

Dai Vernon

A LEGACY OF MAGIC

By DAVID BEN

As we kicked off the new millennium, readers of this magazine cast their ballots to elect the ten most influential magicians of the 20th century. Although there were some surprises, few could argue with the top two — Harry Houdini and Dai Vernon. While scores of books have been written about Houdini, David Ben has spent the past five years preparing the first detailed biography of Dai Vernon. What follows is a thumbnail sketch of Vernon's remarkable life, legacy, and contribution to the art of magic.

SCENE: OTTAWA
YEAR: 1899

David Frederick Wingfield Verner, born on June 11, 1894, was raised in the rough-and-tumble capital of a fledgling country, Canada, during the adolescence of magic's Golden Age. It was his father, James Verner, who ignited his interest in secrets. James, a career civil servant, performed a few simple tricks, tricks learned from his father. Young David — Dai Verner — was swept away. How was it possible, for example, for his father to knock a chalk mark through the surface of an oak table? Discovering the secret, Vernon yearned for more. Although professional magicians of the Victorian era groused and groaned over the continual public exposure of their trade secrets in newspapers, magazines, and books, Vernon was appreciative. He scoured libraries for the secrets sequestered there, discovering works by Professor Hoffmann and others.

At the age of seven, already enthralled by the clandestine world of conjuring, Vernon met Howard Thurston, a self-described “master” manipulator of playing cards. Invited to the home of a friend whose father was entertaining Thurston, Vernon fooled the master with a simple card trick drawn from Thurston's own publication, *Howard Thurston's Card Tricks*. Vernon was both shocked and reassured by the realization that there was no correlation between public profile and professional prowess.

The following few years brought countless other showmen of every description to Ottawa. Vernon gravitated towards the magicians, and although he enjoyed the mystique associated with grand illusion, particularly when performed by Harry Kellar, he



admired performers such as T. Nelson Downs, Nate Leipzig, and J. Warren Keane more. He marveled at their ability to entertain audiences with simple props and virtuoso sleight of hand. Coins flitted and flickered through Downs' fingers, while Leipzig and Keane, ever the gentlemen, entertained with packs of cards and other small, simple props. Bigger, Vernon determined, was not necessarily better.

The next epiphany came at the age of 11. Vernon discovered a book — *Artifice, Ruse and Subterfuge at the Card Table* — by S.W. Erdnase. Popularly known as *The Expert at the Card Table*, the work taught how to cheat at cards — masterfully. By the time he was 12, an age at which most had yet to learn the values and suits in a deck, Vernon had absorbed its contents. The book became his life map.

As a teenager, Vernon's skill with the pasteboards attracted his first patron, a wealthy industrialist with an interest in conjuring named Warren Soper. Soper gave Vernon access to information, wealth, privilege, and an Edwardian education at Canada's pre-eminent preparatory school for boys, Ashbury College. Though a mediocre student, Vernon proved himself as a gifted athlete. When not on the playing field or in the hockey rink, Vernon spent time studying the nuances of sleight of hand.

As *The Expert* became a larger part of Vernon's being he began to seek out the men who practiced its principles and worked the unique blend of sleights and subtleties it laid bare. Vernon met gamblers and cheats who preyed upon the itinerant labor attracted to Ottawa's burgeoning lumber industry. He learned from them finesse points for the shift, the second deal, and the crimp and, more importantly, he was encouraged to refine his ever-growing arsenal of techniques. Vernon was intrigued by their exotic world, riding the rails from town to town in search of games and the taking down of big “fish.” It sparked his interest in traveling the world and exploring the subculture of gambling, in all its down-and-dirty glory.

SCENE: NEW YORK CITY
YEAR: 1915

Vernon arrived in Manhattan, a hustling, bustling metropolis that was quickly becoming the center of the modern world. There he set his sights on another educational institution: the Art Students League. He was warned, however, by disillusioned artists, not to turn his avocation into a vocation. While gifted in a number of visual mediums, Vernon heeded the advice and terminated his tenure at the school. He entered another classroom — the magic emporium — hoping to learn great marvels. He was disappointed

to learn, however, that he might as well have been the teacher.

