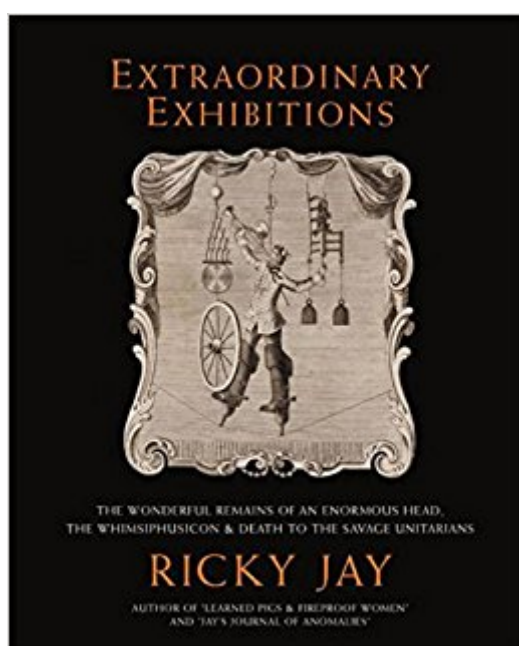


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# Extraordinary Exhibitions: Broadsides From The Collection Of Ricky Jay



## Synopsis

An informal history of sensational, scientific, silly, satisfying, and startling attractions based on seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century broadsides from Ricky Jay's extraordinary collection. It includes observations on the convention of promoting such appearances, digressions on the manner and method of printing advertisements to do so, and insights into the psychology employed to that end. All are compiled in a monograph that is itself a shameless attempt to entertain and elucidate. It is the contention of the author that neither the tongue of the most florid orator, nor pen of the most ingenious writer, can sufficiently describe the elegance, symmetry, and prodigious accomplishments of those who pass in review within these pages. Included are broadsides advertising: an armless dulcimer player, a ghost showman, a singing mouse, a chess-playing automaton, a cannon ball juggler, an African hermaphrodite, a chicken incubator, a rabbi with prodigious memory, a ventriloquist, a spirit medium, a glass blower, a woman magician, a speaking machine, a mermaid, a bullet catcher, a flea circus, and an equestrian bee keeper. Illustrated throughout.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This oversize, richly illustrated and well-annotated book could emerge from none other than Jay's showman, card shark, actor, curator and wondrously quirky cultural presence. The author of *Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women* likes to collect showbills, those exuberant

advertisements for singular, often questionable entertainers, and the ones presented here—in Italian, French, German and English—vividly depict the sideshow mentality with idiosyncratic graphics and "florid, orotund language." The collection parallels Jay's interest in both deception and unusual acts, beginning with the "Learned Horse" in Milan, circa 1618, which collected money and fetched wine, and ending with Cinquevalli, "King of the Jugglers," who dazzled 1898 Birkenhead, England, with his skill manipulating cannonballs and pool balls. In between, readers meet "the greatest German living," a 29-inch wonder; the equestrian apiarist who wore a "bee blindfold

Ricky Jay is one of the world's great sleight-of-hand artists and an expert on the world of fantastic entertainment. His award-winning one-man shows were directed by David Mamet, in whose many films Mr. Jay has appeared. He is author of New York Times Notable Books *Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women*, *Jay's Journal of Anomalies*, *Extraordinary Exhibitions*, and *Dice: Deception, Fate & Rotten Luck* with Rosamond Purcell. He lives in Los Angeles.

Ricky Jay has put together another stunning book that captures a small slice of the odd and usual through playbills and broadsides. This oversized volume is beautifully put together, and each broadside is reproduced faithfully on glossy paper. They are unique pieces that you would be hard pressed to find elsewhere (though a few are in Jay's other books as well). By far my favorite author of the unusual and the arcane, this book is the prettiest that Jay has put together recently. As someone who loves books and all the tactile sensations that come along with cracking open a good one, reading this book is a pleasure. It is an expensive book, but I can promise that if you are interested enough to be reading this review, it will not disappoint. Purchase it and enjoy while reading about learned horses, daring apiarists, fantastic machines, genius animals, and magical impostors. If you are new to Ricky Jay and hesitate to spend the money, start with the equally great and much less expensive *Celebrations of Curious Characters*, then move on to this volume. Highly Recommended.

The presentation of this book is just as fantastic as the content and vivid imagery. It takes you through almost 400 years worth of exhibitions and its amazing the quality of this collection. My favorites are the "Pig-Faced Lady" (1815), "George Anderson the Living Skeleton" (1862), and "Bertolotto's Industrious Fleas" (1876) - among others. A very interesting read and nice coffee table book.

