

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

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The Great Sebastian

The world-renowned magician, the greatest illusionist since the immortal Harry Houdini, had a mystical bent but knew well the un-crossable line between magic and miracle, until last night's Halloween Show at Miami's Donald J. Trump Memorial Theater, honoring the anniversary of the iconic master showman and escape artist's tragic death on October 31, 1926.

This morning's *Herald* ran a picture of The Great Sebastian bandaged head to foot, with a tube in his nose, next to the photo of his blood-soaked top hat, black cape, the shattered Wonder Cane, below the story about the flood. Sebastian's assistant, Roxie Anson, was treated and released via motorboat from St. Andrew's Hospital, with lacerations of the hands and arms and minor facial bruising.

On last night's cloudless Spring evening, as always the performance started well, with steady "ahs" and hearty clapping and cheers from the children and men and women dressed as witches, red devils, comic book heroes and villains, some wearing rubber masks of the current president.

Sebastian warmed up the overflow costumed crowd with a series of easy new tricks that were each more amazing as he patiently raised the pitch, preparing his audience in careful steps for the ultimate deception.

In the ascending display of splendors, each ruse will eclipse the preceding flourish, the veronicas of magic announcing the final unsheathed saber of the mind, Sebastian thought in mid-execution as he threw the first of 12 steel circles into the air.

"The Magic Feat of the Century" had been advertised for a month on placards tacked all over the city. The vivid poster showed the Chinese Water Torture Chamber in which the doomed Houdini nearly drowned, before his assistant shattered the glass that Halloween Night with an axe and the water poured out.

Vampire bats with scalloped wings and fangs, goblins and streaming ghosts circled above the waiting empty transparent case initialed with a brushed black "H."

"Houdini Returns!" proclaimed the 12-inch crimson letters, above "The Great Sebastian!" and in smaller print, "Door Prizes for Best Costumes."

First Sebastian tossed the dozen solid stainless steel hoops floating like a long flashing airborne snake that zigzagged 20 feet with glinting scales as it glided off stage.

From a flaming witch's cauldron he pulled a dyed yellow dove that flew with flaming wings in three wide circles above the heads of the shocked audience and back into the yellow fire.

Sebastian kept trying to pour water from a pitcher into a bowl but the water wouldn't fall and rose in a blue cloud that rained onto the stage as he stood in the white chalk circle he'd drawn and remained untouched, his waiting hands held out for a single drop.

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All of this was relatively “old hat” to the entertainment critics in attendance and one amateur magician dressed as a magician began to shout from the balcony, demanding when the “real tricks” would begin.

His first time in Miami and the Deep South and a lifelong progressive, Sebastian was tempted to ask his scantily clad assistant, longtime lover and secret wife to roll out the glass-walled Torture Chamber to recapture the suddenly uncertain crowd dressed as ghouls and monsters.

Roxie would shackle his hands and ankles before the cable from the ceiling lowered him into the transparent booth and she fastened the lid with 20 padlocks and turned on the thick hose that quickly filled the case with water. Then Roxie would swivel to the crowd, in terror waving her arms and demanding who had stolen Houdini’s axe from the great magician’s trunk as the water rose to Sebastian’s neck, the operation they’d practiced many times until it clicked like clockwork.

But Sebastian was The Great Sebastian and refused to interrupt his careful symphony of slight-of-hand and nodded to the pretty woman in the sequined swimsuit to carry out the round table where he set his sable top hat upside down.

The magician with the Wonder Cane in his white-gloved hand tapped the side of his hat and out jumped the white rabbit named Murphy that wore a top hat and black cape Roxie had fashioned.

With the cane Sebastian tapped Murphy’s hat and with his own short cane in his teeth the rabbit tapped Sebastian’s hat and another white rabbit with cane and cape leaped out, the one Roxie called Otis.

In perfect unison, the magician and the two standing rabbits become magicians bowed in unison.

Sebastian’s 2,000 reassured Florida fans went wild, the trick had silenced the heckler, and the journalists bent quickly to their notebooks to begin reviews of the wonderful show, which was still building toward its mysterious and vaguely spectral promised climax.

Okay, Sebastian thought, we’re back on track . . .

He made another low bow, basking in the applause that didn’t ebb but grew even stronger, until the gratified illusionist sensed he was not the focus of the crowd’s attention as they stared at something to his right.

The white rabbit Otis that Murphy, the first rabbit, had summoned from Sebastian’s silk topper now tapped with his black cane and another top-hatted rabbit, Matilda, Roxie’s favorite, appeared.

