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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Robert-Houdin’s “Ethereal Suspension” and the Birth of Theatrical Magic



A sleight of hand seemed to have piqued Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin’s interest in magic. The son of a watchmaker, he had saved up to buy a set of books on clockmaking, only to discover that a set on magic had been packaged instead. Nevertheless, he was captivated. Eventually, Robert-Houdin began to perform as an illusionist at private parties in elegant Parisian parlors. He dreamed of moving magic shows from local fairs to venues as refined as the homes that employed him. In 1845, he built a small but sumptuous theater on the grounds of the old Palais-Royal. With persistence, he won the respect of magic devotees and society’s elite, and in 1852, the Théâtre Robert-Houdin moved to a larger permanent space (advertised *left*). One of his best-known acts debuted in 1847 and exploited the contemporary fascination with ether (*lower right*). His youngest son, Eugène, stood onstage on a center stool, with his arms resting on two canes that leaned on outer stools. After sniffing (an empty bottle of) ether, Eugène went limp. His father removed the middle stool, and then the left cane. Next, his little finger alone appeared to lift the boy’s entire body horizontally. When the father stepped away, his son levitated in midair, his right elbow balancing effortlessly on the remaining cane (*upper right*). A visual spectacle, Robert-Houdin’s “Ethereal Suspension” appeared to elevate not only the human form, but also the status of magic in the public eye. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

Jane S. Moon, M.D., University of California, Los Angeles, California, and Melissa L. Coleman, M.D., Penn State College of Medicine, Hershey, Pennsylvania.