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Dramatic Publishing

The Last Illusion



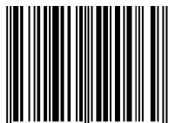
Drama by
B. Dwayne Craft

The Last Illusion

Drama. By B. Dwayne Craft. *Cast: 10 to 11m., 13 to 14w., 1 to 2 either gender.* Harry Houdini is perhaps the most well-known illusionist of the past two centuries, and the passion and beauty that are behind his fame are revealed during his final performance. Told through the memories and voices of those who knew and loved the man for the magic he brought to their lives, *The Last Illusion* is a touching portrait of the man behind the magic. Derived from the actual facts of Houdini's life, this play is guaranteed to captivate the audience with its unique staging, intimacy and honesty, as well as fidelity to the reality of the man known as the world's greatest magician. *Flexible set. Approximate running time: 45 minutes. Code: LL1.*

*Bob Jones High School, Madison, Ala., featuring (l-r) Emily McDowell, Olivia Skillern, Jonny Smith, Kayla Thompson and Emeline Earman.
Photo: Leigh Butgereit. Cover design: Susan Carle.*

ISBN: 978-1-61959-006-9



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311 Washington Street
Woodstock, IL 60098
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The Last Illusion

By

B. DWAYNE CRAFT



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(THE LAST ILLUSION)

ISBN: 978-1-61959-006-9

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“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., of Woodstock, Illinois.”

Dedicated to Barrett Daniel Craft and Kennedy Elise Craft.
May your world always be full of magic.

The Last Illusion was inspired by a conversation with Nathan Daniel, who mentioned the interesting life of Harry Houdini.

The Last Illusion was premiered by the Bob Jones High School Patriot Players Drama Troupe at the Bob Jones High School Edward Zompa Auditorium in Madison, Ala., on Oct. 29, 2013.

Directors..... B. Dwayne Craft, Mary Davis
Student Directors Kaitlyn Esteppe, Maegan Baldwin
Producer Delaney Mayer
Student Technical Direction..... Exavier Ayers,
Stephanie Lepper, Jimmy Boynton,
Kaitlin Duez, Nick Conklin
Sound Exavier Ayers
Lights Kaitlin Duez
Follow Spot..... Ingrid Hickey
Stage Managers..... Rachel Fewell (L), Jimmy Boynton (R)
Props Xena Saunders
Crew Directors Nick Conklin, Tristan Vinson
Scenic Artists Dave and Jackie Smith
Set Wranglers Nick Altstatt, Thornton Drury,
Joey Dickerson, Matthew Copeland,
Lydia Jean Chappel, Xena Saunders,
Michaela Porter, Ian Hendrix, Emily Bohatch,
Ayden Crowe, Zane Burns, Allison Bailey,
Shea Hannigan, Victoria White, Trevor Thomas,
Ashley Moore, Travis Craft, Colton Graf,
Travis Walls, Ryan Knowling, Spencer Webb
Costume Design..... Shari Kingsford
Student Costume Mistress..... Sariah Robertson
Assistant Student Costume Mistress Cassidy Macfarlane
Costume Crew..... Abigail Nichols, Wendy Robertson,
Heather Bailey, Clark Kingsford

Cast:

Harry Houdini	Jonny Smith
Martin Beck	Nathan Daniel
Bess Houdini	Olivia Skillern
Theo Weiss	Chris Gunner
Celia Weiss	Kayla Peel
Paul Daniel	Marcus Mack
Assistant #1	Kayla Thompson
Assistant #2	Kristen Alley
Assistant #3	Emeline Earman
Assistant #4, Vocal Soloist	Emily McDowell
Gordon Whitehead	Jesse Tollison
Mary Davis	Megan McDowell
Beatrice McClentock	Devyn Guillebeaux
Evelyn Richmond	Caroline Jackson
George Lewis	Chance Novalis
Myrna Lewis	Kaylie Miller
Dr. Crandon	Jack Judy
Margery Crandon	Anna McAbee
Hereward Carrington	Micah Smith
Sheriff Williams	Jacob Crawford
Reporter #1	Jett Ryan
Reporter #2	Will Beck
Reporter #3	Shafer Williams
Society Woman #1	Lindsey Solomon
Society Woman #2	Christy Rawls
Society Man	Nathan Rhodes
Female Understudy	Kinzie Kerce
Male Understudy	Zane Burns

