Lost Empires Revisited

presented by

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Lost Empires by J. B. Priestley was published in 1965, and set half a century before that, at the outbreak of the Great War. It concerns the music hall magician Ganga Dun, a corruption of Kipling’s Gunga Din, and is told through the eyes of an assistant; his nephew Richard Herncastle. The magician’s real name is Nick Ollanton, and he takes on the young man upon the death of his mother.

The book is sub-titled ‘Richard Herncastle’s account of his life on the variety stage from November 1913 to August 1914, together with a Prologue and Epilogue by J. B. Priestley.’

Although, of course, Priestley created the whole thing himself (in itself a convincing illusion) he remarks, with his tongue in his cheek:

‘This is Richard Herncastle’s story, not mine. If there are passages here and there that sound more like me than him, that is because in these places I had to enlarge upon what he had found hard to express; but in every instance he agreed with what I had finally set down. Fortunately, our temperaments and outlooks are not dissimilar, in spite of some obvious superficial differences.’

Anyway, I thought this may be an appropriate time to revisit the text and examine it from several points of view:

Firstly, what examples of magic are actually contained within its pages?

Then, how far do these correspond to actual magic tricks and, if so, are they effects which would have been performed at that time? Are there any anachronisms, not realised by the writer?
Finally, Priestley says:

‘I have taken an obvious liberty with music-hall history by taking imaginary performers into real variety theatres, in real towns and cities and at definite dates.’

I thought it may be interesting to look at one of these theatres and see exactly what was being performed at that time, and how those acts corresponded to their fictional counterparts.

In company with several other authors, Priestley was an amateur conjuror. His son, Tom, wrote:

‘Magic was very important to him. I can remember at home there was a special drawer full of conjuring tricks, with a haunting smell of old cigar boxes, so that the seductive smell of cedar wood always brings back memories of that chest of drawers and the conjuring tricks. They were pretty basic, but he enjoyed the performance, and we enjoyed his enjoyment.’

Although he wrote a great deal about the music hall itself, little can be found in Priestley’s journals about specific magicians – apart from an essay on Frank Van Hoven, who was a particular favourite. Van Hoven, the Mad Magician and the Man Who Made Ice Famous was nothing like the conjuror who appears in Lost Empires. Priestley loved slapstick comedy and clowning. He mentions Charlie Chaplin and Dan Leno in the book, alongside David Devant (described as the only magician better than Ganga
Dun) and the ‘Great Lafayette circus’.

In some ways Van Hoven was a precursor to the Tommy Cooper style of comical chaos, and Priestley delighted in the inspired mayhem he created. A native of the USA and apparently inspired to be a magician by watching Dante, Van Hoven the ‘cod magician’ was very popular during and after the First World War; the heyday of Ganga Dun. Harry Stanley has described how he created laughter through the use of scruffy-looking boy assistants and a routine involving a bowl of water and a large block of ice. The intended trick was to pass a handkerchief into the ice, but by the end of the act tables and chairs had been overturned, the water had been spilled and the ice broken into many pieces. Van Hoven pattered throughout ‘like the crackling of a machine gun’. He made a career out of performing exactly the same act, but was continuously rebooked. Although others copied him, they never achieved his level of success.

Returning to the matter in hand, what magic did Ganga Dun actually perform in *Lost Empires*?

The stage set was an elaborate Indian temple, and Dick Herncastle remarks that the Indian Magician act, not depending upon language, could be played anywhere.

It began with the production, from seemingly empty bowls and vases, of bunches of flowers, fruit, coloured silks and gold and silver coins. Then, a heap of sand was covered with a cloth, and when it was removed a plant was seen to be growing there.

Herncastle remarks:

‘The bouquets were, of course, made of artificial flowers that could be closely pressed and then folded into tiny packets, which were released by a spring. A lot of these effects were used at the beginning of the act, and I was glad to learn that Sam and Ben were responsible for making sure they were properly folded and that the springs were in good order.’

