



ANTHONY DARKSTONE BROOK IN CONVERSATION WITH BOB BLAU

In August 2000, my son Charles and I were invited by the TAOM 2000 President Scott Wells to attend the TAOM convention in Dallas, Texas, USA. And what a convention it was! You can read more on this in another section.

Eugene Burger once told me that it is the people that make a convention. He was absolutely right. During the convention I had several opportunities to spend time with many wonderful magician friends, both old and new. One of them was the great Bill Palmer and during one of our conversations the name of Bob Blau cropped up.

Imagine our joy and pleasure a few hours later when my son Charles and I were introduced to fine looking gentleman in a red beret. A broad welcoming smile and an animated conversation ensued. Much of what followed was a delightful journey into a secret world that very few magicians in this world have had the privilege of undertaking.

However, as we neared the end of conversation, Bob and his wife Thelma found out that after Dallas we would be going on to Houston to perform; he extended a cordial invitation for us to visit him at his home.

After arriving in Houston, close friend and brother Magician, Ken Neble collected us from my sister's home in Pearland, where we were staying, and drove us a few miles down the road to meet with Bob and Thelma.

No sooner had the gates sprung open and we were parking the car, down the path comes a sprightly gentleman wearing his trademark red beret and around his neck hung several medallions testifying to his illustrious 90 year career in magic. This is not a mis-print. In October 2000, Bob celebrated his 98th birthday! Forget any images of an aged old man. Bob is far from that! He has a mind that can rival any modern computer!

Unless you are a true devotee of the art of magic and been around for a while it is entirely possible that many of you reading this may not have heard of Bob Blau. It is precisely for this reason that I wanted to share the experience. It is like finding a bottle of Latour '57 and offering a glass to brother connoisseurs. When I suggested the idea of writing an article on Bob for the site, Steve Dacri was delighted. To quote Steve's words " this is exactly what our site is all about - sharing the experience of magic!"

Bob's picture has been on the front cover of Juggler, MUM and The Linking Ring magazines. He is The Dean of Texas Magicians. The International Brotherhood of Magicians Ring 39 in Houston, Texas is called the Bob Blau Ring. My son Charles and I are honored and proud to be members.

It was really a fabulous evening visiting with them and we chatted about all kinds of things and finished the evening in his inner Sanctum. Bob and Thelma were gracious hosts and I consider myself most fortunate to have been a guest at his home. What follows is a summary

of a memorable evening that needs to be shared with all true lovers and connoisseurs of magic.



My sincere thanks to you and Thelma for your kind invitation to visit your home. Let me begin by asking you the obvious question, how did you get started in magic?

Tony, you and your family are entirely welcome. I delighted to have you here. I've heard a lot about you and your devotion to magic and I was very pleased to meet you in Dallas. I am happy to have you in my home and to spend time with you. Thank you for accepting my invitation to visit.

Well, my start in magic. I owe my start in magic to my parents. They loved music and played the piano, violin and xylophone. They were very extrovert types and loved going out to Vaudeville shows, dramatic plays and circuses. Luckily for us, my two brothers and sister, it meant that we were included in these outings. My father had a small business and in exchange for putting up a few posters and signs in his shop, he was given free tickets. I got to see a lot of good stuff. Jugglers, fire-eaters, knife throwers, mentalists, magicians, acrobats, etc. I watched in amazement and was hooked.

How old were you?

Let me see. It all got started back in 1910 when I was eight years old. A whole different world came into view. My mother made a mouse from a white handkerchief and my eyes and my mind came alive with wonder and enchantment as she manipulated it. My father showed me the 'Ball and Vase'. I was truly hooked. The bug had truly bitten.

When did you start doing your shows?

Almost right away and by the time I was 15 years old I was fairly well experienced. In 1917, I used to entertain at Camp Logan in the Houston area. The rest as the saying goes is history.

Well, Bob the saying in your case is most appropriate, it most certainly was history in the making... and what a history! You must have some excellent memories of those days. Are there any that especially stand out?

Yes! Never follow a horse! Back in the days of World War II I found myself performing at a show at Ellington Air Force Base. My act followed Roy Rogers and Trigger. It sure was a tough act to follow. On occasions, I even had to watch my step!

Also I remember one time with the Spirit Cabinet. The ghost emerged in a flimsy white covering and walked across a dimly lit stage. This time the stage was so dim that she fell into the orchestra pit! Thankfully, our music people were in the pit and were able to break her fall and gently lifted her back onto the stage where we continued the act.

Among my many magic and juggling performances I also had parts in Operas including 'MacBeth'. The script called for me to be 'murdered' every night and for a robust Italian baritone to fall across my prone body as he finished his operatic lament.

I don't mean gently collapse. I mean really fall. This baritone wasn't exactly gentle as he threw himself upon my prone body each night!

After a few performances I was almost murdered for real when his weight began to crush me. Many a time I had to whisper to him " your weight is killing me".

Well, that showbusiness. I could tell you lots more but the problem is no one would believe it!!!!

