

ALAN WARNER MASTER CRAFTSMAN



Li Chang's Boxes

By Elizabeth Warlock

Photographed from
the collection of Bill King



Spirit Cabinet

He is a man for all connoisseurs. An artist of apparatus *par excellence*, whose talent for creating effects combined with intricate design and fine woodwork have earned him an almost legendary place in magic for nearly 30 years.

sions of the story give it as Camelot which may have been in Somerset.

Alan's home is not far from Tintagel, in a tiny hamlet called Wainhouse Corner and where the nearest town of any size is 12 miles away. His is a comfortable home which doubles as a studio and workshop where he can create and make his exclusive Mini-Magic gems to order. There he lives and works with his wife, the author Mignon Warner, who has written a number of crime fiction books (one is even called *Illusion*) and, although Australian by birth, has her roots in Cornwall.

It all began in Harrow, not far from the famous school for kings and princes, where Alan was born in 1935 and grew up as a boy, and where he first became interested in magic. A school friend had been given a "Coin In Nest Of Boxes" as a present, and when Alan saw a performance of it, he thought it brilliant and was hooked. However the friend wouldn't reveal the secret, although just a little later he saw the trick in a shop window and promptly went in and bought it for himself. Then one day his father took him to London and to Ellisdon's Magic Shop. It was an Aladdin's cave for an 11-year-old boy and he was able to purchase a number of effects by E. & S. Word soon spread of his magical interest and a neighbor who was in a concert party and did a little bit of magic, gave him a small book on the subject.

But when he was 12, his parents emigrated to Australia. It was a drab and dreary England at that time. World War II had only been over for a year and there were shortages in everything, plus many of the buildings had been damaged by bombing. The prospect of a warm and sunny climate was just too much to resist and, when his father was given the chance to open a new printing plant there, that sealed it. Actually in

1946 one could go to Australia for just ten pounds because the country was looking for extra population.

The only provision was that you had to stay for at least two years, for those

It was in 1972 that the name of Alan Warner first appeared on the scene as the Rolls Royce of dealers. Not for him the conveyor belt production of tricks using cardboard, metal, and cheap cuts of wood so often disguised by a thin layer of paint. Every item was hand crafted with only the very best of materials. No wonder his pieces are now sought after by collectors the world over.

It was perhaps appropriate that, when he partially retired as a dealer in 1997, he should move to the north part of Cornwall. This county of England has always been shrouded in mystery. The furthest point west, it is where the Atlantic rollers meet the English and Bristol Channels, and its rocky coastline was the haunt of smugglers in times gone by. But it is perhaps most famous for the village of Tintagel, the birthplace of the legendary King Arthur, the son of Uther Pendragon, and it is where as a child he was cared for and counseled by the wizard, Merlin. It was Merlin who founded the Round Table there, and was supposedly the site of King Arthur's court, although some ver-



Pentra

two years surrendering your passport. The family settled in Adelaide in South Australia.

After school he followed in his father's footsteps by entering the printing trade and becoming a photo/lithographic color retoucher involved in fine art reproductions, paintings, and the like. But during his transgression from school to occupation in life his interest in magic had not wavered, and he naturally drifted into doing shows, particularly for children, for there is always a demand for a magician to entertain at birthday parties. The only drawback was that there were no magic dealers in Adelaide in those days, although there were a number in places like Sydney and Melbourne, but these were hundreds of miles away. So acquiring the necessary apparatus could pose problems.

Although he owned a number of standard effects, the only way to increase his repertoire was to create and make his own. With his already acquired knowledge of the fundamentals of magic and his skill as a photo/lithographer combined with his flair for coming up with new ideas, he was soon able to produce many original effects. As these were to be performed for children, they were painted in vibrant colors, as opposed to those he makes today which are in natural wood with maybe just a discreet colored embellishment.

It was fortunate that Adelaide had a very good reference library, particularly with regard to magic. There were the Hoffmann books and *Greater Magic* and other classics, and so Alan was able to learn a lot from reading and studying. He obtained a good grounding in the basic techniques of magic.

Like the majority of us he wanted to be among other magicians, not just for the camaraderie it engenders, but also to keep abreast of all that is the latest in the art. He joined the Australian Assembly of Magicians, which had a branch in every State. Later Charles Wicks formed the IBM Garden City Ring No. 148, in Adelaide, and Alan

was invited to be a founding member. Unfortunately he was away doing his National Service at the time and could not accept the invitation, but on his return he was the Ring's secretary for many years.