The rigid body of a Hindu maid was then placed across two trestles. When these were removed the maiden remained suspended in the air. A few more passes, and she mysteriously rose several feet higher. The magician passed hoops around her to prove that no wires were holding her up and then, following a green flash, the sorcerer was holding her by the hand as she bowed and smiled. This was not the full Asrah effect incorporating the mid-air vanish although, being introduced by
Servais Le Roy in 1902, that would not have been anachronistic, and Priestley would certainly have been aware of it. Indeed, the Granada Television adaptation of 1986, starring Colin Firth, John Castle and Laurence Olivier, did convert this illusion into the Asrah.

Then, an angry rival magician, as tall as Ganga Dun and nearly as imposing, wearing a turban, a majestic beard and stiff long robes hiding his feet, arrived rather slowly and shakily to challenge the power of Ganga. This, in fact, was Barney the dwarf on a pair of stilts. With a magical gesture from Ganga and another flash of green light, the stilts telescoped into his boots, Barney flung himself spread-eagled onto the floor under the robes and appeared to have vanished.

The final effect involved Ganga’s assistant, Cissie, ascending a set of steps in order to climb into a box placed on top of a pedestal. The box was raised, a gun was fired and the apparatus fell apart to show that Cissie had vanished. She was, of course, whisked away in the steps and returned to the stage via the auditorium in time-honoured fashion. What is interesting, though, is that Ganga Dun had introduced a special mechanism which allowed the lid of the box to descend slowly as though it were still being held open by Cissie and only gradually closed by her. This enabled her to get into the base and for the box to begin its ascent while the lid was still closing, creating the effect that she was still in there. Ganga uses this to illustrate to the young Richard the importance of timing, and it proves that Priestley had a genuine appreciation of the details involved in the presentation of such an illusion. He makes Ganga Dun say:

“She has to be out of that box (there’s a hinged flap on the bottom) and into the pedestal long before the trick lid has closed. It’s watching that lid close so slowly that deceives them. There’s always a key device for every illusion, and it’s never the one the clever customers think it is. In the box trick, it’s the lid that’s still closing when Cissie’s already in the pedestal. It makes ‘em feel she’s
still lowering herself slowly into the box when in fact she’s already out of it. In
the levitation effect the key device isn’t the steel bar that raises and lowers her
(any fool can work one of them), but the hoops that seems to pass right round
her.”

At one point they experience a problem with the mechanical part of the levitation
and Dick is given the task of oiling it.

In the middle of the novel, Priestley introduces a topical sub-plot involving the
suffragette Agnes Foster-Jones. Although not sympathetic to her cause, Nick
Ollanton accepts the professional challenge of helping her to escape the clutches of
the authorities when delivering a speech at a rally. There is a free-standing screen at
the back of the stage, and a
transformation is achieved as she passes
behind it and comes out the other side.
The lady wears a large wide-brimmed hat
which helps to hide her features, and a
distinctive bright red coat. She simply
changes places with a double wearing the
same clothes and escapes through a door
behind the screen while the police are
pursuing the wrong person. Such
subterfuge was being used by the likes of
Lafayette, of course, during this period,
and has since been employed by
performers as diverse as Paul Daniels
and Lance Burton.

One item which is possibly a bit more
anachronistic is the newspaper headline
prediction which finds its way into the
story. At one point in the narrative
Ollanton places a headline prediction for
the local Burmanley Evening Mail in a
locked box, to be displayed in a shop window and eventually opened on the stage of
the music hall. The dirty work is achieved by means of the key, which is hollow and
projects a rolled up piece of paper into the box while opening it, in the manner of a
billet knife. “There’s a neat little spring inside the key,” says the magician. To add a
touch of irony, he contrives to have a local councillor who is critical of the theatres
and music halls as ‘haunts of vice’, to be named in the headline, and therefore mentioned on the stage as part of the entertainment which he so detests. Ollanton asks a journalist to “get Alderman Fishblick into one of your headlines on Thursday”, and he responds by saying he will “talk to our chaps” and try to oblige. It is most unlikely, even in those days, that a member of the public could dictate editorial policy in this way for the sake of a magic trick, but as there is a council meeting at which the said alderman is vociferous he manages to achieve his aim.