SETTING

The set begins with a building exterior that unfolds into the performance space for Houdini's last performance. Alternately, the stage can be blank at the beginning with set pieces rolling on for the performance. The tables and chairs mentioned in the script should consist of boxes and crates painted to look like travel crates used to ship Houdini's props. These travel crates will be used throughout the show and will be used alternately as tables and chairs, podiums or stands to provide levels for characters, or any other needed set piece. Appropriate travel stickers from around the world can be used to emphasize their appearance. The audience consists of characters sitting on stacks of these boxes and crates during portions of the performance.

The water chamber is best achieved with lighting effects in a 3' x 3' x 6' box. One side of the box should be Plexiglas, and the effects can be projected from within the box onto the Plexiglas (provided that it has been frosted or a window film applied). The American DJ H2O LED fixture worked extremely well in the original production and is relatively inexpensive.

Houdini's entrance in the water chamber can be as complex as hanging the actor over the water chamber and lowering him as in the original production (if time and resources allow for a safely executed effect), or Houdini can lower himself into the chamber and be "secured" by the assistants. If needed, referencing a poster or projection of the effect as executed by Houdini can be substituted.

The Last Illusion

CHARACTERS

HARRY HOUDINI: The great magician himself. More importantly, he is a loving husband and true friend to those who know him. Avoid the impulse to play him only as a showman, and focus on the human side of the man.

MARTIN BECK: Houdini's manager and friend. Martin should be played both as a showman and as someone who loves and respects Houdini. The manager side is as important as the friend side of him.

BESS HOUDINI: Houdini's wife and partner. Her love for Houdini must be evident from their first meeting to her last monologue.

CELIA WEISS: Houdini's mother and the consummate Jewish mother. She worries but also has faith in her son.

MARGERY CRANDON: A spiritualist and medium. Renowned for her beauty, she is ultimately proven to be a fraud by Houdini.

GORDON WHITEHEAD: An angry and jealous boyfriend. He is actually the man who killed Houdini.

HEREWARD CARRINGTON: A representative of *The Scientific American* and investigator. He is most likely seduced by Margery and supports her claim to be a legitimate psychic.

GEORGE: A loving husband who is at times gruff with his wife.

MARY: Gordon's girlfriend and a fan of Houdini.

BEATRICE: An academic who has given up on men and who assists in *The Scientific American's* investigation of so-called psychics.

EVELYN: Beatrice's friend and a fan of Houdini.

MYRNA: George's wife.

PAUL: Houdini's mechanic and builder of his illusions. Paul is closest to Houdini second only to Bess. He is Houdini's friend and cherishes him.

DR. CRANDON: Margery's husband. He is a wealthy physician who supports his wife's claims to be a psychic.

ASSISTANTS 1–4: They are an invaluable part of the play in that they continuously remind us of the danger Houdini is in. They should grow increasingly alarmed with each passing second of the performance.

REPORTERS 1–3: They are your typical 1920s reporters and provide important information throughout the play. Gender swapping is possible for Reporters 1 and 2, or all three can be combined into a single role, if necessary.

SOCIETY LADY 1, SOCIETY MAN, SOCIETY LADY 2: They attend Margery's séances probably more for the free liquor and food than any real belief in the supernatural or her abilities. They are affluent and bored but not true believers.

COSTUMES

Mid-1920s costumes. Assistants' costumes should match the period and style but allow for greater interpretation.