Sebastian turned again and bowed but the cheering didn’t stop, the three rabbits didn’t bow beside him, and with a glance he saw another rabbit, one he didn’t recognize, leap out at the stroke of Matilda’s cane.

Sebastian bowed again, somewhat exasperated by Roxie’s mistake with counting the rabbits, and took a deep breath, nearly whispering, “*The show goes on!*”

Turning quickly, he nudged his hat with the cane, to make it fly high in the air, somersault three times and fall perfectly on his head as he introduced the last warm-up illusion before the Torture Chamber was in place.

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It's not working, Roxie forgot to cock the spring, Sebastian thought.

The four white rabbits in cape and hat sat on the tabletop and Sebastian glared angrily at blonde-haired Roxie who waited in the wings with the Plexiglas cabinet higher than her head.

Another rabbit hopped out of the hat, and another, both strangers, and in her swimsuit and high heels Roxie held out her hands palms-up and frowned.

Now she raised her fingers to her mouth, to make a megaphone and called, *"I love you!"*

Sebastian started to press the Wonder Cane's emergency button to let the nail slender as a hatpin shoot from the cane's silver tip to secretly spear the hat, but a new rabbit materialized, another, another.

The crowd gasped and sat forward in their seats and the magician stepped back in his black patent pumps catching the green spotlight.

In a white blur more unknown rabbits with shiny wands produced more rabbits pouring from his hat, until there were 25 rabbits crowding the table.

The thin invisible spike slid from its wooden holster and Sebastian raised his polished stick like a sword, the flash of Ronald Coleman in "Prisoner of Zenda" a flickering memory . . .

Sebastian waved quickly for Roxie to push out the Chinese Water Torture Cabinet but the multiplying white-furred magicians engulfed the table and spilled in a white lake onto the stage until there were 100 silent rabbits with lifted ears.

In hats and capes they formed a perfect ring around Sebastian, sitting on their haunches and staring with 100 pairs of pink eyes, each rabbit with a cane like a black pencil nub in its mouth.

"Abracadabra!" the magician cried, not a fake magic spell but a prayer to Houdini and all the ghosts of magicians going back to Merlin, then *"Be gone!"*

Sebastian's command sounded weak and slightly corny to his frightened ears but he'd never meant anything more in his long career.

A stillness descended, those attending suddenly aware that they were witnessing the greatest trick anyone had ever seen – *that baffled the magician himself and was impossible, but still a trick, and Thank God couldn't be true and so was the most magnificent illusion ever performed in the history of magic, rivaling the miracles in the Bible* –

Right here in Miami, on Halloween, on the day of Houdini's death . . .

The rabbits refused to obey or didn't hear amid the crowd's rising uncertain laughter.

"Go now!" Sebastian repeated, looking from one stationary animal to another. Murphy, Otis and Matilda stared at him coldly, not budging when Roxie called their names.

At a silent signal – the first far drops of the approaching rain? – the

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circle of rabbits collapsed like a 100-petalled white folding flower, charging The Great Sebastian.

He broke free of the perimeter, swinging his sharp Wonder Cane left and right, the scarlet-lined cape a streaming flag.

Sebastian was running for the Torture Chamber that Roxie had managed to maneuver onto the far corner of the stage through the multiplying army of waiting rabbits, well aware that representatives from the Humane Society, The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and PEDAsat alertly in the first row.

Dexterous as the great Houdini himself from two yards Sebastian leaped and caught the glass wall's high lip but before his gloves could pull down the lid his assailants jumped in one up-rushing white waterfall.

The 100 rabbits filled the rocking chamber flashing black and silver, blurred with a rising flurry of feathers, escaping doves and ravens awaiting the penultimate wonder before the eagerly anticipated earthshaking Halloween finale.

Houdini's clear case was spattered red and panicked spectators rushed for the single exit where the amateur magician in top hat and cape shoved a small boy dressed as Superman and his mother in a Wonder Woman costume roughly to the floor.

He was first outside, into the emerald rain that began to fall without let-up and has since caused major flooding, kept local residents indoors or in emergency shelters operating throughout the city, and confounded meteorologists from the U.S. Weather Bureau and scientists at the National Center for Atmosphere Research in Boulder, Colorado.

The Great Sebastian is listed in fair condition but expected to leave the hospital by week's end, pending further tests and needed medical procedures, while storm-related accidents continue to occur and unconfirmed reports suggest a rising excitement among the closely knit Miami psychic community, concerning urgent communications from the spirit world.