

# Secrets of Magus

by Mark Singer

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Ricky Jay, who is perhaps the most gifted sleight-of-hand artist alive, was performing magic with a deck of cards. Also present was a friend of Mamet and Mosher's named Christ Nogulich, the director of food and beverage at the hotel. After twenty minutes of disbelief-suspending manipulations, Jay spread the deck face up on the bar counter and asked Nogulich to concentrate on a specific card but not to reveal it. Jay then assembled the deck face down, shuffled, cut it into two piles, and asked Nogulich to point to one of the piles and name his card.

"Three of clubs," Nogulich said, and he was then instructed to turn over the top card.

He turned over the three of clubs.

Mosher, in what could be interpreted as a passive-aggressive act, quietly announced, "Ricky, you know, I also concentrated on a card."

After an interval of silence, Jay said, "That's interesting, Gregory, but I only do this for one person at a time."

Mosher persisted: "Well, Ricky, I really was thinking of a card."

Jay paused, frowned, stared at Mosher, and said, "This is a distinct change of procedure." A longer pause. "All right—what was the card?"

"Two of spades."

Jay nodded, and gestured toward the other pile, and Mosher turned over its top card.

The deuce of spades.

A small riot ensued.

Deborah Baron, a screenwriter in Los Angeles, where Jay lives, once invited him to a New Year's Eve dinner party at her home. About a dozen other people attended. Well past midnight, everyone gathered around a coffee table as Jay, at Baron's request, did closeup card magic. When he had performed several dazzling illusions and seemed ready to retire, a guest named Mort said, "Come on, Ricky. Why don't you do something truly amazing?"

Baron recalls that at that moment "the look in Ricky's eyes was, like, 'Mort—you have just fucked with the wrong person.' "

Jay told Mort to name a card, any card. Mort said, “The three of hearts.” After shuffling, Jay gripped the deck in the palm of his right hand and sprung it, cascading all fifty-two cards so that they travelled the length of the table and pelted an open wine bottle.

“O.K., Mort, what was your card again?”

“The three of hearts.”

“Look inside the bottle.”

Mort discovered, curled inside the neck, the three of hearts. The party broke up immediately.

One morning last December, a few days before Christmas, Jay came to see me in my office. He wore a dark-gray suit and a black shirt that was open at the collar, and the colors seemed to match his mood. The most uplifting magic, Jay believes, has a spontaneous, improvisational vigor. Nevertheless, because he happened to be in New York we had made a date to get together, and I, invoking a journalistic imperative, had specifically requested that he come by my office and do some magic while I took notes. He hemmed and hawed and then, reluctantly, consented. Though I had no idea what was in store, I anticipated being completely fooled.

At that point, I had known Jay for two years, during which we had discussed his theories of magic, his relationships with and opinions of other practitioners of the art, his rigid opposition to public revelations of the techniques of magic, and his relentless passion for collecting rare books and manuscripts, art, and other artifacts connected to the history of magic, gambling, unusual entertainments, and frauds and confidence games. He has a skeptically friendly, mildly ironic conversational manner and a droll, filigreed prose style. Jay’s collection functions as a working research library. He is the author of dozens of scholarly articles and also of two diverting and richly informative books, “Cards as Weapons” (1977) and “Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women” (1986). For the past several years, he has devoted his energies mainly to scholarship and to acting in and consulting on motion pictures. Though he loves to perform, he is extremely selective about venues and audiences. I’ve attended lectures and demonstrations by him before gatherings of East Coast undergraduates, West Coast students of the history of magic, and Midwestern bunco-squad detectives. Studying videotapes of him and observing at first hand some of his serendipitous microbursts of legerdemain have taught me how inappropriate it is to say that “Ricky Jay does card tricks”—a characterization as inadequate as “Sonny Rollins plays tenor saxophone” or “Darci Kistler dances.” None of my scrutinizing has yielded a shred of insight into how he does what he does. Every routine appears seamless, unparsable, simply magical.

Before getting down to business in my office, we chatted about this and that: water spouters and armless origami artists and equestrian bee trainers, all subjects that Jay has written about. As we were talking, an editor friend and two other colleagues dropped by. I had introduced Jay and the editor once before and—presumptuously, it turned out—had

mentioned earlier that morning that he would be coming by for a private performance. Politely but firmly, Jay made it plain that an audience of one was what he had in mind. There was an awkward moment after the others left. I apologized for the intrusion, and he apologized for not being more accommodating. He reassured me that he still had something to show me. My cluttered office didn't feel right, however, so we headed upstairs to a lunchroom, found that it was unoccupied, and seated ourselves in a corner booth, facing each other. He unzipped a black leather clutch that he had brought with him and removed a deck of red Bee playing cards imprinted with the logo of Harrah's Casino.

In "Cards as Weapons" Jay refers to Dai Vernon, who died last year, at ninety-eight, as "the greatest living contributor to the magical art," and he quotes Vernon's belief that "cards are like living, breathing human beings and should be treated accordingly." I was reminded of Vernon's dictum as Jay caressed the deck, as gently as if it were a newly hatched chick. He has small hands—just large enough so that a playing card fits within the plane of his palm. There is a slightly raised pad of flesh on the underside of the first joint of each finger. "Not the hands of a man who has done a lot of hard labor," Jay said—a completely disingenuous line, to which he added, "One of the best sleight-of-hand guys I know is a plumber."

Jay's hands seem out of scale with the rest of him. He is of average height but has a hefty, imposing build. During the seventies, he regularly toured with various rock groups as an opening act and could easily have passed as foreman of the road crew; at the time, he had dark-brown hair that reached the middle of his back, and a dense, flowing beard. He now keeps his hair and beard neatly trimmed. He has a fleshy face, a high forehead, and dark eyes. His eyes light up and then crinkle when he laughs—a burst of what might or might not indicate pleasure, followed by a dry, wise-sounding chuckle that could mean anything. His inflection is New York with a Flatbush edge. In three of Mamet's films—"House of Games," "Things Change," and "Homicide"—Jay has been cast to type as a confidence man, a gangster, and an Israeli terrorist, respectively. In one scene of the play within a play of "House of Games," he portrays a menacing professional gambler.

"I'm always saying there's no correlation between gambling and magic," Jay said as he shuffle-cut the cards. "But this is a routine of actual gamblers' techniques within the context of a theatrical magic presentation."

He noticed me watching him shuffling, and asked softly, with deadpan sincerity, "Does that look fair?"

When I said it looked fair, he dealt two hands of five-card draw and told me to lay down my cards. Two pair. Then he laid down his. A straight.

"Was that fair?" he said. "I don't think so. Let's discuss the reason why that wasn't fair. Even though I shuffled openly and honestly, I didn't let you cut the cards. So let's do it again, and this time I'll let you cut the cards."

He shuffled again, I cut the cards, he dealt, and this time I had three tens.

“Ready to turn them over?”

My three-of-a-kind compared unfavorably with his diamond flush.

“Is that fair?” he said again. “I don’t think so. Let’s talk about why that might not be fair. Even though I shuffled the cards”—he was now reshuffling the deck—“and you cut the cards, you saw me pick up the cards after you cut them, and maybe you think there was some way for me to nullify the cut by sleight of hand. So this time I’ll shuffle the cards and you shuffle the cards.”

Jay shuffled the deck, I riffle-shuffled the deck and handed it back to him, and he said, “And I’ll deal six hands of poker—one for myself and five for you. I’ll let you choose any one of the five. And I’ll beat you.”

He dealt six hands. Instead of revealing only one of my five hands, I turned them all face up.

“Oh, oh,” he said. “I see you want to turn them all over. I only intended for you to pick one—but, well, no, that’s all right.”

The best of my five hands was two pair.

Jay said, “Now, did that seem fair?”

I said yes.

Jay said, “I don’t think so,” and showed me his cards—four kings.

I rested my elbows on the table and massaged my forehead.

“Now, why might that be unfair?” he continued. “I’ll tell you why. Because, even though you shuffled, I dealt the cards. That time, I also shuffled the cards. Now, this time you shuffle the cards and you deal the cards. And you pick the number of players. And you designate any hand for me and any hand for you.”

After shuffling, I dealt four hands, arranged as the points of a square. I chose a hand for myself and selected one for him. My cards added up to nothing—king-high nothing.

“Is that fair?” Jay said, picking up his cards, waiting a beat, and returning them to the table, one by one—the coup de grâce. “I. Don’t. Think. So.” One, two, three, four aces.