In 1915, New York could lay claim to several private magic emporiums, the places where magic secrets were bought, built, and sold. Much to Vernon's chagrin, the proprietor and staff at Clyde Powers' shop on 42nd Street mistook him for a rank amateur. Vernon was soon invited into the inner sanctum, however, having flabbergasted the shop's best-posted demonstrators and the professional clientele, including Dr. James William Elliott. Elliott, a Harvard trained physician, was recognized by his peers as the greatest exponent of sleight of hand with playing cards in the world. Vernon fooled Elliott and the others with his amalgamation of gambling sleights, estimation, and improvisation.

Artistic successes aside, harsh realities crashed into his world on more than one occasion. Without steady work — Vernon quickly learned that fooling magicians didn't pay the rent — he found himself adrift in Manhattan. Eventually, Sam Margules escorted him to Coney Island. While there, Vernon recalled seeing a silhouette artist years before and thought that he, too, might be able to cut exquisite profiles from matte-black paper. Vernon set up a stall that advertised one silhouette for 50 cents, two for 75. Before long, Vernon came to regard silhouettes as currency, black pieces of paper that could be transformed into gold. Although his deft touch and artistic sensibility would eventually earn him the title as one of the great silhouette artists of the 20th century, for Vernon, cutting silhouettes was simply a means to an end, a way of supporting his exploration, his study of magic and card table artifice.

Coney Island generated seasonal income. In the off-season, Vernon toured the country, seeking out the moves and the magic that fueled his fire. Cutting silhouettes financed his peregrinations. In 1919, while in Chicago, he caught wind of an elderly gambler who *never* lost. Dad Stevens was the gambler's name, and Vernon, after some effort, tracked him down. Though their encounter in Chicago was brief, Vernon would forever regard Stevens the most skillful and innovative *advantage player* of the 20th century. The technique Stevens displayed literally brought tears to Vernon's eyes; he never imagined that someone could be so skillful with a pack of cards. Stevens could deal seconds, thirds and fourths — flawlessly. His piece-de-resistance, however, was the Riffle Cull, a technique for covertly assembling cards at will under the guise of a series of table shuffles. Gaining Stevens' confidence, Vernon was ushered into the innermost circle of them all.

SCENE: BALLROOM OF THE GREAT NORTHERN HOTEL, CHICAGO
YEAR: 1922

On February 6, 1922, Vernon and his confidant, Sam Margules, attended a banquet in honor of Harry Houdini in the Crystal Ballroom of the Great Northern Hotel. That night, Vernon met Houdini, the great self-liberator and self-professed “King of Cards.” Vernon fooled him with a card trick, not just once but eight times. (Houdini had thrown down the gauntlet that he could not be fooled by a trick if he had the opportunity of seeing it performed three times in a row.) Thereafter, Vernon was known as the man who fooled Houdini. He returned to New York swimming with ideas and with a slight swagger in his step. The trick: a mini-Ambitious Card routine employing a little known gaff — a double-backed playing card.

In 1922, vaudeville was in full force and magicians were featured as specialty acts in an era with an insatiable appetite for live entertainment. Horace Goldin's *Sawing A Woman In Two* was a worldwide phenomenon. Vernon returned to Coney Island and joined a troupe that performed the illusion. The troupe traveled to Cuba where Vernon enjoyed the lifestyle and characters that the island had to offer. When he returned to New York, Vernon connected with Jeanne Hayes, a visual artist so petite that she formed the lower half (the feet) in the *Sawing* illusion. After a brief courtship, they married. To finance the romance Vernon sold a small manuscript titled *Secrets*, and taught Jeanne to cut silhouettes. Together, they led a Bohemian lifestyle that alternated between Manhattan and the Atlantic City boardwalk.

As a young, dashing New Yorker in his 20s, handsome and confident, his reputation grew in the magic world. Whispers of miracles emanating from his fingertips continued to circulate through professional circles, sometimes creeping into print in the pages of *The Sphinx* and other trade journals. And yet, as the legend of his work grew, the exploration of magic and gambling became his life's work.

In 1924, while plying his trade in Atlantic City, Vernon was discovered by Frances Rockefeller King, the preeminent agent for private theatricals in New York. King promised Vernon a \$5,000 winter income if he would perform his magic at

[Facing page] David Verner on his third birthday. [Top to bottom] Vernon's wife Jeanne poses as her husband snips away in the back of the Little Blue Bookshop in Atlantic City, 1924. *Silhouettes of Cardini and Houdini*. Vernon working *Greenwich Village*, New York, circa 1943.



