bered in detail, is already part of the myth. The revelation that the ascetic recluse who hated publicity had many friends and even love affairs was already there in Knowlson's own biography of Beckett, *Damned to Fame*. His generosity to friends, young artists and anyone in need has long been part of the hagiography.

So it is that *Remembering Beckett* makes it easy to forget the darker moments found in the biographies; Beckett beating up a school bully, the love-loathing relationship with his mother, which led him to smash all her kitchen crockery. There is also the fragility of his mental state, as depicted by Deirdre Bair. That's why a moment in the present work—when he tells a contributor that he had no children, "lucky for them"—should, like his own half-humorous statement that his saintliness is "a mask", be taken as truth. In the end, however, what *Remembering Beckett* lacks due to its hero-worship, sentimentality, and occasional fetishisation, is amply offstet by Beckett's own surprising and unprecedented elucidations of the ideas that drove him to write. •

Magic Man

Dai Vernon: A Biography
Artist-Magician-Muse, 1894-1941
David Ben
Squash Publishing
366 pages, $46.56 cloth
ISBN: 9780974468150

by Paul Quarrington

When the editors of this fine periodical asked me if I wanted to review David Ben's *Dai Vernon: A Biography*, I should have pointed out, as a matter of journalistic integrity, that I know and admire the author. I should have recused myself, but I didn't because I wanted the book. You see, as a card-carrying member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, I have an abiding interest in the thaumaturgical arts. This was therefore a book I had long anticipated. Not only is its author one of Canada's finest prestidigitators, but the subject of Ben's book is Canada's greatest magician ever (I claim this with a respectful nod toward the late Doug Henning.) Moreover, Dai Vernon is in some senses one of the greatest magicians who ever lived. That this fact is unknown to virtually all of his countrymen has always struck me as a great and sad shame, and David Ben, with this book, is doing everything he can to redress it.

For one thing, Ben gives the book the kind of heft such a subject might deserve. It is not made clear on the jacket, but this is merely the first volume of the biography. A friend noted the book sitting on my coffee table, and remarked on the dates in the title, "1894-1941", "That guy didn't live very long."

"Well, yes he did," I corrected her, for Vernon was a well-known presence at Hollywood's Magic Castle well into his nineties. He would hold court, a gruff and scholarly man (he earned the sobriquet "The Professor" very early in life), and he would give counsel to the few acolytes who had somehow earned his respect. To those few, he would expound upon the same themes. Things have to look natural, he would lecture. The more natural things look, when it comes to thimble-riggery, the closer one comes to that which Dai Vernon sought all of his life: perfection.

The thoroughness of Ben's research is mind-boggling, and having read the book I feel I know all of Vernon's peregrinations, and they were many. He was born David Verner in Ottawa, Ontario. Although an athletic young man, his ambitions lay toward the visual arts. Indeed, he was a success in this regard, as the full title of the book implies. Vernon was widely acknowledged to be the finest silhouette artist of the time, travelling from place to place and rendering intricate shadows with scissors. Ben's book, which is handsomely complemented with photographs, contains a reproduction of Vernon's silhouette of FDR. But it was Vernon's fortune to be a lad during the golden age of magic, when performers like Alexander Herrmann traveled the land in huge railway caravans. Vernon became obsessed with illusion, and card work in particular. When he purchased a book called *The Expert at the Card Table*, he discovered his life work set before him.

I shall try to explain this so that the lay person might understand. (I'm only slightly less lay when it comes to magic than the majority of readers.) *The Expert at the Card Table* was written by S. W. Erdnase (a pseudonym). It would have been more accurately titled, *The Cheat at the Card Table.* It's a book about how to be an "advantage player", how to manipulate playing cards so that the element of chance is eliminated. It's about how to false shuffle, false cut, second deal, bottom deal, etcetera, and above all it preaches naturalness, to make these ersatz moves look exactly like the legitimate ones. It stresses that one must practise, practise, and practise some more—until one achieves perfection.