Professional magicians too would visit Adelaide, either to appear at the one and only theater there, or in cabaret at one of the hotels. One magician in particular was the Sydney-based Colin Dexter, and whenever he was in town appearing in cabaret, Alan would

spend time with him talking magic. In addition, at the odd convention there would be visiting magicians and the chance to hear lectures.

Although he had met and married an Australian girl by the name of Mignon, the pull of his homeland was still there. And so in 1969 he and Mignon made a trip to England. He had three months service leave due to him, so they decided to travel by taking a long cruise which took in a lot of different countries, before finally arriving in England. They stayed in a flat in London's fashionable Sloane Square, and enjoyed the scene so much with its abundance of theaters and other entertainment that they decided to stay. London was swinging in the sixties.

His first thought was of returning to the printing trade, but there was nothing available to suit his skills at that point. So this is where magic came into its own. It was his great love and when the opportunity arose to become a demonstrator for Ron MacMillan (International Magic) in his shop on Clerkenwell Road in London, he jumped at it. In addition he helped Ron assemble the magic sets which International Magic prepared for the famous department store, Harrods. Then Ron opened a section in the famous toy store, Hamley's, and Alan was asked to manage this and do the demonstrating, which he did for a couple of years.

It was while at Hamley's that he had his first real taste of close-up magic, albeit somewhat limited. It occurred to him that there was not enough of that sort of thing on the market, for while Tenyo had already started manufacturing a number of close-up effects, these were very basic at that time, and it was to be some years before the range was anywhere near what it is today. And of course there was Eddie Taytlebaum, who perhaps more than anyone, was Alan's inspiration to produce effects that were individually crafted and thus exclusive.

Therefore there was a niche in the market for this type of magic. In the England of the early seventies this was called pocket or micro magic, and it was to be a while before "close-up" was to become the established name for this facet; a look at British Ring convention programs for those years will find it listed as Micro Magic.

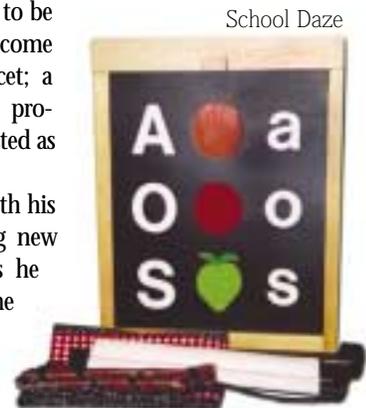
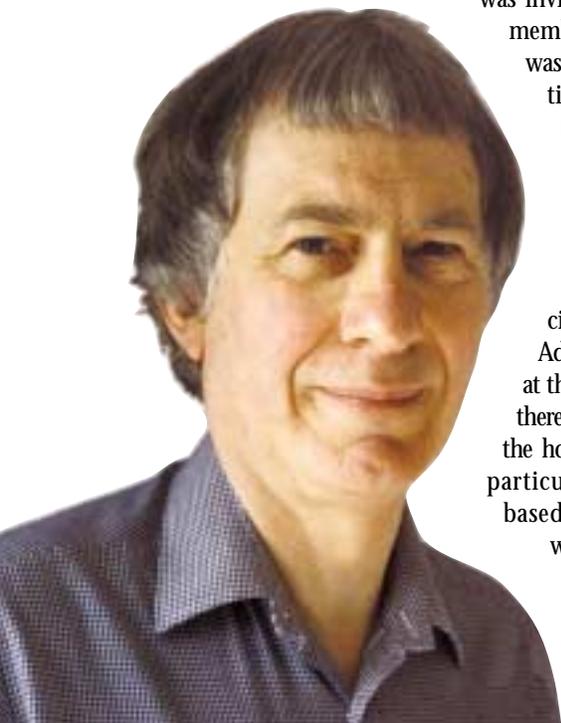
While never a card man, but with his gift for creating and constructing new effects, ideas for *Mini Magic*, as he called it and which was to become the registered trade name, started to flow from his fertile mind. It was then he decided to take the



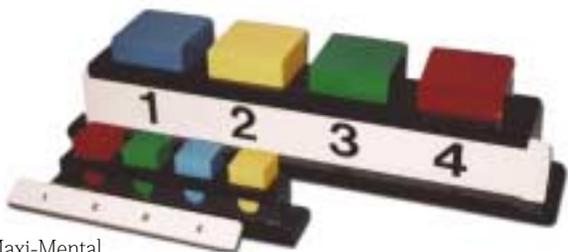
Cairo Con



Die 'N Dice



School Daze



plunge and become a dealer. Although he never envisaged making a living out of it, he thought that by combining this with children's shows, he would be able to get by quite comfortably. However after the first advertisements appeared in *Abracadabra* in 1972, he never looked back and never once had to supplement his dealership with fees from kids shows. The magic business just snowballed.