PHOTO: IRVING DESFOR



PHOTO: IRVING DESFOR



PHOTO: RICHARD PITCHFORD



private parties in Manhattan. Vernon eventually accepted her offer and began a ten-year association with King, performing for the elite of Manhattan society including the Carnegies, the Schwabs, and the Astors. The student of the art of magic became one of its preeminent practitioners. Vernon conured in intimate settings. Participants in his miracle-making did not select cards, they simply *thought* of them. Then, infallibly and uncannily, Vernon made their thoughts materialize.

The roaring '20s also marked an era in which Vernon formed strong, lasting bonds with two other magicians — amateurs — S. Leo Horowitz and Arthur Finley. Together, the trio was a vanguard that introduced a new wave, one that imported the secret techniques of gamblers into the realm of the escamoteur, shrouding this virtuoso skill in the natural movements and mannerisms of the artist. Led (in the figurative sense) by Vernon, this trio developed and honed principles that would become hallmarks of 20th-century card magic: estimation, card controls, palms, and doctored decks. The source of power shifted from the back rooms of magic emporiums to the late night coffee table *du jour* that these gentlemen frequented.

A newcomer, a recent immigrant to America named Richard Pitchford, soon joined their ranks. Pitchford was a Great War veteran with an insatiable appetite for sleight of hand. With Vernon's assistance, Pitchford refined the character — an apparently tipsy monocular card manipulator called Cardini — and charted a course to great acclaim, one that would inspire thousands of copycat magicians.

Reports of Vernon's own work continued to filter out into the community. In his *Sphinx* column "Trouping Around New York," Max Holden regularly reported the effects Vernon had been performing around the city. While some dismissed Holden's descriptions of Vernon's tricks as hyperbole, others like Charles Miller aspired to duplicate them. Soon Holden declared that New York had an "Inner Circle" and intimated that Vernon was its king.

While a new generation of magicians, particularly amateurs, was inspired by the Inner Circle and its officers, an old guard planned to steal Vernon's crown. T. Nelson Downs, Vernon's boyhood idol, conspired with Eddie "Tex" McGuire to usher a New England card cheat named Walter Scott, dubbed The Phantom of the Card Table, into New York

Vernon performing at the Kit Kat Club in Manhattan, 1936. Jeanne's life-like mask of Cardini. The Vernon family — Derek, Dai, Ted, and Jeanne — in a 1944 snapshot by Cardini.

for a private session. The session would take place while Vernon was on tour cutting silhouettes. McGuire and Downs' goal was to convince Vernon's confreres to part with the secrets, particularly those belonging to Vernon in exchange for access to Walter Scott.

Scott bamboozled the assembly — a group that included Horowitz, Cardini, and Max Holden. Holden crowned Scott the new king of the cards. Scott, although a gifted advantage player, was not as skillful as he appeared to be, relying on marked decks provided to him by the conspirators. Vernon soon recognized the session as a hoax, one designed to deceive the Inner Circle and get its members to part with their cherished secrets. He had out-hustled other hustlers before who had mistaken him for easy prey. Vernon did not reveal his secrets to either Downs or McGuire.

SCENE: THE GREAT DEPRESSION YEAR: 1932

Large-scale illusion shows were fading fast, ambushed by shifting economic sands and new forces in the entertainment industry. Performers could no longer afford to tour and audiences preferred to spend their money on talking pictures.

Interested in neither money nor publicity, Vernon toured the Midwest with his young wife and son, Edward Verner, cutting silhouettes, meeting magicians, and searching for advantage players. He met Paul Fox, a superb magical craftsman and jeweler in Colorado Springs. Vernon also befriended a small-town magician named Faucett Ross in St. Joseph, Missouri. Through Ross, Vernon met a Mexican gambler named Amador Villasenor. Villasenor informed Vernon that he had met a man who could deal from the center of the deck, an entirely new concept that, if true, would be the Holy Grail for card cheats. Vernon embarked on an exhaustive hunt and eventually located the man in Pleasant Hill, Missouri. His name was Allen Kennedy and he could do what no one thought was possible, exactly as Villasenor had described it: deal from the center of the deck — *perfectly*. Vernon convinced Kennedy to teach him the deal and, like the Riffle Cull, guarded the secret closely for 50 years. Ross did convince Vernon, however, to publish some of his other secrets in a small manuscript. The now-famous publication was called *Ten Card Problems* and sold for a then whopping \$20. The Vernon legend continued to grow.

