

The Nielsen Gallery

Blackstone - The Bunny Outdoes Blackstone

Dimensions: 2-sheet 40.5" x 55" • Lithographer: Unknown • Date: mid 1940s • Nielsen Rating: Unique

For fifty years, Harry Blackstone Sr. traveled the breadth and depth of this country with his *Show of 1001 Wonders*, persistently working his way up from a small-time vaudeville act until he wore the mantle of America's favorite magician. And throughout that time, an important part of the color and pageantry of his large-scale illusion show was his company of "30 Mostly Gorgeous Girls." Sadly, most of these girls (and boys) are gone, and with them the memories of life on the road with Blackstone. One remains, however, who not only remembers every moment of her time with the show, but who has released a revealing, behind-the-scenes memoir. Meet Adele Friel Rhindress – Blackstone's Elusive Moth.

Adele joined the Blackstone show in October 1947 at seventeen years of age. Already a popular tap and ballet dancer playing Philadelphia area nightclubs, hotels, and conventions, she received a call from her agent telling her Blackstone was looking for a girl to replace one who was leaving the show. This led to an interview with Blackstone, stage manager Fred Phillips, the experienced Sara Graves with whom Adele doubled, and Patty Rose, the short-time sub who was leaving the show. Adele was the perfect size and height and was hired.

She was eager to tell her parents she got the job, but she wasn't going home. In fact, she got a crash course on which illusions she would be working and her cues, and was then hustled out of the Walnut Street Theater to purchase stage make-up and silver high-heeled shoes. Then it was back to the stage. Her job started the day she was hired and her first night on stage was a whirlwind. She got through it and the rest of the shows that week without problems, and when its run in Philadelphia ended, Adele was a "box-jumper" with the Blackstone troupe of entertainers.

Major illusions were the mainstay of Blackstone's show and over the years included *The Levitation of the Princess Karnac*, *Vanishing Horse*, *Broadcasting a Human Being*, the *Bridal Chamber* illusion, *The Girl from the Tires*, *The Old Man with the Whiskers*, and many more.

She worked as the lead in *Costume Trunk* (in which she magically appeared as either *Red Riding Hood* or *Alice in Wonderland*), *My Lady's Garter*, and *The Chinese Fantasy*; for Blackstone's opening, *The Enchanted Garden*, she turned into a rose bush.

The *Elusive Moth*, the illusion with which she will always be associated, was born when she received two letters from Blackstone in 1948 telling her he was creating an illusion just for her. He told her to come to Colon, Michigan, right away for rehearsals and a trip to Chicago for costume creation and fitting. Adele describes the costume this way:

"It was a three-piece costume. The top, bottom, and headpiece were made of a satiny material, mostly in shades of green with dashes of orange, purple, dark red, and black accents. The headgear was close-fitting, like a swimmer's cap, with a strap

that snapped under my chin. My hair was hidden but my face was visible. Two colorful 'eyes' were prominent just above my own eyes. The bottom and top of the costume were formfitting without restricting my ability to move. Long sleeves were attached at the shoulders, and a neckband decorated the neckline. And of course, a moth must have wings. My wings were spectacular. Multicolored expanses of gossamer silk were attached to the top part of the costume, and I held a silk-covered twenty-four-inch dowel in each hand, which extended the wingspan well beyond my outstretched arms."



Moth and Natives

The illusion premiered August 18, 1948, at the Erlanger Theater in Chicago. As seen from the audience, Adele, dressed as the giant moth, danced and twirled about the stage in a jungle scene. Suddenly savage native pursuers wearing animal-print costumes and frightening masks chased the moth across the stage, forcing her into a giant spider's web. She tried to escape by leaping and spinning but she was captured and rolled up in the web. She writes:

"Just when the situation seemed hopeless, Blackstone saved the day: with a magical gesture, he conjured up a sudden burst of smoke. When the smoke cleared, my captors gazed in amazement

as the web unraveled. It was empty. The Moth, now truly elusive, was gone."

Del Ray played the Witch Doctor and Tom Reid played the Jungle Chief. Eventually, noted illusion builder and magician Nick Ruggiero played one of the natives.

Adele recalls many other anecdotes of life on the road with Blackstone and the excitement and challenges of living and working with other members of the troupe. Through her detailed descriptions, Adele gives readers the rare chance to stand backstage as assistants change costumes (sometimes more than a dozen times), get loaded into secret compartments, run down alleys next to the theater and back through the lobby to appear magically in the audience, and much more. She reveals as well, the health challenges Blackstone faced in the closing years of this show as he battled severe asthma.

On April 1, 1950, the Blackstone show played its closing engagement in Bay City, Michigan, and the tour ended. No one in the cast realized it yet, but that April Fool's Day was the end of the big Blackstone magic shows. He would take out smaller shows, but they were different. As Adele writes, "There was no Sepoy Mutiny, no Princess Karnac levitation, no Elusive Moth. The golden age of the touring illusion show was over."

It's not over, however, for readers of *Memoirs of an Elusive Moth: Disappearing Nightly with Harry Blackstone and His Show of 1001 Wonders*. I heartily recommend you pick up a copy and step behind the curtain into a world the audience never saw.

Memoirs of an Elusive Moth is available from www.squashpublications.com, www.Amazon.com, or from your favorite magic dealer. ★

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AT LAST!..... *The* BUNNY OUTDOES BLACKSTONE
THE SHOW OF 1001 WONDERS