But apart from his work in the printing trade and his skills as a children's entertainer and demonstrator, how was he able to construct from wood such intricate pieces of apparatus able to bear scrutiny right under your nose? It seems that in this field he is virtually self taught, with no special training. While at school in England, and before moving to Australia, he did a basic woodworking course, but that seems to be it. It is quite obviously a natural talent. The amazing part is that even today he only uses three tools—a craft knife, a sander, and something called a Scroll machine.

At first to cut out the pieces he used a fret saw, which was quite hard. However he went to a woodworking exhibition in London and saw a special machine being demonstrated there which enabled one to do more intricate designs which a regular hand fret saw could never do. This he just had to have, and so he bought it on the spot. This was called a Scroll machine. The only problem was that it only came with very basic instructions, and consequently he had to work out various methods in order to use it to the maximum. First and foremost was how to cut very fine pieces of wood with it. Eventually, however, he found ways and means, and it proved a very beneficial purchase, and something he would never be without.

Strangely some 10 years after acquiring this valuable piece of equipment, he saw an advertisement

in a wood working magazine for a book on the use of it. Much to his satisfaction he found he had correctly worked out for himself the many tasks it could be used for. However he also discovered some additional uses for it.

Ever since becoming a dealer Alan has only constructed his own inventions. He certainly would be the ideal man if you wanted, say, a Koran Locked Box made in teak or some other superior wood. However he explained that there is so much work involved in making a perfect reproduction that he simply does not have the time to work on effects created by other magical inventors. It would not matter if your name were David Copperfield, Lance Burton, or just the local magical neighbor, the answer would always be a polite “no.”

But what has made his pieces such prized possessions among his clientele? Some of the reasons are that every piece is individually made only from the finest materials, there are only a certain number of each made, and they are all his own inventions. Although he first called himself a manufacturer, this term was soon dropped for manufacturing is something that is mass produced.

Although the total number of originations to date is around 100, only about 90 of these have actually been put on the market. His last catalogue, which went out about three years ago, brought the number to just over 80, but since then the total has swelled to about 90. His catalogues only list about 30 items at a time.

I asked him if he had any favorite pieces, for surely from such a large

number of creations, there must be at least one. Surprisingly, his favorite is always the one he is currently working on, for he literally lives with it through so many stages, from the basic idea to the designing, choice of materials, and the making of two or maybe even three prototypes, before the effect is perfected. Alan explained that it is different if you are a performer because it is natural for one to have preference for a certain routine,

but as he doesn't perform anymore his latest project becomes his favorite. He is creating something from nothing right through to the end product, and it naturally becomes a part of him during that time.

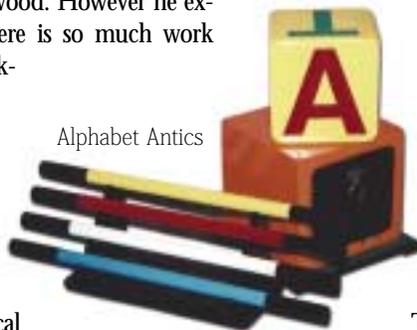
The process is like building a model airplane. Some effects have 20 to 30 pieces which have to be assembled.

Once the prototype is complete, he will make three actual models and test them vigorously over a period of three weeks. After that, if they work perfectly, he will then start to advertise them. In the early days he would make three or four at a time, but now he will only make one at a time to order.

Of course the time span for development varies from effect to effect. Some may take only a few weeks, others like “Voo Doo” took two years because of the mechanics and ingenuity that went into it, and having to surmount all kinds of difficulties to get it to work perfectly. As the

name implies, this has overtones of occult magic. On the magician's table sits an oblong teak case with a demon's head on the top and a three-inch tall wooden cutout of a man

with four holes in it—one in each of the head, body, one leg, and a foot. A spectator is given three pegs and asked to place one in three of the four holes. The story is that the demon, by the power of Voo Doo, has influenced the spectator to place the pegs in certain holes. The case is tilted



Alphabet Antics



Voo-Doo

and a second figure slides out with only *one* hole in it which exactly matches the hole left unpegged by the spectator.

The spectator's choice is completely free—the case is specially rigged so, even though it appears thin, it contains four extra cutout figures, each with a hole in a different place. Warner's ingenious construction of the prop allows the performer to tip the case and, without hesitation, ensure that the correct figure slides out.

