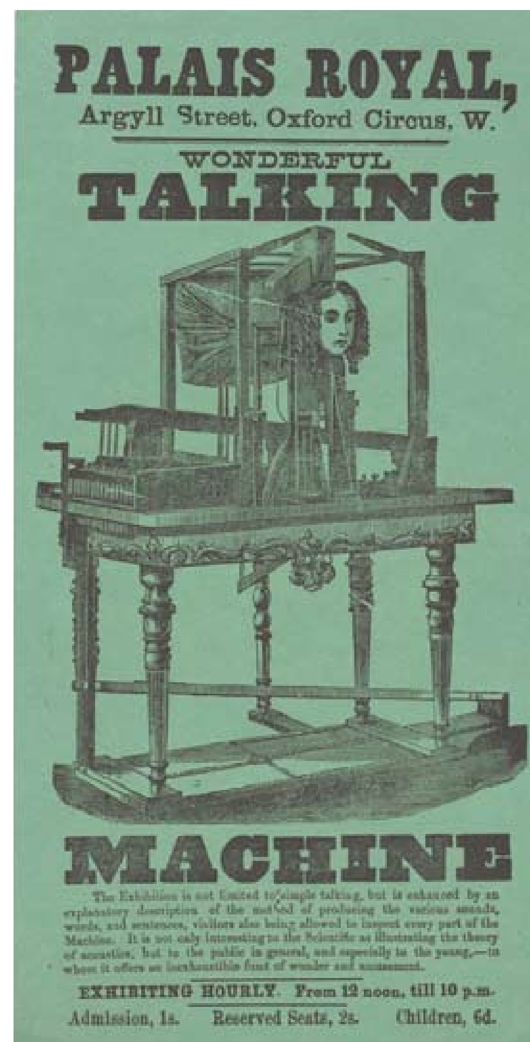
HAMMER

Extraordinary Exhibitions: Broadsides from the Collection of Ricky Jay



Left–Right:
Professor Faber's Euphonia, c. 1846, 5 x 9 15/16 inches; *Rubini "Beheading a Lady!"*, 1869, 12-3/16 x 24 inches; *George Anderson, "The Living Skeleton"*, c. 1862, 33 x 50 inches.

Cover:
Cinquevalli, "King of the Jugglers", 1898, 11-5/8 x 35-3/8 inches.

All images courtesy of Ricky Jay.

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICKY JAY

Ricky Jay is a celebrated sleight-of-hand artist and a famously engaging performer on stage and screen. While pursuing this career, Jay has also cultivated a more private role, that of the inquisitive scholar and passionate collector. Over the past thirty years he has assembled an astonishing archive of printed ephemera on spectacles and magic-related exhibitions. In Extraordinary Exhibitions: Broadsides from the Collection of Ricky Jay, the Hammer Museum presents a selection of broadsides, playbills, and posters from Jay's holdings. These works, which range in date from the 1600s to the early 1900s, are documents of the history of showmanship and entertainment, records of the often-peculiar events and entertainers that stunned and dazzled audiences of an earlier era. Conceived to attract the public's attention, many of the pieces are also noteworthy for their inventive design and typography.

The following interview is based on recent conversations with Jay, whose knowledge of theatrical broadsides is unrivaled, and on his contributions in the book that accompanies the show, *Extraordinary Exhibitions: The Wonderful Remains of an Enormous Head, the Whimsiphusicon and Death to the Savage Unitarians*.

AP: Ricky, your collection of broadsides reflects years of attentive search and selection. How and when did it originate?

RJ: I've been collecting this material for more than thirty years. Since my primary occupation is that of a performing sleight-of-hand artist, I was able to obtain many of these pieces while on tour in various cities in America and Europe. I would often spend my days haunting bookshops and printsellers, going to libraries, tracking leads on unusual entertainers.

AP: There is an obvious connection between the subjects of your collection and your professional practice. Could you elaborate on the link between the performer and the scholar in you?

RJ: My collection parallels my interest in two major areas: the broad field of deception and the exploits and accomplishments of unusual entertainers. My interest in these fields began in childhood and has never waned.

The happiest times of my youth were spent under the tutelage of my grandfather, a talented amateur magician, and I spent the largest part of each day in the practice of sleight-of-hand. I was naturally drawn to the milieu of conjuring, but as my grandfather numbered among his friends not only great illusionists but also puppeteers, jugglers, and ventriloquists, I soon became intrigued by those arts as well and began to delve into their history. A longtime friend, the statistician and sleight-of-hand expert Persi Diaconis, was the catalyst for my transition from an interested reader to an enthusiastic researcher and collector. As I began to amass my own library, I was often struck by the wonderful iconography of the subjects that interested me, and I began, on those rare occasions when I could afford it, to supplement my diet of books with an occasional helping of visual ephemera: especially prints, posters, and playbills.