The whole incident is probably anachronistic, as Stewart James is credited in Whaley’s Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Magic with inventing the headline prediction, using a prediction chest such as this, in 1938, considerably post-dating the era of Lost Empires. Annemann had released his Original Faked Envelope in 1935 to predict the winner of a local election, and this method appeared as the ‘News Event Prediction’ in Practical Mental Effects in 1944.

One illusion which Ganga Dun is trying to perfect, the Vanishing Cyclist, runs through the novel. He says:

“I’m working now on putting an open doorway on the stage. Somebody comes in on a bicycle, rides across to the doorway at a smart pace, but instead of going through they vanish, bicycle and all. The bike is the key device, of course. If I can’t make it do what I want it to, then I’ll send the bike through the doorway and the rider will have disappeared.”

In the end he decides that just the rider disappearing would in fact be better:

“The effect is – you see a man riding up to this open doorway, then the bike goes through and the man vanishes. That’ll make ‘em sit up – except on Mondays in Glasgow.”

Dick writes:

‘He showed me the diagrams, which he had drawn himself to exact scale. Later he sold this Vanishing Cyclist effect to an American illusionist for seven thousand five hundred dollars, and for all I know somebody may still be doing it; so that even now I don’t feel I ought to give away its secret. But it wasn’t, as some people say, ‘all done by mirrors.’ The doorway and the bit of wall surrounding it were not as simple as they looked; two identical bicycles, built specially to Uncle Nick’s specifications, were used.’
And so Priestley deftly avoids the need to explain exactly how the feat was to be accomplished.

Again, Nick remarks:

“Everything depends on the two seconds, or even a bit less, when they think they’re staring hard and they aren’t. It’s all in that split-second timing.”

When asked why both the rider and bike were not made to vanish he responds:

“The vanishing isn’t good enough unless there’s something to take their eye at once. If, after the green flash, they see that bright new bicycle going through the doorway their eyes will have to follow it. I’ll tell them on the programme what to expect – the cyclist vanishing in the doorway while his cycle goes through it – and that’s what they will see. Everything will be slowed down before the vanish, so that the minds of the audience will still be moving in slow time when we’ll be working unbelievably fast. That’s the secret, lad. It’s really how I get away with the old box trick, which I wouldn’t bother with if I hadn’t thought of that slowly closing lid, which makes ‘em feel Cissie is still settling down into the box when she’s already out of it and into the pedestal. I’ve read every book I can find in conjuring and illusionists’ effects, all about misdirection, false choices and the rest of it; but not one of them sees the importance of this slow time in the audience’s mind when you’re working fast on the stage. It’s my speciality.”

Dick Herncastle writes:

‘I can’t go into details without giving away the trick, but my part was to approach the open doorway quite slowly on my bicycle and then, at a given signal, when Uncle Nick fired his green flash, turn and race off the stage through a concealed flap in the set.’

Appreciating the magician’s psychology, Priestley presents this later exchange between the magician and a member of the audience: “I saw this open doorway brought on and saw you walk through it several times to prove it’s all right – just a doorway. Then this young fellow comes riding on towards the doorway, and you said “Ready, steady, go!” There was a flash and I saw the bicycle go through the doorway and your dwarf came running on to catch it – and the young fellow had completely disappeared.” Nick gave me a wink. Later, he said: “You remember what I told you about their minds moving slowly while we’re working fast? Of
course the flash blinds them while the two hinged flaps come out of the wall, and then I’m waving towards the other side of the doorway where they expect to see the bike coming out – and then they see Barney running to catch it . . . and the flaps are back before they’ve had time to notice them. They see what they expect to see. While they’ve had little time we’ve had a lot of time – and that’s the chief secret.”