Thus it can be seen that the creation of each effect takes over his mind completely, even staying with him for a while afterward. That is, of course, until he starts developing the next item and then that takes over, thus becoming his favorite creation.

Once he started making apparatus, he found it completely took over his life. There was no longer time to attend the magic club meetings which make up such a chunk of the average magician's time. However he did join the British Ring of

the I.B.M., continued his membership in the I.B.M., and attended various conventions over his 25 years as a dealer, like FISM, Blackpool, and the British Ring.

It is over 10 years since he regularly advertised. These days he will only do so occasionally when he

issues a new catalogue, and that mainly to let folks know he is still around. He has a regular clientele who are interested in his exclusive type of magic, so when he has one or two new items he does a mailing shot with a flyer containing descriptions together with pictures. There are some magicians who collect everything he makes; others just the Egyptian collection which specializes in effects which have an Egyptian design or routine.

And there are some famous names among his customers, one being Paul Daniels who used a number of his effects on his TV shows. One of these was "Enigmatic," a mental item based on matching pairs. But instead of using the normal ESP cards for such an experiment, Chinese Lucky Charms are used together with a small box, elevating it into something different as well as creating added interest for the audience.

When he first started as a dealer he was not selling solely close-up magic. A look at an early catalogue reveals many children's effects like "The Magic Paint Box," "Clown Caper," the spooky "Flibbertigibbet," "Dom-Dom Domino," "Alphabet Antics" and "The Scarecrow," where a framed



picture is shown of the scarecrow Basil Huntingdon-Smythe looking rather sad because someone has stolen his clothes. He is placed in an empty wooden barn. Some pieces of brightly colored felt are shown and placed in a scrap bag. The magic spell is made, the pieces of felt vanish, and the barn is opened to reveal a smiling Basil completely clothed with colored patched pants and jacket and a feathered cap.

I had the opportunity recently of seeing "Dom-Dom Domino" performed by Keith Bradbury at his home near Coventry. This is a very colorful and mystifying effect and was later made into a close-up item under the title "Do-Mini-O." Three large white dominoes with black spots are used together with a slim empty cover and three colored pieces of ribbon in red, yellow, and green. First the red ribbon is draped over one end of the cover and one of the dominoes dropped into it. A magic pass and the domino is pulled out of the cover to show that the spots have changed to red. The same procedure is repeated with the second domino and yellow ribbon, with the spots changing to yellow. Finally all three ribbons are draped over the cover, the third domino dropped inside. Then *voilà*, the domino is removed to reveal multi-colored spots of red, yellow, and green.

One very unique piece is the Special Millennium Collection for the year 2000 comprising eight individual pieces of Mini-Magic combining both old and new origina-tions, and all contained in a beautifully crafted box of veneered mahogany specially



The Millennium Collection

designed to house the collection. This was originally intended to be restricted to 12, one for each month of the year, but the demand was such that 23 have so far been made, but he will go no further than 25.

This commemorative box contains a "Paddle Trick" where the white spots on the paddle change color as the performer pushes the paddle through his hand. There are the "Rattle Bars" that will rattle when picked up by the performer, but won't when a spectator tries it; the "Magic Belt Hook" which defies gravity when a belt is hung from it and the tip of the hook is suspended

from the end of a finger; "Kubika," a miniature block release; "Coin Blocks," whereby a coin removed from a recess in one of the blocks keeps returning despite the block being completely covered by a solid block—even when the coin has been signed by a member of the audience; "Geometric" where a spectator is given a free choice of three small pieces of plastic each of which has a different geometric design cut out of its center. The chosen one is placed inside a small wooden cover which contains a shallow tray. The tray is tipped out to reveal a plastic piece with a cut out that exactly matches the spectator's choice.

Then there is "Candle Candle." This consists of a wooden tablet showing a drawing of a candle with an orange flame. The tablet is placed inside a cover, the performer blows on it, and on removing the candle tablet it is found that the color of the flame has changed to blue—a play on the word "blew." The process is repeated and the flame returns to its original color. Finally a spectator is asked to blow on the cover and the flame vanishes.

"Spot On" consists of 10 wooden tablets, each with different-colored

spots at each end. The tablets are shuffled face down. One is selected and placed face down in a cover. The rest

of the tablets are dealt face up in a straight line with the colored spots matching end for end. The two colors at each end of the line are noted. On removing the chosen tablet from its cover, it is shown that the two colors on it match those at each end of the line.