Vernon's contribution to the art of magic was to marry this philosophy to the more showbizzy aspects. At least, his contribution was to bring this philosophy to the table, because he himself was unable to successfully combine the two. His career as a performer had its highlights, certainly, but it was not where his interest lay. A passage from the book makes this abundantly clear:

> Vernon once told Francis Finnerman . . . that although it might sound presumptuous, he had indeed created "the most perfect move in magic." When asked to demonstrate the move, however, Vernon declined. "No one," he said, "was ever going to see it." When asked why he would bother to create such a move if he did not intend to show it to anyone, Vernon replied, in essence, that [since] his goal was to strive toward perfection, the move was irrelevant.

The Vernon family: Jeanne, Dai and Ted, photographed in 1931

Such an attitude limits one's horizons both as a performer and as a provider. It quickly becomes clear that Vernon was neglectful as a husband and father, preferring to travel around the United States (he went to New York as a young man, and stayed south of the border, for the most part) looking for advantage players from whom he might learn. He spent a great deal of time and energy, for example, searching for (and locating) a gambler possessed of a mythic "middle deal", the ability to deal a card from the middle of the deck (as opposed to the bottom, say) without the move looking in anyway suspect. This was, in a sense, Vernon's Holy Grail.

I was delighted by Ben's book, but I cannot help wondering why anyone else would care to read it. On one level, it is a very thoroughly researched and well-

written account of a man who remains an asterisk and footnote in the annals of 20th century entertainment. He influenced all of the great magicians that were his contemporaries, and this influence can be felt today, albeit by a dedicated few. Dai Vernon, for example, brought back the famous "Cups and Balls" effect from obscurity, and multitudes have subsequently been delighted by this. But magic has failed, as an art form, to pierce the armour of our collective indifference. It grieves me to say it, but we do not delight in wonder and mystery the way we might. If we did, Dai Vernon would be a household name, and we would swagger in foreign lands, proudly boasting that our frozen nation produced such a titan. As it is, only magicians really care, and magicians might have a few problems with this book. For example, Ben doesn't reveal any of the 'work' involved in any of Vernon's effects (he says nothing about the mechanics of the middle deal, and I know that he knows), and magicians are invariably eager, insistent, that secrets be revealed. No secrets are revealed here. Mind you, if they had been, magicians would be quick to condemn Ben for doing so.

The joy of the book comes from the quixotic quest at the root of Vernon's life. In an age when mediocrity and acquiescence to the banal is the norm, Vernon's relentless pursuit of perfection is invigorating. David Ben—perhaps because he shares the inclination—details every step and misstep in this regard. He admires Vernon, but makes no excuses for his poor performance as a husband and father. Instead, he makes us understand that there is a universe of ideas and ideals—we refer to it as 'magic', here on our little planet—that some people find endlessly enchanting. •

Fizzling Out in Hollywood

Lost Genius: The Story of a Forgotten Musical Maverick
Kevin Bazzana
McClelland & Stewart
383 pages, $36.99 cloth
ISBN: 9780771011009

by George Fetherling

Lost Genius: The Story of a Forgotten Musical Maverick by Kevin Bazzana, who won various literary awards for the biography of Glenn Gould he published in 2003, isn't the first book written about Ervin Nyiregyházi, a concert pianist and composer who was once famous and is now famously forgotten. *Lost Genius* was preceded by *Erwin Nyiregyházi: Psychologische Analyse eines Musikalisch Hervorragenden Kindes*, the work of Dr. Geza Revesz, a prominent psychologist who made a study of child prodigies. Revesz's book was published in 1916 when its subject was only thirteen years old, but already had been writing music for a decade. Given that Nyiregyházi lived until 1987, there is obviously much more of his story to tell, much of it almost unbearably tragic.

Everyone knew that the young Nyiregyházi was special. When he was four, he impressed the faculty of the National Hungarian Royal Academy in Budapest (where he was born into a lower-middle-class Jewish family). At five, he corrected a dentist who told him to say *La*: "That's not *La* you said, that was *Fa*." His talent, while obviously concentrated in music—he's known to have composed 900 pieces—sprawled in many directions. At six, the year he gave his first public concert, he was playing chess blindfolded. "He recalled," Bazzana writes, "that his forte was defence rather than attack—a neat metaphor for his personality."

