

# The Chainletter

An e-newsletter by and for the escape community

August 2020

Volume 11

Issue 118



## Allan's 24 Hour Handcuff Challenge

I will be wearing Handcuffs for 24 hours for The Prince of Wales Hospice, Pontefract because They an awesome charity who are close to my heart.



## Way To Go Mate!

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## Miranda Allen on "Fool Us!"



By Morgan Black Global News ...

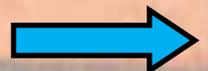
Edmonton actor and escape artist Miranda Allen has received a big

compliment from legendary illusionists Penn and Teller.

Allen, alongside her best friend and co-performer,

Sarah Emslie captivated the duo on the TV series Penn & Teller: Fool Us. The show is a magic competition where magicians perform tricks in front of Penn and Teller, where the goal is to baffle and captivate the legendary illusionists.

While she didn't manage to fool them and win the prize, the duo called Allen's escape from a barrel filled with red wine "perfect."



“I was emotionally prepared for every outcome, except them liking it that much,” Allen said. “It was completely overwhelming.”



“You inspired us. It was beautiful, it was heroic. I just loved every second of it,” Penn told Allen during the episode.

Back in March, the pair flew to Las Vegas to perform the routine in front of a live studio audience. During the stunt, Allen is restrained



by handcuffs and chains and then locked beneath the lid of the barrel.

She said the moments on stage just before her big performance, were actually the most calm she had felt since arriving in Las Vegas.

“Everything was madness, right up to the dress rehearsal,” Allen laughed. “[My costume] got wine spilled on it during the dress rehearsal just before we went on stage. So my friend was downstairs hand washing it



out as they were setting up the camera angles, desperately drying my shirt

to run it to me onstage.”

The idea for the stunt first came to Allen more than two years ago.

“I was performing at the Adelaide Fringe in Australia. In between shows, I was hanging out near an outdoor garden area,” Allen said. “I noticed they were using these oak wine barrels as tables. I just kept wondering ‘Can I fit in there?’”

As soon as she came back to Canada, she began developing the performance.



“Then, suddenly I was standing in front of Penn and Teller on television.”

With a stunt like the one she performed for the magicians, practice makes perfect. Without it, there could be disaster.

Allen said working on an escape stunt takes



quite some time to perfect.



“Wild about Harry”  
John Cox’ Houdini web site  
[www.wildabouthoudini.com](http://www.wildabouthoudini.com)



“I was raised by an architect and an avalanche forecaster, so working with structures and



risk management were everything in my house,” she said. “I’m very afraid for my life when I’m conceptualizing and building the stunt. I take that fear and channel it into making sure I’m doing my homework.”

“I’m really trying not to think at all, which is very difficult and takes a lot of rehearsal. I work with free-diving principles to hold my breath. So it’s about slowing your breath and conserving your oxygen.”

After the show, Penn and Teller stopped by to chat with Allen.

“I could hardly speak! They were very kind,” she said.

Allen said when her episode aired on July 13, she relived the magical moment all over again.

“Being on stage in that environment, that’s a really lovely moment for a performer, because

that’s where I’m at home...in front of a live audience.”

Allen is working on a new stunt that “involves a lot of rigging.”



# Inescapable: The Life and Legacy of Harry Houdini

BALTIMORE 2018 — The joy and fascination museumgoers will feel when stepping into the bold, big-top experience of the Jewish Museum



of Maryland’s new original exhibit, “Inescapable: The Life and Legacy of Harry Houdini,” is how many layers of the world-famous

magician and escape artist’s life it explores. The big reveal is the saga of how young Jewish immigrant Erik Weisz persevered through poverty and destitution to become one of the most popular and beloved figures of the 20th century.



The exhibit offers up Houdini’s life in two phases. First comes the

early years, his reinvention as Harry Houdini and his struggle to make a living. Next is his international rise to fame and his lesser-known feats involving aviation, invention, early film production and a crusade to unveil fraudulent mediums and spiritualists.



