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## Illusionist Harry Houdini reappears in Austin 100 years after his death

A play, an exhibit and a new book recall magician, escape artist and celebrity

By [Michael Barnes](#), *Columnist*

April 14, 2026

 Gift Article



"Katie Bender: Instructions for a Séance," presented by Fusebox and Texas Performing Arts, takes place at a séance meant to contact Harry Houdini, who died almost 100 years ago.

Alexandra Dugan/Fusebox Festival



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Illusionist Harry Houdini reappears in Austin 100 years after his death

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Harry Houdini, the famed magician, escape artist and figure of popular imagination who died in 1926, pops up all over the place these days. Three of those appearances are tied to events at the University of Texas campus.

- Animated by the Houdini archives housed at UT's [Ransom Center](#), "Katie Bender: Instructions for a Séance" is a 70-minute theatrical romp presented by Fusebox and Texas Performing Arts as part of the Fusebox Festival, April 16-19 at the Bass Concert Hall Rehearsal Room. Bender, an Austin playwright-performer, stars in this quirky, immersive show. ([texasperformingarts.org](http://texasperformingarts.org))
- Over at the Ransom Center, [Eric Colleary](#), curator of theater and performing arts, plans "Houdini's Library," a big exhibit about the celebrity's vast personal collection of books, manuscripts and ephemera about the history of theater and magic. The free show runs Aug. 29-Jan. 24. ([hrc.utexas.edu](http://hrc.utexas.edu))
- Right before the exhibit opens, Abbeville Press will release a landmark book, "Houdini's Library: Inside the Spellbinding Collections of the Great Illusionist," by the aforementioned Colleary. Timed to the centennial of Houdini's death, it will be the first-ever volume about the huge collection that once filled every corner of Houdini's house at 278 W. 113th St. in New York City. ([abbeville.com](http://abbeville.com))

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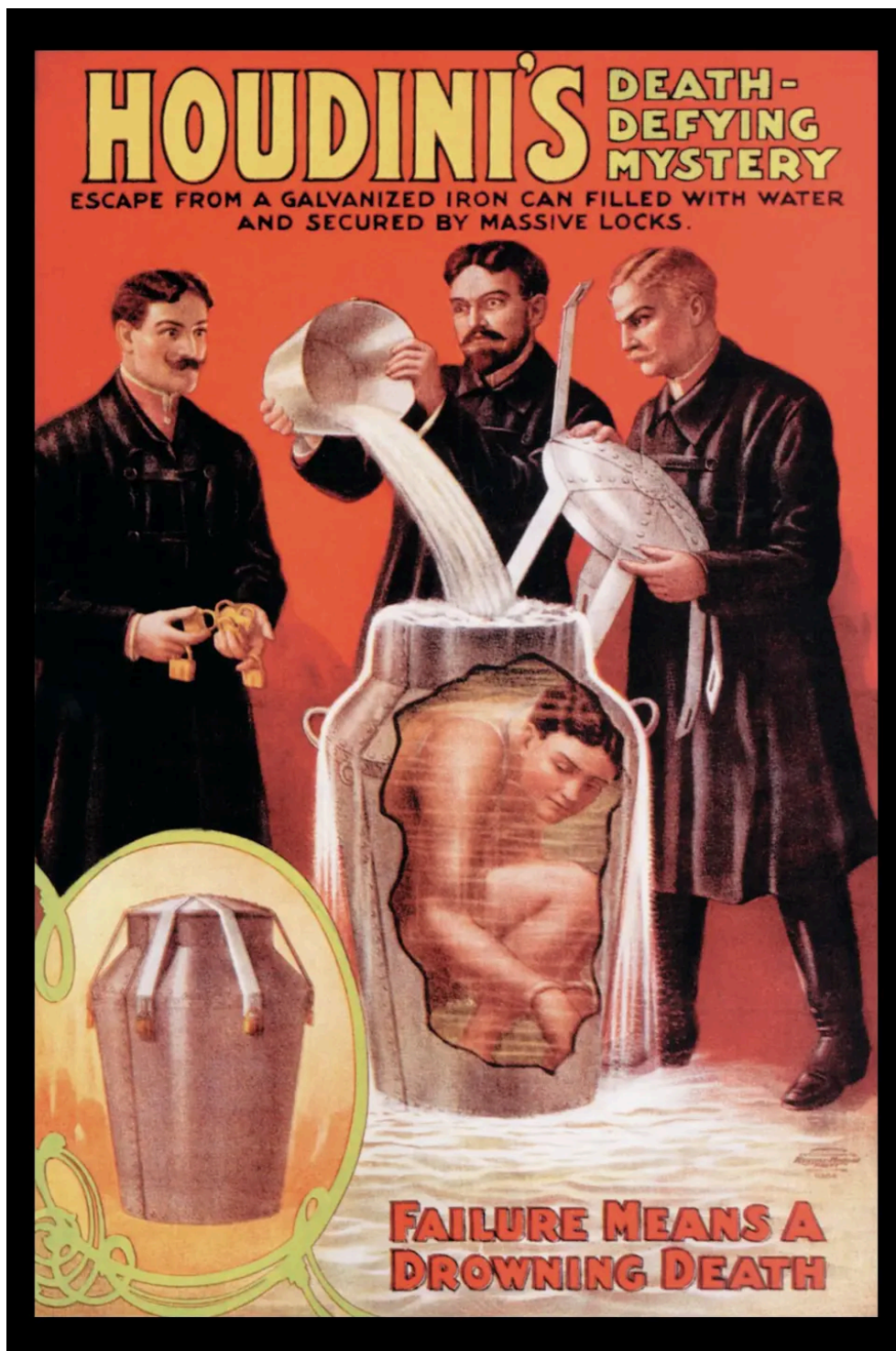
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It doesn't end there.

