

= Hadji Ali =

Hadji Ali (c . 1887 ? 92 ? November 5 , 1937) was a vaudeville performance artist , thought to be of Egyptian descent , who was famous for acts of controlled regurgitation . His best @-@ known feats included water spouting , smoke swallowing , and nut and handkerchief swallowing followed by disgorgement in an order chosen by the audience . Ali 's most famous stunt , and the highlight of his act , was drinking copious amounts of water followed by kerosene , and then acting by turns as a human flamethrower and fire extinguisher as he expelled the two liquids onto a theatrical prop . While these stunts were performed , a panel of audience members was invited to watch the show up close to verify that no trickery was employed .

Although never gaining wide fame , Ali had a dedicated following on the vaudeville circuit in the United States . He performed for heads of state including Tsar Nicholas II of Russia . Judy Garland named him her favorite vaudevillian and David Blaine identified Ali as his favorite magician . Portions of his act were captured in the short film *Strange as It Seems* (1930) and in *Politiquerias* (1931) , the Spanish @-@ language version of Laurel and Hardy 's *Chickens Come Home* . Two documentaries contain footage of Ali taken from *Politiquerias* : 1977 's *Gizmo !* , and 1999 's *Vaudeville* . Ali 's unusual gastric abilities led to rumors that the Rockefeller Institute had offered a large sum of money to obtain his stomach post @-@ mortem . After he died in England , his body was offered to Johns Hopkins University for study , though the offer was declined .

= = Background = =

Hadji Ali was born into a working @-@ class family in approximately 1887 or 1892 , depending on the source consulted , probably in Egypt . His fame was as a practitioner of a recognized vaudeville subgenre known as a " regurgitation act " , involving the swallowing of material or objects and their regurgitation in various ways . Ali became aware as a child that he possessed an unusual gastric ability . He explained in response to audience questions at a performance held at St. Mary 's Hospital in Niagara Falls , New York , in May 1926 , that while swimming in the Nile as a ten @-@ year @-@ old boy , he naturally discovered that he could swallow a large amount of water and blow it out like a whale spouting . He continued to develop and refine the ability as he grew older . A more dramatic version of these events was provided by Ali 's daughter , Almina Ali , in an interview in England after his death . She stated that his abilities were first learned through a single incident : while bathing in the Nile , he inadvertently swallowed a fish and an ample volume of water . Instead of dying , as those present thought he might , Ali simply regurgitated the liquid and the fish without ill effect .

Ali learned that his regurgitation talents had the potential to entertain and to earn money through performance at the age of fifteen :

I tried out my tricks first of all in the street , swallowing many glasses of water and then pouring forth a great fountain from one side of the road to the other ... A cafe proprietor saw me doing this one day , and chased me down the street . I thought he wanted to beat me up , but no ? all he did was to put a coin in my hand and ask me to repeat the trick . Finally , he was so delighted that he asked me to come to his cafe and entertain the customers .

Taking his abilities on the road , Ali met an Italian man in Cairo who signed him to a contract for music hall performances . Ali performed under contract throughout Europe and at times for heads of state . According to Ali , in or about 1914 he was summoned by Tsar Nicholas II of Russia to perform at the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg , Russia . He stated that the Tsar " must have liked my performance because he awarded me a special decoration , which is now one of my most treasured possessions . " Following World War I , Ali began managing his own affairs and toured the world , learning more tricks as he went .

Ali came to the United States with Almina in the mid @-@ 1920s . They performed together at fairs , carnivals and in vaudeville , sometimes advertised under the collective name , " Hadji Ali & Co . " Almina played the part of assistant in her father 's act , billed in his shows as " The Princess " . Ali alone had a variety of stage names , including : " The Great Egyptian Miracle Man " , " The Amazing

Regurgitator " , " The Egyptian Enigma " , " The Human Aquarium " , " The Human Volcano " and " The 9th Wonder of the Scientific World " . Ali has been described as a " large , barrel @-@ chested and bearded man ... [that cut] an imposing figure in his Arab costume . "

Although Ali spoke a number of languages and became a naturalized U.S. citizen , it was reported that Almina acted as his interpreter in the United States and other places , as he did not speak English and was illiterate . Once he had gained some notoriety , Ali took on as his manager Hubert Julian , a former colonel in the Abyssinian Air Force . Although he developed a significant following , even being named Judy Garland 's favorite vaudevillian , Ali " remained more a sideshow curiosity than a true vaudeville headliner " according to at least one source . Nevertheless , at the time of his death in 1937 , Julian commented that Ali had " earned big money in America ? \$ 1 @,@ 000 a week sometimes . I was building him up here [in Europe] and had a Continental tour arranged . "

= = Performance = =

The mainstay of Ali 's act was " water spouting " . After swallowing large amounts of water , 60 to 100 glasses at a time , he spouted the water in a continuous stream for a sustained period of time , sometimes approaching one minute . Another common trick was to swallow 30 to 50 unshelled hazelnuts (although one of his posters advertised 40 pecans) , followed by another nut of a different variety , such as an almond . Ali then brought them up one by one with the odd @-@ nut @-@ out produced at a mark called out by the audience . In another trick , Ali swallowed three to six handkerchiefs of different hues and then produced them in a color order requested by audience members .

