



## THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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### **Bro. LESLIE GEORGE COLE (1892-1978).**

Pix/People reported on 22nd January 1976 that magic was making a dramatic comeback on world stages and that Australia had at that time one of the greatest of them all, The Great Levante, at 84 years<sup>1</sup> of age still weaving magic designed to surprise and amaze audiences.

Les was born on 5th March 1892 at Alexandria in Sydney and his parents moved to Wangaratta in Victoria where he commenced work driving a baker's cart. Melbourne soon beckoned and at 17 he became a barman and billiard marker at The Vine Hotel, Richmond.

After some coaching and encouragement from a showman, Tom Selwyn, who suggested the name "The Great Levante" Les embarked on a long and successful professional career in magic in 1912 after playing in repertory and between silent films for two years. This work only really earned Les very small money.

He commenced tours around Australia playing at Luna Park in Melbourne and at White City in Sydney before touring Queensland. During World War 1 he toured extensively in Queensland which was a pretty rough life with poor rewards and sleeping out and at times very difficult audiences. When Les saw Harry Houdini in action on an Australian tour he became fascinated his work. Les then went home and learned to escape from chains and padlocks while submerged in a bath and then progressed to the local swimming pool where people thought he was quite mad. Training and perfection were always to be the trade marks of his work as a magician.

Les also worked with war propaganda and recruiting causes during the war and in 1919 he married Gladys Costin. With their only child, Esme, born in 1921 they continued touring in Western Australia performing from Broome to Birdsville. During these tours his stooges were shearers and bullockies all anxious to discover his tricks but The Great Levante was too clever for them. They were travelling in a Dodge bus that was especially designed and built in Perth from Western Australian jarra.

From 1912 to 1927 he spent 15 years touring city and country in Australia perfecting his craft and showmanship. During this time he also spent time in New Zealand, the Pacific Islands and some Asian Countries.

The family then set off on a world tour in 1927. For the next thirteen years the family of three toured England, Asia, Malaya, Japan and India until 1940. During this period he built up a large and spectacular show, his wife and daughter being sawn in half many times over. He was pulling rabbits from hats and producing golf balls from all respectable parts of peoples' bodies. His shows were particularly lavish and he was also a very suave and distinguished figure on stage.

He gradually built up his act, throwing himself off Lambeth Bridge into the Thames while handcuffed and manacled. He could also struggle free from strait-jackets while suspended from high poles in public streets.

While performing in England he built up a very lavish production called "How's Tricks" with a big cast and also chorus girls and animals on stage. One of the highlights was to have a choir sing "Ave Maria" while he produced a choir boy from an organ pipe.

The Institute of Magicians in London in 1935 named Levante's trunk trick the Mystery of Mysteries, the Inner Magic Circle awarded the Gold Star and in 1939 he was invited to the United States of America where the International Brotherhood of Magicians elected the world's number one magician.

He continued performing in England and Europe before returning to Australia opening with "How's Tricks" at the Kingsway Theatre, Melbourne on Boxing Day, 1940. This played until 1st March 1941. On a sunny day in Melbourne in 1941 Levante announced that he was going to jump from Prince's Bridge with his wrists and ankles chained together behind his back into the Yarra River, a jump of 56 feet. Before a policeman could intervene Levante jumped. There was no appearance for half a minute but at 55 seconds the Great Levante's head popped up out of the water 20 yards upstream.

After the Melbourne show he toured New Zealand before going on to Brisbane and also entertaining troops in Queensland. During the period 1942 to 1944 Levante supplied shows for both the Sydney and Melbourne Tivolis. A favourite trick was to produce coins from the ears of a watching audience. He did this once with a little girl called Gloria Dawn who was watching her parents perform on stage. A few years later when this same Gloria Dawn was starring in the musical "Gypsy" Levante popped up behind her and plucked a flower from her ear.

He finally settled in New South Wales before touring to South America in 1954 and making two more tours of England. During the 1960s and 1970s he continued touring until retiring in 1977. He then continued with some club work, appearing at the St. George Leagues Club in 1976 at the age of 84 years remarking that one of his favourite illusions was making things disappear although commenting that animals can be difficult to work with.

On stage Les Cole was a very imposing figure with a flowing cape, top hat, cane, white tie and tails but off stage he was gentle and completely unaffected. He worked hard at his profession, believing "that the hand is indeed quicker than the eye." He built all his own equipment and props in a hut in a cottage at old Guildford in Sydney. Show business was really to him a business as much as showmanship. He lived with his wife of 60 years, Gloria, their daughter and son in law in a home at Bellevue Hill. He also invested wisely, lived frugally and indeed lived very well in retirement. His hobbies included bowls, trout

fishing, chess and exposing spiritualists. He never exposed any of his tricks believing that magic exposed is not magic any more.

The Great Levante died on 20th January 1978 after over 60 years performing, the world's oldest practising magician.

Leslie George Cole was initiated in Lodge Stability, No. 320 on 17th September 1920, passed on 26th July 1921 and raised on 23rd August 1921. He was struck off on 11th May 1931. He then rejoined on 14th August 1933 before calling off on 11th October 1937. He next affiliated with Lodge Stability on 13th December 1943 from Lodge Thalia, No. 5177, English Constitution, obviously having joined that Lodge in England whilst working there. He next called off Lodge Stability on 8th March 1954. He then affiliated with Lodge Honour No. 519 on 8th July 1959 and called off on 13th November 1963. Before calling off he had affiliated as a Foundation Member of Lodge City of Sydney, No. 952 on 12th April 1962, called off on 18th March 1964, finally affiliating with Lodge Honour, No. 519 on 10th June 1964 and remained a member until his death in 1978.

Ref: Aust Dict. of Biography,  
Curtain Call, Bridges. N. Sydney 1980.  
Pix/People, 22nd. Jan., 1976.  
S.M.H., 24th Jan. 1978.