Jay has an anomalous memory, extraordinarily retentive but riddled with hard-to-account-for gaps. “I’m becoming quite worried about my memory,” he said not long ago. “New information doesn’t stay. I wonder if it’s the NutraSweet.” As a child, he read avidly and could summon the title and the author of every book that had passed through

his hands. Now he gets lost driving in his own neighborhood, where he has lived for several years—he has no idea how many. He once had a summer job tending bar and doing magic at a place called the Royal Palm, in Ithaca, New York. On a bet, he accepted a mnemonic challenge from a group of friendly patrons. A numbered list of a hundred arbitrary objects was drawn up: No. 3 was “paintbrush,” No. 18 was “plush ottoman,” No. 25 was “roaring lion,” and so on. “Ricky! Sixty-five!” someone would demand, and he had ten seconds to respond correctly or lose a buck. He always won, and, to this day, still would. He is capable of leaving the house wearing his suit jacket but forgetting his pants. He can recite verbatim the rapid-fire spiel he delivered a quarter of a century ago, when he was briefly employed as a carnival barker: “See the magician; the fire ‘manipulator’; the girl with the yellow e-e-elastic tissue. See Adam and Eve, boy and girl, brother and sister, all in one, one of the world’s three living ‘morphrodites.’ And the e-e-electrode lady . . .” He can quote verse after verse of nineteenth-century Cockney rhyming slang. He says he cannot remember what age he was when his family moved from Brooklyn to the New Jersey suburbs. He cannot recall the year he entered college or the year he left. “If you ask me for specific dates, we’re in trouble,” he says.

Michael Weber, a fellow-magician and close friend, has said, “Basically, Ricky remembers nothing that happened after 1900.”

Jay has many loyal friends, a protective circle that includes a lot of people with show-business and antiquarian-book-collecting connections and remarkably few with magic-world connections.

Marcus McCorison, a former president of the American Antiquarian Society, where Jay has lectured and performed, describes him as “a deeply serious scholar—I think he knows more about the history of American conjuring than anyone else.”

Nicolas Barker, who recently retired as one of the deputy keepers of the British Library, says, “Ricky would say you can’t be a good conjurer without knowing the history of your profession, because there are no new tricks under the sun, only variations. He’s a superbly gifted conjurer, and he’s an immensely scholarly person whose knowledge in his chosen field is gigantic, in a class by itself. And, like any other scholarly person, he has a very good working knowledge of fields outside his own.”

The actor Steve Martin said not long ago, “I sort of think of Ricky as the intellectual élite of magicians. I’ve had experience with magicians my whole life. He’s expertly able to perform and yet he knows the theory, history, literature of the field. Ricky’s a master of his craft. You know how there are those teachers of creative writing who can’t necessarily write but can teach? Well, Ricky can actually do everything.”

A collector named Michael Zinman says, “He’s instantly reachable, up to a limit.” Those most familiar with his idiosyncrasies realize that there are at least three Ricky Jays: a public persona, a private persona, and a private persona within the private persona. Jay can remember his age—somewhere in his forties—but says that it is irrelevant. It is also irrelevant that Jay was not his surname at birth; it was his middle name. Janus Cercone,

who wrote the screenplay for “Leap of Faith,” a recent film that stars Steve Martin as a flimflam faith healer and credits Jay as the “Cons and Frauds Consultant,” told me, “I talk to Ricky three times a day. Other than my husband, he’s my best friend. I think I know him as well as just about anyone does, and I know less about his background and his childhood than about those of anyone else I know.”

Mamet and Jay have been friends for several years—a bond rooted, in part, in their shared fascination with the language, science, and art of cons and frauds.

“I’ll call Ricky on the phone,” Mamet says. “I’ll ask him—say, for something I’m writing—‘A guy’s wandering through upstate New York in 1802 and he comes to a tavern and there’s some sort of mountebank. What would the mountebank be doing?’ And Ricky goes to his library and then sends me an entire description of what the mountebank would be doing. Or I’ll tell him I’m having a Fourth of July party and I want to do some sort of disappearance in the middle of the woods. He says, ‘That’s the most bizarre request I’ve ever heard. You want to do a disappearing effect in the woods? There’s nothing like that in the literature. I mean, there’s this one 1760 pamphlet—“Jokes, Tricks, Ghosts and Diversions by Woodland, Stream and Campfire.” But, other than that, I can’t think of a thing.’ He’s unbelievably generous. Ricky’s one of the world’s great people. He’s my hero. I’ve never seen anybody better at what he does.”

I once asked Mamet whether Jay had ever shared with him details of his childhood.

Mamet replied, “I can’t remember.”

I said, “You can’t remember whether you discussed it or you can’t remember the details?”

He said, “I can’t remember whether or not I know a better way to dissuade you from your reiteration of that question without seeming impolite.”

Jay’s condensed version of his early life goes like this: “I grew up like Athena—covered with playing cards instead of armor—and, at the age of seven, materialized on a TV show, doing magic.” Confronted with questions about his parents, he suggests a different topic. Whatever injuries were inflicted, his mother and his father were apparently equally guilty. Any enthusiasm he ever expressed they managed not to share. “I’m probably the only kid in history whose parents made him stop taking music lessons,” he says. “They made me stop studying the accordion. And, I suppose, thank God.” He loved to play basketball. There was a backboard above the garage of the family house, which had aluminum siding. “Don’t dent the house!” his mother routinely warned. His father oiled his hair with Brylcreem and brushed his teeth with Colgate. “He kept his toothpaste in the medicine cabinet and the Brylcreem in a closet about a foot away,” Jay recalls. “Once, when I was ten, I switched the tubes. All you need to know about my father is that after he brushed his teeth with Brylcreem he put the toothpaste in his hair.”

Though Jay first performed in public at the age of four, he rejects the notion that magic—or, in any case, his mature style of magic—is suitable entertainment for children. Nor does he apologize for his lack of susceptibility to the charms of children themselves. I once drove with him from central Massachusetts to my home, near New York City. We had to catch a plane together the next day, and I had invited him to spend the night in a spare room, on a floor above and beyond earshot of my three sons. While acknowledging that they were Ricky Jay fans, I promised him that they would all be in bed by the time we arrived and off to school before he awoke the next morning. As it turned out, we had no sooner entered the house than I heard one of my six-year-old twins announce “I think Ricky’s here!” Before he could remove his coat, the three of them, all in their pajamas, had him cornered in the kitchen. My eleven-year-old son handed him a deck of cards. The other boys began parroting the monologue from one of his television appearances—patter from a stunt in which he tosses a playing card like a boomerang and during its return flight bisects it with a pair of giant scissors. Jay gave me the same look I imagine he gave Mort, the unfortunate New Year’s Eve party guest. I immediately reached for the phone directory and found the number of a nearby motel.

Just as resolutely as he avoids children, Jay declines opportunities to perform for other magicians. This habit has earned him a reputation for aloofness, to which he pleads guilty-with-an-explanation. According to Michael Weber, he has a particular aversion to the “magic lumpen”—hoi polloi who congregate in magic clubs and at conventions, where they unabashedly seek to expropriate each other’s secrets, meanwhile failing to grasp the critical distinction between doing tricks and creating a sense of wonder. One guy in a tuxedo producing doves can be magic, ten guys producing doves is a travesty. “Ricky won’t perform for magicians at magic shows, because they’re interested in things,” Weber says. “They don’t get it. They won’t watch him and be inspired to make magic of their own. They’ll be inspired to do that trick that belongs to Ricky. Magic is not about someone else sharing the newest secret. Magic is about working hard to discover a secret and making something out of it. You start with some small principle and you build a theatrical presentation out of it. You do something that’s technically artistic that creates a small drama. There are two ways you can expand your knowledge—through books and by gaining the confidence of fellow-magicians who will explain these things. Ricky to a large degree gets his information from books—old books—and then when he performs for magicians they want to know, ‘Where did that come from?’ And he’s appalled that they haven’t read this stuff. So there’s this large body of magic lumpen who really don’t understand Ricky’s legacy—his contribution to the art, his place in the art, his technical proficiency and creativity. They think he’s an elitist and a snob.”

Jay does not regard “amateur” as a pejorative. His two most trusted magician confidants are Persi Diaconis, a professor of mathematics at Harvard, and Steve Freeman, a corporate comptroller who lives in Ventura, California. Both are world-class sleight-of-hand artists, and neither ever performs for pay. Jay extolls them as “pure amateurs in the best sense.” The distinction that matters to Jay is between “good” magic and “bad.” Magic “gives me more pleasure and more pain than anything else I’ve ever dealt with,” he says. “The pain is bad magicians ripping off good ones, doing magic badly, and making a mockery of the art.” One specific locale that he steers clear of is the Hollywood

Magic Castle, a club whose membership consists of both amateur and professional conjurers. On a given night, one can see a great performer at the Magic Castle, but all too often the club is a tepid swamp of gossip, self-congratulation, and artistic larceny—a place where audiences who don't know better are frequently fed a bland diet of purloined ineptitude. Many years ago, Jay had an encounter there that he describes as typical.

“A guy comes up and starts telling me he's a fan,” he recalls. “I say thank you, that's nice to hear. He says he used to see me perform in Boulder, Colorado. That's nice, too, I say. Then he starts talking about this wonderful piece I did with a mechanical monkey—really one of the most bizarre routines I ever worked out—and I thank him, and he says, ‘Yeah, I get a tremendous response when I do that. Audiences just love it.’ And I say, ‘Let me ask you something. Suppose I invite you over to my house for dinner. We have a pleasant meal, we talk about magic, it's an enjoyable evening. Then, as you're about to leave, you walk into my living room and you pick up my television and walk out with it. You steal my television set. Would you do that?’ He says, ‘Of course not.’ And I say, ‘But you already did.’ He says, ‘What are you talking about?’ I say, ‘You stole my television!’ He says, ‘How can you say that? I've never even been to your house.’ This guy doesn't even know what a metaphor is. People ask me why I don't do lectures at magic conventions, and I say, ‘Because I'm still learning.’ Meanwhile, you've got people who have been doing magic for ten months and they are actually out there pontificating. It's absurd.”