You're right Bob. Most likely they wouldn't. You have some great stories. Can you tell us a little more of those days and your links with The Society of American Magicians and The International Brotherhood of Magicians ?

Sure. Back in 1920, Fred Furman, Simon Kottwitz and I started a small magic club. We also had a publication called 'The Texas Trixter' and in the October 1924 issue I published a card trick using the classic force. In 1930, with the help of Harry Redan, the club was Chartered as SAM Assembly 19. Harry who was a Member of SAM Assembly 1 in New York had recently moved to Houston.

In 1929 I joined The International Brotherhood of Magicians and in 1945 with the help of several Houston Magicians I organized IBM Ring 39. They have honored me by calling it The Bob Blau Ring.

Obviously you must have known some of the legends of magic. Which ones are the most memorable?

Truly all of them. The greats, the not so greats, the ones who would become great. Many wonderful memories and events. Here are just a few :-

- Leon Hermann - one of several from this famous family.
- Horace Goldin - performing ' From Film To Life' . I suppose this must be the first ever ' Shadow Box Illusion '.
- Herbert Brooks - card manipulations and his feature ' The Canvas Covered Trunk Escape'
- Doc Nixon - 'Where Do the Ducks Go?'
- Jack Merlin - ' Rising Cards From a Glass'. Held by a spectator standing in the aisle.
- Hugh Johnston - Billiard Ball Manipulator . Truly unforgettable.
- Houdini - The last time I saw him was in the summer of 1926. His act included the needle trick and sensational escapes. He escaped from a locked cell in the Harris County jail. Also a strait-jacket from the Chronicle Newspaper Building.

- Nate Leipzig - Superb card manipulation. Wowed us with coin and card magic. I even drove him to one of our Club meetings.
- Thurston - A man who made stage magic look like real magic.
- Blackstone - When I first met him, Harry Jr. was two years old!
- Carl Rosini - Great illusions including a Great Dane!
- Paul Rosini - Delightful manner and great card magician.
- Amac - A real class act with an original illusion ' Find The Lady'. Based on the 'Three Card Monte' three cards about six feet high, stood vertically on a stool on stage about five feet apart and a live lady assistant popped out from behind the card.
- Chris Charlton - Clocks appeared , vanished, multiplied, diminished, enlarged and all with ringing tones. Nobody slept while he was on!

I think magicians and lay people will both agree that the name Harry Houdini is the name that is most likely to be the first to spring to mind if someone is asked to name a magician. Do you agree ?

Rhetorical question really. But I know what you mean. I consider myself very fortunate and privileged in meeting and witnessing the performances of many of the leading magicians of this century.

I first met the great Houdini back in 1916. A real thrill for a kid of fourteen. Several policemen secured him in a strait-jacket for his upside down escape from the Chronicle building. An Uncle of mine was the Chief of Police at the time and as I was known to most of the policemen I was allowed to get close enough to the great one to grab his hand. Ten years later in 1926 was the last time I saw him. He was performing at the Majestic Theatre. It was at this time that he began to feel the pains in his stomach. From Houston he went to Detroit where he suffered his final illness and passed on.

October 31st 1936 holds a special meaning for you. Can you share some of this with us?

Some of it yes. Mrs. Harry Houdini and Edward Saint, The Director of the Final Houdini séance sent me an invitation to attend the final Houdini séance. Much of what happened that night will stay a closely guarded secret. I'll share it with you. But Tony, I'll extract a promise from you first. I think I'm the only one left to talk about it. I will share some of the evening's events with you personally on the strict understanding that you will never write any of it down or include it in any written material. You may only talk about it only to those whom you personally deem worthy to hear. Tony, I entrust this secret to you. **(author's note: as I have given my word I will not say any more on the subject. Suffice to say, that Bob's recollection of that evening's events was literally astounding !)**

Bob, you have done all kinds of magic, indoors and outdoors, not to mention allied arts like dramatic theater, acrobatics and juggling but you are best known for your sealed billet reading, X-Ray vision, Spirit Slates and of course, your signature piece, the famous Spirit Cabinet. Is there any one that you loved the best?

Truly, I loved them all and still do. Our family did a lot of magic in Amusement parks. These were small permanent buildings or tents for various shows. Our family troupe of seven occupied one of these buildings and we presented such things as 'The Girl's Head on a Sword' and 'The Spider Girl' - (head in the middle of a tinsel web) . We also did the Pulse Test, Thayer's Hand, and the Dr.Q Slates.

At other times in the summer season we presented ' Daisy - The Educated Shetland Pony'. The little horse would solve mathematical problems called out by the audience by tapping on the ground with her front hoof. At other times we presented 'Tina - The High School German Shepherd Dog '. The dog would bark answers to questions from the audience. We did a lot of shows and even a few big shows including some at the Houston City Auditorium. For these shows the sponsor paid for authentic Oriental costumes for us and we did the fish bowl production and other Oriental type effects.

