

Kellar's Egyptian Hall: America's Premier Temple of Illusion

By Tom Ewing

Some years ago, the late Robert Lund, owner of the American Museum of Magic in Marshall, Michigan, gave a lecture at the Magic Collector's Association Weekend on "The World's Greatest Magician." He asked fellow collectors by what standards should this title be judged? Should it be the amount of money the performer made? Should it be the publicity he or she generated? How about the number of famous people the magician knew? He contended it was these and many other factors.

The same question can be asked about what starts a person on a lifelong journey to greatness. Does greatness simply fall into one's lap when least expected? Or, is achieving greatness like achieving success — 10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration?

In the case of Harry Kellar, America's most beloved magician of the late 19th and early 20th century, it started with a small black dog. By chance or fate, the dog, which belonged to the Fakir of Ava (Isaiah Harris Hughes), took a liking to young Kellar when, as a boy, he responded to a newspaper advertisement for the position of "magician's assistant."

Many other boys had applied but until young Kellar stepped through the gate, the Fakir's dog had not taken a liking to any of them. Kellar was greeted warmly and his path toward magic stardom was sealed with a lick.



Kellar and Hughes

As magic historians know, Kellar travelled with the Fakir for several years, struck out on his own a few times (unsuccessfully), and then joined up with the Davenport Brothers. Eventually he parted company with them and took William Fay, another Davenport assistant with him. Thus began a series of worldwide travels from England to India and from South America to Australia. He was beset by bandits in Mexico, shipwrecked off the coast of France and lost his entire life savings in a bank failure. Yet, the experience he gained was invaluable.

One thing that he longed to do was to open his own permanent theater along the lines of Maskelyne and Cooke's Egyptian Hall in London. He eventually accomplished this when he opened his own "Egyptian Hall" in Philadelphia. The dates of its operation are mentioned in magic history books and Kellar's success there documented. However, these are only fragmentary references and little is known about the theater itself, the magic that was performed there, or how it helped position Kellar to assume the mantle of "America's favorite magician."

It has been more than 120 years since the footlights blazed upon America's premier temple of illusion. Now it is time to draw the curtains back again so that the brilliance of Philadelphia's Egyptian Hall can fascinate again.

When Kellar arrived in England, following the sinking of the Royal Mail Steamer Boyne and the loss of his entire show and life savings, one of the first places he visited was Maskelyne and Cooke's Egyptian Hall. He was fascinated by both the theater and the illusions performed there. The permanence of the place also seemed ideal for illusionary work. His fascination eventually took the form of an obsession, with Kellar duplicating many of the effects offered in London, and culminating with him appropriating the name of the theater for his own.

Following a series of world travels, including a stop in London in 1878, where he acquired a pirated copy of "Psycho" a whist-playing, mind-reading automaton, he returned to America where, on December 15, 1884, he opened his very own Egyptian hall and began what was to be the longest and most successful run in his career.

The First Egyptian Hall



The Philadelphia theater Kellar chose for his Egyptian Hall was the old Masonic Hall at 713-721 Chestnut Street. It had a long and illustrious history having descended from the first Masonic Hall which opened in 1810, burned in 1819, was rebuilt, and in 1841 housed Charles Wilson Peale's Museum of Curiosities. Prior to Peale's using the hall, it served as a showcase for performers like Mr. Sutton from England, "First Ventriloquist of Europe," who, in addition to offering a speaking automaton, also performed a "grand and brilliant exhibition of magical illusions" from September 8-10, 1836.

Also exhibited were six Indian chiefs of the Sacs, Fox, and Kiowa tribes and their warriors and squaws in 1843. Daguerre's Magical Pictures from Paris representing the

wonderful effects of day and night appeared on May 9, 1842, as well as assorted exhibits of musicians, electrical experiments and paintings throughout the years.