T. A. Waters, a mentalist and writer, who is the librarian at the Magic Castle, told me, “Some magicians, once they learn how to do a trick without dropping the prop on their foot, go ahead and perform in public. Ricky will work on a routine a couple of years before even showing anyone. One of the things that I love about Ricky is his continued amazement at how little magicians seem to care about the art. Intellectually, Ricky seems to understand this, but emotionally he can't accept it. He gets as upset about this problem today as he did twenty years ago.”

At some point within the past twenty years, Jay asked Dai Vernon—a.k.a. the Professor—how he coped with affronts of this sort, and Vernon replied, “I forced myself not to care.”

“Maybe that's how he lived to be ninety-eight years old,” Jay says.

Jay's admirers invariably dwell upon his technical mastery—what is known in the trade as “chops.” According to Diaconis, he is, “simply put, one of the half-dozen best card handlers in the world. Not maybe; everybody thinks so.” Diaconis and Jay were casual acquaintances as kids on the New York magic scene during the fifties, then lost track of each other for several years, in part because Jay deliberately exiled himself from the mainstream magic world. They reestablished contact twenty-odd years ago, after Diaconis caught one of Jay's appearances on the “Tonight Show.” By then, Jay had honed an out-of-left-field brand of gonzo-hip comedy magic, a combination of chops and antic irreverence. Often, he would begin a performance by demonstrating a not easily marketable skill that eventually earned him a listing in the “Guinness Book of World Records”: throwing a playing card for distance. A properly launched card would go



ninety miles an hour. Unobstructed, it could travel a hundred and ninety feet. From ten paces, it could pierce the outer rind of a watermelon. After impaling the flesh of a watermelon with a card, Jay would rifle one card after another into the exact same spot. He also used a plastic chicken and windup toys as props and targets, often inflicting disabling injuries. His patter was voluble, embroidered with orotund, baroque locutions; he would describe the watermelon rind, for instance, as the “thick pachydermatous outer melon layer.” In a memorable routine, the “Laughing Card Trick,” which involved no words at all, Jay showed his hands empty and then produced cards one at a time, along the way building suspense with cackling laughter. Each time he produced a card—somehow, it was always a jack of spades—he gripped it with his lips. After doing this maneuver four times, he removed the cards from his mouth and revealed that—voilà!—they had become the four aces. Next, he would do spirit-writing on a tortilla. Downshifting, he would segue to “The Four Queens,” a minuet-like Victorian parable in which the four face cards representing “the feminine portion of the smart set” were “besieged” by “suits from the lower orders.” In other words, each of the four queens was grouped with three numbered cards. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he would announce, “as you have seen, I have taken advantage of these tenderly nurtured and unsophisticated young ladies by placing them in positions extremely galling to their aristocratic sensibilities.” Somehow, the queens must “find each other’s company”—that is, transport themselves so that what remained would be three groups of four numbered cards and a quartet of queens. This Jay accomplished in a manner so simple, natural, and miraculous as to render prestidigitation invisible, thereby raising the strong possibility of divine intervention.

Jules Fisher, the theatrical-lighting designer and a friend of Jay’s, told me, “Ricky will look into any effect and find the side of it that is inherently magical. He doesn’t present magic as a challenge—as a matter of ‘Look, I can make this disappear and you can’t.’ Rather, he wraps it in a dramatic plot. In many of his tricks, there are stories. In ‘The Four Queens,’ the cards take on personas, which is much more impressive than the question of how that card disappeared.”

Michael Weber has a vivid memory of seeing Jay execute “The Four Queens” fifteen years ago on a network-television special with Doug Henning as host. “It was a transcendent moment in popular magic,” he says. “Ricky had attitude, presentation, humor, and chops. Everybody was talking about that show. It was one of those times when all the elements of his talent were so self-evidently on display that even the people who could never before get it finally got it.” Dai Vernon once saw Jay perform “The Four Queens” live, during a lecture-demonstration at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, at the University of California at Los Angeles. Afterward, the Professor told his disciple that the entire performance “restored dignity to the art of magic.”

“The magical aspect of Ricky is very strong,” Diaconis says. “It’s one thing to see someone who is very skillful with cards and quite another to witness an effect and have just no idea what happens. With Ricky, it’s very hard to isolate technique from performance. I can sense when a sleight has happened and how it happened, but I still don’t see it. I just feel it intellectually. When Ricky is doing one of his poetical pieces,

he's working in his own unique venue. He's mixing disparate things—quirky scholarship, iconoclasm, technique, a good story—into some soup that works. Because he picks good, strong tricks and makes them come to life, in the end there's this basic simplicity about what he does. Before Ricky came along, there had been comedy magicians, but never ones who really fooled people. And you can see the consequence—there are a dozen people now working in night clubs doing Ricky Jay acts. But none of them are Ricky Jay.”

In “Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women” Jay devotes a chapter to “Max Malini: The Last of the Mountebanks.” Malini, who was born in 1873, stood five feet two, had short arms and unusually small hands, dressed like a dandy, spoke English with a comically heavy Eastern European accent, and was celebrated as the most astonishing sleight-of-hand artist of his day. He performed all over the world, for Presidents, prime ministers, robber barons, emperors, kings, and Al Capone. Jay quotes Nate Leipzig, “a master exponent of pure magic technique” and a contemporary of Malini’s: “I would give up everything I know in magic just to get the reaction Malini does from vanishing a single coin.” At a dinner party where Dai Vernon was present, Malini borrowed a female guest’s hat, spun a half-dollar on the table, and covered it with the hat, which he then lifted to reveal not the coin but a block of ice. Though Vernon knew ahead of time that this effect would be performed, he later reported that Malini, who had remained at the table throughout the meal, “fooled the hell out of me.” Jay recounts this and other Malini anecdotes with a mixture of delight and wistfulness. In a just universe, he seems to imply, he himself would have been in Leipzig’s and Vernon’s shoes, playing to the same discerning audiences that witnessed Malini’s exemplary talents. He writes, “Malini was rarely featured on music hall or theatre stages, even though he performed in the heyday of the great illusionists. Yet far more than Malini’s contemporaries, the famous conjurers Herrmann, Kellar, Thurston, and Houdini, Malini was the embodiment of what a magician should be—not a performer who requires a fully equipped stage, elaborate apparatus, elephants, or handcuffs to accomplish his mysteries, but one who can stand a few inches from you and with a borrowed coin, a lemon, a knife, a tumbler, or a pack of cards convince you he performs miracles.”

Jay feels connected to Malini not only out of veneration but by a strange coincidence. Malini, who was born in a small town on the Polish-Austrian border, had the given name of Max Katz (or, perhaps, Max Katz-Breit). Max Katz was also the name of Jay’s maternal grandfather, a well-to-do accountant and, most important, the one member of the family who loved and appreciated Ricky and for whom Ricky in return felt love and gratitude. “My grandfather was an amateur acquirer of skill and knowledge,” Jay says. “He was interested in a lot of things—pool, chess, checkers, calligraphy, cryptography, origami, magic. His philosophy was to take lessons from the best available people and then proceed on his own. He was really a terrific teacher. And his greatest contribution was to expose me to the best. Because of him, I was able to see on a regular basis the finest closeup-magic people in the world. Unlike me, he actually liked to fraternize with magicians.” At one time, Katz was president of the Society of American Magicians. When, at the age of four, Ricky did his first trick in front of an audience—he multiplied

paper coffee creamers during a backyard barbecue for the Society of American Magicians—Dai Vernon was a witness.

Jay told me, “When we watched Vernon, my grandfather would say, ‘Look at the Professor and study the naturalness with which he handles objects.’ He introduced me to Slydini and to Francis Carlyle, two other great closeup illusionists. These were guys who were capable of doing magic—something beyond tricks—and the fact that they were stylistically so different from each other fascinated me. With Slydini, it was important to understand that he was the master of misdirection—drawing the spectator’s attention away from the sleight. With Carlyle, the purpose was to absorb what my grandfather called the clarity of instruction—how Carlyle subtly guided the spectator in a way that enhanced the clarity of the effect. There was a period of several years when I took formal lessons with Slydini. In his stage appearances, which were infrequent, he used to perform in a toreador suit, and he made one for me. I wore it with my hair slicked back, and I had these fake sideburns pencilled in. I performed with doves. I did a piece called ‘The Floating Cane’—stage-illusion work, with no patter, that eventually made me realize I wanted to speak and I preferred closeup. An audition was arranged for me for ‘The Ed Sullivan Show.’ I wore my toreador suit and wanted to pretend I was Spanish, knowing it would increase my chances of getting on the show, but my parents wouldn’t let me. By then, I had already done a lot of television. When I was five, I was supposed to appear on ‘Startime Kids,’ with Ed Herlihy, but I dozed during the dress rehearsal and slept through the show. I was on a program called ‘Time for Pets’ when I was seven. I was the youngest magician who had ever been on TV. I was awful. I was a kid. The only thing that’s important is that I was very comfortable performing. I was supposed to produce a rabbit, but they couldn’t find one, so I had to work with a guinea pig, which took a leak on my father’s necktie. My father said, ‘Perfect. You get all the glory and I get all the piss.’ ”

