

HOUDINI AT PLYMOUTH

Basis of a lecture delivered, with demonstrations by 'Riley', R. Johnson.

Houdini visited Plymouth August 16th – 21st 1909. A "performing week" ran from Monday to Saturday, and Houdini made certain that full publicity was achieved for his performance that week at the Palace Theatre.

The act, at the time, followed a set pattern. It was a successful formula that varied only slightly in each town: The stage act was handcuff escapes, the straight jacket escape, the milk can escape, and an outdoor stunt for publicity – this was either an escape from a local police cell or prison, or a manacled jump from a nearby bridge into a river. If the sea was close at hand, the jump was sometimes made from a boat.

On Monday evening at the Palace, Houdini made a "*most satisfactory debut*" as the Western Morning News reported the following day! The newspaper also reported that Houdini had shown "*a series of excellent pictures upon the bioscope, showing his famous dives from various bridges around the world, earning much applause.*"

Both the Western Morning News and the Western Evening Herald made mention of Houdini's proposed manacled leap from a local bridge the following evening. "Halfpenny Bridge", Stonehouse, was (and is) conveniently situated just a few minutes walk from the Palace Theatre. This was the scene of Houdini's leap on Tuesday, 17th August at 6.00 p.m. This had the desired effect of a full house at the Palace just a short time later!

The full view straight-jacket escape was demonstrated, and the escape from the water filled locked milk can. Houdini would invite the audience to hold their breath as he disappeared into the water filled can, (without the locked lid at this point).

A large clock on the stage would show the passage of time. After two or three minutes Houdini would surface from the can to hearty cheers. Then he would submerge once again, the can would be topped up with buckets of water, and the lid would be padlocked in place. Screens would then be placed around the can, and the audience would wait. One or two of Houdini's assistants would stand by with large axes, in case of an emergency (*A wise precaution, as he ran into difficulties when performing this feat the following year at the Empire Theatre, Leeds. On that occasion, the can had been filled with beer as a challenge from Joshua Tetley & Sons, Brewers. Houdini, a teetotaler, was overcome by the fumes and passed out inside the can. His chief assistant, Franz Kulol, realised something was wrong and the can was wrenched open.*)

For the milk can trick, sometimes a local dairy would challenge Houdini to escape from the can after they had filled it with milk. Local firms were never slow to realise the value of publicity for their company or product.

An advertisement on page 2 of the Western Evening Herald on Friday, August 20th, 1909 states "*Houdini will attempt to escape from a packing case constructed by 6 employees of the Keyham Yard, Devonport, tonight, second house.*" (Palace Theatre). Houdini liked to present a special challenge on Friday nights, second house.

The packing case escape had been performed by Houdini for many years. A rare sketch (shown during this lecture), shows the stage set-up following Houdini's packing case escape as performed at the "People's Palace", Halifax in November 1902. The artist was a member of the audience, thought to be an employee of T. Gaines & Sons, the firm who proposed the challenge. (Their name appears on the side of the packing case). The drawing also shows Houdini's handcuff display board which was sometimes displayed in the theatre lobby – outside – for publicity purposes, often alongside the actual packing case. Also in the sketch may be seen pairs of 'open' handcuffs on the stage floor and the curtained cabinet used to enclose the packing case during Houdini's escape. The publicity material for the packing case escape always included names and addresses of those involved with actually nailing the case closed.

Later in his career, Houdini presented the packing case escape under water. It also featured in his movies.

With the exception of David De-Val, few escape artists have attempted this dangerous effect.

These notes give an idea of the Houdini "formula" which ensured he remained the most popular "draw" of his time.

As the popularity of the "music hall" gave way to the new 'movies', Houdini made several films in the 1920's. However, these were not a great success.

He died on October 31st, 1926, aged 52 years.

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