In 1855, a new and lavishly decorated Masonic Hall (*left*) was built across from City Hall and it was to this theater that Kellar brought his magical illusions. In his book, "Philadelphia Theaters A to Z," author Irvin Glazer used the description of Darrel Sewell, curator of American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art to describe the building. He wrote:

It was ornamented and furnished in the most chromatic orchestration of the Gothic vocabulary, pulling out all the stops in an adaptation of an ecclesiastic arrangement at a high altar – Gothic motifs – flanked by statues in niches. The walls were supported by columns terminating in a delicate poly-chromed web of fan tracery. The space was calculated to have a breathtaking effect; dominating hues of blue and gold evoked pageantry. The designers felt free to draw upon recognized architectural conventions as well as to add their own imagination to create one of the Gothic revival's most dazzling showcases."

The rendering of Egyptian Hall in Milbourne Christopher's book, "The Illustrated History of Magic," (*right*) seemed a little less grand than that described by Sewell, and a check of the photographic files of the Free Library in Philadelphia revealed that it was not Kellar's first Egyptian Hall — but rather his second one. His first was the Masonic Temple, which the owner William Singerly, purchased in 1882 for a sum of \$225,000 and spent an additional \$175,000 in renovation and decorating costs. The height of the building from the pavement to the finials on either side of the main tower was 112 feet, or 11 stories. The front was painted white and blue with gold decorations. With the exception of the Academy of Music, the theater had the largest seating capacity of any similar place of amusement in the city.



A newspaper account at the time of the opening described the theater in detail. It read: Upon entering, visitors passed into a handsome vestibule tiled with black and white marble and ornamented with balustrades finely carved. Behind the balustrades and covering the walls of the vestibule were hung large mirrors. A flight of five steps and a short landing at the top led from the vestibule to the entrance of the grand staircase which was guarded with doors. By this arrangement, a second passageway similar to the vestibule was made which was provided with mirrors separated by ornamented and carved columns bearing electric lights of different colors producing a brilliant effect. The mirrors gave the vestibule and passageway the appearance of being considerably larger than they were in reality besides reflecting the brilliant illumination. The staircase was divided into three flights of seven or eight steps each separated by wide landings. Extending around the area was an arcade roofed over and supported by a number of delicately fashioned wooden columns between which were specimens of

spindle work. The steps were carpeted and their ends finished in cherry wood. There were three entrances to the parquet of the auditorium immediately in front of the grand staircase while the balcony was reached by two pair of stairs on each side of the doorway.

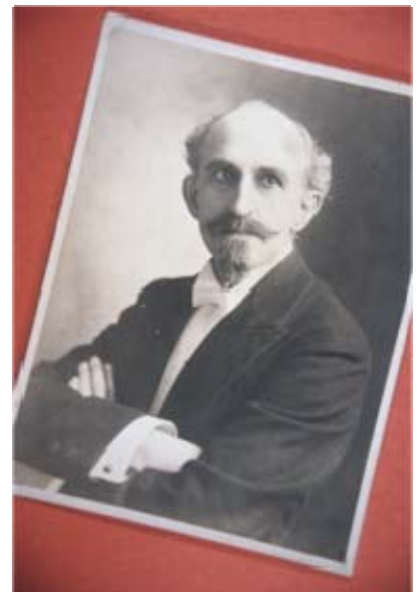
The decorations were quiet and sumptuous while beautiful coloring everywhere greeted the eye. Olive bronze was the basis for the upholstery and decorations. The ceiling is paneled with emblematic designs representing comedy, tragedy, lyric poetry and martial instruments. The walls, proscenium arch and lobby were covered with arabesque and floral designs in subdued tones. The first floor had 750 chairs of which 340 were in the orchestra and in all, there were 2,200 seats. In richness of fittings and elegance of design, it is said not to have been surpassed by any theater in the country.

