

INFORMED OPINION

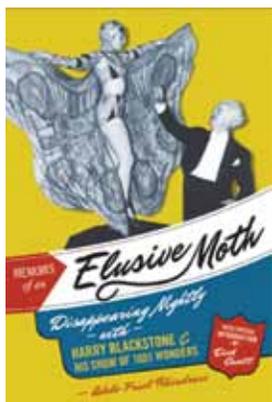
Latest Product Reviews

Compiled and Edited by W. S. Duncan

MEMOIRS OF AN ELUSIVE MOTH BOOK BY ADELE FRIEL RHINDRESS

Available from: www.squashpublications.com
Price \$35.00

REVIEW BY TOM EWING



The shortcoming of most magic historical books is that they suffer from the writer not having firsthand experience with his subject. Writers may comb letters, scrapbooks, magazines, and newspapers in their search for elusive details for their stories, but may end up with an incomplete and often lacking account of what really happened. Luckily, this is not the case with *Memoirs of An Elusive Moth*, the first-person account of Adele Friel Rhindress and her travels with the Blackstone illusion show in its last years.

This is an absolutely delightful biography, charmingly written by a member of Blackstone's troupe, which takes the reader behind the curtains and on the road as *The Show of 1001 Wonders* delights audiences across the country. From 1947 to 1950, Rhindress toured as an assistant to America's favorite magician and was featured in an illusion Blackstone designed specifically for her, The Elusive Moth, which was her signature effect.

Rhindress joined the show in 1947 after receiving an urgent call from her agent telling her that the Blackstone show needed a new girl and directing her to turn up at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theater. Only seventeen, she was already an accomplished dancer and by her own admission, while not a star, was a solid act that opened for performers like Orson Bean, Jerry Vale, Jack Klugman, and Ed McMahon.

Her account of first meeting Blackstone, trying on costumes, being swept away to a theatrical supply company to purchase make-up and silver shoes, and appearing on the show that same day is wonderfully told, as are most of her recollections. A quick study, Rhindress learned her music cues, how she was to be concealed in illusions, how to change quickly from one costume to another just off stage, and a hundred other unseen tasks that are essential to delivering a magical experience for the audience.

The way Rhindress writes, readers will feel like they are traveling with the Blackstone show as the cast members pull into town, unload the show, find lodgings, meet with sponsors, perform to crowded houses, and then break everything down and move on to the next town. Along the way you get to meet other members of the troupe, including a young Del Ray (who taught her magic), Pete and Millie Bouton, noted illusion builder Nick Ruggiero, stage manager Fred Phillips, and young Harry Jr., who Rhindress befriended and who was her teenage companion on shopping sprees when he visited the show during school breaks.

Rhindress first learned of Blackstone's intention of creating an illusion specifically for her when she received two hand-written letters from him detailing his thoughts. It was to be called The Elusive Moth, and he asked her to come immediately for costume fittings and rehearsals. She left immediately, heading for Colon. This biography benefits greatly from the fact that Rhindress lived with the Blackstone family in Colon, Michigan, for two summers, where she and the cast rehearsed the entire show for the upcoming tour.

In the prologue to the book, Blackstone expert Dan Waldon writes of Rhindress's illusion: "Night after night, she spread her wings and danced through the jungle, voodoo drums throbbing in her ears, a savage tribe in hot pursuit behind her. And night after night they would catch her in the gigantic web of a spider, and hoist her into the air so she could not escape. Yet escape she did. A flash of light, a burst of smoke [from Blackstone], and she was gone – vanished, just as though it were a magic trick."

Rhindress also reveals another secret hidden from admiring audiences but much more serious: Blackstone's failing health. Unknown to most was Harry's continuing battle with severe asthma. Only a few months into her first season, Blackstone suffered an attack and everyone was sent home with their pay and travel expenses. She recalls a number of occasions when, despite his illness, the fraternal Blackstone would perform in the evening and then visit local magic clubs to hang out with the local magicians.

April 1, 1950, was the closing engagement for the season. Starting in September 1949, they had played twenty-two states and forty-six cities with almost 250 performances. Everyone headed home and the "real" world. For a variety of reasons, Rhindress never worked again for the Blackstone show. Nor was the Blackstone show ever the show of "1001 Wonders." A smaller version went out for the final tour in 1954-55, but it was very different from the one Rhindress worked on. She went on with her life, took other jobs, married, raised a family, and basically kept quiet about her memories of her time with the show. That is, until a surprise from her children ignited the spark of magic once again. Like a great magic trick, I can't reveal what that surprise was, you'll just have to ask Rhindress at the many magic conventions she now attends and buy the book from her or your favorite dealer and find out. And I strongly recommend you buy it. *It's magic!*

RAMESES, THE FORGOTTEN STAR BOOK BY CHRIS WOODWARD

Available from: www.squashpublications.com
Price \$45.00

REVIEW BY TOM EWING

Anyone who has had the pleasure of attending any of the leading magic collecting and history conferences and has heard author and historian Chris Woodward lecture knows that when he speaks, interesting and unique aspects of our magical history will be revealed. Such is the case with his latest effort, *Rameses*,