Weekends, Jay often made trips to Manhattan, first in the company of his grandfather and by adolescence often on his own. The cafeteria on the ground floor of the Wurlitzer Building, on West Forty-Second Street, was to the magic demimonde what the White Horse Tavern was to literary pretenders. Jay also spent many contented hours at Al Flosso’s magic shop, on West Thirty-Fourth Street. He preferred Flosso’s to the more popular Tannen’s, which was then in Times Square, because, above all, he loved Flosso. Also, the marvelous clutter of old posters, handbills, and books appealed to him far more than the antiseptic ambience of Tannen’s. “Early on, I knew I didn’t want to do the kind of magic other people were doing,” he says. “So I started buying old books to look for material.” Flosso, in the guise of a sideshow pitchman from Coney Island, did wonderful comedy sleight of hand and had a flourishing career—in the big rooms at Grossinger’s and the Concord, on the Sullivan show. When Ricky’s parents asked what kind of bar-mitzvah celebration he wanted, he said he wanted Flosso to perform. “The thing that’s significant about that event is that it’s literally the only warm memory I have of my parents,” he has said.

Prodded by Slydini and his grandfather, he entered several performing competitions at magic conventions. “I always won,” he says. “But the whole thing soured me on the idea

of competitions within an art.” By the time he was fifteen, he had had enough of living at home. He moved in with a friend’s family, moved back home again, moved to the resort town of Lake George, in upstate New York (where he discovered what it was like to support himself as a pro), and, before he turned eighteen, had left home for good. He either did or did not officially complete high school—another one of those elusive memories. Max Katz died around that time. At the funeral, Flosso ceremonially broke a wand and placed it in the casket—“the single most frightening thing I ever saw,” Jay says. His grandfather’s death marked the end of his relationship with his parents. (He remains on good terms with his younger sister, whom he says he admires tremendously.) By then, he was living in Illinois, having begun a peripatetic college career. Over a period of ten years, he attended five different colleges and “officially was never anything other than a freshman.” At Cornell, he enrolled in the School of Hotel Management. “In case I had my own joint in Vegas, I thought I might be the only guy in the business who would know how to get around in both the casino and the kitchen,” he likes to say. He and several friends formed an a-cappella doo-wop group called Chico and the Deaf Tones. The Deaf Tones were five guys named Tony plus a girl named Laura. Their big number was “Tell Laura I Love Her.”

To pay tuition and otherwise make ends meet, he briefly sold encyclopedias, travelled with a carnival, worked on Wall Street as an accountant, tended bar, and, of course, did magic. From talking to Jay’s friends, I gathered that there was a time when he played cards for a living. Boldly, I once raised this subject with him, and he pretended not to hear me.

“Would anybody play cards with you today?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “Silly people.”

Twice while he was still at Cornell, he appeared on the “Tonight Show.” With Ithaca as his home base, he became nomadic. He performed frequently in Aspen and Lake George, did club and concert dates all over the country with various rock and jazz groups—Ike and Tina Turner, the Chambers Brothers, Leon Redbone, Al Jarreau, Emmylou Harris, Herbie Hancock, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Sometimes he was the opening act, sometimes he was the headliner. Invitations to perform in Europe materialized. In the early seventies, he moved to Los Angeles and found plenty of work, first at a club in Santa Monica called McCabe’s Guitar Shop and then at the Magic Castle. Tracy Newman, a television-comedy writer, who lived with him for a year, says she went to see him perform “probably seventeen times” before they started dating. Not long ago, she told me, “The thing Ricky had that I’d never before seen in a magician was charm. At McCabe’s, he was doing improvisational patter. He had his stuff down so well he was just free. He had the guts to bring people onstage and really play with them, instead of having to be so careful that they might see something that would cause him to blow what he was trying to do. He was very casual, but his language had a Shakespearean feel. He was brutal with hecklers—not because it would throw him off. He just didn’t like hecklers. He vaporized them.”

In those days, Dai Vernon had a sinecure at the Magic Castle that entitled him to living quarters nearby. Vernon's presence was the main thing that had attracted Jay to Los Angeles. When he was not on the road, he sought out the Professor's company virtually every night. Wherever they started the evening—at the Castle or somewhere else—they would invariably wind up at Canter's Deli, on Fairfax Avenue, a shrine of vinyl and Formica and leaden matzo balls. There Vernon would hold forth until five or six in the morning. A few years ago, Jay wrote a magazine article in which he described one such session at Canter's, an occasion when he petitioned for practical counsel rather than the generous praise that Vernon typically dispensed:

"Professor," I protested, "I really want to know how I can improve my technique and performance. I want to take lessons from you. I really want advice."

Vernon smiled his patented half smile, and with a delicate movement of his eyes beckoned me closer. I leaned forward with anticipation, almost unable to contain my excitement, about to receive my benediction from the master. "You want advice, Ricky," he said. "I'll give you advice. Fuck as many different women as you can. Not the same one. Not the same one. Fuck many different women. Many different women."

Persi Diaconis ran away from his unhappy home at the age of fourteen and spent two years travelling with Vernon—an unsentimental education. "Life with Vernon was a challenge," Diaconis says. "Vernon would use secrecy as a way of torturing you. When he and I were on the road, he woke up one morning and said, 'You know, I've been thinking about sleight of hand my whole life, and I think I now know how to encapsulate it in one sentence.' And then, of course, he refused to tell me." Another friend of Vernon's once said, "I wouldn't have taken a million dollars not to have known him. But I'd give a million not to know another one like him."

Vernon was extroverted, insouciant, a winning combination of gentleman and rake. Though he perfectly fitted the role of guru, he was not the paternal mentor that Jay's grandfather had been. To the extent that anyone could fill that void, Charlie Miller did. "Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women," which Jay spent ten years writing, is dedicated "to my wonderful friend Charles Earle Miller, a unique, eccentric, and remarkable entertainer." Had Miller not been Vernon's contemporary, Jay believes, he would have been regarded as the greatest sleight-of-hand figure of his time. "For fifty or sixty years, Charlie lived in Vernon's shadow," he says. "And yet Vernon knew that Charlie was the best sleight-of-hand artist he'd ever seen." Vernon once described Miller as "unquestionably the most skillful exponent of the magic art it has ever been my pleasure to know." Miller was a shy, vulnerable man, for whom public performance was a bravura act. As a friend to Jay, Diaconis, Steve Freeman, and another accomplished magician, John Thompson—his four most reverent acolytes—he was emotionally much warmer than Vernon. "Vernon was very comfortable to be around," Freeman says. "But Charlie was your pal, Charlie was your uncle, Charlie cared about you." On the West Coast, he was the premier cruise-ship performer, and this arrangement suited his essentially rootless nature. (Jay himself worked very few cruise ships—a merciful policy, he says, because "the people who went on cruises had saved up their entire lives just to get on a

boat and be away from people who looked like me.”) For Vernon, Jay says, “making money was only a means of allowing him to sit in a hotel room and think about his art, about cups and balls and coins and cards.” Charlie Miller was, if anything, more cerebral, even more obsessive.

“Charlie and Vernon were both magicians for magicians,” says Robert Lund, the founder of the American Museum of Magic, in Marshall, Michigan. “Only magicians truly appreciated what Charlie was doing. Charlie knew more about why you do it this way instead of that way than anyone I’ve ever met in my life, including Ricky Jay. If there were a hundred ways of doing an effect—a card trick or sawing a lady in half—Charlie went through all hundred and analyzed each one, looking for the most natural way of doing it, the approach that would be the most palatable and acceptable to an audience.”

More than any other magician Jay has known, Miller had an orthodox devotion to preserving the secrets of the art—a fundamental precept that Jay today shares with Diaconis and Freeman. To their dismay, Vernon wrote a series of instruction books. When these began to appear in print, Diaconis said to Vernon, “Why did you publish these, Professor? We don’t want the animals using tools.” As a palliative, they can speculate about the secrets that Miller took to the grave—an absolutism that, while perhaps depriving him of mundane celebrity, at least made the secrets themselves immortal. “Charlie would never tell anything to anybody who wasn’t really on the inside,” Diaconis says. “There’s something called the Sprong shift. Sprong was a night watchman—he did that for a living so that he could spend his days practicing card handling. The Sprong shift is a certain way of reversing the cards so that a card that would be in the middle will end up on top. It’s a move that has been passed down only orally. It’s never been described or even hinted at in writing that such a thing existed. It got disseminated to three or five of us, and the one who does it beautifully is Ricky. Charlie had the capacity to watch Ricky practice it for several hours non-stop. He’d keep moving around the room to see it from every possible angle.”

After both Vernon and Miller died, there were memorial services at the Magic Castle—events that Jay refused to attend, because, he said to Freeman, “most of those people didn’t know anything about Vernon and Charlie.”