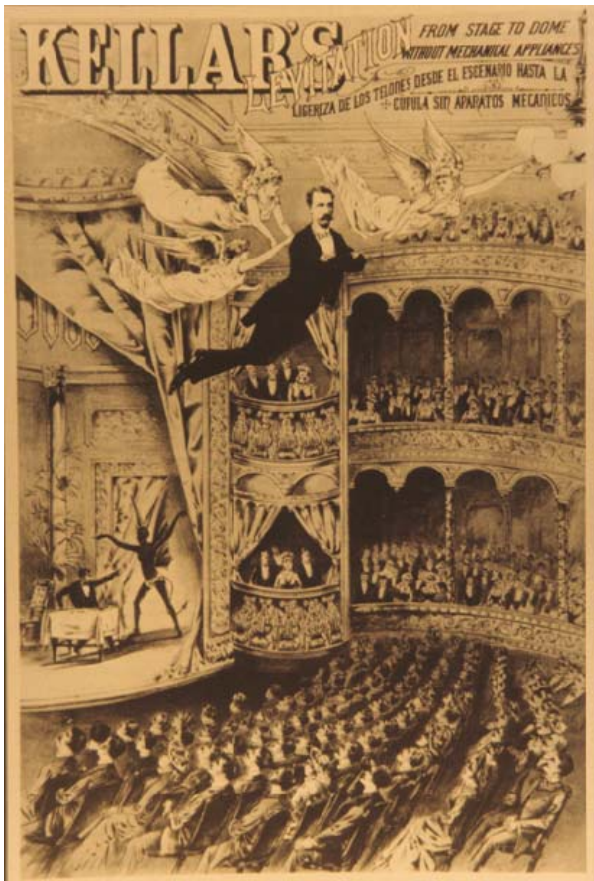


Egyptian Hall programs were usually eight pages long (*left*) and carried a considerable amount of advertising. In addition to the theater, there was a section of the building called the "Egyptian Musee" where exhibitions of wax figures were displayed. The figures were reportedly very finely done and proved a popular attraction to Philadelphia audiences coming to see Kellar's magic show.

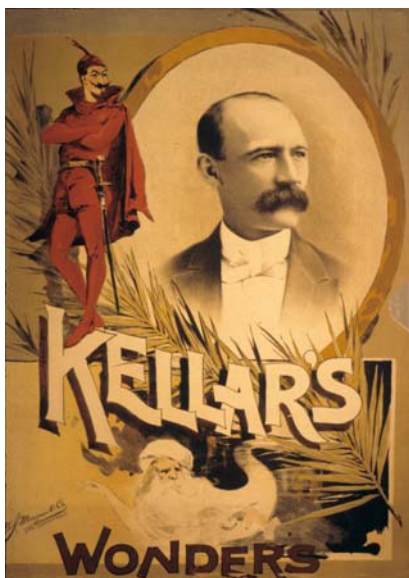
In the basement was the "Chamber of Horrors" representing such things as a man falling into the hands of cannibals, an Indian scalping, Mary Stuart going to her execution and other gruesome representations. Other smaller rooms contained figures such as Civil War generals, Washington crossing the Delaware, Napoleon and Josephine, and Queen Victoria.

Among the members of the audience on Kellar's opening night was Philadelphia native Frederick Eugene Powell. He recalled that Kellar's performance was divided into two parts. The first was entirely magic and the second part was his "wonderful cabinet" where he recreated and enlarged upon the performances of the Davenport brothers. His first effect was the "Enchanted Casket" where he fired rings borrowed from the audience into a nest of boxes, and then recovered all but one which was eventually found tied to the neck of a guinea pig as the finish for "Any Drink Called For." Slate writing followed as did his famous "Mesmerized Hand." He performed "Spiritual Table Tipping," and also caused a chair to adhere to his hand in a similar fashion.





In the second part, Kellar presented the cabinet séance, working his escape from the ties put on him by a committee from the audience and also tying himself up when alone in the cabinet. The committee was dismissed and Kellar stepped to the front of the stage. The lights of the theater were turned out and the rays from a lantern held in the hand of an assistant were thrown on Kellar. Slowly he rose from the stage (*left*), floated over the heads of the audience, ascended to the dome of the theater and then descended back to the stage. Additional cabinet effects followed including a coronet played by one of the cabinet spirits. Kellar would warm the horn over the footlights and remark that it was necessary to make the temperature approximate to the regions from when the player would come. Attendance that first night was sparse but owing to his brilliant performances, word of mouth and advertising, his shows were soon packed and a daily matinee added.



