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**MAGIC!  
 SPIRITUALISM!**

THE  
 ACTUAL WORDS  
 OF  
 HARRY HOUDINI  
 AND  
 SIR ARTHUR  
 CONAN DOYLE!

**HOUDINI**  
 SPEAKS  
 - TO THE -  
**LIVING**

BY  
**BETH BURNS**  
 AND  
**PATRICK TERRY**

Duplicating and Bettering the Feats of Bogus Spiritualists,  
 Houdini "Materialized" an Ectoplasmic Spirit by Means of a  
 Gas-Filled Rubber Bag and a Tiny Flashlight  
 Concealed in a Chair Post.



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**OCTOBER**

21<sup>ST</sup>-23<sup>RD</sup>, 26<sup>TH</sup>-30<sup>TH</sup>

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**HALLOWEEN  
 SHOW**

October 31st, 7:00pm at  
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This project is supported in part  
 by the Cultural Arts Division  
 of the City of Austin, Recreation  
 Development Department





Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Houdini

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES:

The trick is to bring Houdini back. Show him to us. Let us hear him speak, watch him make his magic, feel his presence among us, let Houdini live again!

Or "activate the Houdini collection through performance." Same thing, basically.

The Harry Ransom Center is declaring October the "Month of Houdini," and the Center is marking the 90th Anniversary of his death (October 31, 1926) with an exhibition in his honor, and indeed a piece of theatre illuminating at least one aspect of his fascinating life. My task was to dive into the treasure trove of the Ransom Center's Harry Houdini Collection, and see what secrets lay waiting to be told on stage. But how to turn Houdini's papers into a picture of Houdini the man?

In my many months of exploration of Harry's life, (May I call him Harry now? Probably not.

He wouldn't have liked it.) I do feel like I've gotten to know him, and certainly I could argue that I know him as well as I can know anyone I've never met. But how well is that really?

What do I really know?

Well, through the many boxes of his personal correspondence that live in the Ransom Center, I know how he interacted with his wife Bess, his mother, his siblings, his friends, acquaintances, fellow magicians, rivals, and enemies. The letters and notes between he and Bess were particularly dear, and Houdini's sense of humor often shines through. I know how strong he was physically - just trying to lift one of his ball and chain props was difficult.

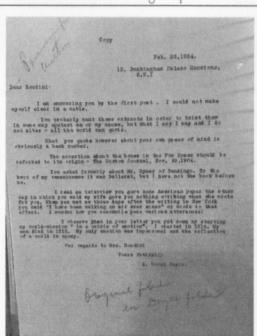
I know how hard he trained, both physically and mentally - he speaks of it often, and others cite his almost super-human regimen. Friends said he could hold his breath underwater for ten minutes or more. I know how he loved to collect stories and artifacts from magicians and actors throughout history. I know that he greatly admired Abraham Lincoln, so much so that he named his trained eagle after our 16th President. I even have a hint of how he smelled, or at least how the safe Bess kept his things smelled. It's a nice, clean, woody smell - like Old Spice and shaving cream, with a note of coffee.

But it wasn't until I discovered that Houdini had a friend whose collection was also housed at the Ransom Center that a more complete picture of the man came into view. Just a few aisles away, live the papers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and his back and forth debate with Houdini over Spiritualism (the scientific possibility of communication with the dead) feels as fresh and continual as though the two men never stopped arguing, even after death.

On the trail of these miles of papers, a play began to take shape. Hidden Room's Houdini Speaks to the Living is largely Verbatim Theatre - about 75% of the text is quoted straight from the two men's letters, essays, and books. We were lucky that in addition to personal correspondence between the two, both Houdini and Doyle had competing lectures about Spiritualism - Houdini touring to educate the public against the dangers of fraud mediums tricking them out of their fortunes, and Doyle touring in hopes that this "great philosophy" would bring comfort to the many people who had lost loved ones in the wars. Further, both men dedicated full chapters of their books to debate with the other. Houdini's A Magician Among the Spirits is dedicated to seance busting, and carefully picks apart Doyle's Spiritualism claims. Doyle's 1930 book The Edge of the Unknown, is filled with personal accounts of ghosts, seances, and spirit photography, and calls Houdini to task over his negative stance on Spiritualism, despite Harry's inability to respond due to his death four years before.

