

# Dignity Personified

How actions speak  
louder than words in  
the career of one of  
magic's  
beloved  
luminaries

by Amy Stevens

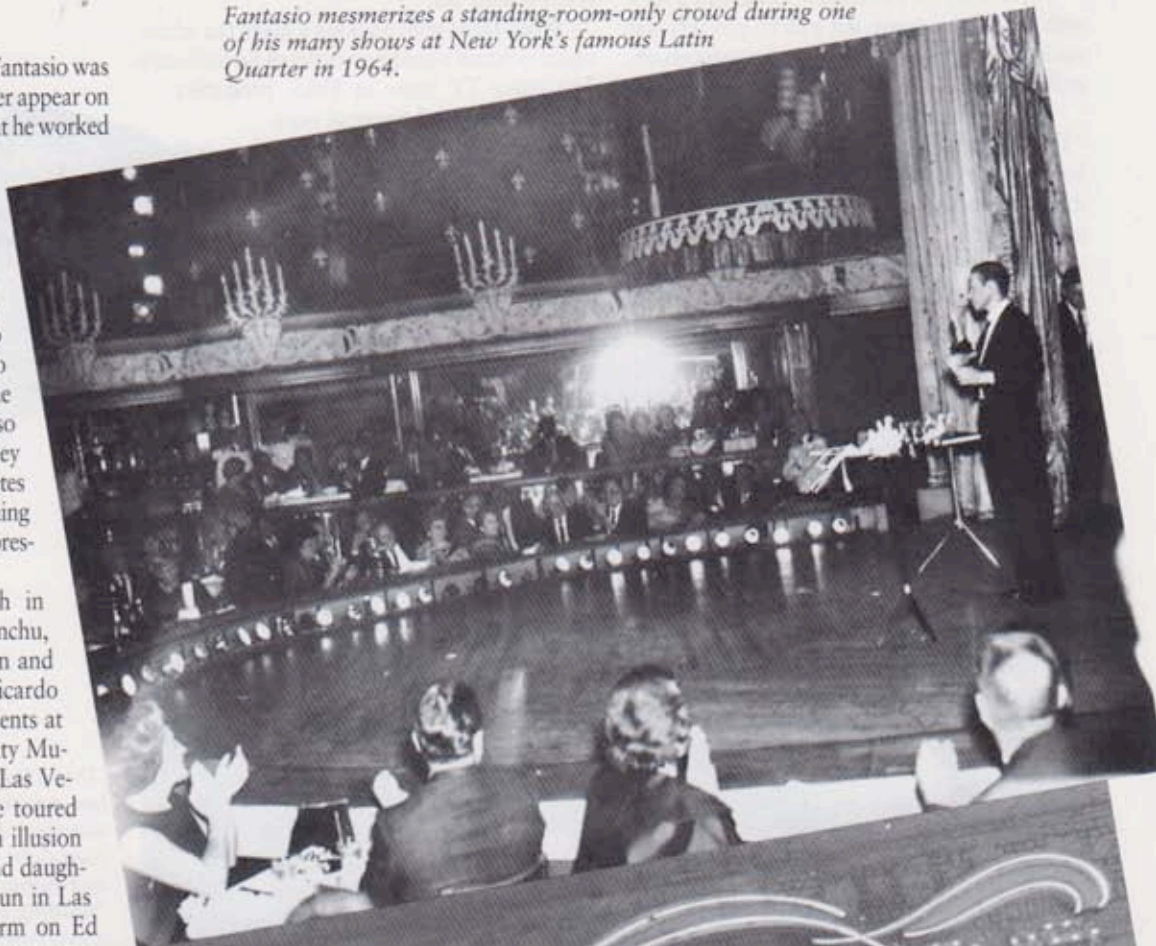


*Fantasio mesmerizes a standing-room-only crowd during one of his many shows at New York's famous Latin Quarter in 1964.*

Few people know that Ricardo Fantasio was the highest-paid magician to ever appear on "The Ed Sullivan Show," or that he worked on the same programs as did the Beatles, Louis Armstrong, Bob Hope, Tony Bennett, Count Basie and his orchestra, and many other notables.

The reason this intriguing snippet falls by the wayside is because Ricardo Fantasio is not burdened with an ego run amok. He seems resilient to the bombast and amperage ingrained in so many modern-day performers, be they rock stars, opera singers, actors, athletes or magicians. Yet despite his unassuming manner, or perhaps because of it, his presence in magic looms large.