NOTES

Magic illusions can be built from plans widely available online for "Metamorphosis" and "DeKolts chair." Step-by-step videos that reveal the techniques are also widely available online. Timing is the most important aspect of performing any illusion, and sufficient time should be allowed to perfect this aspect of the performance. Consulting with a professional magician, however, is encouraged. Matt Adams of *MattAdamsMagic.com* consulted for the original production and is available to consult for future performances for a fee. It may be possible to omit the actual illusions, but the play is more striking if they are included.

The Last Illusion

(MARY enters followed by GORDON.)

MARY. Did you hear? They say he's coming today. They say he's going to hang right up there in front of the *Times* building and perform his amazing escape ...

GORDON. Mary, for the last time, I don't care anything about seeing some two-bit magician do some phony trick, now let's go to the five and dime.

MARY. The only phony I know is the wise guy who promises his girl that they were getting engaged and never makes good on it. A girl has to have a little magic in her life.

GORDON. If some guy hanging upside down is magic, then I'm a monkey's uncle. And we'll get engaged as soon as I get a little dough together. What's so special about this guy anyways?

MARY. Well, Johnny Smith saw him at the Orpheum last week and said that he can escape from handcuffs, straight jackets, ropes, even chains all locked together! Johnny said that he was so strong, he could take a punch from any man in the audience.

GORDON. What are you doing running around with Johnny Smith anyways? I'll give that Johnny a punch right in the snout for putting the moves on my girl. And this goofy magician you want to see, he can get socked too if he starts in on that game!

MARY. You'd be a sight punching someone like him. He ain't just some "goofy magician" He's ...

(GORDON and MARY freeze in tableau. BEATRICE and EVELYN enter.)

BEATRICE. Evelyn! Evelyn, how dare you drag me out in the middle of the afternoon to watch some silly man hang upside down. You know I need to study.

EVELYN. But Bea, I heard that he is as handsome as Valentino and that he has an accent. I hope he has an accent. I like men with accents.

BEATRICE. Oh Evelyn, you're always chasing after some man ... and he's usually married. You should do what I've done and give up on them altogether. Besides, I thought I read somewhere that he was born in Wisconsin.

EVELYN. Oh Bea, you read too much. I heard he's Hungarian nobility, and that he kisses every girl he meets on the hand just like a prince would. I hope he kisses me on the hand.

BEATRICE. Oh Evelyn, he's a married man. All the good ones are married, that's why I quit looking and stuck to books.

EVELYN. Why, I know that Beatrice, but a girl can look at a handsome fella all she wants, even if he is married. It's just a little kiss on the hand. Valentino does it in all his movies. Besides, there's no harm in wishing. Especially when it's someone as famous as ...

(BEATRICE and EVELYN freeze in tableau. MYRNA and GEORGE enter.)

MYRNA. Now George, don't you dare ruin my shopping by standing there reading your paper and smoking your pipe without even saying a word.

GEORGE. Can't you see I'm busy?

MYRNA. You know my mother is coming over for dinner. You should have brought something home to eat instead of making me drag you out into town again.

GEORGE. Well Myrna, maybe I wanted to come back anyways. There's this magician fella they wrote about in the paper who's doing some stunt right here in front of the *Times* building, and I wanted to see it.

MYRNA. Selfish as always, George. Why, what kind of man would let his wife's mother go hungry just so he can see some phony baloney magician do some trick. I knew Mother was right when she said I shouldn't marry a lug like you.

GEORGE. I may be a lug, but I am a smart lug, and I always have a trick or two up my sleeve. It ain't no accident that I want to see this fella's trick today.

MYRNA. Running around chasing after some fake magician is hardly smart in my book! And you ain't got no tricks up your sleeve that I know of.

GEORGE. That's because I want to learn the greatest trick I can imagine. Because if there is anyone in the world who can teach me how to make your mother vanish into thin air, it has got to be ...

(GEORGE and MYRNA freeze in tableau. MARGERY and DR. CRANDON enter.)

MARGERY. Dear, can you believe that charlatan? Claiming to have magical powers. Staging such a spectacle, and in front of the whole city!

DR. CRANDON *(distracted and clearly not interested)*. Yes, dear. Simply mortifying.