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“The exhibit is, for the most part, chronological, except for two spaces,” said museum executive director Marvin Pinkert as he led a tour of the exhibit. “One is the Maryland space at the end of the exhibit and one is the behind-the-scenes section. We ended up going more towards the straight biography in terms of the exhibit just because there was so much to tell.

“But as you go through the exhibit, you’re going to see several stations that make it clear that Houdini not only was influenced by [his Judaism] in his childhood, but his Jewish identity was part of his adult experience as well.”

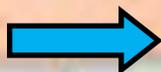
### The immigrant

Harry Houdini was born Erik Weisz on March 24, 1874, in Budapest, Hungary, to Rabbi



Mayer Samuel Weisz and wife Cecilia. The family, renamed Weiss, immigrated to Appleton, Wisconsin, when Erik was 4. His father led the town’s first synagogue. There, Erik — also later known as Erich and Eric and Erie before he took on the mantle of Harry Houdini — began practicing and

performing acrobatics. Four years later, the rabbi was let go and the family moved to Milwaukee, where they fell on hard times. His father was unable to get a job as a rabbi.



**This site is well worth the time to study if you want to learn about lock picking**  
[www.lockpickguide.com](http://www.lockpickguide.com)

# Begging Box!

Your input is our output!

This is the part of The Chainletter where the editor begs for you to give him some material to publish. No idea what to write?



Well, How about...

- ◆ Your first escape.
- ◆ How did you learn to escape?
- ◆ Your creative process.
- ◆ Your last escape.
- ◆ Who is your hero? Why?
- ◆ What makes a good escape.
- ◆ Your escape bio.
- ◆ An escape you saw on TV.
- ◆ An escape you saw live.
- ◆ Anything escape related.



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Quoted in the exhibit, Houdini said about those times, "Such hardships and hunger became our lot. The less said on the subject the better."

Houdini left home at 12 for a year to reduce the family burden. Not much is known about that year, said museum deputy director Tracie Guy-Decker. "There's a postcard that he sent to his mom, saying that he was OK and that he would come back."

He returned to his father, who had moved to New York



looking for a job, and they worked together at a necktie factory, among other odd jobs.

"It's hard to imagine, given the success that Harry would have, how little secular education he had," Pinkert said. "He was trained in Hebrew studies by his father and later by a



Rabbi Drachman, but I don't think he had more than a handful of years of public schooling."

Houdini smiles with the two important women in his life, his mother, Cecilia, left, and his wife, Bess.

Photo courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Posters



The exhibit includes his father's Hebrew Bible with marginal notes written by Houdini. His father sold the Bible when the family was struggling, but



Houdini was able to buy it back later in life.

"Being Jewish mattered to him for his whole life," Pinkert noted.

"When he went to the YMHA, he put on his first magic show as Erik the Great," Pinkert said. "But by the time he was 18, he was Harry Houdini."

He chose the name Houdini after a French magician he admired, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, and began performing with his friend, Jacob Hyman, as the Brothers Houdini and later with his brother Theo. It was during this time that he met his wife Bess, who was performing on Coney Island.



"They got married immediately," Guy-Decker said. "They met and just absolutely fell in love."

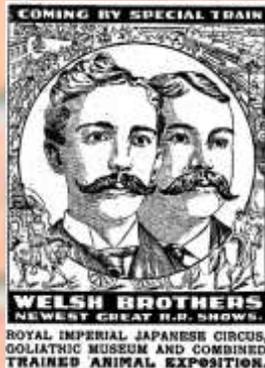


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## Harry Houdini

“Most exhibits on Houdini have been focused on Houdini the success. We give the whole life of Houdini, which starts out with many years of failure,” Pinkert said. “Houdini was part of dime museums, medicine shows, the World’s Fair and eventually vaudeville. But each one was a struggle.”

Houdini first came to Maryland in 1898 with the Welsh Brothers Circus. He kept a diary at the time, which is on display in the exhibit.