In December 1933 Vernon returned to New York with a second son, Derek Verner. On arrival he met up with Cardini who introduced him to Billy Rose, a nightclub impresario. Rose hired Vernon as a resident performer, Vernon performing magic at patrons' tables at the Casino De Patee, Manhattan's premier nightspot. The concept of table-side



Charlie Miller and Vernon in the midst of a session. [Below] The Harlequin Act at New York's Heckscher Theatre, February 25, 1939.

entertainment was new, and Vernon was a perfect fit. His intimate style and endless catalog of one-on-one illusions guaranteed his success. Casino de Patee clientele represented a who's who of New York society and entertainment. Vernon met celebrities, gangsters, and political figures. Although the era of the large-scale illusion show had faded, magic experienced a renaissance in New York as fashionable nightclubs featured sophisticated variety artists. Vernon was at the forefront of yet another new wave.

Soon, his base of operation shifted to the Madison Hotel, where he performed table magic for one year. Yet, a certain satisfaction was lacking in his work for the public, and Vernon became disenchanted with performing. He preferred to spend his waking moments studying and practicing obscure sleight of hand. Though a proven professional performer — a virtually peerless magician in all respects — he regarded himself as a student of the art first and foremost. Despite familial responsibilities and the protestations of his wife, Jeanne, Vernon started to turn down lucrative engagements.

With two boys to raise Jeanne Verner tired of the hunt for elusive gamblers quickly, to say nothing of the sporadic income her husband generated. She helped make ends meet by sculpting performance masks for actors, magicians, and artists. In the meantime, Vernon displayed a callous disregard for conventional home life. He slept during the day and spent most nights practicing sleight of hand, meeting with magicians, and sharing his secrets. A colorful cast of characters frequented the Vernon household seeking guid-

ance and instruction. They wanted to learn from him, yet Vernon was not interested in accepting money for his instruction. He shared information because he loved the craft. He became known as "The Professor."

One student, Garrick Spencer, an attorney for the Woolworth Corporation, suggested that Vernon create a stage act similar to his friend, Cardini, an act that could be performed entirely to music and showcased anywhere in the world. Vernon accepted the challenge and created the Harlequin Act. Jeanne designed the costumes and acted as his assistant. After performing out of town try-outs, Vernon premiered the act in New York in 1938 at the fabled Rainbow Room in Rockefeller Center. He received great criti-



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PHOTO: IRVING DESFOR

cal acclaim and was held over for ten weeks. Magicians regarded the Harlequin Act as the high water mark of artistic excellence. On the heels of glowing reviews, the act was booked into Radio City Music Hall but closed after three performances, too small to be seen and appreciated on the cavernous stage. Vernon was crushed and returned to past practices, sleeping away his days and sessioning into the wee hours.

By 1939, the dissemination of magic secrets had exploded; the notion of secrecy within the magic community undertook a fundamental shift. Unbeknownst to the public, the safe had fallen open, its contents laid bare to all who expressed an interest in the secret art. Books such as *Greater Magic* and *Expert Card Technique* drew heavily from Vernon's repertoire, and these tomes immediately became recognized as the most significant contributions to magic literature since the publication of Erdnase's book in 1902. Even so, Vernon received no remuneration for his contributions.

Eventually, Jeanne persuaded her husband to accept a steady, non-showbiz job. He signed on as project manager on an East

River construction site, where after only two weeks on the job, he fell through a plank into the river, breaking both arms. With doctors ready to amputate, Dr. Jacob Daley, a New York ear, eye, and throat specialist and student of Vernon's, intervened. The road to recovery was long and one that, in Vernon's opinion, he never completed. His superhuman sleight-of-hand skills were diminished forever.

SCENE: THE WORLD IS AT WAR
YEAR: 1941

Vernon performed for soldiers stationed in America and in the South Pacific as part of a troupe of performers organized by Antoinette Perry. After the war, Vernon became the focal point of the groundbreaking *Stars of Magic* series, manuscripts that represented a manifesto for performing close-up magic. With the uptick in interest at the hobbyist level, Vernon was also persuaded to lecture on the art to magic societies. He laid the groundwork for an industry in which performers were paid to perform and explain their secrets to aficionados.

