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SCENE

Late magician still makes dollars disappear

By Chris McNamara
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The security guard overseeing the collection of magic memorabilia in the basement of the Hyatt Regency Woodfield wasn't concerned that the people viewing this valuable merchandise were magicians, practitioners of the dark arts who might conjure a spell to leave him temporarily blind as they disappeared into the night with these treasures.

To be honest, he seemed bored sitting amid the card-trick books and vanishing-bird cages. But some 300 attendees were thrilled to inspect these artifacts pulled from the late magician Jay Marshall's vast collection. And best of all, they were able to bid on interlocking rings and something called a "dove decapitator" with which to amuse family and friends with phony bird beheadings. Abracadabra!

This auction was one component of the Magic Collectors Association Weekend held in Schaumburg recently, an annual event hosted at various cities where, according to Jay Marshall's son Sandy, "people with too much money come to own the collections of famous magicians. Sometimes it's Houdini. This year it is my dad. It depends on who croaked."

Son shares father's sense of humor, which propelled the elder magician (who passed away in 2005) to fame throughout a 60-year career, during which he regularly appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and opened for Frank Sinatra, accompanied by his sidekick rabbit puppet, Lefty. Jay Marshall also served as the dean of the Society of American Magicians and owned Magic Inc. on Chicago's North Side.

More than 350 items sold at the auction generated what Sandy Marshall estimates at more than \$300,000 to be put into escrow for the family. An original Houdini poster netted \$11,000. "We're dealing with an eclectic and unusual estate," said Sandy, a Broadway producer who divides his time between New York and Chicago.

Oddest among the items were a number of gaudy plaid sport coats -- a favorite of the late

magician's. "One of those jackets was gaffed, as they say in the trade," explained Sandy. "Let's just say that wearing that jacket, you could do certain tricks that others couldn't do."

"I don't know the magic world, but I've seen a lot of white shoes and fanny packs," remarked Eric H. Josteck, the attorney overseeing the finances at the auction. Additionally, there were plenty of Harry Blackstone-esque coiffed beards in the audience, a few curled mustaches and some women who -- if you used your imagination -- maintained a touch of their past lives as scantily clad magician's assistants.

Bill Futrell of Cheyenne, Wyo., hung the ID badge around his neck with a magician's rope, which he happily removed to perform tricks. He pulled alkaline batteries and screws from his pockets to craft a makeshift magical motor.

"Magic collecting is a sickness that you catch when you're young and you can't get rid of," explained Carl Williams, who had sauntered over to see this impromptu show. The 84-year-old Pasadena, Calif., resident restores and collects old magical items -- his passion and his curse.

"I want to get out of this," he said, before adding that he is looking for a young magician to whom to gift his collection. "This stuff is driving me crazy."

Inside the convention hall where the bidding was taking place, auctioneer David Goodman rattled off prices and descriptions, keeping the mood light and the bids flying. "That phone bidder takes an hour and a half to watch '60 Minutes!' " he chided one slowpoke as the audience laughed.

Tim Felix, owner of Midwest Magic shop in Franklin Park, dropped a couple hundred dollars on a few books.

"Chicago is a magic city. It always has been," said Felix, who lives in Downers Grove. "But we're a dying breed. The Internet has changed the business drastically." (Global collectors were able to bid at this auction in real time via eBay.)

"Stuff has gone out of the hands of guys who really like it and into those who can dole out large sums of money," he continued. "Some things at this auction sold for eight times higher than the estimate."

Even magic can't stop inflation. Some of the younger bidders today don't carry the air of magician about them, the way the older set does. They can purchase these collectibles, but they might not know how to use them.

But then, collecting has always been a struggle between heartstrings and purse strings, whether the objects of obsession are baseball cards or dove decapitators.

And although the late Jay Marshall might not have known some of these younger bidders

the way he did the old guard of magic memorabilia collectors, he surely would have appreciated the thought of one final trick performed from beyond the grave: making hundreds of thousands of dollars disappear. Poof!

q@tribune.com

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