But I suppose my signature piece if you want to call it that is the Spirit Cabinet. Much of its success I owe to Cathie Orozco my 'medium'. I am pleased to say that this number has delighted, entertained, mystified, enchanted and baffled audiences. Much of the methodology that I used in the Spirit Cabinet was my own creation.

Speaking of The Spirit Cabinet, my friend, Spanish Magician Luis Boyano won a FISM 2000 award with a version of The Spirit Cabinet and later whilst I was chatting to Billy McComb and Jay Marshall they both told me that it was the fastest they have ever seen it done. Have you heard news about this?

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Well Tony, I have heard a lot about this and I'm delighted that Luis has done such a great job. I know you were part of the backstage team at FISM 2000. As you know I wasn't at FISM 2000 but I've been to a few FISM conventions.

I first wrote about the Spirit Cabinet back in 1985 in my first ever book entitled ' Bob Blau's World of Magic' and I've expanded upon it in my next book published in 1994 entitled ' Spirits on the Stage and More Guarded Secrets Revealed'. Bill Palmer was the catalyst that inspired me to write both books. Since their publication I have a stack of letters from quite literally all over the world and even a few from Luis Boyano.

Well, that sure does explain a lot. You really are the secret within the secret. How does it feel to be the Oracle, the Sage, The Master and the Original Source all rolled into one?

It feels like you are talking about someone else. But I guess it is very nice to be thought of as all those things. Magic has been good to me and if I can put back a little that makes me feel real good. I don't think anyone will think I'm boasting if at almost 98 years old I refer to myself by my nickname " Jack of all Tricks". (Bob was 97 at the time - he turned 98 in October 2000)

[At this point Thelma, Bob's wife comes into the living room and suggests to Bob that we move into his Inner Sanctum while she organizes a little more refreshment. Bob then takes me to his Inner Sanctum and hanging on the walls are literally hundreds of Awards, Diplomas, Certificates and photographs. A treasure trove. A magical museum. Living history and testimony to a magical career spanning several decades. Bob then opens a cupboard and produces six stage suits, immaculately preserved. He proudly shows each one in detail and tells me some magnificent stories that come to life as he demonstrates each one. I can't help thinking that I will be indeed be grateful if I am half as energetic as he is when I get to his age. Much later after all the props and costumes have been shown and talked about Bob turns to me and pays me the greatest compliment that I've had in my life. He tells me that I am one of the most enjoyable magicians he has ever met and then gives me a signed copy of his last book together with a few guarded secrets and then to top it all he asks me to choose one of his stage costumes as a gift and souvenir of our visit !

Despite my protests, he politely urges me to accept. Thanks to Bob I now possess a priceless magic artifact.

We come back out to the living room and I'm sure if I live to be a 100, I doubt if I would have a more fascinating and interesting time within the portals of magic history. I feel truly honored and privileged. In my hand, inside a suit carrier carefully hanging on a hanger is a piece of magic history. We chat some more about the Spirit Cabinet.]

I heard somewhere that you were involved with boosting the attendance at a Spiritualist Church. Do you want to talk about that?

Sure. It all started when a member of a Spiritualist Church saw one of my public shows and was fascinated that we were able to " make contact with the Spirits in such an effective and dynamic manner". He told me that they could never get that kind of response from the Spirits at their services! As you can imagine all I could do was politely smile and thank him. Much to my surprise a few days later I received an invitation to attend their church and " spice up" their services a bit!

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It is indeed ironic to think that spiritualists, who were members of a church that Houdini says was founded on the admitted and confessed deceptions of the Fox Sisters should come to an admitted trickster to obtain the phenomena they needed for their services. It was around that time that I learned the art of 'cold reading' from watching them. They had mastered the art far better than any magician could ever imagine.

Are there any parting words of wisdom that you would like to share with fellow magicians Bob?

Sure. But wisdom from an acknowledged trickster! Well, why not? I think that if you truly want to entertain an audience no matter how big or small you have to prepare yourself well in advance. Like all performers magicians should understand that they are involved in a theatrical art. A sense of purpose and a sense of dramatic wonder must be transmitted. Enchantment, that's the word. Above all, don't forget to entertain. Bring joy and wonder to people - that's your job. It's also your job to enjoy your job!

I would also like to share my favorite quote :-

From Shakespeare :- Henry IV - Part 1, Act III, Scene 1 :-

Glendower : I can call the spirits from the vasty deep.

Hotspur : Why, so can I, or any man;
But will they call when you call for them ?

Did you know that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes was also badly fooled? Good fun this magic business !!!

Bob broke into wonderful laughter at this point. His laughter like his personality and his magic is infectious. We all joined in with his laughter and for a goodly while, the Spirit of real magic hovered in that room and wove its spell of enchantment. Sadly, the time had come for us to leave but we did not leave empty-handed. We left with a sense of awe and admiration. We left feeling deeply honored that we had shared many precious moments with one of the true living legends of magic. It is my sincere wish that with these few words of mine that some of that feeling has been transmitted to you.

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