After cutting his magical teeth in Buenos Aires with the likes of Fu Manchu, René Lavand and, later, Dai Vernon and Francis Carlyle, Fantasio, born Ricardo Roucau, had long-running engagements at the famous Latin Quarter, Radio City Music Hall, the Liberace show, and at Las Vegas' Desert Inn. For three years he toured South America and Florida with an illusion show featuring his wife, Monica, and daughter Jacqueline. One day, during a run in Las Vegas, he received a call to perform on Ed



# LATIN QUARTER

THE LAT IN QUARTER PRESENTS  
DIAMOND FAIR

XAVIER CUGAT	
BETTY GEORGE	JUAN MANUEL FANTASIO
LES CIRANOS	MICHAEL & PAULA REVEL & SAN JUAN
WAZZANS	JACK DEL RIO
THE BROWNS	BES ARLENE
ANA RAINS	JACK RAINS

E. Rootery

BLUE BIRD Studios  
Portrait & Candle  
PHOTOGRAPHERS

SELMAS  
SWEET WORLD

PLAY



Sullivan's show.

Fortunately for Fantasio, he could cast a spell with not only his magic, but with his geniality that could sway even hard-nosed show producers engulfed in the capricious world of entertainment.

On five different occasions he appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show," even though show booker Mark Leddy initially wasn't interested in hiring him due to the large contingent of magicians slated to appear. When producers requested only a three-minute act for the show, Fantasio's panache overcame their concerns for

time; viewers at home were treated to his entire seven-minute act.

When faced with booking a magician whose visual richness would be worthy of Ed Sullivan's first color TV show in 1965, producers called Fantasio, who several years earlier — when black-and-white television reigned supreme — was the first magician to make brightly hued doves appear at a whim. This performer now had a strange new canvas on which to leave his mark,



[Top] During Fantasio's run at the Desert Inn, he struck up many friendships, including Las Vegas powerhouses Johnny Paul (left) and Jimmy Grippo (right). [Left and below] What better way to prove "nothing up the sleeves" than to perform in a short-sleeved tux on the "Ed Sullivan Show" on Oct. 5, 1969. [Below right] On tour with the bejeweled virtuoso Liberace, Fantasio performs completely surrounded by the crowd.







try we can get a divorce right away." They've been married for 35 years.

"I now had to give her a name. My name was Larry and I wanted her to have a five-letter name. I didn't want it to be longer or shorter," says Fantasio, who preceded equal billing efforts by nearly 20 years. "Her real name was Margarita, which is Daisy in English. So we became Larry and Daisy."

When magician John Scarne saw the duo perform in South America, all but one nuance impressed him. "He asked us if we wanted to perform in the States. He said we had a beautiful act, but our name would never work in America,"

says Fantasio. In a desperate attempt to reinvent the wheel, Fantasio returned to his hotel room and did what many magicians do when faced with an important enterprise — he began playing cards. In a few seconds he noticed the brand name — Fantasio — on the pasteboards. He thought the name decidedly international, since in Spanish the "F" sound is usually written with a "Ph" except for the words fantasy and fantastic. Like in German and English, both those words are spelled with an "F."

Despite a luminous performing career that spanned 19 years, Fantasio readily admits his disdain for being in the spotlight. "I never wanted to be a professional magician. I hate the stage," he admits. "I love magic. I love to create

and he did so with the elegant artistry that defined a genre of magicians in the '60s. "I built everything for color," recalls Fantasio. He crafted elaborate silk productions with a myriad of fountains, flags, a 12-foot by 18-foot silk, and much more, all from Silk King Studios. "But the cost to buy silks was more than \$7,000," he says. As a testimony to the producers' faith in him as an artist, they gave him the money to buy the props. Today, he still has the silks.

Yet, there are some things from his early days which he no longer has. His original stage name, Ricardo, is one. Gone too is the name chosen for one of his first out-of-the-country appearances. "I needed some publicity because of an engagement in Uruguay. I saw a marquee advertising a comedian named Larry. So I had my friend take a photo of me standing in front of the marquee and went off to Uruguay as the famous magician Larry," Fantasio says.