The quest for a steady income continued to knock at Vernon's door, so he became a fix-

ture on cruise ships that traveled between New York and Buenos Aires. It was a lifestyle Vernon, a hedonist in the truest sense of the word, found easy to enjoy. Essentially, he was paid to work in a '30s-era nightclub environment stationed on the high seas. But more importantly, cruising gave him the opportunity to meet magicians, including David Bamberg, and advantage players in ports of call. He soon tired of the routine, however, abandoning the field and opening it to others.

By the late 1950s, Vernon was unencumbered by family; his sons, now grown, achieved their own success despite an unorthodox upbringing. Vernon had renounced his Canadian citizenship so that his son, Edward Verner, could enter Annapolis Naval Academy. He rose through the ranks to become a Lt. Colonel in the United States Air Force. Derek Verner also joined the Navy, but left eventually to become a technical writer in the aerospace industry. Jeanne Verner stayed at home in Westchester, New York. Vernon's lack of financial support, however, made it difficult for her to make ends meet. She sought refuge in the bottle, becoming an alcoholic.

Vernon was invited to lecture and perform in Europe. Magicians followed him from town to town, absorbing what has become known as "The Vernon Touch." To spread the gospel even further, Vernon agreed to the release of some of his most valued secrets in a series of publications written by Lewis Ganson. *The Dai Vernon Book of Magic* became an instant classic and launched a new era of magic publications in both size and content. Other works, including tributes to Nate Leipzig and Max Malini, became part of Vernon's oeuvre.

The 1950s ushered in the television era, the small screen quickly becoming the primary purveyor of family entertainment. Magic was at a crossroads, and the public was skeptical. A public accustomed to and wary of the visual illusions made possible by multiple cameras and editing did not find magic very convincing on TV, especially stage-sized illusions. Magicians were also

wary of this new medium because of its voracious appetite for material. Like many vaudevillians, for years magicians understood that a ten-minute stage act could generate ten years of income. The way televised performances consumed material, there was no time to hone sophisticated performance pieces or refine skill to a virtuoso level.

Vernon was one of the first performers invited to perform on television, yet, like other opportunities, he failed to rise to the occasion, choosing instead to become removed from the debate on how his craft could benefit economically and artistically from the new technology. He was at an age when he should be thinking of retirement. Unfortunately, he had no means of economic support.

Vernon spied a young boy practicing sophisticated gambling technique in the corner of a cafeteria. Impressed by the boy's prowess, Vernon invited him to sit in with the Inner Circle. The boy, Persi Diaconis, was 14 years old. Soon after their initial encounter, Vernon asked Diaconis if he would like to join him in the hunt for an advantage player. Diaconis ran away from home and joined Vernon on a trek across the country. Under Vernon's tutelage, Diaconis explored the subculture of gamblers, hustlers, and magicians, and developed into one of the 20th century's finest practitioners of sleight of hand. During his time with Vernon, Diaconis displayed other talents, as well. Vernon advised Diaconis to continue his education. Eventually, Diaconis graduated from Harvard, pursued a career in mathematics, and went on to receive a MacArthur Foundation Grant for his work in statistics.

SCENE: SUNNY HILLS OF CALIFORNIA
YEAR: 1963

William and Milt Larsen, the sons of a California lawyer obsessed with magic, opened the Magic Castle on Franklin Avenue in Hollywood. Vernon, now turning 70, left Jeanne in New York to visit Jay Ose, the magician who had been hired as the resident performer at the new venue. Vowing to stay a week, Vernon extended his visit by close to 30 years. The Larsens provide Vernon with room, board, and a small stipend. In turn, Vernon provided the Magic Castle with public and professional credibility. In the process, with Vernon's move, the center of the magic world shifted from New York to Los Angeles, and a whole new cast of characters — actors, writers, and producers — joined Vernon's circle.

