SIT A SPELL

Hollywood’s Magic Castle, an old haunt for master illusionists, is a members-only club, but visitors can conjure up a reservation, too.

By Tom Pomroy

To reach Magician’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, you now must drive an hour and a half from Los Angeles, instead of riding a Burbank-bound train. The magic is now housed in a former bedroom that has long been used for séances. I praised over antique props like crystal balls and “Magic Linking Rings.” I learned about magicians who were once as renowned as Houdini, including Chung Ling Soo (real name William Elwood Robinson), 1892-1898, who died when a “balloon trick” went awry. But of course the live acts were the main draw in the featured show, magician Dan Birth produced dozens and even a mouse ran from thin air. At the Parker of Prestidigitation, TV producer and part-time magician Alan Arvis launched into a string of coin tricks. David Blaine, he wasn’t, but seeing even this old-school magic up-close was claiming another fraction of what was on offer. Still, it’s inevitable to leave the castle wanting more. Like a magician’s top hat popping out fake flowers, its contents may never quite be exhausted.

THE CASTLE

A bookcase slid open to reveal a hidden doorway, and I stumbled into the Grand Salon, where I joined a line of men in tuxedos and women in flow- ers. The magic was delivered by a banker in 1909, I learned, who actually had to stay through a solid wall at a London train station. My route into the Magic Castle, home to the Academy of Magic Arts in Los Angeles, involved a secret passageway too. To secure a reservation at the members-only club, which looks over Hollywood like a haunted French chateau, I had booked a room next door at the Magic Castle Hotel, a nary-yellow 1950s apartment building turned motor lodge, where the sound of kids play- ing in the pool wafted up to my balcony. Non-members usually need an invitation from a member to visit the neighboring Magic Castle, but there is a little-known loophole. Although un- der separate ownership, the Magic Castle Hotel has long had special permission to book its guests at the club for dinner and shows. Since 1963, the Magic Castle Hotel has long had special permission to book its guests at the club for dinner and shows. Since 1963, it had faked its way in the early 1990s when Bill Larame, a TV writer, began to renovate it as a clubhouse, aided by his brother Bill. Members of America’s magic royalty, the pair had, as children, traveled the U.S. performing magic with their parents, who founded the Academy of Magi- cal Arts in 1951. For the new clubhouse, Bill Larame cann-ibalized doors from mansions being demolished for fre- ways—a Lupa chandelier, carved mantels. The Magic Castle opened in 1963 and be- came a cult hit. As well as Cary Grant, Orson Welles and Johnny Carson were regulars. The castle offered classes to building magicians, and with Grant’s support a Junior Acad- emy for the next generation, with stringent entry tests for 13-year-olds. By 2008, when the castle was named a Los Angeles His- toric Cultural Monument, that first golden age had faded. “It was dead,” said Erika Larson, Bill’s daughter and former club president. “People got so used to special effects in cin- ema and TV, they weren’t into live magic. And they didn’t want to dress up. The castle just wasn’t hip anymore.” Things turned around in 2008, when the actor Red Patrick Harris became president and hooked fresh acts. In 2012, Katy Perry hosted her Hallow- en-themed birthday party there. Other unsual cul- tural forces came into play. “I think the Harry Potter movies made magic cool again,” said Ms. Larson. “On my next visit, after say- ing “Open Sesame” to the owl—well formally, I tricked through Houdini’s original secret passage and the set of mummmies he wore in his es- cape act. They were displayed in a former bedroom that has...