There he met Monica, a Spanish dancer, and fell in love immediately. She agreed to work with him but discovered an added surprise stemming from puritanical hotel accommodations. "We were not allowed to stay together because we weren't married," Fantasio explains. "So I told her let's marry in Uruguay, because in this coun-



*A 24-year-old magician and his assistant, once billed as Larry and Daisy, appear in Buenos Aires in 1960.*





*Fantasio, Monica and 12-year-old Jacqueline appear in the "Fantastique Revue" in Acapulco, Mexico in 1976.*

tricks, and will do so until the day "I die." This undying creative quest — to date

he's invented more than 50 effects — has led him on some strange odysseys from supermarkets to refrigerator paint stores to train depots all in the name of coiled plastic.

The journey started by accident in 1960 when a German-made "Vanishing Cane" he was using broke in the middle. Fantasio turned defeat into victory by painting half of it white and resurrecting it as a "Vanishing Candle." After this genesis, the rest is history. Single-handedly, Fantasio began one of the most successful business ventures ever in our industry. What amateur or professional hasn't used his apparatus? Six years later he scoured New York City in search of the plastic used to hold six packs of Coca-Cola against a wall. That was the exact material needed for his "Color-Changing Canes" and "Vanishing Candles." Nearly 29 years later, his combined sales of canes and candles is more than 400,000.

His early efforts, however, were fraught with frustration [see sidebar]. Supplies proved difficult to find and distributors, such as Tannen's, Al Flosso and Russel Delmar, rejected his prototypes, claiming Russell Walsh had sold thousands of metal canes and the market was saturated. "They told me to keep my money in my pocket," says Fantasio, who recalls his sales pitch to these dealers in 1967. "But I never wanted to compete with Russ Walsh. My idea was to have color for the 'Triple Color-Changing Cane' — not a 'Vanishing Cane.'" Fantasio persevered with belief in not only his idea, but in himself.

Within a year, hundreds of magicians believed in his products as well, as Tenyo became his first wholesale customer and as 300 pieces sold at each the S.A.M. and I.B.M. conventions. In 1967, he protected his endeavor by purchasing a train car (80,000 pounds) full of the laminated plastic material for \$250,000, converting an extra room in his new Miami home into a factory. Due to the possibility of fire and the prohibitive cost of insurance, he divided the material between three mini-warehouses and his home. And just this year, that initial stock has finally been depleted. Fortunately, he has located a new source for an even better plastic material to con-



*Few magicians can boast this much organization. In his Miami home, merchandise shares equal status with memorabilia from a life in the limelight.*



tinue his manufacturing of the Fantasio line of canes and candles.

Recently, the magician and entrepreneur has trod back onto the boards under the new billing of "Funtasio," a comedy magic act he's been developing for three years and premiered in the F.I.S.M. competition in Yokohama. The result: Second Place in Comedy. "I don't have the face or the guts to come out and do my candle act. Everyone does my candles better than I do," he says. While his original act is still in demand, this comedy act is what he now performs when friends, whom he can't turn down, call him for an appearance at magic conventions. His days of performing for people other

*A graceful artist takes center stage in London in 1991.*



than magicians are over. "I don't want to try to impress producers," he says. But considering his history, you know he could easily win them over, not so much with words, but simply in the time it takes a candle to disappear. ♦

*Amy Stevens is a Contributing Editor, but spends most of her time these days wrestling the monsters of cyberspace launching Stevens Magic Emporium's Greater Magic Network — an online computer magazine.*

## Almost **30** Years Ago BY FANTASIO

In 1960, I had a German-made "Vanishing Cane" that had broken in the middle. With one of the pieces I decided to make a "Vanishing Candle." Up until this time, I had been using the "Atomic Candle," made from waxed paper. It was necessary to have the steel painted white with a baked enamel, which was done by a friend of mine who restored refrigerators.

My success with the painted candle gave me the idea to paint two "Vanishing Cans," one red and one green, so that I could perform a "Triple Color Changing Cane" ending with a double floral bouquet. Pecora in Argentina made several bouquets for me, because the feathers would eventually be ruined by the sharp edges of the cane and the oil needed to keep the cane working. In 1964, I stopped doing this effect because of the aggravation of keeping the paint in good condition and I ran out of bouquets.

My wife, Monica, and I returned to New York in 1966 after a two-year engagement at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas and six months with Ice Review at Chicago's Conrad Hilton. We rented an apartment at 255 West 75th Street, just half a block from Broadway.