Shortly after the Magic Castle opened, two young hobbyists, Larry Jennings from Detroit and Bruce Cervon from Akron, Ohio, traveled to Los Angeles to be near Vernon, the living legend. They were the first of many who pulled up stakes and migrated to California. Cervon transcribed



PHOTO: IRVING DESFOR

[Facing page] Recovering from his construction site accident; this photo is inscribed January 3, 1942. Vernon was the star of the Stars of Magic. [Above] Bill Larsen prepares *The Professor* for a lecture at the Magic Castle. Mingling with two other grand men of magic, Blackstone and Ose. Appearing with one of his students, Doug Henning.

extensive notes on all of their meetings. Decades later, these notes of tricks, techniques, and routines were published to inspire another generation of magicians.

Vernon, ensconced at the Magic Castle, pondered abstract questions related to sleight of hand. The methodology he studied was both sophisticated and esoteric, and the merits of his work were recognized by an ever appreciative group of magicians. In 1968, he was awarded the inaugural Masters Fellowship from the Academy of Magical Arts & Sciences.

SCENE: THE MAGIC CASTLE
YEAR: 1972

Suddenly, as if dropped from the sky fully formed, a young Canadian magician named Doug Henning was awarded a travel grant by the Canada Council to study magic in Los Angeles with Vernon. Henning, sporting long hair, tie-dyed T-shirts, and flower-power charisma, was the antithesis of the public perception of a magician. Though they made an

unlikely pair — the octogenarian and the hippy — Vernon recognized Henning's talent and agreed to tutor him. Vernon predicted that Henning would change the face of magic. His approach was fresh, exciting, and rooted in the Vernon tradition that the effect — not the technique — is of primary importance. Henning starred in the most successful magic show in the history of Broadway and parlayed these performances into a series of award-winning television shows.

Henning shattered stereotypes and broke new ground in the way that magic was presented on television by performing and transmitting the shows live. There could be no debate about trick photography, camera editing, or post-production. His magic emphasized mystery and wonder in a way that appealed to all ages. Henning breathed new life into a moribund industry, inspired a whole new generation of magicians, ushered in a new Golden Age and set the stage for David Copperfield.



PHOTOS: KAISER, FOR STARS OF MAGIC



Ed Marlo, Roger Klause, Charlie Miller, Dai Vernon.

Other students of Vernon's, on the heels of Henning's success, also drew public praise. A New Yorker, Ricky Jay, had also moved to Los Angeles to be close to Vernon. Under Vernon's tutelage Jay grew into a world-class, sleight-of-hand performer, going on to star in a variety of feature films and successful one-man stage shows directed by David Mamet in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, London, and Washington.

lesser man, touring the world to attend conferences and gatherings of magicians. He was feted year after year at events in Europe, Asia, North and South America, and Australia.

At the age of 83, feeling both a bit of remorse for not providing more for his family, and wanting to provide financial assistance to another friend, Joe Cossari, Vernon embarked on a Farewell Lecture Tour, speaking in 50 cities at a fee of \$1,000 per

speech. He was an inspired orator, and magicians marveled at his stamina and grace. Each lecture was a marathon that exhausted the spectators, not The Professor. In 1986 a book that he wrote in the late 1950s — *Revelations*, Vernon's meditation on Erdnase — was released by Persi Diaconis and published by Mike Caveney. The Professor's work had come full circle. At the age of 98, on August 21, 1992, Vernon died in the home of his son, Edward, in Ramona, California. His ashes were placed in an urn on display at the Magic Castle.

After his passing, products, books, and videos related to Vernon and his legend appeared anew. His silhouettes, apparatus, and notebooks became coveted collectibles. A feature motion picture called *Shade*, the term gamblers use to describe techniques used to conceal their technique, starring Sylvester Stallone, Gabriel Byrne, Melanie Griffith, and Hal Holbrook as Vernon, was released. The film was inspired by Vernon, his relationship with Dad Stevens, and his lifelong pursuit of advantage players.

David Blaine is now regarded as one of

of estimation for this particular trick improve as you increase, within reason, the distance between you and the deck. Now, with your back to the spectator, ask whether he has finished mixing the cards. Do not turn around. Once he has said, "Yes," tell him to place the deck on the table in front of him. Still with your back to him and standing 15 to 20 feet away, extend your right hand from your side as if reaching over to cut an imaginary deck of cards, and ask the spectator to lift off a portion of the pack. Keep your right arm extended.

