

Magic At Gunpoint

HE asks you to scratch your initials on a bullet. Then it's loaded into a 12-bore gun and handed to his assistant. He steps back several paces, points to his face as the target and barks out the word: "Fire". The bang that follows and the short distance that missile has to traverse tells you the man's a goner. When you next open your eyes, the bullet's between his teeth! He puts it into your hand and it's still hot. The initials are there all right. Astounding, but is there a catch somewhere?

In all probability, of course there is, but it doesn't detract from the interest in this Bullet Catching Act that Prince SO of Bengal has honed to perfection. He tells you 75 people have died trying to do this feat, and he realises that one day he too could join them. Rather an ominous note on which to begin a conversation, and you

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The magic scene in India has a few bright sparks here and there. One such is Prince Sil of Bengal. Rina Chunder meets the magician who impressed big names in the business at the Festival of Magic in Bangalore recently

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tell him so. But he laughs and explains that the slightest lapse of concentration can cause death in this case. As when the famous Chinese magician Chuni-Ling-Soo died on 23 March, 1918, at the World Green Empire Theatre, London.

He says Robert Houdin (1805-71), considered the father of modern magic, was responsible for popularising this bullet-catching act and now there are just three such "exponents" in the world and he's the only one in India. Which is why he was invited to the Garden City Magic Festival in Bangalore recently, where magicians from all over the world participated, among them the better-known David Costi, David



Prince Sil with his able helping half Jaya and (above) 11-year old sorceress daughter Roshni

Aladin, Bob Sheets, Manvel Kazarian, Carlos Vaquera and Mark Setteducati. Compere Aladin, from Britain, praised Sil and mentioned that 75 magicians had died since the beginning of the century trying to "catch the bullet".

Sil first performed the feat in 1977 and received the Jadu Samrat P. C. Sorcar Award in 1984. But he found the performance lacked dramatic effect because it was "too smooth, too quiet", and so he innovated. He now keeps a glass plate ("not sugar-glass") between himself and the shooter. When the gun is fired, the bullet breaks the glass before Sil catches it between his teeth. The sight and sound of breaking glass has the desired effect on the audience, although it exposes him to the "added danger of being cut by glass splinters". He still calls upon someone in the audience to scratch his or her initials on the bullet, even fire the gun; but to this latter invitation the person usually refrains and the organisers object. Therefore his brother, Bikash, is the designated "shooter".

While praising P C Sorcar, Junior, for taking Indian magic to the realms of fantasy, Sil also acknowledges his generosity in leaving this particular feat for him to make his big break. But why didn't P C Sorcar try this himself? "Because he does not need to," laughs Sil. "He doesn't need to play with his life to make a career. But he is the main inspiration behind my success."

Success isn't easy to come by in India, at least not on the magic scene where there aren't any magical illusions for the protagonists. There is little money in the business and all of it pretty hard-earned.

This state of affairs, says Sil, is very sad, since magic is something that was born here. The word "magic" itself derives from "magus", the plural of "magi", which means Eastern magicians; it also refers to the wise men of the East. But Indian magic, which is as old as Indian civilisation and is even mentioned in the *Atharva Veda*, has come a long way from the time it had its honoured place in the kings' courts.

The Indian Rope Trick, so famous down the ages, is lost today. It has almost become a myth. Being technologically more advanced and financially better equipped, the Western countries today dismiss India from the magic scene. Yet most magicians study Indian magic at some point of their training period. For example, in 1847 Robert Houdin claimed he had invented "Aerial Suspension" which, in reality, was a renovation of a similar feat that is mentioned in old Indian records and was performed in this country as long as 200 years ago. Sophie

Hardins, who had Come down from England for the Bangalore Festival, is doing her research on Indian magic too.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations is doing little to help as it does not consider magic an art at all, says Sil. Since it does not get any representation in the international cultural festivals organised by it (save for a few madati acts performed by street performers) its status is far different from what prevails in other countries. Magicians in the West quote mindboggling figures for brief performances at private parties while in India the rates are not only measly, but assignments are few and far between.

Floor shows in restaurants (with which Sil started his career) have become almost a non-entity in Calcutta and it has become impossible to survive on magic alone. So Sil has to pursue a separate career and works with Carritt Moran, the tea auctioneers.

Magic however remains his first love. Has been since Ms school days, for which he I received quite a few whacks from his father. His was a conservative business family of north Calcutta where such frivolities were frowned upon. But, ironically, there came a time when the business was doing so badly that all the ancestral property had to be sold off, and one square meal a day for the 15 members of the family became a cause for concern.

The responsibility of running the show fell on the 16-year-old Sil who was preparing for his Senior Cambridge exams from a well-known English-medium school of Calcutta. His magic guru, Professor Pan, helped him a lot and introduced him to Mr Joshua of Trinca's who gave him his first break. That was the era of Pam Grain and Usha Uthup at Trinca's, and Sil was slotted for about 15 minutes in between the crooners, both at tea and dinner time, earning Rs 700 a month.

The money wasn't too bad in those days, but it still wasn't enough to feed so many mouths. So he took a job while continuing to do floor shows at the various five-star hotels all over the country and even abroad, in Hong Kong and Singapore and Bangkok. His wife, Jaya, has truly proved to be an able helping-half, both on and offstage, while their 11-year-old daughter, Roshni, does a 20-minute sorcery act in between her father's performance. His brothers Bikash and Shankar are also involved in his shows.

But be that as it may, catching bullets between the teeth and other such exotic acts do not a life of bliss guarantee. Magicians, like most everyone else, have to sweat it out to make ends meet.



Loaded, fired and between the teeth: Sil at his 'Bullet Catching Act'