

He Revolutionized Magic with Candles and Canes

During the 19th century, Europeans developed collapsible top hats and canes to pack more easily into traveling luggage or check when attending the opera. This, it is said, inspired Harlan Tarbell later to suggest that the principle be used by his Chicago neighbor, magician Russ Walsh, for a vanishing cane trick. After much experimentation, Walsh found that coiled steel film two inches wide, used in the production of razor blades, created a strong, realistic, fast-collapsing cane for an impressive quickie effect. Marketing these, hundreds were sold, and many a conjuror lamented cutting the palm of his hand from them instead of receiving palm clapping from others for his efforts.

The years slipped past. Except for embellishments like changing the disappearing cane into streamers, flowers, silks or sparkles, cane magic remained stagnant. And then, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on October 3, 1936, Ricardo Roucau

was born. He was destined to create a revolution that would affect generations of professionals. Inspired as a teen-ager by a performance of Fu Manchu (David Bamberg), he studied and practiced assiduously, even teaching himself English in order to gain access to a greater volume of literature on conjuring. In 1959, his professional career debuted on Montevideo, Uruguay television, followed, one month later, by his marriage to Monica, a lovely dancer.



Fantasio (and Monica), the Argentine-born artist who revolutionized cane and candle magic, gives his fifth performance on the top-rated Ed Sullivan Show in the U.S.A. over CBS-TV in 1969.

An immediate hit as a team, they played the better hotels, nightclubs and television of South America, steadily moving north toward the U.S.A. In the Caribbean, their clean, colorful and skillful silent act in the Hilton and Intercontinental Hotel chains caught the eyes of New York bookers. Starting at the famed Latin Quarter in America's largest city, he soared upward: 15 months at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, six months in the Ice Review at the Conrad Hilton in Chicago (world's

largest hotel, then), and five appearances, over the years, on Ed Sullivan's top-rated Sunday evening variety hour over CBS TV. Year after year, they were one of the hottest acts of the time.

The public has known him as Richard Rex (1956), Ricardo "Larry" Roucau (1957) and Fantasio (since 1961 when he joined the *Círculo Mágico Argentino* in Buenos Aires). The legendary Walt Disney exclaimed after seeing the act: "Fantastic is the word for Fantasio." *The Hollywood Reporter* (Los Angeles) gave its opinion: "Fantasio is one of the most accomplished magicians ever to appear in Las Vegas." In some respects Fantasio & Monica's six-week engagement in the world's largest theatre, Radio City Music Hall in New York City, was the peak of their performing career.

Joe Cabot, Fantasio's agent, had tried fruitlessly to get them into that 6,000-seat playhouse. One evening James F. Gould, president of the Radio City Music Hall, caught Fantasio's new act on the Ed Sullivan television show. Working in a sleeveless dress jacket with a candelabra, candles, pigeons of various colors, and canes that changed hues—the magician's revised routine—he so impressed Gould that booker Mark Leddy was told to sign him immediately for November into December 1969 at the Music Hall.

How could a two-person manipulation act be made visible on that immense stage? This worried Fantasio. Mark Leddy demanded for him the same stage set up that had been used in the 1930s for Cardini, to accomplish this. Six brilliant spotlights were to shine on Fantasio & Monica. Rehearsals began with the orchestra. It received the act's musical scores for 16 instruments but had to arrange and expand them for the theatre's 60 musicians! The melodies were all Cole Porter. Finally, the air conditioning during rehearsals kept blowing out the candles. Solution? The management decided to turn it off for 20 minutes before each performance.

The last major hurdle to cross in making the act audience-visible entailed eliminating the first two rows of theatre seats in order to put the artists way out in front. A runway was built on which the famous Rockette dancers would enter, forming a screen that hid the huge orchestra rising out of a pit behind and then sliding back five meters. During these seconds, Fantasio & Monica slipped unseen to center stage front. The kicking Rockettes split into two lines at the center, wheeling to the sides, revealing the performers in the glaring spotlights. The act began. The exit was simpler: a blackout concealed them as the orchestra descended into its pit.

After the initial thrill passed of working Radio City, the six-week run became a long, tiring and monotonous routine. Obligated to be in the theatre before 11 a.m., they could not return to their hotel until 11 p.m. The four lengthy daily shows were separated by a motion picture that ran two hours in between. Their daughter Jacqueline was just two years old, at the time.

In July 1976, Fantasio—after 17 years on the professional stage—left showbusiness. The second portion of his life then began. It was dedicated to creating, manufacturing and selling magic. That decision was to engrave his name in magic history. Now we can learn how he came to invent his miracles with candles and canes designed in, and constructed out of, metallic-looking light plastic.

The seeds had been sown 16 years earlier. With one piece of a German vanishing cane that had broken in half, he had made a vanishing candle, painted white by a friend. This suggested painting one vanishing cane red and another green so that he could perform a triple color changing cane, ending with a double floral bouquet. For four years this was part of his act. But keeping the paint in good condition was a headache; and he ran out of bouquets.

One evening he picked up some groceries in a market on Broadway near their 75th street apartment in New York City. He was intrigued by rolls of spring plastic advertising Coca Cola and other soft drinks, which held the six-can packs against the wall. The manager let him take a loose one home. "That was my greatest magic moment," Ricardo Roucau says today. "I knew that this plastic would be perfect for my ideas with the color changing cane and the vanishing candle."

A busy, seven-month search for this material finally turned up a source among all the plastic suppliers in New York City. He received two small, sample rolls of dark blue plastic from which he made two prototype canes. But when he demonstrated their superior qualities and potential to three magic shop owners in New York—Russell Delmar, Al Flosso and Lou Tannen—and advised them that he planned to sell them to magic shops, they told him to save his money. Thousands of the Walsh metal canes had been sold; the market was saturated.

Ignoring their advice, he purchased the minimum quantity of material possible from the manufacturer, enough black material to make 7,500 canes. That took guts. He designed techniques for manufacturing the other elements in a vanishing or color changing cane. One by one he received

samples of red and then green plastic with which he could make prototypes of vanishing and color changing canes as well as a red, vanishing lit candle.

His first ad was in the September 1967 *Linking Ring*, Duke Stern allowed him to demonstrate and take orders for his color changing cane in Abbott's booth at the July 1967 S.A.M. convention in Boston. Sales rocketed. Living space in the Fantasios' New York apartment was swallowed up by the cane business. They moved to Miami and bought a house, with an extra room that became a cane factory.

Ricardo played gala shows at national magicians' conventions and entered victoriously his sensational new candles and canes effects in their originality contests, to publicize them. Superb professional that he is, he transformed conjurians into avid purchasers of these effortless and wondrous effects. His first wholesale customer was Japan's Tenyo, back in 1968. From being a simple manufacturer, he now has designed and had made specially 22 different, injection moulds, to produce the various parts for the canes and candles.

After over a quarter-of-a-century, the Argentine-American tallies up sales of around a half million canes and candles. Not only are they sold throughout the globe, but almost every topnotch professional manipulator in every land, at one time or another, has included Fantasio-made candles, candelabras and cane effects in routines. His business has brought bookings to help keep magic and its practitioners alive and well. Knowing this, he remarks philosophically: "I can only think back to those pearls of wisdom given to me 25 (plus) years ago, to 'save my time and money as the market is saturated!'"