“I now say that keeping secrets is my single most important contribution to magic,” Diaconis says. “Listen, I have lots of things I won’t tell Ricky about. It’s pretty hard for us to fool each other. Several years ago, he borrowed my deck and had me pick a card. Then he told me to reach into my left trousers pocket and there was the card I’d picked. For half an hour, I was as badly fooled as I’ve ever been. In order for him to bring that about, he had to take dead aim at me. That’s a phrase we use in discussing the big con: taking dead aim—deeply researching somebody’s habits.”

Jay once subjected Freeman to an equally unsettling experience. “I walked into Ricky’s apartment one day, and I was wearing a shirt that Charlie Miller had given to Ricky and that Ricky had left at my house,” Freeman says. “I was returning it, but, just for fun, I had put it on. I took the shirt off, and Ricky said, ‘Oh, just leave it on the back of that chair.’

Then we started talking for a while and he said he wanted to show me a new trick. He spread the deck face up and told me to point to a card. I did, and then I gathered and shuffled and dealt them face up. There were only fifty-one. I didn't see my card. And he said, 'Oh, well, go over and look in the pocket of that shirt over there.' And the card was in the shirt pocket. It takes a lot of knowledge about people to be able to do something like that. Ricky was enormously satisfied. Did I figure it out? Well, I was very fooled at the time. I felt stupid, but it was nice to be fooled. That's not a feeling we get to have very often anymore."

Victoria Dailey, who, along with her former husband, William Dailey, deals in rare books from a shop on Melrose Avenue, in Los Angeles, likes to refer to Jay as "our worst customer." She hastens to point out, "He could be our best customer. He wants everything but can hardly buy anything." Both Daileys regard Jay as "a true eccentric" in the English sense—part Bloomsbury, part Fawlty Towers. More than fifteen years ago, they sold Jay the first book for which he paid more than a hundred dollars. The first time he spent more than a thousand dollars for a book, and, again, when he reached the five-thousand-dollar threshold, the Daileys were also involved. The latter item was Jean Prévost's "La Première Partie des Subtiles et Plaisantes Inventions," the earliest known important conjuring book, printed in Lyons in 1584.

"I bought it unhesitatingly," recalls Jay, for whom possession of the Prévost is a bittersweet memory; uncharacteristically, he parted with it during a fiscal crisis. "I bought it and then, with remarkable rapidity, three particular jobs that I thought I had went sour. One was a Johnny Carson special on practical jokes that didn't pan out because of one of his divorces. Another was a tour of Australia that was cancelled by a natural disaster—in other words, by an act of God. This book was so fucking rare that people in the magic world just didn't know about it."

It is the Daileys' impression—a perception shared by other dealers in rare books and incunabula—that Jay spends a higher proportion of his disposable income on rare books and artifacts than anyone else they know. His friend Janus Cercone has described him as "an incunable romantic."

"Probably, no matter how much money he had, he would be overextended bibliomaniacally—or should the word be 'bibliographically'? Anyway, he'd be overextended," William Dailey has said. "The first time I met him, I recognized him as a complete bibliomaniac. He's not a complete monomaniac about books on magic, but within that field he is remarkably focussed. His connoisseurship is impeccable, in that he understands the entire context of a book's emergence. He's not just interested in the book's condition. He knows who printed it, and he knows the personal struggle the author went through to get it printed."

In 1971, during Jay's nomadic phase, he spent a lot of time in Boston hanging out with Diaconis, who had begun to assemble a library of rare magic books. Diaconis takes credit for explicating the rudiments of collecting to Jay and animating his academic interest. He now regards Jay as "ten standard deviations out, just the best in the world in his

knowledge of the literature of conjuring.” Jay’s collection—several thousand volumes, plus hundreds of lithographs, playbills, pamphlets, broadsides, and miscellaneous ephemera—reflects his interest not only in magic but also in gambling, cheating, low life, and what he described in the subtitle of “Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women” as “unique, eccentric and amazing entertainers: stone eaters, mind readers, poison resisters, daredevils, singing mice, etc., etc., etc., etc.” Though Jay abhors the notion of buying books as investments, his own collection, while it is not for sale and is therefore technically priceless, more or less represents his net worth. There was a time, within the past decade, when he seriously considered becoming a bookdealer himself. The main thing that dissuaded him, he says, is that “I wouldn’t want to sell a book to a philistine, which is what every bookseller has to do.” Unlike a lot of collectors, he actually reads and rereads the books and other materials he buys, and puts them to scholarly and performing use. Therefore, he has no trouble rationalizing why he, rather than someone else who might turn up at an auction or peruse a dealer’s catalogue, is more worthy of owning, say, both variant editions of “A Synopsis of the Butchery of the Late Sir Washington Irving Bishop (Kamilimilianalani), a most worthy Mason of the thirty-second degree, the Mind Reader and philanthropist, by Eleanor Fletcher Bishop, His Broken Hearted Mother,” Philadelphia, 1889 and 1890.

One day last spring, I got a phone call from Jay, who had just returned to Los Angeles from Florida, where he and Michael Weber spent several months doing “pyromagical effects” on a movie called “Wilder Napalm.”

“There’s a pile of mail on my desk,” he said.

“I hope there are a few checks in it,” I said.

“Yes, actually, there are. But, of course, I just spent it all on a book.”

The book in question was Thomas Ady’s “A Candle in the Dark: Or a Treatise Concerning the Nature of Witches and Witchcraft,” which includes an important seventeenth-century account of an English magic performance. I had once heard Jay allude to “A Candle in the Dark” during a lecture at the Huntington Library, in San Marino, California. The Huntington owned a copy, and so did a few other institutions. Jay described it to me as “exceedingly rare—only one copy has been sold in my collecting lifetime,” and said that he had acquired his from a New York dealer “after a long negotiation.” On a subsequent visit to New York, he took me to meet the dealer, Steve Weissman, a preternaturally relaxed fellow, who was obviously quite fond of him.

“We have a common interest,” Weissman, who does business out of an office on the East Side, said. “We do like the same kinds of books. I don’t specialize in Ricky’s area of interest—only Ricky does—but I find that I gravitate toward it. My stock is dominantly literary. And I like oddball subjects: slang dictionaries, magic, gambling, con games. The advantage for me with Ricky is that he’s an enthusiast for a wide range of subjects. Most customers arrive and they’re entering the dealer’s world, my world. He walks in and I enter his world. The next customer through the door might be a Byron fanatic and I’ll



have to enter his world. It's not a unique situation, but with Ricky it's particularly gratifying, because of the kind of collector he is—passionate and knowledgeable. Ideally, I would also include rich in that equation, but he doesn't qualify."

Referring to "A Candle in the Dark," Weissman added, "I don't doubt that I could have sold it for more money to someone else. But it's more fun to sell it to Ricky."

A young man with a ponytail and peach-fuzzy sideburns and wearing a herringbone-tweed topcoat entered the shop. As he closed the door behind him, the doorknob fell off. He picked it up and handed it to Weissman's assistant and said, "I think this is yours."

Sotto voce, Jay said, "Who is that guy?"

"I think he's someone who's trying to swindle us into buying a Visa card, or something," Weissman said.

When the young man was ready to leave, a few minutes later, the doorknob had been reattached but would not turn. Twenty minutes elapsed before we were finally rescued by an upstairs neighbor who was able to open the door from the outside. While we waited, before our liberation seemed certain, Jay gestured at the wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling shelves of rare books and said, "To most people this would be hell. But to me it's just a holiday."

Several years ago, Weissman attended an auction at Christie's and, bidding on behalf of Jay and Nicolas Barker, of the British Library, bought a collection of rare engravings whose subject matter was calligraphy. Jay writes in a stylized calligraphic script, and Barker, having spent much of his professional life cataloguing and studying antiquarian manuscripts, confesses to being "passionately interested in the history of handwriting." There were more than thirty items in the auction lot, and Jay and Barker divided them according to a simple formula. "I kept all the images related to armless calligraphers," Jay says, "and Nicolas got all the calligraphers with arms."

In a chapter of "Learned Pigs" entitled "More Than the Sum of Their Parts," Jay recounts the skills and accomplishments of various men and women, all celebrated figures between the sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries, who lacked the usual complement of appendages—arms or legs or digits—and compensated in inspiring ways. He dotes especially on Matthew Buchinger, "The Wonderful Little Man of Nuremberg," who was born in 1674, died around 1740, and, in between, married four times, sired fourteen children, and "played more than a half dozen musical instruments, some of his own invention, and danced the hornpipe . . . amazed audiences with his skills at conjuring . . . was a marksman with the pistol and demonstrated trick shots at nine pins . . . was a fine penman; he drew portraits, landscapes, and coats of arms, and displayed remarkable calligraphic skills." Buchinger managed these transactions without the benefit of feet or thighs, and instead of arms he had "two fin-like excrescences growing from his shoulder blades." He stood, so to speak, only twenty-nine inches high. The Christie's auction enabled Jay to add significantly to his trove of Buchingeriana—playbills, engravings by

and of the Wonderful Little Man, self-portraits, specimens of his calligraphy, and accounts of his performances as a conjurer.