Nyiregyházi was fortunate to have grown up in Budapest when it was the fastest-growing, most religiously tolerant, and possibly the most cultured city in Europe. He was not so lucky in his parentage. He was only eleven when his father, a sensitive man with whom he had a decent relationship, died. That left him all alone to deal with the mother of all stage mothers. She saw that there was good money to be made in the child prodigy biz and exploited it for all it was worth, mindless of her boy's emotional health.

In Bazzana's account, Maria Nyiregyházi insisted "that he be an adult (a professional virtuoso) while he was still a child, yet demanding also that he remain a child (a marketable prodigy) even though he was approaching adulthood." What's more, she was loud, boorish and crass. For example, in 1917—just before the golden age of Hungarian culture, which Bazzana captures so well, was destroyed by the Great War—"he joined several artists in playing for a member of the Austro-Hungarian imperial family, in a benefit concert for the Hungarian Red Cross, and was humiliated when his mother insisted that he be paid." She put pressure on him to play Chopin's "Minute Waltz" in less than a minute, to show how good he was. As he recalled years later, "If I received one favourable review and one unfavourable one after a concert, my mother would say that the man who wrote the unfavourable review knew more about music." She could be physically abusive as well.

Not surprisingly perhaps, his personality developed along unusual lines. "In him," Bazzana writes,

> "the grandiosity and narcissism typical of adolescence were greatly magnified; they were a kind of armour against anxiety but did not protect him from a crippling fear of criticism and a dread of the expectations of others, as though he had internalized his mother's carping, and he was terrified at the prospect of abandonment by those he loved. The powerful price that made him insist on his artistic and intellectual superiority wrestled with his profound insecurity . . .
>
> The normal turbulence of adolescence was magnified by his intelligence and sensitivity, and by his mother's infantilization and control. She still refused to let him wear long pants, which boys usually started wearing at 14 or 15. She was apparently terrified that her son might grow up and was steadfastly puritanical where his sexuality was concerned."

Mother and son often quarrelled and he often ran away. "But, unable to look after himself, he always returned." Of course, he continued to rebel, mainly by becoming deeply involved in the music of the great Franz Liszt, his fellow Hungarian who had died a generation earlier, but, strangely, was still known more as a performer than a composer. Spurred by Liszt's example, Nyiregyházi became a kind of musical arch-expressionist, a pianist for whom emotion was everything.

Eventually, in 1920, when he was seventeen, he ran off to the United States (and never saw his mother again after 1924). A New York reporter described the young genius this way: "He does not know how to tie his shoes. He cannot put on his collar. Knotting his necktie needs a whole corps of assistants. He cannot carve his food. Soup is a dreadful affair with him. And he owns a collection of crochets, whims and eccentricities that are arresting even among musicians—to whom crochets, whims and eccentricities are conventional." A slight exaggeration perhaps, but he was certainly unworldly in practical matters, including business. He fell prey to an unscrupulous manager and found the kind of career he had enjoyed in Europe impossible to replicate on the other side of the Atlantic.

His gigs included helping Rudolph Valentino judge a beauty contest and performing for prisoners at Sing Sing. The latter paid $25. That's five more than he received for entertaining at Harry Houdini's house party. Houdini was astonished at the performance. "How can you play the piano as you do?" he asked. Nyiregyházi replied, "You don't tell me your secrets and I won't tell you my secrets."

From the late 1920s to the late 1940s, many exiled European artists found good careers in Hollywood. Nyiregyházi wasn't one of them. He scored some films and even played piano on screen a few times, but he was not a success. The low point must have been when he accepted six dollars to provide accompaniment for a wannabe's screen test. He lived in a succession of skid row hotels.

Nor was his romantic life happy. Actually that's putting it mildly. He was married ten times, once to a native Vancouverite who "was variously described by L.A. newspapers as a dramatist, actress, and aviatrix." He