Kellar's advertising ran the gamut from newspaper ads where he described himself as "Kellar the Conjuror," "Monarch of Magicians," "The Greatest Master of His Art in the Universe," and "Great Monarch of Wizards," to this photograph which he used as the centerpiece for this lovely poster. The poster is part of the Theater Collection at the Free Library of Philadelphia and comes from his Egyptian Hall days. Perhaps you've seen the illustration before.

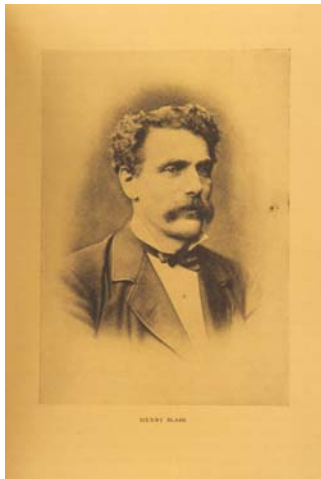
I doubt, however, that many have seen this poster (*right*) of Eva Kellar. It is lovelier than her husband's with the devil. The side profile is both striking and lovely.



Kellar employed no other strictly magic performers during his appearance at the theater although he did engage a number of novelty performers to add variety. He employed performers like Fanny and Harry Osbourne who did comedy and songs, Longrenia who offered his trained birds and mice and "Narcisse," an added illusion in the basement showing the head and bust of a young woman suspended in midair. Several coronet players were also hired including a number of child stars.

On the anniversary of his 100th performance at Egyptian Hall, Kellar had a little magic played on him instead of the audience. When the time came to break the bottle on the "Any Drink Called For," to disclose the guinea pig and lost ring, what Kellar found instead was a lovely pocket watch tied to a note which instructed him to call a Colonel Mann from the audience. The colonel came upon the stage and presented the watch to Kellar as a token of appreciation from the citizens of Philadelphia. Kellar thanked Mann and the members of the audience. The watch reportedly cost \$550.

On the afternoon of February 17, 1885, Kellar gave a private "séance" for reporters on the Egyptian Hall stage. While the reporters and Kellar were seated around a table, empty slates were held beneath the table by Kellar with his thumbs above and fingers below. Messages appeared a number of times and reporters were baffled.



Interest in spiritualism was extremely high at this time and the University of Pennsylvania had established the Seybert Commission to investigate spirit mediums and manifestations. Of all the mediums investigated, none proved more difficult to pin down than the famous slate writer Henry Slade (*left*). Kellar was a recognized expert on spirit phenomena and so, the commission called upon him to perform his slate writing effects. The commission members gathered and once again, the spirits of Egyptian Hall were prolific in their writing. In fact, the final message to commission members was written in six different languages.

Kellar never moved his hands under the table, never moved his thumb on top, and yet mysterious writing always appeared. How did he do it? Once the séance members were seated, Kellar's assistant Barney opened a small trap door in the stage no larger than a hot air vent and from below the stage, wrote the answers on the slates and replaced them under Kellar's fingers.

A number of famous people attended Kellar's performances including his old friend and mentor, The Fakir of Ava. John L. Sullivan, then the World Heavy Weight Boxing Champion, tied Kellar up one afternoon and after stepping into the séance cabinet, Sullivan was stripped of his vest and coat and chucked from the cabinet. He said, "...as if some fellow tucked me one in the jugular." The famous actor Edwin Booth had a similar but less violent visit to Kellar's cabinet on April 13. And, noted evangelist Billy Sunday was also a friend.



Another friend from his Philadelphia days was a performer named Julian Eltinge (*left*). Here is a picture of a youthful Eltinge as he appeared off stage. Surely one would consider him a handsome, virile young man.

Here he is on stage (*right*). Eltinge was the greatest and most skillful of all female impersonators. He toured America and England and gave a royal performance before Edward the VII at Windsor Castle.