Segueing from a passage about Carl Herman Unthan, who was armless, played the violin with his feet, toured in vaudeville as “Unthan, the Pedal Paganini,” and “fired the rifle . . . with enough skill and accuracy to be compared with the great trick shot artists Ira Paine and Doc Carver,” Jay writes, “Writers, scientists, and medical men have explored the psychologies and physiologies of these prodigies; they and the public alike are intrigued by the relationship between the horrific and miraculous.”

This last phrase concisely expresses Jay’s central preoccupation as a scholar and a performer. “Learned Pigs” contains only passing references to Houdini, whose tirelessness as a self-promoter was concomitant with his gifts as an illusionist. Jay has attempted to rescue from the margins of history performers who in their day were no less determined than Houdini to please their audiences. Here is an echt-Jay paragraph:

As the novelty of fire-eating and -handling wore off, those performers not versatile enough to combine their talents into more diversified shows took to the streets. In 1861 Henry Mayhew, in Volume 3 of “London Labour and the London Poor,” described one such salamander. After a fascinating and detailed account of a fire king learning his trade and preparing his demonstrations, we find the poor fellow has been reduced to catching rats with his teeth to earn enough money to survive.

The rest of the fire-handlers, geeks, acid-drinkers, bayonet-swallowers, mentalists, contortionists, illiterate savants, faith-healing charlatans, porcine-faced ladies, and noose-wearing high-divers who populate “Learned Pigs” routinely sacrifice their dignity, but they never lose their humanity. “I don’t want to be seen as somebody who just writes about freaks,” Jay says. “A lot of the people I write about were very famous in their day, and they were a great source of entertainment. Today, audiences are just as curious, just as willing to be amazed. But look at everything we’re barraged with—it just doesn’t lodge in the imagination the same way.” His mission, in sum, is to reignite our collective sense of wonder.

Jay’s fruitful combination of autodidacticism and free-lance scholarship is itself a wonderful phenomenon. Reviewing “Learned Pigs” in the Times, John Gross wrote, “One effect of Mr. Jay’s scholarship is to make it clear that even among freaks and prodigies there is very little new under the sun. Show him a stone-eater or a human volcano or an enterologist and he will show you the same thing being done before, often hundreds of years earlier.” In the Philadelphia Inquirer Carlin Romano wrote, “‘Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women’ is a book so magnificently entertaining that if a promoter booked it into theatres and simply distributed a copy to each patron to read, he’d have the hit of the season.” A blurb on the jacket from Penn and Teller says, “It’s the coolest book . . . and probably the most brilliantly weird book ever.” Jay wrote much of “Learned Pigs” while occupying a carrel in the rare-book stacks of the Clark Library, at U.C.L.A. At one point, Thomas Wright, a librarian at the Clark and a former professor of English literature, tried to persuade him to apply for a postdoctoral research fellowship. When Jay

explained that he didn't have a doctorate, Wright said, "Maybe a master's degree would be sufficient."

"Thomas, I don't even have a B.A."

Wright replied, "Well, you know, Ricky, a Ph.D. is just a sign of docility."

As Jay was completing the writing of "Learned Pigs," he received an offer, unexpected and irresistible, to become the curator of the Mulholland Library of Conjuring and the Allied Arts. John Mulholland, who died in 1970, was a distinguished magician, historian, and writer. He was also a close friend of Houdini, whom he befriended in his capacity as editor of *The Sphinx*, the leading magic journal of its time. Above all, he was an obsessively thorough collector of printed materials and artifacts relating to magic and other unusual performing arts. In other words, if Jay and Mulholland had got to know each other they would have become soul mates. Mulholland's collection comprised some ten thousand volumes, in twenty languages. In 1966, he moved it to The Players Club, on Gramercy Park, and until his death he remained its curator. In 1984, the club put it up for sale. The auction gallery that was handling the sale enlisted Jay to help catalogue the collection and advise on its dispersal. Jay feared that it would be broken up or sold overseas, and either outcome seemed perilously likely. At a late hour, however, a young Los Angeles attorney, businessman, and novice magician named Carl Rheuban—someone Jay had never heard of—turned up and bought the library intact, for five hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars.

Like a lot of promoters who floated extravagant fantasies during the profligate eighties, Rheuban knew friendly and indulgent bankers. As it happened, the friendliest of these bankers was Rheuban himself. In 1983, he founded the First Network Savings Bank, leased office space in Century City, offered high interest rates to attract deposits from all over the country, and started investing the funds in complex and wishful real-estate ventures. By the spring of 1985, Jay had an office on the bank premises, where the collection was housed. Soon, he also had a steady salary, a staff of three assistants, a healthy acquisitions allowance, friendlier-than-ever relationships with dealers all over the world, and control of a superb research library. Plans were drafted for what Jay anticipated would be "a dream come true": the collection would be moved to a building in downtown Los Angeles, which would also accommodate a museum and a small theatre where he would regularly perform, as would other artists who appealed to his sensibilities. Edwin Dawes, a British historian of magic and a professor of biochemistry, who visited the library and regularly corresponded with Jay, has said, "It just seemed as if Ricky's fairy godmother had appeared to provide the environment in which to work and all the facilities to do the job." Even from the perspective of Jay, the inveterate skeptic, it was a nearly ideal situation. And, clearly, Rheuban, who was occupied with diverse enterprises, regarded him as the ideal overseer.

In April of 1990, however, First Network was abruptly closed by California banking regulators, and the Resolution Trust Corporation (R.T.C.), the federal agency created to cope with the nationwide savings-and-loan crisis, moved in to liquidate its assets.

Rheuban soon filed for personal bankruptcy, and was reported to be the subject of a criminal-fraud investigation. With no forewarning, Jay discovered that he could not even gain access to his own office without first receiving permission from self-important bureaucrats who didn't know Malini from minestrone. The irony of this was unbearable. Had Ricky Jay, of all people, been victimized by a high-stakes con game?

If Rheuban did commit crimes, the government has yet to persuade a grand jury that they were transgressions worthy of an indictment. Nor does Jay at this point have a desire to know how, precisely, First Network came undone. Regardless of what was going on inside the bank, Jay had felt that his working arrangement with Rheuban was basically satisfactory. Though they have not spoken in almost two years, he expresses no bitterness toward his former employer and benefactor. For the functionaries of the R.T.C., however, he harbors deep contempt. Because Rheuban's personal insolvency was enmeshed with the bank's insolvency, the fate of the Mulholland Library was for many months suspended in legal limbo. Brian Walton, an attorney and friend of Jay's, who advised him during the fiasco, has said, "When you look at the question of the ownership of the library, the moral ownership was clearly in Ricky's hands. The financial ownership was obviously elsewhere. But, of course, artists will often become divorced from what they create. Every day, there would be one yahoo or another messing with what were, in a moral sense, Ricky's treasures. One day, Ricky came by the library and there were some government people videotaping the collection for inventory purposes. And they'd just placed their equipment wherever they felt like it. Ricky looked at one guy and said, 'Get your stuff off those posters.' And the guy said, 'I'm So-and-So, from the F.B.I.' And Ricky said, 'I don't care who the fuck you are. Get your crap off those posters.' "

The outlandishness of the situation was compounded by the fact that the Mulholland Library proved to be a splendid investment—the only asset in the First Network bankruptcy which had appreciated significantly. After a year and a half of what Jay regarded as neglect and mismanagement, the R.T.C. finally put it up for sale at auction. The day before the auction, which was to be presided over by a bankruptcy judge in a downtown courtroom, Jay gave me my first and last glimpse of the collection, which was still in Century City. In the building lobby, on our way to what had been First Network's offices, on the fifth floor, Jay pointed out that the bank's small retail operation was now occupied by a custom tailor shop. Upstairs, we walked through an empty anteroom that had once been lined with vitrines, then headed down a long beige-carpeted corridor. James Rust, a young R.T.C. employee, emerged from a corner office—formerly Rheuban's—and greeted us.

Our first stop was a large storage room filled with material from the collection of a German physician named Peter Hackhofer. "I bought different parts of this collection from Hackhofer in several crazy transactions," Jay said. "He used to lead me on incredible goose chases all over Germany. We'd end up doing business at three in the morning on the Autobahn, halfway between Cologne and Frankfurt. We'd be pulled over to the side of the road with theatrical posters spread out on the roof of his car. Once, I went all the way to Germany to buy a collection that Hackhofer was going to broker, only to find out that the owner refused to sell. Months later, in New York, I met Hackhofer at

a hotel. He'd brought with him a hundred posters, which, because his room was so small, he spread out in the hallway. He had to restrain me from attacking a bellboy who rolled over some of them with a luggage cart." The storage room contained hundreds of books, in German and French, as well as a silk pistol, a billiard-ball stand, a vanishing and appearing alarm clock, a cube-shaped metal carrying case for a spirit bell, and a paper box with a ribbon on it, which was about the size of a lady's handbag, and which Jay said was "a Victorian production reticule." I knew that I could have happily occupied myself there for several hours, but he seemed eager to move on. We walked down another long corridor, past the erstwhile loan-servicing and accounting departments, and came to a locked door. As Rust unlocked it, Jay looked at me with a wry, I-will-now-have-my-liver-eaten-by-vultures sort of smile.