AP: Is there competition in your field among collectors and institutions here and abroad?

RJ: Sure, to some extent, but showbills are considered the black sheep of theatrical memorabilia. They haven't been traditionally appreciated and respected as works of art. I love these sheets, which often provide the only surviving data on singular performers. These bills and broadsides are their legacy, and I pursue these documents less as a collector of rare ephemera than as a celebrant of the performers' accomplishments.

AP: Your collection documents the exploits of the great magicians of the past, but it also records sensational animals like Toby the sapient pig of around 1820 and mechanical marvels like Cantelo's egg-hatching machine of 1851. Do you find yourself continually expanding the range of your interests?

RJ: It was an easy segue from conjuring to automata, the marvelous mechanical devices often exhibited by magicians. Then another small leap brought me to scientific attractions like speaking machines or magic lanterns, and then to inventions claiming to have conquered the unconquerable mystery of perpetual motion. Which takes us back to deception and fraud, which call to mind broadsides for exhibitions of tools used by pickpockets and burglars, displayed in a detective museum. Which leads to museums themselves, which often exhibited physical anomalies that seemed related to exotic ethnological attractions, which spawned an interest in unusual animals and menageries, which relates to the circus, which in its early years often featured magicians . . . And thus, the course of my collecting took me from magicians I admired in childhood to a vast sphere of performance and entertainment—and back to magicians again.

AP: For those of us who are new to this material, could you discuss the terminology of the different types of sheets presented?

RJ: A broadside is a single sheet of paper printed on one side only, while a playbill might be defined as a broadside announcing a theatrical production, sometimes including its cast. The examples presented here are perhaps best considered broadside showbills that feature exhibitions and performances that are not conventional dramas. A poster is usually distinguished from a playbill as advertising an attraction not limited to a specific date or engagement. Posters are primarily visual, while a bill is more likely to emphasize text. Showbills are typically printed in letterpress and, if they are illustrated, most often employ woodblocks or wood engravings. Color, if incorporated at all, is used sparingly. Posters are generally reproduced by lithography, a technique invented in the last decade of the eighteenth century but not widely employed in the theatrical trade for nearly fifty more years.

AP: Can you say a few words about the historical development and stylistic evolution of this type of broadside?

RJ: The size and style of the early handbills, letterpress affairs usually no larger than six by eight inches, seem modest by today's standards (our full-color "one sheet" posters are about twenty-eight by forty inches). These early examples of the genre were typically unillustrated, and the printer's skill was exemplified principally in the choice of type: usually classic roman faces, almost subdued in contrast to the flamboyant display type that became conventional by the mid-nineteenth century. A decorative border or crest denoting permission to perform might create visual interest; an occasional woodcut greatly enhanced the overall appeal. The major strategy, however, was always verbal: hyperbolic, florid, orotund language evoking provocative or unique attributes of astonishing acts.

AP: What are the characteristics you admire most in the material you collect?

RJ: I especially love the language—for example, the "celebrated posture masters and buffos" or "jugglers to the king." I love the lure of untranslatable neologisms, for instance the whimsiphusicon, the eidopolyphoscopia, or the enchanted sciatoricon. I am also intrigued by the grandiloquent attempts of performers trying to stake a claim of originality in a vast expanse of competition.

I also love the typography. Early showbills were often produced on rich, creamy sheets of paper and printed with metal type. I love the elegant roman faces of the eighteenth century and the ornate display fonts of the Victorian era. And I love the woodcuts that sometimes embellish these placards. Such illustrations were often primitive attempts to render animals or apparatus, or the performers themselves, but they are wonderfully evocative of time and place.

AP: Could you elaborate a little on the content of the playbills and how these works lured you to become one of today's foremost collectors of these types of prints?

RJ: I have often been dazzled by collections of automata, hand-carved ventriloquist dummies, and fine-turned boxwood magical apparatus, but I am not, as a rule, particularly engaged by objets d'art. I am fascinated by the artifacts of showmen and, I confess, would dearly love to own the original speaking machine of Prof. Faber, or Phillipstahl's magic lantern, or Tom Thumb's pants. But, oh, that paper. I love the look, the feel, and the texture of paper. I find beauty in the irregularity of the deckled edge, the watermarks, and even the effects of natural attrition: small holes left by vermin, corners broken from years of handling, the discoloration of foxing. The Thai menus of yesteryear, these sheets were handed out to passersby, or placed under doors to be perused, then dismissed and discarded. I admire them as survivors that have endured the handling of unsympathetic, clumsy, or soiled hands, outlasted the ravages of time, and escaped the wrath of the elements.

Allegra Pesenti is Associate Curator at the Grunwald Center for Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum.

Another version of this exhibition was curated by Renny Pritikin at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

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HAMMER

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