Ask the spectator whether he has cut off a portion of the deck. Once he has, ask him to look at the card at the bottom of the packet held in his hand. It is at this point, and this point only, that you turn around and glimpse the size of the block of cards on the table. Do not try to estimate the specific number of cards, just the mass of the block. This glimpse takes but a fraction of a second and must be done under the misdirection of turning around to gaze at the imaginary packet you are holding in your outstretched right hand. Your eyes look at the imaginary packet and in your peripheral vision you note the mass of the block on the table. Turn your gaze away as soon as you can.

With your right arm extended as if you are still holding the packet, ask the participant whether he has noted a card. When he says, "Yes," tell him to replace the packet on top of the deck and make sure that the cards are absolutely square. Ask whether he has done this. Once he says, "Yes," turn around and walk back to the table, pick up the deck and, as you ask, "Did you give the deck a shuffle?" knowing, of course, that he has not, then give the deck a false shuffle. Give the pack a simple cut at the end of the shuffle, separating it into two blocks, the bottom one being the approximate size of the one you peeked at moments before, and complete the cut. This cut sequence should form the punctuation mark — a period — to your shuffle sequence. With practice, you will be able to cut the selection to within three cards of the top or bottom of the pack. You now have, in essence, a six-card margin of error. With more practice, this slight margin can be reduced.

It is also worth pointing out that Vernon and others — Malini, for example — realized that few people square the cards completely when asked. The cards will often break at the point where the spectator cut for the selection. This natural break point is also often maintained during the course of an overhead false shuffle.

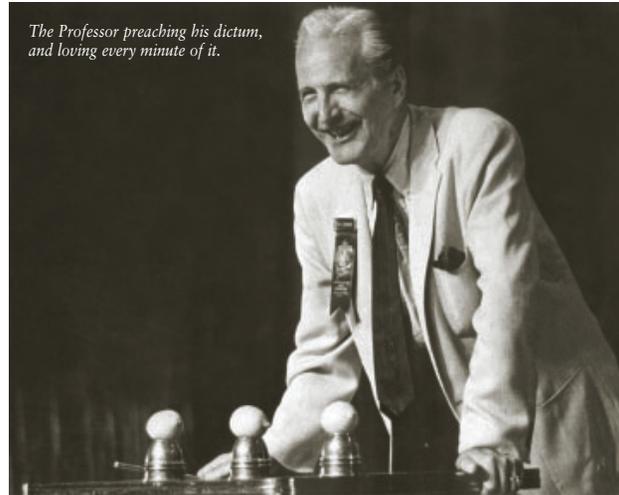
You must now use the right tool from your stock of techniques to conclude the trick in a mysterious manner. This is obviously easier if you have mastered

the world's premier magicians. In many ways, he combines the best of *MAGIC* magazine's nominees as the two most influential magicians of the 20th century. Blaine supplements the sensationalism of Houdini's stunts with the insouciance and confident swagger Vernon demonstrated in his prime. Blaine's repertoire also is built on material taken from their oeuvre. He augments Houdini's tests of endurance with Vernonesque "think of a card" tricks, improvised stunts and feats, like the self-levitation, that Vernon and his Inner Circle championed between the 1920s and 1960s. Blaine, like Henning before him, marked a path that others would follow.

The journey and Vernon's influence will continue. ♦

David is both a performer and the Executive Director of Magicana, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting magic as a performing art.

Dai Vernon: A Legacy of Magic, the first of two volumes, will be released next month by Squash Publishing, www.squashpublishing.com.



"Circa 1915" by Dai Vernon

Described by David Ben

Vernon performed this trick for other magicians upon arrival in New York in 1915. It was one of the pieces that helped establish his reputation. The only one who came close to reconstructing it at the time was Dunninger.

HERE'S THE EFFECT: With the magician standing 20 feet away and with his back to the audience, the spectator shuffles his own deck of cards, looks at a card in the pack, and squares up the deck. The magician turns around, takes the pack and discovers the spectator's card in a startling manner.

I titled this "Circa 1915" because it relies on estimation. Estimation is the principle of determining the location of a spectator's selection by determining its general position in the pack and then using a series of procedures to narrow the field and produce or reveal the chosen card, using the best option at hand. The principle was rarely used in 1915 and would remain buried in the literature until magicians like Jim Steranko and Ed Marlo wrote about the technique in more detail in the 1960s.