We stepped into a square room, perhaps thirty by thirty. Bookshelves and glass-enclosed cabinets lined the walls, and tables and flat files filled the interior. Separated from this room by a glass partition was a ten-by-twelve cubicle that had been Jay's office. It contained a desk, a wall of bookshelves, and a side table. Two automatons stood on the table. One, called "The Singing Lesson," was the creation of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, the nineteenth-century watchmaker-turned-conjurer, who is considered the father of modern magic. The other was a Chinese cups-and-balls conjurer built by Robert-Houdin's father-in-law, Jacques Houdin. A large, framed color poster of Malini, advertising his "Round the World Tour," hung on the wall to the left of Jay's desk.

"I heard that that poster holds some sort of special significance for you, Ricky," James Rust said.

Jay responded with an opaque, querulous stare that said, in effect, "Hey, pal, everything in this place holds special significance for me."

Along the back wall of the main room were shelved bound volumes of *The Sphinx*, *The Wizard*, *The Conjurer's Monthly*, *The Linking Ring*, *The Magic Circular*, *Das Programm*, *La Prestidigitation*, *Ghost*, *The Magic Wand*, *The Gen*, *Mahatma*, and other periodicals. I spent an hour and a half in the main room, exploring the contents of the file drawers, staring into the glass display cases, pulling books from shelves, admiring framed lithographs, and listening to Jay. Ultimately, the experience was disquieting. Connected to virtually every item was a piquant vignette—a comic oddity, a compilation of historical or biographical arcana—but each digression inevitably led to a plaintive anticlimax, because the tangible artifacts had now passed from Jay's care. I paged through the scrapbook of Edward Maro, "a Chautauqua-circuit magician who played the mandolin and did hand shadows." A Barnum & Bailey poster trumpeting automotive daredevils—"L'Auto Bolide Thrilling Dip of Death"—had been used by Jay when he was "writing a piece about crazy car acts for an automotive magazine." There was a lithograph of Emil Naucke, a corpulent charmer in a flesh-colored tutu, of whom Jay said, "He was a German wrestler in drag, he was a famous strongman, he had a theatre of varieties, and as part of his act he danced with a midget." A lithograph of Martini-Szeny depicted "a Hungarian Houdini imitator who wore chaps and a Mexican hat and used to have himself strapped to a cactus," Jay said. "I was going to write a book on Houdini

imitators that I would call ‘Houdini: Howdini, Oudini, Martini-Szeny, and Zucchini, Pretenders to the Throne.’ And with these reference books over here I could look up and see exactly where Martini-Szeny performed in, say, February of 1918. I bought this entire collection from an old circus artist in Atlanta who did a barrel act.”

We wandered back into Jay’s former office at one point. To his obvious annoyance, Rust wound up the “Singing Lesson” automaton. While it was playing, Jay turned his attention to a book that had been sitting on his desk, a seventeenth-century copy of the first book on magic to be printed in Dutch. The front cover had become separated from the binding.

“That’s nice,” he said with sarcasm. “This was not detached.”

Rust nodded in acknowledgment.

“That’s creepy,” Jay continued. “This was a really solid vellum binding. That’s why I don’t want people in here who don’t know how to handle books.”

“Do you know how many hands have been here, Ricky?”

“Yes, and it’s really creepy.”

When Rust left the room, Jay said to me, “You know, I never had any agreement with Carl. At the outset, he asked me, ‘What do you want?’ And I said, ‘I want access to this collection for the rest of my life.’ And he said, ‘Fine.’ After we moved in here, I unpacked every single book. We catalogued what we could, but, as with any active collection, you can never really catch up. In the five years I was here, I almost doubled the size of the collection. This was the only thing I ever did that I spoke of myself as doing into the indefinite future.”

Shortly after eight o’clock the next morning, I picked Jay up in front of his apartment building, and we drove downtown to the courthouse, where the auction would take place. A couple of days earlier, he had said to me, “I’ve talked to a lot of people who say they might be bidding, and I can tell you that, without a single exception, they’re utterly soulless. No one gets it, no one has a clue to what the collection is really about. There actually are people who are knowledgeable about this, but they’re not the ones who are able to buy it.” As it was, the disposition of the Mulholland Library now seemed a foregone conclusion. David Copperfield, a workaholic stage illusionist who spends several weeks each year performing in Las Vegas and the other weeks touring the world, had agreed to pay two million two hundred thousand dollars for it. The only thing that could alter this outcome would be a competing bidder—bids would be allowed in minimum increments of fifty thousand dollars—and none had materialized.

At the courthouse, we discovered that the bankruptcy-court clerk had altered the docket and we were more than an hour early. Jay and I retreated to a cafeteria, where we were soon joined by William Dailey, the bookdealer, and by Steve Freeman, Michael Weber, and Brian Walton. When we finally entered the courtroom, Copperfield was already

seated in the front row of the spectator gallery, along with two attorneys, a personal assistant, and a couple of advisers, who were also acquaintances of Jay's. Twenty or so other people, among them several lawyers representing creditors in the Rheuban bankruptcy, were also present. Copperfield is a slender, almost gaunt man in his mid-thirties with thick black eyebrows, brown eyes, aquiline features, and leonine dark hair. He was dressed all in black: double-breasted suit, Comme des Garçons T-shirt, suède cowboy boots.

John Gaughan, a designer of stage illusions, who was seated with Copperfield, said to Jay, "Did you bring some cards?"

"Oh, yes," Jay replied. "When you feel your life threatened, you're always prepared." Then he asked Copperfield, "Where have you come from?"

"Atlantic City."

"Ah—from one gambling arena to another."

The judge, the Honorable Vincent P. Zurzolo, appeared briefly, only to learn that Katherine Warwick, the main lawyer for the R.T.C., had not yet arrived. Ten minutes later, she breezed in and, in a friendly, casual manner, distributed to the other lawyers present her reply to a motion objecting to the allocation of the proceeds. About half an hour of legalistic colloquy ensued—a debate over whether the auction could even take place and, if so, when. At last, the Judge asked a fifty-thousand-dollar question: "Is there anyone who is here to overbid the bidder who has made the initial offer?"

There was a minute of silence, broken in my corner of the spectator section by Jay muttering, "Unbelievable. Unbelievable."

And, with that, David Copperfield—a man who owned neither a home nor an automobile but was reported to be looking for a warehouse; a man whose stage presentations were once described to me as "resembling entertainment the way Velveeta resembles cheese"—had bought the Mulholland Library for two million two hundred thousand dollars. Katherine Warwick reminded Copperfield's attorneys that he had fifteen days—until the end of the month—to remove the collection from Century City, because the R.T.C. was shutting down its operation there. There were handshakes among the Copperfield entourage, and then Copperfield approached Jay.

"Thank you for everything," he said, extending his hand.

"You'll enjoy it," Jay said. "I did."

"You know you'll be welcome any time."

"We'll speak again in the future, I'm sure," Jay said.

A friend of Jay's who also knew Copperfield said to me later, "David Copperfield buying the Mulholland Library is like an Elvis impersonator winding up with Graceland."

A few weeks ago, Copperfield arranged for Jay to be flown to Las Vegas to discuss the collection. A driver met Jay at the airport and delivered him to a warehouse. In front was an enormous neon sign advertising bras and girdles. It was Copperfield's conceit that the ideal way for a visitor to view the Mulholland Library would be to pass first through a storefront filled with lingerie-clad mannequins and display cases of intimate feminine apparel. With enthusiasm, Copperfield escorted Jay around the premises, insisting that he read each of the single-entendre slogans posted on the walls—"We Support Our Customers" and "Our Bras Will Never Let You Down"—and also the punning tributes inscribed on celebrity photographs from the likes of Debbie Reynolds, Jerry Lewis, and Buddy Hackett. When Copperfield pressed one of the red-nippled breasts of a nude mannequin, the electronic lock on a mirrored door deactivated, and he and Jay stepped into the main warehouse space. Construction work had recently been completed on an upper level. Jay followed Copperfield up a stairway and into a suite of rooms that included several offices, a bedroom, and a marble-tiled bathroom. The bathroom had two doors, one of which led to an unpartitioned expanse where the contents of the Mulholland Library—much of it shelved exactly as it had been in Century City, some of it on tables, some of it not yet unpacked—had been deposited.

Jay stayed an hour—long enough to register pleasure at seeing the collection once again and dismay at the context in which he was seeing it. When Copperfield asked whether he would be willing to work as a consultant on an occasional basis—"Basically, he wanted to know whether, whenever he needs me, I would drop whatever I'm doing and tell him what he'd bought"—Jay recognized an offer that he could easily resist.

After Jay returned to Los Angeles, he said, "As much as I love this collection, I didn't think I could handle going through Copperfield's bra-and-girdle emporium every time I went to see it."

Clearly, Jay has been more interested in the craft of magic than in the practical exigencies of promoting himself as a performer. His friend T. A. Waters has said, "Ricky has turned down far more work than most magicians get in a lifetime." Though he earns high fees whenever he does work, a devotion to art rather than a devotion to popular success places him from time to time in tenuous circumstances. At the moment, he is mobilizing a project that should reward him both artistically and financially. What he has in mind is a one-man show, on a stage somewhere in New York, to be billed as "Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants"—an evening's entertainment with a deck of cards. He envisions an intimate setting.