Houdini was the subject of a recent festival play by [Hidden Room Theatre](#). He is a character in the much-praised revival of "[Ragtime](#)" on Broadway. And he figures into the historical culture of Austin's [Paramount Theatre](#), where he played eight performances in 1916.

Unproven legend has it that Houdini carved a hole in the auditorium ceiling, to the left of the painting of Saint Cecilia, in order to hang upside down for a levitation trick. (True? Maybe. It *is* a good story nevertheless.)



Ehrich Weiss, aka Harry Houdini (1874-1926) was a Jewish Hungarian-American magician. He is regarded as the greatest escape artist in history. During his career, he was also a stunt performer, actor and film producer.

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Other efforts to revive the Houdini magic can be followed at [WildAboutHarry.com](https://www.wildaboutHarry.com).

With all this activity so close to the 100th anniversary of his death on Oct. 31, it's easy to see why Colleary says: "We have gone deep into the 'muchness' of Harry Houdini."

## Invitation to a séance

If, like me, you haven't seen Bender's play yet, it's difficult to imagine what you will see and hear at the Bass Concert Hall Rehearsal Room.

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Let's turn to a reliable reviewer:

"The set of 'Instructions for a Séance' looks like an escape room, with seemingly random objects everywhere," wrote journalist Edward Brown in Fort Worth Weekly about a 2024 staging at Amphibian Stage. "In Katie Bender's 70-minute play, theatergoers are invited to participate in an unfolding attempt to conjure the spirit of Harry Houdini. They're seated in Bender's living room as the playwright, playing

herself, describes her avid interest in the life and death of the famed Hungarian-American escape artist.

“Stage right near the back wall sits a large wooden box that Bender says was made to the exact specifications of one of the magician’s famous escape props as a means of enticing his spirit to make an appearance — Bender said that ghosts are drawn to familiar environments.

“Fair warning: If you snag one of the front tables, you will become part of the play.”

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## **Playwright 'could hear the voice of Houdini.'**

During an interview with the Statesman at Colleary’s atmospheric office on the seventh floor of the Ransom Center, Bender talked about her dive into Houdini’s universe, starting with a visit to the Austin archives in 2016.

“He grew up mostly in Appleton, Wisconsin,” she says about Houdini, whose father was a rather unsuccessful rabbi. “His father died when he was 14 and he took responsibility for the family. Yet he’d run away, trying to make it to Texas.”

The playwright grew fascinated by Houdini’s voluminous correspondence with other magicians. After reading only a few remnants of his writing, “I immediately could hear

the voice of Houdini in my head. There was something about the strangeness of the language and the immediacy of it that conjured a real voice in my head.”

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To kick off this fresh writing project, she finished three monologues in Houdini’s voice.

“In the full show, I play Katie Bender during a séance to get Houdini to show me how to escape fame,” she says. “Houdini has not showed up yet.”

During the interview, curator Colleary brought up the controversy of supposed coded messages said to have appeared to his wife after the death of Houdini. The illusionist, in fact, had both pursued and debunked the popular spiritualism of séances in his day.

“At first, I didn’t even know that spiritualism was going to be part of the play,” jokes Holder, who did a version of “Instructions” in Austin in 2019. She has toured the show to Oklahoma City, Houston and Fort Worth; and a long run is booked for Milwaukee Rep in the fall. “I was just trying to connect with people and escape dealing with my family.”

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## Why Houdini? Why Austin?

“He is one of the few people in history where everybody knows his name,” Colleary says. “Houdini was a master at branding and marketing.”

A big chunk of Houdini’s treasures were given to the Library of Congress, but attorney, entrepreneur, real estate developer and theater manager Messmore Kendall kept more than two dozen crates of Houdini’s library until 1958, when they were acquired by the Hoblitzelle Theatre Library, one of the constituent components of what is now the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. It was stored in the UT Tower until the current building was finished at Guadalupe and West 21st streets.

It took decades to catalogue, in part because the collection was so popular. Because of that, it was closed to researchers for two years to finish the process.

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Colleary has spent many months putting together the book and exhibit on Houdini’s magic, performing arts and spiritualism. The objects include letters to other

magicians, newspaper editors and lawyers — Houdini was litigious.

“Every object has its own story,” Colleary says. “Houdini was in constant interaction with the magic community. He kept an eye on his audience and his legacy.”

Colleary and Holder emphasize that Houdini didn’t originate tricks. His knowledge of the field was enormous, but his charismatic performances sold the tricks.

Holder repeats the wisdom: “Eighty percent of the act is the magician.”

Colleary: “Even after a century, his name holds up and he doesn’t have to do anything!”

April 14, 2026



**Michael Barnes**

COLUMNIST



For the past 37 years, Michael Barnes has written about the people, places, culture and history of Austin and Texas. He earned his Ph.D. From the University of Texas at Austin and has spoken frequently at Central Texas colleges and universities, as well as with civic and community groups. He is the author of five volumes of "Indelible Austin," a series of books that document community-based histories of the city. Barnes has won numerous local, regional and national journalism awards.

## Why Houdini is suddenly everywhere in Austin

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