Circa 1915 is also important because, in many ways, it is the precursor of Vernon's Out of Sight, Out of Mind. Both tricks are, in essence, card control rather than effects — in the traditional sense that an "effect" has a predetermined outcome. Vernon improvised the revelation of the chosen card. By 1927, however, Vernon rarely improvised in the wild manner of his youth. He explored other types of material and approaches to magic. Out of Sight, Out of Mind, as a control, represents a step forward from Circa 1915 because the spectator merely "thinks of a card" rather than physically cutting to one.

Vernon used a combination of skill in manipulation and the psychology of misdirection to lead the spectator's mind step by step to defeat its own logic. Circa 1915 illustrates the power of that combination.

TO PERFORM: Ask a spectator if he has a deck of cards. You can provide one, but it is better if the participant uses his own deck. Tell the spectator to give the deck a good shuffle. Walk away from him as he does this and emphasize that you will be as fair as possible. Counter-intuitively, your powers

of the pack. I then hand the deck to the participant and inform him that if he thinks of his card and taps the deck once, the selection will vanish completely. He does so. I instruct him to deal the cards face up one at a time to look for his card. He will be too busy looking for his card to notice the deck is missing two others as well. Sometimes I leave it at that. Other times, I then ask him for the name of his card and remove it from my pocket. Obviously, I remember the order of the three cards that I palmed from the pack and reproduce the appropriate one from my pocket.

As you can see, there are an infinite number of possibilities. Here are a couple of variations that enhance the impossibility of the control. I keep a deck of cards on my desk so that when a visitor, sitting across from me, reaches over to cut the cards, I am in perfect position to turn my back and estimate the size of the block on the table by looking at its reflection in the glass on a photograph hanging on the wall. On other occasions, I have left the room while the spectator has shuffled, cut, and noted the card. I speak to him from the hallway, stick my arm in the doorway to demonstrate how he should pick up the pack, and obtain the necessary glimpse as my head pops momentarily around the doorway ostensibly to look at the imaginary card in my extended hand. I ask permission to re-enter the room moments later.

Finally, here is how I used to practice the trick. I would set up a table some distance from a mirror and then stand so that the table was between me and the mirror. I would then turn my back to the mirror. I would place the shuffled cards on the table behind me, cut the pack, and hold the upper packet so that it faced the mirror. Turning around quickly, I would then note both the card reflected in the mirror and the size of the block on the table, then turn back. Reassembling the pack, I would false shuffle and cut. I would then note whether I was able to cut the selection near the top or bottom of the deck, and then study my options for concluding the trick.

As one can imagine, Vernon flabbergasted magicians with this when he first arrived in New York. Estimating the position of the card is easy. Setting the appropriate scene so that the spectator is defeated by his own logic and concluding the trick in a mysterious manner is much more difficult. Both take mental agility. With practice, however, it will become second nature and you will experience the thrill of performing Dai Vernon's brand of jazz magic. ♦

MENTAL DIVINATION

Spread the pack between your hands, note the variants at top and bottom, and then perform a classic pump/fish/binary sort based on the principle of majorities. "Think of your card. It is a red card... it is a high/low/Diamond/Heart card." You get the idea.

SPECTATOR DISCOVERS CARD IN OWN HANDS

You may be in the position to very quickly narrow the card down to two possibilities. Position one on top, the other on the bottom. Place the deck in the spectator's hand. Ask him to tap the deck and name the card. Ask him to turn over either the top card or the entire deck, depending on the situation.

Note that if you are wrong, and you know now that his card is actually second from the top or bottom of the pack, you can top change or second deal the appropriate card to the table to conclude successfully.

NUMERICAL COUNT DOWN

Sometimes when I have narrowed it down to one of three, I position them through a series of simple cuts or shuffles so that they rest in their relative numerical positions in the deck. For example, if the cards are a Five, Seven, and Nine, they are secretly maneuvered to the fifth, seventh, and ninth positions from the top. I ask the spectator to think of the numerical value of his card. I then deal cards one at a time from the top of the pack and ask the spectator to say, "Stop," when I have dealt the card that corresponds with the numerical value of the one he has in mind.

VANISH FROM PACK

Sometimes, I narrow the field down to three variables and palm them out