“It’s hard to read, but it gives his trip day-by-day,” Pinkert said, flipping through the diary. “Through Cumberland, through Hancock and then he stops in Paw Paw [West Virginia] and it says, ‘Rain hard. No dinner.’ Meaning there wasn’t enough money raised to pay for dinner.”

While working for the circus, which travelled by train and put on shows at every stop, Houdini not only performed magic, but also appeared as The Wild Man of Borneo, dressed as a caveman in a cage. Discouraged, he tried to sell his act — including all of his tricks,



secrets and equipment — for \$10.

“And he still couldn’t find a buyer,” Pinkert said.

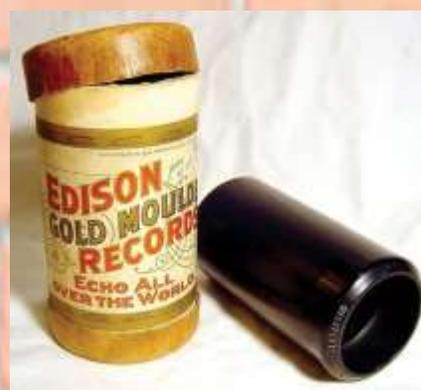
He was known as the King of Cards when vaudeville theatrical owner, manager and agent Martin Beck met Houdini and saw something special in him, suggesting that if he were to focus not on magic but escape tricks, he could become a sensation.



“He gives Houdini the chance to play on the Orpheum circuit. It’s there that he becomes the Harry Houdini we know today,” Pinkert said. “Houdini would later say that Martin Beck changed his life.”

The exhibit chronicles Houdini’s rise, creating more and more daring escapes — from jail houses, stacks of handcuffs, yards of chains, straitjackets, water-filled boxes and milk cans and beer-filled casks. In “The Self Liberator” section, museumgoers can take in Houdini’s huge collection of handcuffs and keys, as well as that original straitjacket and milk can.

Colorful posters and antique photographs abound in the display chronicling Houdini’s family life, career and the handful of films in



which he starred. His voice can even be heard on a vintage wax cylinder recording.



An eerie section of the exhibit tells the story of his crusade against unscrupulous mediums and spiritualists, whom he believed were capitalizing on grieving people who yearned to be reunited with loved ones who died in World War I. The end of the exhibit recounts Houdini's untimely death in 1926 caused by punches to the stomach. His appendix burst and he died a few days later of peritonitis. He was 52.

### Exhibit magic

How the Jewish Museum's Houdini exhibit came to be is a bit of a magical tale in itself.



Last summer, a scheduled exhibit fell through and Pinkert found himself in a bind. He went to Artscape one afternoon to cheer

himself up. And as with many Artscape weekends, it was a brutal, hot day.

"I looked for the first shelter I could find, which was a theatre. On the stage was David London, a magician. And David put on quite an act. He even called me up to be part of the act and I couldn't figure out how he did the trick," Pinkert recalled. "But while I'm still sitting there in my seat, still shvitzing, (sweating) I recalled that back in my American studies course in college, my professor had talked about Houdini quite a bit and mentioned that he was the son of a rabbi.

I looked at David and said, 'This guy is probably Jewish and maybe he's interested in doing an exhibit on Jews and magic.'"

Pinkert emailed London later that day.

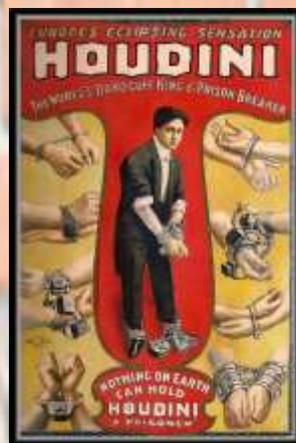
London, 36, who is Jewish, was thrilled by the prospect. A passionate magician since age 7, London performed his first public magic trick at his cousin's bar mitzvah, where he pulled a rabbit out of a top hat.

