

# HOUDINI



International

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## CONTACT

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“Magic,” Houdini would say, “is not what you do, but what the mystery loving public thinks you do.” Harry Houdini convinced the public then and now that he could do the impossible. Often half naked and bound in chains before an audience that included proper middle-class ladies, he challenged the taboos of sexuality; he was a consummate showman, master of self-promotion, megalomaniac, devoted husband and dutiful son. In this one-hour program, producers will take the viewer behind the scenes of great escapes and show to what extraordinary lengths this performer went to earn the reputation as “The Great Houdini.”

From his turbulent, impoverished childhood, through his life on the road with his wife, Bess, the film explores how Houdini learned to polish his magic tricks to satisfy his ever-growing audiences and take them all over the world racing the specter of potential failure. He was forced to invent more spectacular escapes—the milk can escape, the handcuffed bridge jumps and submerged box escapes, the Chinese water cell escape—each one increasingly more dangerous, each one pushing the envelope of the possible, frequently putting his life in jeopardy.

His death came at the height of his career and it would shock the world. At a performance in Montreal, a student asked Houdini if it were true that he could withstand blows to his stomach. Like all that had come before, Houdini accepted the challenge. The blow ruptured an inflamed appendix. In pain, Houdini went on to the next day’s performance in Detroit, only to collapse on stage. On October 31st at 1:26pm Houdini died.

The film features a recreation of Houdini’s most spectacular escape, the Chinese water torture cell and interviews with Houdini’s most recent biographer and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Kenneth Silverman. We hear from Dorothy Young, who spent a year working with Houdini when she was seventeen, and two well-known former escape artists and Houdini experts: David De-Val, from England, and James Randi, from the United States. From the contemporary magic world we hear from illusionist David Copperfield, whose international renown is the closest to Houdini’s. E. L. Doctorow, the author of the acclaimed novel *Ragtime* is also interviewed for his insights on turn of the century New York City and Houdini, who he researched in order to create the fictionalized character of Houdini for *Ragtime*. We also hear from Al Hirschfeld, noted theater caricature artist who as a young man met Houdini backstage at New York’s Palace Theater.



## CREDITS

*Executive Producer:* Margaret Drain

*Produced by* Nancy Porter

*Series Host:* David McCullough

*Produced by* Nancy Porter

*Cover Photo Credit:* Brown Brothers



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