Philadelphia artist and cartoonist C.R. Macauley (*left*), was another friend and sent Kellar this autographed photo and caricature showing Kellar with another of his passions — fishing.

By June the newspaper advertisements began to announce the last days of the wonderful Kellar and included that on June 24th he would offer his 264th and final performance. When his season finally ended he left behind a city that had adopted him as an institution. He had become as much a “must see” as England’s home of mystery. But, there were additional chapters in Kellar’s book of life.

In the fall of 1885 Egyptian Hall reopened as the Temple Theater. The first show was “The Little Tycoon”

and it had the appearance of beginning a successful run. Within a few months, the newly named theater was reduced to smoking ruins by a fire that caused hundreds of thousands of dollars damage and claimed two lives. Appropriately, the fire started in the Chamber of Horrors. On December 28, 1885, a gaslight illuminating the painted backdrops in the Chamber of Horrors set one of the panels ablaze. The fire quickly spread and the wax figures and other attractions burned out of control for 18 hours.

There were two final miracles at the former Egyptian Hall though. In the midst of the fire, people noticed that two cross beams stood among the ruins like a



Christian cross and that a latticework of ice had formed where they intersected in the shape of a heart. But this coincidence was shortly eclipsed by an even more remarkable miracle. When the collapsed and still smoldering ruins of the theater were excavated, workers discovered that a lone figural display had survived. The only exhibit left unharmed was the one representing Christ on the cross. The side walls apparently fell slightly inward while the upper floors dropped directly on top of, but not down upon the exhibit. In effect, the representation of Christ had been sealed in a tomb, safe from the flames, water and crushing debris.



So what then of Christopher's illustration of Egyptian Hall? Well, it turns out that it was a theater known as Concert Hall (*left*), which was built in 1852. Charles Dickens gave readings there in 1868, the first flying machine was displayed there in 1878, and Kellar opened his second Egyptian Hall there in October 1891. Kellar was familiar with the theater having performed there in 1879 upon the death of Robert Heller.

Once again, having a permanent theater allowed Kellar to present some illusions that would have been hard to transport and perform on the road. A case in point was his Blue Room. A reviewer noted that it started with Mrs. Kellar walking on stage and then slowly dissolving into her husband. Guitars and chairs floated about the stage, but the materializations were the best. The effect concluded with Kellar sitting in an ordinary chair and then slowly dissolving away leaving nothing but the chair on the stage. He was also still performing his "Miraculous Growth of Flowers."



This was also the period in Kellar's career when he had the very able assistance of the talented William Robinson and his wife Dorothy. Robinson had a part in the show where he presented his "Black Art." Robinson appeared on stage in a white robe, white turban and sporting a beard. In the usual fashion, objects appeared, disappeared, floated, and then finally, Robinson wrapped himself in a white sheet, the sheet crumbled to the stage and Robinson was gone.

Psycho (*left*) was still called upon to do his usual act, although by this time, Eva Kellar was performing many of Psycho's best effects in her own mind reading and second sight act called "Karmos." She excelled brilliantly with the

act and generated outstanding publicity for the show. Described as "a grand incomprehensible, unfathomable, psychological puzzle," Eva was placed in a chair, securely blindfolded and then, without her husband uttering a word, was able to read numbers written on a blackboard, give the square root and cube root of those numbers, name any card selected from a pack shuffled by the audience, announce serial numbers off of currency collected from the audience and perform other amazing feats. She even accomplished all the moves of "The Chess Knight's Tour," in which the audience decides which square the knight will be placed upon and then, without hesitation, the blindfolded Mrs. Kellar moved it around covering, but not repeating, every square on the board.