"I think I was always a trickster by nature," London said. "That was the first day I knew I was a magician. I was hooked."



London has been touring since he was 18 and feels a real affinity for Houdini's life story.

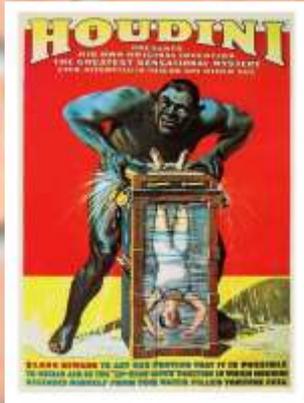
"I really found inspiration in Houdini's own struggle, especially in the early years of his career just trying to make it," he said. "He never gave up. He was determined and he wanted to be the best he could be and push harder and harder and harder. And even at times when he considered giving up, he continued to push and eventually he hit the big time."



Although experienced in arts administration, London had never curated a museum show like the one Pinkert proposed. But, as a guy who's had a poster of Houdini on his wall since he was a teen, he had a bit of a jump-start on his Houdini research.



“It’s hard to move through a path of magic without studying Houdini to some degree, because he was so influential in the world of magic. But this was a definitely deeper dive than I had ever done into the Houdini story,” he said. “I decided early on that in order to



understand the story of Harry Houdini as superstar magician, we really had to first understand the story of Erik Weisz, the immigrant.”

He read and watched and researched everything he could find and, with help from connections in the magic community, he contacted collectors and museums to gather photos and artefacts. He travelled the country, bringing back pieces related to Houdini’s charity work, his family, his early life and his Judaism.

“I think one of the most prized artefacts in the show is his father’s Hebrew bible,” London said. “I was particularly interested in exploring his Jewish heritage. And truthfully, despite my lifelong interest in magic, it was those things that gave me insight into his Jewishness and into where it

connected to him. That illuminated parts of his life that were just below the surface.”



Beyond the magic and the escape artistry, London said, lies an inspirational story that still has the power to inspire new generations.

“He wasn’t just an escape artist or magician, but he really was a symbol of self-liberation and a symbol of freedom and a symbol that really nothing could hold you back,” he said. “So much of his acts were about facing challenges and overcoming challenges. I think some of the reason he remains a significant symbol to this day is that he sort of captures in his escapes the universal human drama of encountering things that we must overcome and tackling those things head on, often with great struggle and eventually overcoming them.”



Dai Andrews frees himself from a straitjacket at the Magic of Jonestown Festival. Photo by David Stuck

Around the time London came on board, the museum brought on designer Danielle Nekimken, who worked with him to put the story and artefacts together in a context that told the tale but also grabbed the visitor visually.



“One of the things I really like about the exhibit is the way she totally activated our 17-foot

ceilings,” Guy-Decker said. “I think she really did an amazing job.”





Originally a painter with an opera, theatre and event production background, Nekimken,

47, who is Jewish, was intrigued when the museum approached her about a Houdini show.

“It became clear that David wanted to tell more of a biography from a Jewish perspective of how Harry Houdini began as the son of a rabbi and became this international superstar and how it affected him along the way,”

Nekimken said, including

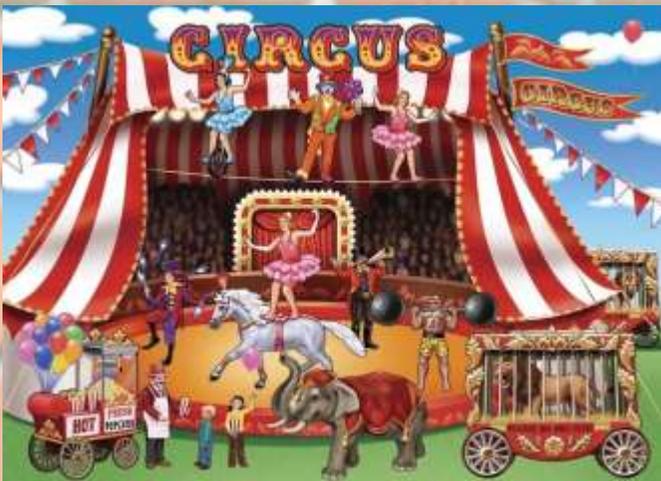
when he performed in Russia and hid his Jewishness. “That wasn’t something he advertised

about himself. But he

had created this new persona that had a different identity.”



