

Street Magic

Book review

Pat Halley

1977

a review of

Street Magic. Edward Claflin in collaboration with Jeff Sheridan, Doubleday/Dolphin Books, 1977

By far the most dominant feature of American streets is that hardly anything happens. The routines of commerce and work continue like clock-work, dangerous beasts are extinct, and vivid characters have perished as has literature since World War One.

For truly, America is a melting pot...and the funny thing about being melted is that when it happens you are gone. The intricacies of maintaining the mechanism of American culture requires the skillful weeding out of anything that lives apart from the faceless crowd.

In previous centuries when people starved and were colorful, as opposed to now where people are—cancerous and colorless, the streets begged people to come out. Before entertainment and craft as well as produce were industrialized, the streets contained characters and had character. Though times were not ideal to be sure, if ever they can be, at least there was a personal meaning to public places, and there was a kind of magic in public gatherings.

Quite literally there were street magicians for the longest part of our history. From the day that the first Cro-Magnon baffled peers with disappearing shells to the time of the great charlatans peddling their snake oils, magicians, like minstrels, added a dimension to public life that is irreplaceable despite the little practical value of their trades.

Celebration, Mystery Gone

That is what is precisely missing from our lives in varying degrees. The celebration, the mystery, the absurd frivolity of fools who take us out of the shop. What could be more useful to us now than the useless and impractical!? To return the world to its childhood...ah, that is the mission, and people have dedicated their lives to only that.

The water spouter of Malta could fill jars with quarts of different colored water in separate streams coming from his mouth at one time. The great Bosco could cut off the heads of a white pigeon and also a black pigeon, touch them both with a wand, then uncover them to reveal a white bird with a black head, and a black one with a white head and—boom—he could put them back to the original again.

In countries throughout the world there are people who can “levitate” other human beings, or cut persons in half, yet bring them back together again! This is terrible, and some Hindoos can be buried alive for weeks and then revive. Indeed, many of the tricks, if not all of them, performed on television now or on stage, such as fire eating, levitation, cutting into halves of people, making things disappear, etc. are hundreds, even thousands of years old and were used on street corners or in fairs by people with weird assumed names.

The book *Street Magic*, by Edward Claflin, is an historical treatment of magic tricks and tells of some of the greats from the past and even reveals some of the secrets. Splendidly illustrated, *Street Magic* tells the story of Harry Houdini—one of the last of the great street performers. It tells of Greek and Roman performers, and of Indian Fakirs. Reading the book one can almost hear the crowing of the street barker, the murmur of the crowd and the reverberations of strange energies devoted to mystifying the brain.

Revival of Magic

Claflin also talks about the current revival of magic and even of street magicians. He points out how they, like musicians and actors have been trying to humanize the streets wherever they may be. They confront reality head-on at its strongest points and at times, the pleasure principle—the world of fantasy and play—is victorious.

In Detroit you occasionally see musicians or actors waging war on the gray, but it hasn't developed like in some other cities. Surely, the attempt by some people to create in the vaunted Renaissance Center would result in a billyclub or the bum's rush to the nearest exit by the authorities. The Institute of Arts in Detroit has evicted poets for selling their books, since the curators are more interested in creating a fashionable tomb than in turning people on.

Indeed, in an age when the dunning letter is the dominant mode of literature adopted by prominent corpses in journalism and book publishing; where to live off of your art or craft you must offer yourself up for adoption in the General Motors Building, the streets are both the end and a possible beginning for those more interested in life than in shrines.

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