One evening Monica was not feeling well and asked me to go out and get some groceries. While picking up a few cans of soda, I discovered rolls of spring plastic used to hold the six packs in place on the display. I picked up one of the loose rolls and asked the manager if I could take it home. He said yes, and that was my "greatest magical moment." Right away I knew that this plastic would be perfect for my ideas with the "Color Changing Cane" and the "Vanishing Candle."

The rolls that I had discovered were 9" wide and 38" long. The coil had an inside diameter of 1 1/16" and the outer diameter was 1-1/8". When I returned to the apartment, I cut a 2-1/4" strip off the roll (I still have the remaining piece) and made my first plastic candle. "It works," I told my wife, who wasn't feeling any better because of my discovery.

I immediately started to search all the plastic suppliers in New York for a source of this material. I spent weeks going around and asking about this plastic, until I finally learned of a company that manufactured

it. Their offices were in the old Pan Am building and I went there immediately. I showed my sample piece to the sales manager and explained my interest in obtaining a larger sample — 80" long by 2" wide — in any color. He took my phone number and said he would call me when the sample arrived.

After three weeks of waiting for his call, I decided to phone him. His secretary told me he was out of town, so I left a message. I phoned repeatedly and each time she gave me a different excuse why I couldn't speak with him; out of town, out to lunch, left the office early, sick at home, etc. I returned to his office, but got the same kind of story from the receptionist.

After seven months of excuses, I decided to go to the Pan Am building early in the morning and wait for him to show up. There were hundreds of people arriving for work and waiting for the elevator. I was afraid that I would not remember what he looked like or would never find him in that multitude of people. Suddenly I saw him approaching one of the elevators. I got into the same car, but he did not notice me. When we arrived at his floor, I followed him out of the elevator, walking right behind him. He said good morning to the receptionist and I waived my hand — she thought I was with him. He entered into the main hall of the office, greeting people as he went along, with me waving and following close

on his heels. He entered his office oblivious to the fact that I was behind him. He removed his hat and coat, hung them on the stand, and turned around to find me there. He was so surprised that he burst out laughing. He could not believe how I got there.

I explained to him how important this material was to me, and that if he needed to I would place a large order. Finally, I convinced him how serious I was and I had my sample a week later.

That first sample consisted of two rolls of dark blue plastic, from which I made two "Vanishing Cans." For the knob (or cap), I used a chrome-plated plastic cap from a perfume bottle, which looked like a crown. I removed the inside thread with a small grinding wheel, opening the neck to 7/8" needed to fit the cane

when it was extended. A brass tube was used for the ferrule. I still have one of the two prototypes.

Armed with my sample cane, I went to see Russell Delmar at New York Magic Centre on 8th Avenue, Al Flosso on 34th Street, and Louis Tannen on 42nd. They all liked my new cane, but when I told them of my idea to manufacture and sell the canes to magic shops, they each told me to save my time and money. They felt Russell Walsh had already saturated the market with his metal canes. I immediately purchased enough black material to make 7,500 canes.

The first set of instructions were written by Ron Morrison, illustrated by Mickey O'Malley, and typeset by my friend Manuel Uber, who worked at the New York Times as a Linotype mechanic. I placed the first advertisement in the September 1967 issue of *The Linking Ring*, page 10.

While my original plan had been to introduce the "Color Changing Cans," the quantity I had to buy the plastic in limited me to only one color, black. With the black material, however, I received a sample of red. This was just in time to prepare a color-changing set for the S.A.M. convention in Boston, July 1967. Abbott's had a booth there, and Duke Stern allowed me to demonstrate in the booth, taking orders. I took hundreds of names of people wanting to buy the effect.

By the fall the sales of the black "Vanishing Cans" were going well. So well that we were running out of space in our New York apartment. In December 1967, we moved to Miami, Florida, and bought a house with an extra room to use as a factory.

By February of 1968, we were able to purchase red material and the black-to-red "Color Changing Cane" and the red "Vanishing Candle" were introduced. Meanwhile, I had received a sample of green, and that summer I performed an act in the I.B.M. and S.A.M. competitions with a "Triple Color Changing Cane" (black to red to green to silks) and a four-candle candelabra. I won first prizes at both, and sold over 600 pieces.

Since those humble beginnings, I have become the possessor of 22 injection moulds to manufacture the parts of my canes and candles, which are now sold all over the world. In this, our 28th year of a very successful business, with sales approaching a half-million items, I can only think back to those pearls of wisdom given to me almost 30 years ago... "Save your time and money. The market is saturated." ♦

*Additional editorial contribution by Ken Ward.*