Nekimken drew from the lush, colourful history of circus and magic artwork to plan the color schemes and graphic elements for the



“It’s so rich as a topic to dive into,” she said. “The colors are very rich and dark and I really did want the bulk of the section as he became a superstar to be black, because it just upped the drama. So much of what he became famous for was the escapes. And the escapes had the element of the life-or-death challenge that made them so exciting to people.”

### The legacy

One of those challenges was hanging upside down from a crane high over Charles Street in downtown Baltimore, completely confined in a straitjacket, while 50,000 people looked on from below or from the windows and ledges of nearby buildings.

Not long ago, Baltimore illusionist and escape artist Dai Andrews recreated that signature Houdini stunt for the museum’s annual Jonestown Festival.

Andrews, 40, of Hampden, fell in love with magic when he got a Fisher-Price magic set for his fifth birthday.



“When I started to grow up, I got more interested in escape artistry and Houdini because I really enjoyed doing something real — getting out of handcuffs or a straitjacket — as opposed to an illusion, like a card trick,” he said. “That led me to mind-over-body things, sword swallowing, fire eating, that kind of thing.”



He remembers always being aware of Houdini.

“His name is synonymous with magic. You would have a hard time arguing who is a better self-promoter, Barnum or Houdini. But either one were legends of their times,” he said.

Andrews ordered a straitjacket when he was a teen and practiced with it, even watching films of Houdini’s escapes, until he perfected his.

He first performed the straitjacket escape when he was 18. Now, his performances include other Houdini-esque stunts.

“The highlight of my escape program is I let two members of the audience tie me up in 100 feet of rope in any way they like, and I escape in less time that it takes them to tie me up, or I pay them a cash prize,” Andrews said. He’s never had to pay.

“But it has come very, very close,” he said, chuckling. “It’s fun. Even the idea of the challenge escape is a Houdini act in and of itself.”

For London, he hopes museumgoers leave “Inescapable: The Life and Legacy of Harry Houdini” with a deeper understanding of Harry Houdini as a person and as a Jew.

“If you ask somebody to name a magician in their top three, they still say Harry Houdini, and he’s been dead for almost 100 years,” said London. “That’s an extraordinary accomplishment. He set out to be the world’s greatest magician and he did it.

“Here is an immigrant son of a rabbi who had a dream and pursued that dream with such great vigour and determination and passion and eventually was able to become exactly what he wanted to become. Even though some of these feats he was able to accomplish are incredible, his biggest trick was transforming himself from Erik Weisz into Harry Houdini.”

Susan C. Ingram is a reporter for the Baltimore Jewish Times.



# Free Escape Artist Lecture!

International Brotherhood of Magicians

Ring 96 Presents...

## Helen & Arthur Coghlan!

Arthur Coghlan and his daughter, Helen, have been entertaining audiences for many years. Their show is full of comedy, audience participation and world-class magic and illusions.

Their escapes are amazing and always leave the spectators completely astounded.

Arthur designs and builds all of his own illusions and, because of his incredible successes, Arthur is much sought-after for his role as consultant and advisor.

We invite you to find out more about Arthur, Helen and the escapes that have Arthur recognized as "the Greatest Escape Artist Australia has ever known".



**Date: Saturday August 15th**

**Time: 7 pm PST**

**How: Contact Cliff Gerstman**

**for the Zoom log in code**

**email: [cliffg37@verizon.net](mailto:cliffg37@verizon.net)**

**See you there!**

**(The Zoom login code will be sent to those who request it, a couple of days before the event!)**