MARGERY. Yes it is, to begin with, he claimed to be a spiritualist when he was with that circus outfit, and now he claims that we are all fakes. Why, that's the only reason I would have even bothered to drag my dearest doctor of a husband down here on such a dreary evening. We of the spirit world must always be prepared to defend ourselves from those that doubt "the gift."

DR. CRANDON. Yes, dear, the gift and such ... Dear, do you think this will take long? I do have to be well rested for surgery tomorrow.

MARGERY. Dearest darling, don't you understand? Those of us who truly are in contact with the spirit world cannot abide a phony. We are the medium through which those on the other side can speak, truly speak, to those who remain behind. We can ...

DR. CRANDON. Does this mean we are going to have another séance? I like it when your friends come to visit, but they can't stay as late as ...

MARGERY. Dear, we must speak to the spirits when the veil between worlds is thinnest. We will have another séance, because I intend on proving once and for all that "the gift" is real.

DR. CRANDON. Well, we aren't having one tonight! It's far too late and I have surgery in the ... Wait a moment, how exactly do you intend on proving your "gift" to everyone, because if it means that I have to buy a whole caboodle of food for your friends to ...

MARGERY. Dear, for an educated man you really can be dense sometimes. I intend on proving myself by holding a grand séance and inviting none other than the great ...

(MARGERY and DR. CRANDON freeze in tableau.

Scene change: We are transported into the performance space for HARRY HOUDINI's show by whatever means available to the director. In the original production, the street scene was "opened" by the entering ASSISTANTS to reveal HOUDINI and MARTIN BECK as well as the water chamber. If the performance scene is moved on from offstage or flown, the transition should be sudden and sweeping

and allow BECK's lines to complete the previous lines of the "audience members." In any case, we are now at the beginning of HOUDINI's performance. HOUDINI can stand on top of the water tank and lower himself into it or any variation up to being lowered into the tank. Competent personnel must check all effects for safety. With line adjustments, it is even possible to use a poster of the illusion to portray HOUDINI being lowered into the tank. It is not necessary to use actual water for this effect as appropriate lighting and set effects are more than adequate.)

MARTIN (*overlapping with previous dialogue*). The great Houdini! Defying with ease any and every form of bondage and restraint known to man. Come see as the world famous Houdini deftly defeats even the most difficult devices ever dreamt to detain mankind.

ASSISTANT 1. Chains and shackles.

ASSISTANT 2. Handcuffs and padlocks.

ASSISTANT 3. Ropes wrapped and tied by experts.

ASSISTANT 4. Blind fold and manacles.

MARTIN. Even the dreaded straight jackets of the local asylum are no match for this master of misdirection and magic. Look upon him there, ladies and gentlemen, and wonder in amazement at such courage in the face of definite danger. What may you ask would a man gain from such an endeavor?

ASSISTANT 4. Why would anyone tempt death in such a way?

ASSISTANT 2. For your entertainment perhaps?

ASSISTANT 3. For the sheer thrill?

MARTIN. No, I tell you! He defies death in order to understand it. For Houdini the bonds of death are no more than mere handcuffs.

HOUDINI. I say that death has no power save what we allow it to have. You tremble in your seats to think of being lowered into the tank below me. You tremble to think of the possibility that I, the great Houdini, will perish alone in a watery cell. Know this, this is no mere slight of hand or illusion of danger. The danger is very real and the water below is as cold as the grave.

MARTIN. Ladies and gentlemen, imagine that you will face death in mere moments. Bound and suspended over a watery grave, perilously close to that country from whose born no traveler returns. What memories play before you as you gasp your last breath? What would you wish to be your final thoughts of this world before the next?

HOUDINI. If you are brave enough to find out, hold your breath with me. I challenge you! Do not resume breathing until I am free of my bonds or until death takes me. That is, if you can hold it that long. Breathe with me now as I prepare to cheat my doom. Breathe with me!

(ASSISTANTS 1-4 all breathe in and out.

