, a close friend of famed coin manipulator T. Nelson Downs, Faucett Ross wrote: "I had a long letter from Dai last week in Philadelphia. He played two weeks in Harrisburg Pa; being held over the second week and says the engagement was a real success. Then he jumped to Philly for a week (last week) while he played the Hotel Adelphia (Café Marguery)... Dai says he stopped the show several times and got over very well. Says an English agent caught the act and cabled recommendations to England. Also a scout from Billy Rose's Casa Mañana was there and possibly it's either England or Billy Rose's. Dai asked me to send the letter on to Paul Fox [Fox] otherwise I'd send it to you but above is the gist of it. Jeanne is working in the act and doing a good job of it & they've hired a good woman to take care of the kids."

Max Holden reported in his "New York Notes" column in the May 1938 issue of *The Linking Ring*: "Every so often we have a new face in magic that comes in to the front and starts a new craze in magic. This time it is not a new face but the greatest card man in the world. He has built up a most wonderful act of magic that is a sensation and strange to say No Card Tricks. Dai Vernon has produced an act that he has been working on for two years and now has it perfected and opened here at one of the night spots and was immediately booked for Harrisburg and they held him over and now is busy signing contracts with the prospect of the Rainbow Room here in N.Y.C. with European offers, etc."

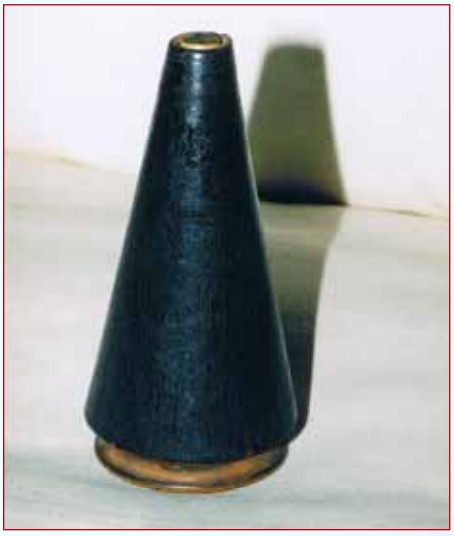
The classic pose of "The Professor," the title bestowed on Vernon by his attorney friend Garrick M. Spencer in 1936, was photographed by Hal Phyfe in 1938.

Initially, Vernon was interested in traveling to Europe. He had dreamt of performing in England and socializing further with English magicians. He had met several recently who were on tour to magic conventions in the States, and Vernon considered one of them, John Ramsay, a greengrocer from Ayr, Scotland, a master of subtle sleight of hand. Vernon had been warned against traveling to Europe, however, by both Chang and Bamberg and elected to follow their advice. Fortunately, Spencer had a contact at the Rainbow Room and Vernon was invited to be the fourth magician to play the club. The three other magicians were Fred Keating, Miaco (a manipulator in the Cardini-mode), and comedy magician Russell Swann. The Rainbow Room, perched on the 65th floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the tallest and most prominent building in the Herculean development, symbolized all of the glamour and elegance New York nightlife had to offer.

Even though Vernon had spent two years creating the Harlequin Act — the longest and most intense period he had ever devoted to non-gambling artifice — he was not satisfied with its development. He sought both a more dramatic opening number and a coda to the act. For the opening, he thought a trick described in 1907 by Ellison Stanyon in *Stanyon's Serial Lessons in Conjuring, No. 16* might fit the bill. It had been performed by the English magician Martin Chapender at Egyptian Hall in 1904. Chapender entered wearing white gloves, and when he removed the gloves and tossed them into the air they morphed into a white dove. For the act's coda, Vernon thought of using Compeer, a pet monkey that Jeanne had named Compeer because she thought "it looked so much like some of the members of the Society of American Magicians." Vernon wanted to toss a coconut, much like the white gloves, into the air and have it transform into Compeer, dressed as a harlequin.

Unfortunately, Compeer was not as cooperative as a dove. Vernon couldn't train the little monkey. Vernon learned that the few times he inserted the trick into his show that Compeer was more interested in masturbating before the public than he was in following the script. Whether it was the lights or the music, or simply that he was in front of a crowd, Compeer would play with himself. Vernon said that he only used the monkey a half dozen times before he had to give up all thoughts of performing the trick properly.