I have discussed with Paul Kieve and John Gaughan the possibility of Devant’s ‘Biff!’ of 1913 being Priestley’s inspiration for this illusion, which appears to be of his own devising. The vanish of a motor bike and its rider from a suspended packing case employed ‘black art’ principles, and also used that green lighting so favoured by Ganga Dun. Although achievable on stage, David Hemingway, the magic adviser to the television adaptation, has conceded that this was the only effect in the series to be created by the special effects team. His comment in an appendix to the shooting script simply says: ‘Unless we deviate too far from the effect as written, by introducing props, boxes etc., not mentioned, it seems that a camera trick is the only way of effecting this.’

When I asked Scott Penrose how he would approach the staging of this illusion he replied, with typical pragmatism, “Get them to replace it with another one.” It reminded me of the episode in Educating Rita when Rita’s tutor poses the question ‘How would you solve the problems of staging Macbeth?’ and she replies ‘Do it on the radio.’

Who provided the main inspiration for the character of Ganga Dun?
Well, I’m grateful to my good friend David Budd for pointing me in the direction of the book *The Biography of the World Famous Illusionist The Amazing Chang* (the stage alias of Samuel Lewis Webster Whittington-Wickes MIMC) by Sandra Evans. According to this, Samuel originally met Priestley whilst attending various show business dinners and social functions in the London area. Their friendship blossomed, and Samuel invited Priestley to his home – Abingdon House. Apparently, Priestley talked for hours to Samuel before writing *Lost Empires*. Having confided in the writer about his show-business life-style Samuel had great expectations of the pending publication, but was disappointed by the content, finding ‘no relevance to the accurate account of my own life whatsoever’. The author went down in his estimation after that, and he termed the novel ‘facile’.

In my opinion, Rameses (Albert Marchinski) is a much more likely candidate for the honour of inspiring Priestley to create Ganga Dun. Their acts were similar in many ways, in style, costume and content (such as the previously mentioned growth of a plant and the production of items from a bowl or cauldron) and both magicians, the real and the fictional, even sailed to America on board the Lusitania. Perhaps most significantly, however, Ganga Dun frequently refers to either cutting out or bringing back the Ball Trick, although he never actually describes it. “Why should I waste my cleverest effect on blockheads?” he says at one point. It is
unlikely to be a close-up effect such as the chop cup or cups-and-balls, and the strong implication is that this is the effect which we see prominently displayed on the Rameses poster as one of his featured items. According to Sam Sharpe, David Devant took the Obedient Ball of Kellar and replaced the elaborate electro-magnetic method with a thread version along the lines of the Hartz Climbing Egg. The original title was the Golliwog-Wolligog Ball (later abbreviated to simply the Golliwog Ball and so losing the hint of its going backwards and forwards) and the effect was that of a large sphere which rolled up and down a plank unaided and stopped on command. By happy coincidence, an article in Eddie Dawes’s *Rich Cabinet of Magical Curiosities* series in the *Magic Circular* mentions the fact that this trick was also taken up by Fred Harcourt in 1905. Another contender to be the Ganga Dun prototype would be Ali Bey, but being born in 1905 he would have been a contemporary of Priestley rather than Nick Ollanton.

Ollanton speaks of his traditional apprenticeship to an old German magician called Krausser, who performed an Indian act under the name of Bimba-Bamba, and how he trained as a mechanic – the most important skill possessed by the illusionist.

As the novel progresses, Dick Herncastle grows in confidence to the point where he invents his own effect – the Magic Painting. It is described thus:

‘A member of the audience chooses one of several subjects to be painted. They are shown two blank canvases. One is put on an easel and turned away from them. I start painting on the other – working fast because the subject will have been forced and will already be pencilled in. When I’ve done a third of it, the other canvas is turned round to show a third of that one completed too. I do two thirds – the magic canvas has done two thirds. When I’ve finished it’s finished, too – the identical picture.