But what of the Egyptian Collection? This seems to have been sparked by his own interest in Egyptology, and was perhaps something that could be applied to magical effects, but had never been exploited to the full. Thayer had put out an Egyptian effect many years ago, but there had been little since that time. Once again he felt there could be an opening for this particular type of magical effect and he developed the theme from there. And they all have names associated with Ancient Egypt, like "The Pharaoh's Curse," "The Tablets of Ra," "Scarab-a-Scarab" and so on.

One of the first was "The Mummy." A plain lid is removed from a sarcophagus to reveal an Egyptian Mummy reclining inside a coffin. The cof-

fin is removed and the Mummy mysteriously floats. Mummy and coffin are returned to the plain sarcophagus and the lid replaced. Attention is drawn to another sarcophagus this time with a decorated lid. Saying that



Scarab-a-Scarab

the Mummy is able to dematerialize, the lid of the plain sarcophagus is removed and it is revealed that the Mummy has vanished. The lid is removed from the decorated sarcophagus to show the Mummy has once more materialized and is inside.

Like many of his regular effects, a number of the Egyptian Collection fall into the category of mental magic. One such effect is "Horus-Scope." The audience sees a wooden cover on top of which is the All-Seeing Eye of Horus, which has protruding from each end a prediction made by Horus, a very powerful God of Ancient Egypt. A small box is introduced



Horus-Scope

that contains six wooden tablets into each of which is carved a hieroglyphic symbol in a distinctive color, the symbols carrying from tablet to tablet. These are laid out in a line, and a spectator is asked to select one, then to remove the slip of paper from the Horus-Scope and read aloud what is written on it. The prediction proves to be correct.

The latest in the collection is "Flight of the Falcon," which was created to celebrate his 25th year as a dealer, and was developed from "Eye of Isis" which has been discontinued for some eight years now. It is the story of the Pharaoh Soris, whose tomb was plundered of all its sacred artifacts, leaving only the chests and caskets that housed them. In these were the reliquary which housed the



The Pharaoh's Curse



The Mummy

sacred objects from the Pharaoh's personal standard and icons representing the falcons which guarded them.

The performer shows a box containing the three sacred falcons, although there are only two in there now because one falcon is already guarding the reliquary (there must always be a sacred falcon in there guarding the treasure). The reliquary, which features a colored wood motif of the head of Soris, is now picked up and shaken. The missing icon can be heard inside. This is confirmed by tipping out the icon representing the blue falcon. This icon is now placed with the other two icons in the casket. Once again the reliquary is shaken, but this time no sound is heard. The reliquary has been plundered and there is no longer anything to guard.

A spectator is asked to choose which of the three falcons he or she would like to guard the reliquary. This done, the lid is replaced on the casket. It is then explained that as soon as the lid was replaced, the selected falcon would take flight from it to stand guard in the reliquary. This is picked up to reveal the selected colored icon, which is then shown to be missing from the casket.

His latest release is "Jack the Lad" which has an art theme. It is the story of four priceless paintings, one of which is extremely valuable, which are kept in a

packing case under lock and key. These are shown and a spectator asked to choose one. All the pictures are placed back in the box. Attention is drawn to a small envelope, another small box which has a "J" on it, which actually stands for Jack the Lad, and a playing card. But this is not a normal card for on one side is a picture of Jack the Lad with a painting tucked under his arm showing that he is actually a fine art thief. Jack is placed inside the envelope which is then sealed and signed by the spectator who, without seeing the very fine print on the envelope, has given Jack the Lad permission to steal the priceless painting which he chose. Horror of horrors. The packing case is opened to show that the painting has in fact disappeared, but on ripping open the envelope the chosen painting is found inside.

Again the props for this are beautifully made. The miniature pictures are true reproductions of famous Australian paintings, although Alan did admit that the gilt frames were a

special purchase. The small packing case is made up of 30 individual pieces of the finest Oregon pine, which has just been sanded and finished, as it must look like a normal packing case which would just be in raw wood. The rest of the props are made in Teak or light Oak. Alan explained that with making all his items, there is a certain amount of wastage of wood, for some of it cannot be used for various reasons such as incorrect grain.

Interestingly Alan does not like using a force, for he always likes to give any spectator a completely free choice. Even in "Jack the Lad" he devised the vanish of the freely selected painting from the packing case.

There you have Alan Warner. A man who has carved a niche for himself in the world of magic, and whose fine and artistic craftsmanship will continue to be sought after by connoisseurs for decades to come. ♦



Jack The Lad



Sign of the Snake



Flight of the Falcon