Contracts were signed to open at the Rainbow Room in June of 1938. Days before the official opening, as Vernon rehearsed the act in the room, Robert Reinhart, the acerbic *Variety* critic, offered him some counsel. He arranged for Jose Limon, an acclaimed choreographer, to add grace notes to the Harlequin Act. Vernon had two sessions with Limon, each long enough to shatter his confidence in both his ability and the act. Although Limon was enthusiastic and optimistic, Vernon realized for the first time the enormous challenge that faced him. The Harlequin Act required him to be not just a magician but also an actor and dancer, skills for which he had had no formal training.



The leather cone fabricated for the Ball and Cone routine is in the author's collection.

The die used to punch out the tissue butterflies was designed by magical craftsman Paul Fox.

PROP PHOTOS BY JULIE ENG

Vernon described his sessions with Limon: "He went through the pantomime of these tricks. The beautiful way he held everything; the things he did just sparkled. He did no magic — just the color and the style — months and years of training. Then I felt incomplete; I knew I was only doing 1/100th of what was possible with my act and I lost heart. What really disgusted me was seeing Jose Limon doing ballet with it and I realized how badly I was doing compared with how it could be done."

Spencer attributed Vernon's lack of confidence to nerves and tried to calm him. Being nervous, Spencer explained, was a sign of a true artist. He added that even Jack Dempsey, the heavyweight champion of the world, would bite his nails and walk around like a caged lion before he got into the ring. Once the bell rang, however, Dempsey was a cool, calculated fighter. Virtuosity, Spencer explained, would always shine through. Vernon, reassured that others felt the same nerves, took comfort in Spencer's remarks and opened as scheduled on Monday, June 20, 1938, accompanied by the Rainbow Room's resident ensemble, Ben Culter and his Orchestra.

The New York critics were effusive. The critic for *Variety* exclaimed, "Dai Vernon, one of the ablest card handlers and close up workers in the prestidigitating field, has arranged a novel floor show routine for the Rainbow Room. Deserting the dress suit formula, Vernon takes a leaf from the pages of magical history and appears in a swell looking Harlequin costume… It's a natural for smart spots."

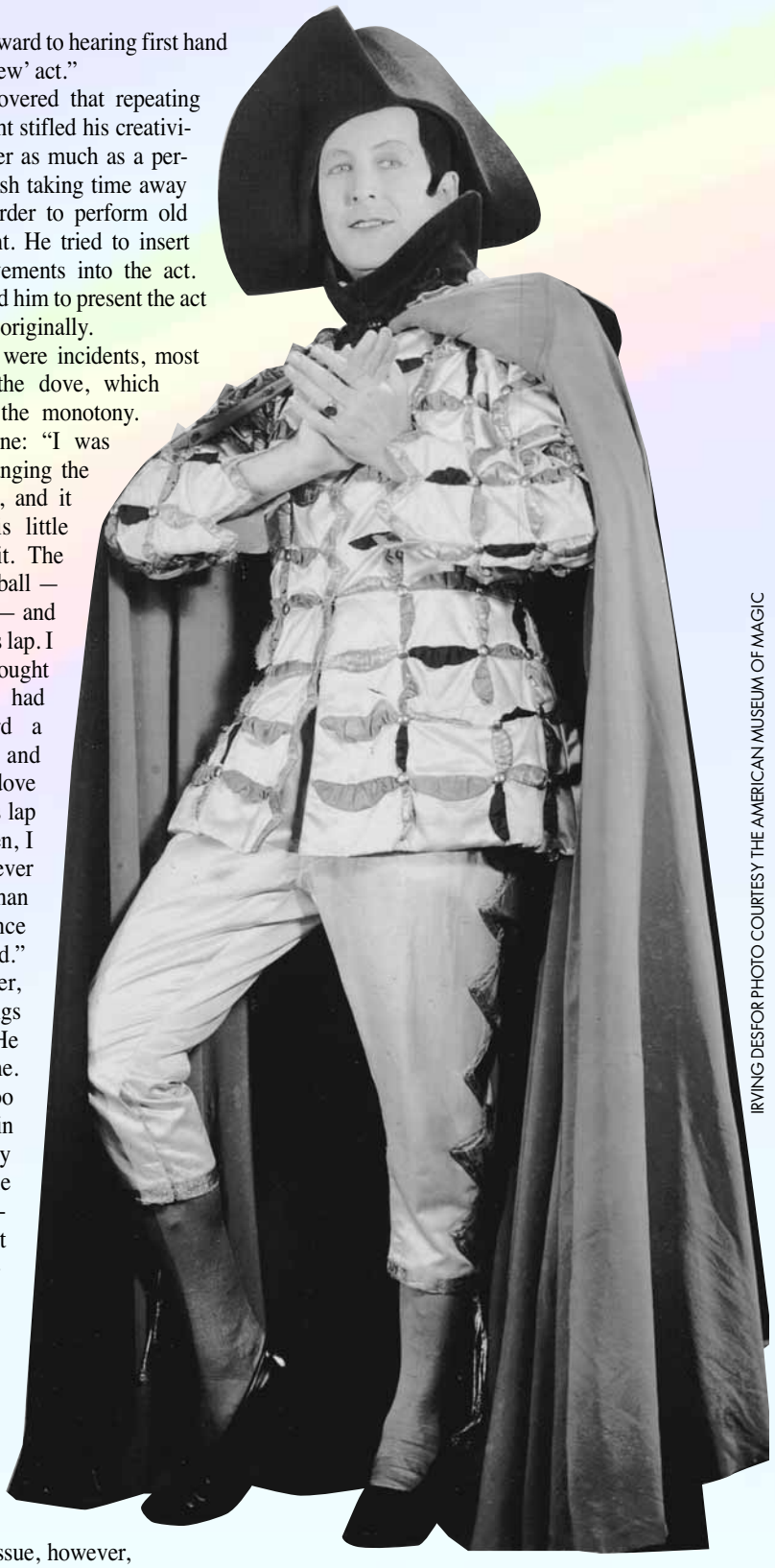
Columnist Hy Gardner said, "Cardini calls Dai Vernon the only magician he'd take his hat off to. Blackstone says that Vernon is his idea of a real magician. He's a sort of Paul Draper of sleight-of-hand artists, smooth, suave, sleek, and yet dazzling." The critic for *New Yorker* quipped, "A sleightly fey atmosphere prevails these nights up in the Rainbow Room where Dai Vernon as 'Harlequin' does a sleight-of-hand act. It's all pantomime, with an elfin musical accompaniment, and the whole thing has a strangely hypnotic effect. Mr. Vernon, as far as I'm concerned, is mammy." Vernon's engagement was extended from one week to ten.