"All I value as a performer is for people to want to see me," Jay says. "I mean people who have come just to see me—they're not going out to hear music, they're not out to get drunk or to pick up women. I'd much rather perform in a small theatre in front of a few people than in an enormous Las Vegas night club."



Provided that the right theatre and the right situation materialize, David Mamet has agreed to direct such a production. “I’m very honored to be asked,” Mamet told me. “I regard Ricky as an example of the ‘superior man,’ according to the I Ching definition. He’s the paradigm of what a philosopher should be: someone who’s devoted his life to both the study and the practice of his chosen field.”

Having directed Jay now in three films—and they are collaborating on the screenplay of another—Mamet holds him in high esteem as an actor. “Ricky’s terrific,” Mamet said. “He doesn’t make anything up. He knows the difference between doing things and not doing things. The magician performs a task and the illusion is created in the mind of the audience. And that’s what acting is about.”

Jay now spends the greater part of his typical workdays alone in his Old Spanish-style Hollywood apartment. It is the repository of his collection, the research facility for his scholarly pursuits. Overloaded bookshelves line the living-room and bedroom walls, and stacks of books on the floors make navigation a challenge. Posters, playbills, and engravings decorate any available wall space—several Buchingers, Toby the Learned Pig (the most gifted of the sapient swine), Madame Girardelli (the fireproof woman), Houdini suspended upside down in a water-torture cell, Erno Acosta balancing a piano on his head, a three-sheet poster of Cinquevalli (the most famous juggler at the turn of the century). Jay sleeps beneath a huge color lithograph of an Asian-looking man billed as Okito, whom he described to me as “the fifth of six generations or the fourth of five generations—depending on whose story you want to believe—of a family of Dutch Jewish magicians, a twentieth-century performer whose real name was Theodore Bamberg.” Between two books on a shelf in the corner of his kitchen is a photograph of Steve Martin, inscribed “To Ricky, Without you there would be no Flydini. Think about it. Steve.” This refers to a comedy magic routine that Jay helped Martin develop a few years ago, a dumb-show piece that he has performed at charity events and on television. As the Great Flydini, Martin appears onstage dressed in tails, unzips his trousers, and smiles uncomfortably as an egg emerges from his fly, followed by another egg, a third egg, a lit cigarette, a puff of smoke, two more eggs, a ringing telephone, a bouquet of flowers, a glass of wine, a silk handkerchief that a pretty girl walks off with and drops, whereupon it flies back inside his trousers, a Pavarotti hand puppet, and soap bubbles.

The last time I visited Jay in his apartment, he was working simultaneously on more than half a dozen projects. Within the past year, he has begun to do his writing on a computer, rather than in longhand on a legal pad with a calligraphic pen. This has evidently not made the process any less daunting. “Writing is the only thing in my life that hasn’t got easier,” he said. “I can say that categorically. Right now, I’m finishing a magazine article that was supposed to be about human ingenuity, but somehow I’ve ended up writing about child prodigies. Here’s my lead sentence: ‘Solomon Stone, the midget lightning calculator, was an overachiever.’ I go from Solomon Stone to the Infant Salambo. This was a child who was from a turn-of-the-century show-biz family. She was abandoned by them for several years, and when they turned up again they realized she had been neglected, had had absolutely no education. But within a year she was appearing onstage,

having been reinvented as Salambo, the Infant Historian—get this—‘absolutely the most clever and best-informed child the world has ever seen.’ ”

He showed me a prospectus for Jay’s Journal of Anomalies, a letterpress-printed broadside for “a periodical devoted to the investigation of conjurers, cheats, hustlers, hoaxers, pranksters . . . arcana, esoterica, curiosa, varia . . . scholarly and entertaining . . . amusing and elucidating . . . iconographically stimulating . . . ”

“I just finished a piece for Jay’s Journal on performing dogs who stole the acts of other dogs,” he said. “Next, I want to do a piece about crucifixion acts—you know, real crucifixions that were done as entertainment. The idea for this came to me one Easter Sunday. Bob Lund, from the American Museum of Magic, has just sent me a little book on Billy Rose’s Theatre that contained one sentence he knew would interest me—about a woman who swung nude from a cross to the strains of Ravel’s ‘Boléro.’ Her name was Faith Bacon. This was in the thirties. Unlike some of the other performers I’ve turned up, in her act she only simulated crucifixion. Anyway, I’m playing around with that.”

Over the past few years, Jay has given a number of lectures on the origins of the confidence game, which he hopes to expand into a book-length history of cheating and deception. For the Whitney Museum’s Artists and Writers series, he is writing a book to be illustrated by William Wegman and others. It is a history of trick magic books, which were first produced in the sixteenth century. “I’m really intrigued with the concept of the book as both a subject and an object of mystery,” he said.

Most afternoons, Jay spends a couple of hours in his office, on Sunset Boulevard, in a building owned by Andrew Solt, a television producer who three years ago collaborated with him on an hour-long CBS special entitled “Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women,” which is the only prime-time network special ever hosted by a sleight-of-hand artist. He decided now to drop by the office, where he had to attend to some business involving a new venture that he has begun with Michael Weber—a consulting company called Deceptive Practices, Ltd., and offering “Arcane Knowledge on a Need to Know Basis.” They are currently working on the new Mike Nichols film, “Wolf,” starring Jack Nicholson. When Jay arrived at his office, he discovered that a parcel from a British dealer had been delivered in that day’s mail.

“Oh my. Oh my. This is wonderful,” he said as he examined an early-nineteenth-century chapbook that included a hand-colored engraving of its subject—Claude Seurat, the Living Skeleton. “Look,” he said, pointing to some scratched numerals on the verso of the title page. “This shelf mark means this was in the library of Thomas Phillips, the most obsessive book-and-manuscript collector of the nineteenth century.”

The mail had also brought a catalogue from another British dealer, who was offering, for a hundred and fifty pounds, an engraving and broadside of Ann Moore, the Fasting Woman of Tutbury. By the time we left the office, an idea for an issue of Jay’s Journal had begun to percolate.

“I could do fasting impostors and living skeletons,” Jay said. “Or what might really be interesting would be to do living skeletons and fat men. For instance, I could write about Seurat and Edward Bright, the Fat Man. Except I might prefer a contemporary of Seurat’s, Daniel Lambert. He was even fatter than Bright, but he’s been written about more. With Bright, the pleasure would be writing about the wager involving his waistcoat. When he died, the wager was that five men twenty-one years of age could fit into his waistcoat. As it happened, seven grown men could fit inside. I have an exquisite black-and-white engraving of Bright, from 1751. And I have a great hand-colored engraving of Bright and Lambert, from 1815, which has an inset of the seven men in the waistcoat.”

Back at the apartment, Jay examined the Seurat book and brought out for comparison an 1827 eight-page French pamphlet on Seurat. I asked what other Seurat material he had, and he removed his shoes, stood on the arm of a sofa, and brought down from a shelf one of four volumes of the 1835 edition of “Hone’s Every Day Book, and Table Book; or, Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastimes, Ceremonies, Manners, Customs, and Events, Incident to Each of the Three Hundred and Sixty-five Days, in Past and Present Times; forming a Complete History of the Year, Months, and Seasons, and a Perpetual Key to the Almanac.” In it he immediately found two engravings of Seurat, alongside one of which he had written in pencil a page reference to a competing living skeleton. “Oh, yes, I remember this,” he said. “I have stuff on other living skeletons, too. I’ve got to show you this George Anderson poster I bought at an auction in London in 1983.”

We moved into the dining room, where there was a flat-file cabinet. He opened the bottom drawer, which was filled to capacity with lithographs and engravings, each one a Ricky Jay diva-gation: “T. Nelson Downs, the King of Koins . . . Samri S. Baldwin, the White Mahatma . . . Holton the Cannonball Catcher. I have a lot of stuff on cannonball catchers. . . . The Freeze Brothers, blackfaced tambourine jugglers . . . Sylvester Schaffer, a great variety artist . . . Josefa and Rosa Blazek, the Bohemian violin-playing Siamese twins. And here are Daisy and Violet Hilton, the saxophone-playing Siamese twins from San Antonio. . . . And here’s Rastelli, perhaps the greatest juggler who ever lived. . . . What’s that? Oh, a poster for ‘House of Games.’ . . . I’m just trying to get to the George Anderson piece that’s sticking out at the end. . . . Oh, this is the Chevalier D’Eon, a male fencer in drag. He used to be the French Ambassador to the Court of St. James’s. It’s a great story but it takes too long.”

Jay had reached and placed on the dining-room table the George Anderson poster, a postbellum piece printed in New Hampshire using wooden type and a large woodblock image of Anderson, who had made an art and livelihood of attenuation. He appeared to be five and a half feet tall and to weigh about sixty-five pounds.

“I know some people find this strange and weird,” Jay said. “Actually, after this life I’ve lived, I have no idea what is strange and weird and what isn’t. I don’t know who else waxes poetic about the virtues of skeleton men, fasting impostors, and cannonball

catchers. And, to be honest, I don't really care. I just think they're wonderful. I really do."