



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 TONY PERROTTET

To reach Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, students famously had to step 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 of sorts. To secure a reservation at the members-only club, which looms over Hollywood like a haunted French chateau, I booked a room next door at the Magic Castle Hotel, a canary-yellow 1950s apartment building-turned-motor lodge, where the sound of kids playing 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 under separate ownership, the Magic Castle Hotel has long had special permission to book its guests at the club for dinner and shows. Since 1963 [ck], the Magic Castle has

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been a beacon of Old Hollywood, the haunt of eccentric TV and film celebrities. Today, spending a night at the castle remains an all-consuming, often bewildering theatrical experience. "There is a kind of performance intimacy there that you just can't get anywhere else," explained Teller, silent partner of Penn and Teller, when I called him before the trip. "With magic, you want to be close to it."

And so, after dark, I slipped into my vintage gold-velvet jacket and pink silk tie—the club enforces a formal, if creative, dress code—then strolled the few steps across the hotel driveway to the turreted Victorian mansion,

where I joined a line of men in tuxedos and women in flowing gowns parading through an arched doorway flanked by griffin statues. I felt like I was entering a different dimension of reality; or, to put it in Hollywood terms, like stepping from a chirpy Doris Day film into the chateau in Jean Cocteau's 1946 "Beauty and the Beast."

In the entry hall, which resembles a Gilded Age library, a clerk behind a desk urged me to say "Open Sesame" to a carved wooden owl with glowing red eyes. ("You have to say it louder," a fellow guest told me after my first attempt failed. "He's getting hard of hearing.") A bookcase then slid open to reveal a hidden doorway, and I stumbled into the Grand Salon, a softly lit enclave adorned with scarlet wallpaper and gilded mirrors.

The evening passed in a blur. I enjoyed a dinner of "Academy Beef Wellington" in the lavish, pricey restaurant. I went to an illusionist show in the main theater, aka "The Palace of Mystery," whose updated takes on mind-reading and sleight-of-hand were both hilarious and confounding. I wandered around the maze of corridors and stairways admiring antique hand-tinted slides, old posters of magicians and photographs of famous members (Cary Grant was on the board of directors). The hokier elements—like a self-playing piano purportedly played by a ghost named Invisible Irma—were firmly tongue-in-cheek and, to me, irresistible: I willingly suspended disbelief for a chance to be entertained while surrounded by so much quirky history.

Only when I found myself back in my hotel room at 2 a.m. did I look over the show schedule I had been given at the castle door and realize how much I had missed: other theaters, other magic shows, relics belonging to Harry Houdini. So I resolved to visit again—after some spending some time researching the strange world I was exploring.

The manse was first built by a banker in 1909, I learned, when Hollywood streets were little more than dirt tracks. It



MAGICAL REALISM
From far left: guests at the Magic Castle, where a formal, if creative, dress code is enforced; illusionist Mike Elkan and guests Maria Navarette.

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had fallen into disrepair in the early 1960s when Milt Larsen, 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, toured the U.S. performing magic with their parents, who founded the Academy of Magical Arts in 1951. For the new clubhouse, Milt Larsen cannibalized décor from mansions being demolished for freeways—a Lalique chandelier, carved bannisters. The Magic Castle opened in 1963 and became a cult hit. As well as Cary Grant, Orson Welles and Johnny Carson were regulars. The castle offered classes to budding magicians, and with Grant's support a Junior Academy for the next generation, with stringent entry tests for 13-year-olds.

By 1989, when the castle was named a Los Angeles Historic Cultural Monument, that first golden age had faded. "It was dead!" said Erika Larsen, Bill's daughter and former club president. "People got so inured to special effects in cinema and TV, they weren't into live magic. And they didn't want to dress up. The castle just wasn't a hip place." Things turned around in 2008, when the actor Neil Patrick Harris became president and booked fresh acts. In 2012, Katy Perry hosted her Halloween-themed birthday party there. Other unexpected cultural forces came into play. "I think the Harry Potter movies made magic cool again," said Ms. Larsen.

On my next visit, after saying "Open Sesame" to the owl more forcefully, I tracked down Houdini's original straightjacket and the set of manacles he wore in his escape act. They were displayed in a former bedroom that has

long been used for séances. I pored 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 Ellsworth Robinson, 1861-1918), who died when a "bullet catch trick"

went awry. But of course the live acts were the main draw. In the featured show, magician Dan Birth produced doves and even a macaw from thin air. In the Parlour of Prestidigitation, TV producer and part-time magician Alex Acosta launched into a string of coin tricks. David Blaine, he wasn't,

but seeing even this old-school hocus-pocus up close was dazzling all the same.

I still only absorbed a fraction of what was on offer. Still, perhaps it's inevitable to leave the castle wanting more. Like a magician's top hat popping out bunnies, its contents may never quite be exhausted.



CAN YOU FLOAT ME? Jody Baran and Kathleen Pomroy performing at the Magic Castle this month.