Paul Fox cabled his congratulations to Vernon and added, "Big news if it means you have definitely decided to stop side stepping opportunities." He then wrote Ross: Did you see the A.P. syndicated three column write up of Dai — three columns with three column photo — doing the Linking Rings in the Rainbow Grill? Swell! Did I get a thrill way out here! It was in the Pueblo paper… Just had a letter from Bob Rinehart — he flew out to Hollywood and he is flying in here tomorrow arriving at nine o'clock to remain over until Sunday afternoon. Know nothing about his plans. Am looking forward to hearing first hand the details of Dai's 'new' act."

Vernon soon discovered that repeating the act night after night stifled his creativity. He was a composer as much as a performer and didn't relish taking time away from new work in order to perform old work night after night. He tried to insert new pieces and movements into the act. Management reminded him to present the act that had been booked originally.

Fortunately, there were incidents, most of which involved the dove, which helped to break up the monotony. Vernon speaks of one: "I was using the gloves, changing the gloves into the dove, and it happened. I had this little dove, and I threw it. The dove went like a baseball — I thought it was dead — and it landed in a woman's lap. I was scared stiff; I thought the poor little dove had died. Then I heard a tremendous laugh and applause. The little dove had landed in a lady's lap and laid an egg. Listen, I don't think anybody ever did a better trick than that! The audience laughed and applauded."

Vernon, however, continued to find things to complain about. He wanted a new costume. The original was too flamboyant. The satin distracted the eye away from some of the magic and was expensive to clean. Also, it was difficult to coordinate the magic with the music. Because the Ben Culter Orchestra featured jazz musicians, they were unaccustomed to playing a classical score with the precision that the act demanded. The real issue, however, was a familiar one: Vernon had accepted the challenge of creating an act that was both an artistic and commercial success and now that it was within his grasp, it was time to turn his attention towards another goal. This did not sit well with Jeanne. For her, the act provided a measure of stability. Once again, just when prospects were looking up, her husband contemplated a change of scenery and act. The pattern was all too predictable. ❖



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Dai Vernon: A Biography, written by David Ben, is scheduled for release this month by Squash Publishing. The 400-page hardcover with dust jacket retails for $39.95 and may be purchased through most magic dealers or online at www.squashpublications.com.