

ARTS & LETTERS

Houdini's Magic

"The Case of Harry Houdini" by Daniel Mark Epstein, in *The New Criterion*, 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

It has been 60 years since Hungarian magician Harry Houdini, born Erik Weisz in Budapest in 1874, escaped from manacles inside a lead-weighted packing case—nailed shut and dropped into Manhattan's East River. But this and many of his other spectacular feats remain unexplained. And, notes Epstein, a poet, those feats were not exaggerated: Houdini's escapes were "more public than the proceedings of Congress, and most of them he performed over and over, so no one would miss the point."

He got out of the world's most secure prisons. He wrestled free while being hung upside down from the tallest buildings in America in a strait-jacket. He was sewn into a huge football and into the belly of a dead whale. In California, buried six feet underground, he clawed his way out. During 19 weeks of performances at New York City's Hippodrome, an elephant was marched into an onstage cabinet from which Houdini made the pachyderm disappear by means still unknown. In London, before a house of 4,000, he picked open the supposedly tamperproof "Mirror Handcuffs" a local blacksmith had been preparing for five years. The list goes on.

Houdini died in Detroit of appendicitis on Halloween, 1926. The rabbi who spoke at his funeral, a close confidante, remarked that he possessed "a wondrous power that he never understood." Houdini's friend, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, agreed that certain of his escapes were "supernatural." Houdini's wife, Bess, recalled in a letter to Doyle that sometimes she had urged her husband to call on "Spiritism" when he appeared stuck during a particularly tough escape trick, after which he would soon spring free.

Houdini himself categorically denied that any of his effects were achieved by supernatural means; he even crusaded against mediums and clairvoyants. Probably, concedes Epstein, he was telling the truth as he saw it. For as the obedient son of a Budapest rabbi, Houdini knew that Talmudic law strictly forbade the performance of miracles. And Houdini was nothing if not strict about both his faith and his craft.

Did he possess "psychic powers," as his wife, tantalizingly, both suggested and denied? For his part, Epstein can only conclude that "Houdini's work was no more miraculous than his life. His life was no more miraculous than the opening and closing of a flower."

The Grand Pianist

"The Pilgrim Pianist" by Sanford Schwartz, in *The New Republic* (Sept. 1, 1986), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Glenn Gould, the renowned Canadian pianist who died of a stroke in 1982 at age 50, earned well-deserved praise for bringing new vigor to the tired classical canon of Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. His interpretations were modern and questioning: Each restless performance challenged the great composers to prove their genius in a different way.

At the same time, writes Schwartz, an art critic, Gould's public performances seemed those of an eccentric brat. He used the sawed-off chair his