Putting these competing words together forms a lovely conversation, and a constructs a portrait of these two luminaries, while reminding us that they were ultimately just people; one, a determined, hard-working Hungarian-born charmer with a love for his morning coffee, and an ever-ready poem cut from a book to paste onto one of his wife's numerous love notes; the other a Scottish gentleman who never let a newspaper get a misstep by without a stern letter in return, and who wore an unremarkable sock with a hole in the toe the day he died. We hope that our performances here in the Mysterious Hidden Room, and also on Halloween in a free show gifted by the Harry Ransom Center, we will perform the one trick that the Spiritualists could never achieve - bringing Houdini back to us.

-Beth BURNS Artistic Director, Hidden Room Theatre



letter from Doyle to Houdini  
from the collection

## Cast

Harry Houdini

Patrick TERRY

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Robert MATNEY

## Production Staff

Master of Play

Beth BURNS

Masters of Research

Beth BURNS & Eric COLLEARY

Magic Director

Patrick TERRY

Magic Consultant

Brad HENDERSON

Master of Stage

Kenneth WILLIAMS

Master of Set

Zac CROFFORD

Master of Sound & Video Design

Lowell BARTHOLOMEE

Master of Costume

Kelli BLAND

Master of Props

Marco NOYOLA

Master of House

Lily PIPKIN

Master of Art

Jennymarie JEMISON of FIVE AND FOUR

Master of Program Design

Emily RANKIN

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# The HIDDEN ROOM

## THANK YOU FOR VISITING!

We hope you enjoyed your journey inside the Hidden Room.

Your experience was made more complete by these generous and talented people, to whom we owe so many thanks:

The Harry Ransom Center, Lone Star Chapter #6 York Rite Masons, The City of Austin Cultural Arts Division, The Creative Fund, Kimberley Mead, Liz Fisher, Peter Reardon, Sloane Reardon, Robin Jones, Judd Farris, Jason Newman, Jennifer Rose Davis, Sarah Murdoch, Brad Henderson, Jon Stetson, Andrew Goldenhersh, John Graham, Kent Axell, Jon Deery, Elliot Zimet, Inez Escamilla, Isabelle Simone, Eric Walton, Buffy Manners, Austin Playhouse, Penfold Theatre, Sarah Murdoch, Justin Scalise, LadyBoss, Minuteman Press, our friends and family, our board members: Farah Karim Cooper, Katy Thompson, Andrea Smith, Blake Shanley, Jennifer Coy, & Djahari Clark



## A NOTE FROM THE RANSOM CENTER'S ERIC COLLEARY:

### Houdini in the Archives

This Halloween marks the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the great illusionist Harry Houdini. Born Ehrich Weisz in Budapest in 1874, he got his start as a trapeze artist before turning his attention to magic. When Houdini died of a ruptured appendix on October 31, 1926, he was one of the best-known illusionists in the world.

Houdini's papers were dispersed through his estate following his death and that of his wife Bess in 1943. One of the larger collections of Houdini's papers went to Messmore Kendall, an attorney, entrepreneur, and theater manager. In June 1958, Kendall gave his collection to the Hoblitzelle Theater Arts Library at the University of Texas at Austin, which became part of the Ransom Center in the 1960s.

The collection holds a variety of material documenting Houdini's personal life and career - handwritten magic tricks; scripts, posters, and press kits from his motion picture company; decades of business and personal correspondence including a series of love letters between him and his wife; clippings and other materials relating to his interest in debunking spiritualism; an extensive collection of personal and professional photographs; his American and British theatre collection; and a ball weight and chain Houdini used in his tricks. In the coming year, the Ransom Center will embark on a major recataloging initiative on the 100+ box Houdini collection to make them even more accessible to visitors.

Over the last several decades, Houdini has inspired generations of scholars, biographers, magicians, and artists through his collection at the Ransom Center, and we are grateful to the Hidden Room Theatre for making these stories come alive on stage.

Dr. Eric Colleary · Cline Curator of Theatre & Performing Arts