In a 1929 article appearing in the Lowell Sun newspaper , physician Morris Fishbein speculated that for Ali 's nut feat , the one nut of a different variety was held in the mouth rather than swallowed , thus allowing him to produce it on cue . Dr. Fishbein also stated that unnamed " investigators " were convinced that for Ali 's handkerchief stunt , to produce them in the sequence stipulated by the audience Ali flavored the cloth , and could therefore taste for the correct one as he brought them up . Ali also swallowed live goldfish , watches , coins , costume jewelry , paper money , peach pits , stones , live mice , buttons , pool balls and other odd objects . In another standard performance segment , he placed eight or more lit cigarettes in his mouth but instead of inhaling , he swallowed the smoke and , after a significant time had passed , issued it forth in a steady stream like an erupting volcano .

Ali 's longstanding finale was the swallowing of copious amounts of water again , but this time followed by a pint of kerosene . A prop was then produced , typically a model castle or house made of metal set on a table , within which a small flame burned . Lighter than water and immiscible with it , the kerosene floated above the liquid in Ali 's gut , allowing him to disgorge it first . The stage thus set , and to a drum roll or an imitation of fire bells , Ali became a " human flamethrower " , spewing the accelerant in a long stream over the sacrificial prop , setting it ablaze . Once the kerosene was exhausted , the water followed , streaming out his mouth in a long flow from up to six feet away , extinguishing the fire .

At some performances , a panel or " jury " from the audience was invited on stage to verify that no trick mechanism was being employed ? that he was actually swallowing the items in question and delivering them back through acts of regurgitation . Sometimes Ali would stroll into the audience during his nut swallowing trick . His stomach exposed by his standard costume , he invited audience members to pat his stomach , allowing them to hear the nuts rattling within . One newspaper reported that Ali 's feats , essentially controlled vomiting , were performed in " a manner without the least bit of unpleasantness or anything bordering on repulsiveness . " Not everyone felt the same : at least one of Ali 's engagements was cut short once the proprietor realized that the nature of the act " was killing their supper shows " . Famed escapologist and magician Harry Houdini remarked in his 1920 work *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods* that water spouting was a " performance that could not fail to disgust a modern audience . "

The abilities of Ali fascinated the public and medical authorities . As reported in a 1928 Sheboygan Press article , at one of Ali 's acts a number of doctors attended and thoroughly examined him

during the performance . They came away satisfied that he was actually imbibing and regurgitating the material and objects as claimed , but remained " mystified over his extraordinary performance . " According to an article appearing in the Naugatuck Daily News , " Physicians of three continents have puzzled over the gastronomical mechanism of this human ostrich without success . X @-@ ray experiments have been made during his exhibition without a plausible explanation forthcoming that satisfies the critical , in fact , the profession of surgery has thrown up its hands in amazement over this human ostrich . "

= = Film appearances = =

Ali 's act was captured in two films : the 1930 short Strange as It Seems , and Politiquerias (1931) , the expanded Spanish @-@ language version of Laurel and Hardy 's Chickens Come Home . Ali also had a bit part as the " Turkish landlord " in Warner Bros. ' 1932 film Scarlet Dawn starring Douglas Fairbanks , Jr. and Nancy Carroll . Two documentaries contain footage of Ali taken from Politiquerias : 1977 's Gizmo ! , and 1999 's Vaudeville , a documentary produced by KCTS @-@ TV that exhibits 90 vaudeville acts over a two @-@ hour running time . The documentary has since aired on the Public Broadcasting Service 's American Masters series numerous times .

Speaking about the democratic nature of the vaudeville performance circuit , Vaudeville 's writer and executive producer said in reference to Ali that the film " embraced everything from Caruso to a guy who threw up . " By contrast , in episode 30 of the Sundance Channel television program Iconoclasts , magician David Blaine speaks enthusiastically of Ali . During the episode , Blaine shows artist Chuck Close Ali 's kerosene and water finale footage from Politiquerias and comments that Ali is his " favorite magician ... it 's real but nobody 's been able to do it since ... his name was Hadji Ali ... he 's my favorite of all time . "

= = Death = =

Ali died on November 5 , 1937 , in Wolverhampton , England , from heart failure during a bout of bronchitis . Even before his death , a rumor had circulated that the Rockefeller Institute sought to procure Ali 's stomach upon his death , and would pay as much as \$ 50 @,@ 000 for it . This claim appeared in a poster advertising Ali 's impending appearance at a theater during his lifetime . After Ali 's death was reported , the rumor resurfaced as an active offer of \$ 10 @,@ 000 . When a Rockefeller Institute manager was interviewed about the story , he said the offer had never been made but that nevertheless , " we should very much like to see the body . " Almina and Julian transported Ali 's body back to the United States on board the Queen Mary . According to a November 29 , 1937 article in the New York Post , upon their arrival , Almina offered her father 's body to Maryland 's Johns Hopkins University for investigation by surgeons , after which it would be transported to Egypt for interment in a mausoleum . However , The Afro @-@ American newspaper reported on December 11 , 1937 , that Johns Hopkins ' officials had declined the offer .