MARTIN once again moves the focus, and the ASSISTANTS should begin acting when he indicates they should close the drapes.)

MARTIN. Watch with me and hold your breath as the great Houdini descends into danger. What fleeting images would haunt you as your life tick, tick, ticks away?

(The ASSISTANTS begin to tap their shoes on the stage floor as if a clock ticking. Tap shoes should be used if possible. If it proves too difficult to conduct the necessary actions for the illusions without distracting from dialogue, another device may be substituted. The tapping continues softly and grows in volume until HOUDINI appears onstage.)

MARTIN (*cont'd*). Savor that last gulp of life. Savor it until it becomes so sweet and consider Houdini under the water, dancing an aquatic ballet in death's cold embrace as the seconds pass. To die is most routine. We are all pilgrims on the road to revelation. The great Houdini has begun his own journey, and we can only ponder where it will lead. What echoes of mortality will sound throughout his soul as he struggles? Will you allow yourself to journey with him as he dares the bounds between this world and the next? A man's life flashes before his eyes in his last moments. What memories play before him as the clock tick, tick, ticks away?

(HOUDINI should appear onstage as far away from the tank as possible. He is in a follow spot downstage. During this scene, the ASSISTANTS for the "magic show" move travel cases into position to form a table with three chairs. CELIA and THEO enter and take their places during HOUDINI's monologue.)

HOUDINI. BREATHE! That's the first and last thought of any water escape. Now, don't be disappointed, I am still very much in that tank there and I may very well perish as you watch. That is at least part of the reason you are here, isn't it? The possibility of me dying? Or is it to know what a man who faces death thinks of after he has passed the point of no return? To better understand, let's start at the beginning. You see, the beginning is always furthest from the end, and death being a sort of ending, it makes a certain sense to distance yourself as much as possible. You see it all started with my brother Theo. He and I were always a team. But he was the one that saw possibilities I had missed.

CELIA. Ehric, Theo, my boys, it has been so long since you've come to visit your mother, I thought the other ladies at the synagogue would think I was not only a widow, but that I

had no children either. Now come, boys, tell me what you've been up to in the city. I have enjoyed your letters, but you haven't said anything about your work in your letters.

THEO. Mother, Ehrie has found a new line of work for us. You will be proud to know that we are going to be in show business.

CELIA. There are a lot of our people in show business, and they are all starving. Ach, at least that much I can fix. You should eat while you are here.

HOUDINI. Mama, we are fine. We have an act and everything.

CELIA. This why you two look like you're wearing schmatta for clothes. Oy vey, your father, the Rabbi, would weep to see his boys so unkempt. Eat.

HOUDINI. I've missed you, Mama. I tried to get Theo to come back and visit, but he insisted that we get the act right first.

THEO. You know lying is a sin, Ehrie. It was all him, Mama, he's a genius with his hands. He ties knots in the neckties we make in the factory and does little tricks with them to entertain the seamstresses on second floor. That's what gave me the idea. He is already practically a real magician.

CELIA. No more haukachinik about this show business until you boys eat. And tell me you didn't quit your jobs at the factory. You would have to be meshugganah to quit good jobs to tie knots for magic tricks.

THEO. Mama, we haven't quit yet, but we are going to soon.

HOUDINI. Theo and I have more than rope tricks for an act. In fact, we have a booking next week out on Coney Island. You should come see.

CELIA. We'll see, boychik. You boys know that I love you. You have always been such smart boys. I know you'll find a way to be big shots. Now eat, eat before it gets cold.

HOUDINI (*comes out of the scene to address the audience*). That was always Mama. Food first, talk later. "Back in the old country, it was different," she always said, as if to remind

us where we were. When I was four, we arrived in Appleton, Wisconsin, and to a child, it was a land where magic seemed to be everywhere. Wisconsin, magic, seems like a joke now doesn't it? Either way, it's no wonder Mama supported Theo and me when we decided to make magic together as a career. She had seen the magic of America herself. She supported us, but she also worried ... a lot! She was after all, a Jewish mother.