Robinson also contributed another illusion to Kellar's show, the well-known "Astarte." This photograph, taken on the stage of Kellar's second Egyptian Hall, shows young Dot Robinson (*right*) rotating in the air with the familiar Black Art background. This levitation startled audiences because Kellar was apparently able to pass the hoop entirely around Dot and yet she could turn somersaults in the air, rotate frontwards and backwards and could even jump rope in mid air, an effect that Walter Gibson recalled with delight. Robinson went on to assume the role of a Chinese conjuror named Chung Ling Soo. As historians know, he was killed doing the bullet catching trick at the Wood Green Empire Theater in England.



By March 18, 1892, newspaper advertisements were announcing the final weeks of Egyptian Hall. On April 30 the last advertisement appeared culminating a very successful run of more than seven months. The theater continued until 1895 when it became the first location of the Free Library of Philadelphia. It was eventually torn down in 1910. With Kellar's departure came the end of his use of Philadelphia theaters for his Egyptian Halls.

In subsequent years Kellar returned to the city. Audiences in the City of Brotherly Love would thrill to illusions like "The Golden Butterfly," the "Levitation of Princess Karnac," and "The Phantom Bride," but never again would he settle in for a long run ensconced in his own theater.

Before we end this story, it would be interesting to describe The Phantom Bride, because it was a truly amazing illusion. It was best described in a May 1893 *New York Times* article as follows:

...Kellar came on stage with Mrs. Kellar. Attendants brought in a large wood framework standing at least twelve feet high. Two ropes hung from the top crosspiece, through pulleys, making the whole thing look like a gallows. The ropes ran to a windlass below.

When the big framework had been placed in position, a heavy chair was set beneath it and tied to the ropes. Then Mrs. Kellar was tied to the chair as securely as the committeemen could tie her. With the windlass,

the chair in which Mrs. Kellar was tied was raised about six feet above the stage.

There was nothing in back of the framework on which the chair was suspended except the scenic background, more than ten feet away. There was nothing above except the flies. The committee stood at one side, and Mr. Kellar, who had drawn a pistol, which he pointed as his wife, stood at the other. "Are you ready?" shouted Kellar. "All Ready," answered Mrs. Kellar from her midair perch. There was a pistol shot, and in an instant the chair dropped to the stage, and the ropes on which it had hung seem to have been fairly shot apart. But Mrs. Kellar did not drop. Nor did she go anywhere else, so far as the spectators could see. She had just vanished.

The acclamation of Philadelphia audiences and the invaluable experience he gained through steady and repeated performances of his favorite tricks and illusions in his own theater positioned him to assume the title of "America's Favorite Magician" upon the death of his rival Alexander Herrmann. His success continued up to and beyond the point of his retirement at Ford's Opera House in Baltimore, Maryland on May 16, 1908. After appearing before the public for more than 50 years, Kellar removed his cape and placed it upon the shoulders of a young magician named Howard Thurston and yet another dynasty of magic began.

After many years on the road, Kellar and his wife moved to Los Angeles to a mansion built to Kellar's specifications, including a miniature theater. Writing to Howard Thurston he said, "My place is one mass of roses even though this is mid-winter. The weather is delightful – lovely blue sky, temperature like springtime. This is certainly a paradise on earth." In a letter to Houdini he wrote, "We have purchased a beautiful home here in this garden of the world and I shall spend the rest of my days in dear old California with its blue skys [sic] and glorious sunshine and flowers."

Unfortunately, just as Kellar was settling into an active retirement, Eva died suddenly of heart failure on March 28, 1910. She was just forty-seven years old. Obituaries and tributes appeared in all the leading magic publications and most general circulation newspapers. Dr. A.M. Wilson, editor of *The Sphinx* was most complimentary and wrote of her saying, "She was a woman of superior intelligence with a commanding presence. Her very appearance on the stage was enough to immediately attract and hold the attention of the audience in all she did. Off the stage she was a most companionable woman, being a good conversationalist and graciously hospitable in her social life."





When Kellar passed away of pneumonia on March 10, 1922, magicians and lay people alike mourned the loss of a great man and outstanding magician. And, one must wonder if, when the angels came to carry Kellar home, they might have found him as if in a trance — ready for a final levitation. But in this, his last performance, no wires or assistants were needed.