‘Uncle Nick brought pencils and paper out of his capacious inside pocket, and for the next half hour we were happily at work on various devices for the magic canvas which, he insisted, we must be able to show closely to members of the audience, even allowing them to touch it, before the trick began.’

Nick constructs a trick frame containing spring rollers which are released to reveal three separate sections of the picture, regarded as being more effective than merely showing the full picture at the end.
Herncastle then adds this touch of authentic detail: ‘Years after I saw an American illusionist at the Palladium working the effect very successfully, and I had a hard time persuading my wife that it was I who had first thought of it.’ It was ever thus.

Throughout, Ollanton is developing a ‘Two Dwarf Illusion’ which never comes to fruition on the stage but is used as an integral part of the plot.

The novel is peppered with pocket effects, no doubt of the type to be found in Priestley’s famous drawer, which the main protagonist performs at the drop of a hat. To a waiter he says:

‘“Don’t go for a minute. Give you a free show. Got a ha’penny on you? Right. Mark it, so you’ll know it again.” He put it in his right-hand coat pocket and then, only a moment later, brought out a small metal box, which he places carefully on the table between us. “Now watch.” He opened the metal box and took out of it a match-box, which had several elastic bands round it. When he had taken these off, he opened the match-box and showed us a tiny silk bag, sealed by very small elastic bands. “Now you open that, lad.” I did and, of course, inside was the ha’penny.’

I’m sure most of us will recognise that one from our earliest magic boxes. I have an Ernest Sewell one which loads the coin into a ball of wool. I had wondered about the availability of elastic bands in 1914, but apparently the rubber band was patented in 1845.

At another point in the narrative Uncle Nick brings out a metal tube about three inches long, then jams into it the remains of his cigar, together with a lot of ash. He fits a screw cap onto the tube, says “Hocus-pocus and Hitchy Koo!” then, when the cap is unscrewed the cigar and ash have vanished. ‘I tipped up the tube,’ says Dick, ‘and a lot of gilded pellets rolled out if it.’

At a party, Nick wraps some Christmas cracker trinkets in a napkin and turns them into a much more useful packet of cigarettes. Crackers containing gifts date back to 1845, too! As war approaches, Ganga Dun introduces a patriotic note into his act, producing from a paper tube the flags of the allies, concluding with a gigantic Union Jack, which brings more applause than all of the clever illusions put together. He is disgusted by the fervour created by this simple piece of ‘children’s party conjuring’. “We’ll find ourselves in a madhouse soon, lad,” he says.
Granada Television created remarkably authentic posters for theatres in Glasgow, Plymouth and Preston to be used as set dressing, and here you see David Hemingway and I displaying the one for Preston, which is the nearest to my home. The real Empire Theatre was opened in Preston in 1911 and on this date, Monday, May 25th, 1914, was advertising a very similar bill of fare. The Fred Karno Company (which in its time employed both Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel) presented Perkins in Paris (an hilarious uproar in two scenes) and Won By A Head, described as ‘the biggest laughing success of the season, as played at the London Coliseum. The Bernhart Brothers were the real-life counterparts of the Lowson Brothers, both presenting original comedy and dance, while Eugene Le Blanc and Molly Bask (respectively an American comedienne and eccentric dancer and an Anglo-French comedienne) replaced our Lilly Farris and Lottie Dean. ‘Norman’ was a ‘unique instrumental novelty’ (possibly an automaton?), while Ivor Vinter was intriguingly described as ‘The Little Surprise’. In fact, Ivor was a midget (the equivalent of Barney in Lost Empires) and my good friend Ernest Ainley recalls seeing him as a child at the Grand theatre in Leeds, playing the title role of Humpty Dumpty in the pantomime there in the mid-1930s. With a child’s fascination with
intriguing detail, he recalls that Humpty had a red sequin on each eyelid, which twinkled as he blinked.

In conclusion, then, I think it is fair to say from our brief return visit to *Lost Empires* that J. B. Priestley not only had a good working knowledge of stage magic, but also instinctively understood the subtleties and problems of its presentation.

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