(The ASSISTANTS move the travel cases back to original positions for the audience while delivering their lines. The audience enters and takes their places as well.)

ASSISTANT 4. Thirty seconds folks, are you still holding your breath?

ASSISTANT 1. The great Houdini.

ASSISTANT 2. The master of escape.

ASSISTANT 3. The king of handcuffs.

MARTIN. The penultimate prestidigitator of prison paraphernalia.

(The ASSISTANTS return onstage to set up chairs and props for THEO and HOUDINI's performance.)

MARTIN *(cont'd)*. You hold your breath anxiously and ask yourself, "Will he escape death itself?" If he dies, you will leave saying that you saw a great one fall and tears will be shed throughout the world for ... But if he lives and escapes the watery casket he is now in, you will leave with something far more precious: hope. That's right, folks. You will have the rarest of hopes, the hope that even death may be defeated. But what weapons might a man bring to his battle with the conquering worm? What thoughts in that final second will supply him the will to humble mighty death?

ASSISTANT 3. Riches?

ASSISTANT 4. Fame?

ASSISTANT 2. Pride?

(At this point, BESS is merely another assistant who will help with THEO and HARRY's performance.)

ASSISTANT 1. Success?

BESS. Love?

MARTIN. Perhaps the memory of love might shield our valiant hero from the grim reaper's scythe?

(Onstage there is an audience seated [actors from opening scene plus extras], and THEO and HARRY are in the middle of a show. HARRY is distracted by a pretty girl offstage. The ASSISTANTS have moved a wooden crate into the center of the stage. The Metamorphosis is an illusion that HOUDINI himself developed. It is easily constructed but requires precision and practice to perform. Other illusions may be substituted, if necessary, with line adjustments, but The Metamorphosis is recommended. Plans are available online.)

THEO. Harry, it's time for The Metamorphosis. Could you quit gawking at the girls and give me a hand?

HOUDINI *(springing into showmanship)*. Ladies and gentlemen, you have seen my brother perform feats of card handling so magical that they have been outlawed in casinos throughout the world. You have witnessed me escape the handcuffs provided by our local constabulary. Sheriff Williams, I thank you for your assistance in the matter.

(In the audience, SHERIFF WILLIAMS stands.)

SHERIFF WILLIAMS. I can swear to it, folks. Those were real handcuffs! And I can't for the life of me figure how he got out of the cell we locked him in. Just to prove it, I am offering a 10 dollar reward to anyone who can duplicate that rascal's trick and show me how it's done.

HOUDINI. Thank you, Sheriff, for that, if you would remain a moment that I may enlist your help a bit more, it would be appreciated. Now folks, we bring you to our most amazing illusion yet. My brother and I will perform a feat that will leave you gasping with wonder.

THEO. Dumbstruck with amazement.

HOUDINI. Bewildered and bedazzled with befuddlement!

THEO & HOUDINI. We give you, The Metamorphosis!

HOUDINI. Behold the shipping crate in front of it. Sheriff, if I could prevail on you to inspect this crate for defects?

SHERIFF WILLIAMS. Looks all right to me.

THEO. Thank you, Sheriff, now if you'll take your seat.

HOUDINI. As you can see, I hold a bag here in my hands. Sizeable enough for me to fit into it.

THEO. Into the bag, Harry!

HOUDINI. Brothers can be such a bother.

THEO. Ladies and gentlemen, watch as I tie the bag shut securely and with the help of our assistants, place my brother into the crate, which will then be secured with these padlocks. I must admit friends that the temptation to leave my brother in the crate is great, but my professional nature gets the better of me. So, if the orchestra will play a little... And our assistants will raise the curtain to obscure the secrets of our profession.

(Suspenseful orchestra music plays while the ASSISTANTS raise the curtain around the crate. They then lower it after a three-count. THEO feigns flirting with BESS when the curtain is lowered the first time.)

THEO (*cont'd*). You're new, aren't you? I didn't know we had a new assistant.