If you ever have a chance for a collector to show his collection, you run the risk of being terribly bored. Unless you yourself collect stamps, coins, thimbles, Hummel figurines, or Corvettes, you are unlikely to sympathize with the delight the collector takes in his hoard. Ricky Jay is a fascinating man; he is a master magician, a historian of show business (especially of novelty acts), and an actor in David Mamet's movies. He collects something few others do: showbills for the jugglers, magicians, animal acts, ventriloquists, and other eccentric and novelty performances through almost four centuries. Don't worry, it is far from boring. Around eighty of his specimens are on display in a large format book, *Extraordinary Exhibitions: The Wonderful Remains of an Enormous Head, the Whimsiphusicon & Death to the Savage Unitarians* (Quantuck Lane Press). The broadsides are funny and beautiful, and Jay's learned and enthusiastic commentary about each one is on the page facing each specimen. It is all thoroughly entertaining, and like any show advertising, the posters make you wonder if the acts are really as described. There is so much verbal and graphic hyperbole on display here that a bit of incredulity is only sensible, but still: who, if confronted by an announcement for Signor Cappelli and his Learned Cats, with assurances that after he introduces his cats to the audience, they will "beat a drum, turn a spit, grind knives, strike upon an anvil, roast coffee, ring bells, set a piece of Machinery in motion to grind rice in the Italian manner with many other astonishing exercises", who, I say, would let incredulity overcome a wish to get a peek at the show? Let me just take the three displays mentioned in the subtitle. "Wonderful Remains of an Enormous Head" were on display in London around 1840, and it was, if the description is to be believed, truly enormous, eighteen by seven feet, and weighing 1,700 pounds. What the head was, we do not know; one observer said it was likely that of a whale, and another said it was an obviously gigantic bird, fish, or lizard. The Whimsiphusicon had one of those fanciful names showmen of the 19th century enjoyed. It is advertised on a playbill for the ventriloquist Christopher Lee Sugg in 1816. Jay says, "Sugg, like a number of early magicians, was a proponent of theatrical neologism used to entice, or more likely confuse, the public." Indeed, Sugg explained on the playbill that the device was also dubbed "The Wandering Melodistical" and was a "Pill to Banish Melancholy," but it is safe to say he didn't give any secrets away until the performance. "Death to the Savage Unitarians" is on an Argentinean bill from 1842, and does not refer to the members of the religious sect, but to the country's Unitarian political group who favored a liberal rule of law and a strong central Argentinean government. They opposed the dictator Juan Manuel Rosas, and probably the phrase was included by the publicist who had drawn up the bill to ensure it would not offend the dictator. It caps an ad for "Robert and His Wife" who did magic and juggling, including "the new trick

of the ceramic plates that will very much please the spectators" and "the lovely balancing act of the two dogs dressed as a Marquesa and a Marquis." There are scores of other playbills for acts in this beautifully produced book that shows some astonishing curiosities, well annotated by the erudite collector himself. It is full of jolly whimsy, for every act depicted is shown at its best, even though it might be promising more than it could actually produce. There is a taint of regret, here, though, on every page. As the playbills frequently remind us, the like of these productions will never be seen again. Oh, how I would love to see Daniel Wildman, for instance, the first and foremost equestrian apiarist of two hundred years ago, who rode his horse standing up while five swarms of bees covered his face, swarms which would thereupon alight on specific locations the performer designated by his command.

Ricky Jay is a national treasure. He's the head curator of a continuing collection of the curious, marginal, sometimes macabre but always compelling congregation of entertainers who have slipped through the trapdoor of time's stage. His newest masterpiece, *Extraordinary Exhibitions*, is a catalogue of broadsides heralding some of the strangest performers that ever graced an auditorium or a sidewalk. You'll meet Pietro Stadelmann, a seventeenth century armless dulcimer player. As well as the nameless 27 year-old Angolan "Famous African Hermaphrodite". And a South American trio whose huge excrescences extruding from their chins gave them their stage moniker "The Monstrous Craws". You can sit at the feet of Joice Heth, the 161 year-old former nursemaid of Little Georgie Washington, the marvelous showman P. T. Barnum's first client. There's singing mice, educated fleas and a Rabbi whose demonstrations of his prodigious memory were endorsed by the Pope himself. To paraphrase the immortal Charles Fort, you'll see a procession of the damned of showbiz. And thanks to the wonderful Mr. Jay, they'll walk (and bark, tumble, juggle, catch bullets, arm wrestle, rope dance and eat stones) again.

This book is a fascinating collection of antique advertisements for entertainment acts ranging from the whimsical to the bizarre. The broadsides themselves are surprisingly readable and Jay's commentary illuminates the subject matter in a way that sheds light on multiple facets of the social context the broadsides existed within. It's an art book, an intriguing work of history, a compendium of the bizarre, a chronicle of advertising techniques, and a unique stage door view on just exactly what humans will define as "entertaining".

This is a wonderful book by a truly genius author. Also, make sure you put Ricky Jay's other books

on your list. He has a great mind and his books are phenomenal!Harry MontiSociety of American MagiciansNational President 1999-2000

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