

Author reveals the nasty side of “BURLESQUE PARAPHERNALIA”

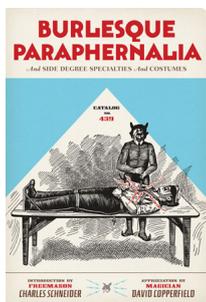
Written by Nick Masercola

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Some of you might fancy yourselves “pranksters.” Maybe you managed to put one over on your family, set a whoopee cushion on Grandma’s chair during Thanksgiving dinner or even had your kid open a “snake in a can.” Well, guess what? You’re all amateurs, and couldn’t even touch the complicated and crazed concoctions created by the DeMoulin Bros.

The DeMoulin Bros. were *the* pranksters back in the early 19th century, putting out entire catalogs with tips on crafting elaborate, mean-spirited hoaxes. These weren’t simple jokes, but well-thought-out, fully built setpieces designed to scare the crap out of someone, usually used in hazing rituals. Now, their creations have been newly brought to the light of day in BURLESQUE PARAPHERNALIA—AND SIDE DEGREE SPECIALTIES AND COSTUMES (Fantagraphics Books), a reprint of their catalog #439, tracked down by Charles Schneider. So what made him investigate this lineage of fiendish practical jokes?



“I have been a prankster since earliest childhood,” he tells Fango. “I used to torment my little sister with elaborate stunts. I’d tie string to a fake skeleton and lure her to the basement and yank the string, making the bones pop up and scaring her badly. I ordered a Johnson Smith Company catalog from a comic book and became fascinated with the old-time novelties—whoopee cushions, joy buzzers. I loved the old style of artwork still used in some of those. The DeMoulin Bros. catalog is an incredible distillation of the best and craziest pranks and stunts, created in a beautifully crafted style for grown-ups!”

So just how hardcore are these pranks? “The Pledge Altar is amazing,” he says, “where you pray and a skeleton pops out of the altar. And Drinking the Goat’s Blood is a very sick stunt. The initiate is forced to drink what he thinks is goat’s blood with cigar butts floating in it!” His personal favorite? “Probably the Throne of Honor, in which a ‘candidate’ sits on a chair on a

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platform. The steps give way, go flat and he slides down, still in the chair, onto a waiting bed of rubber spikes! Incredibly, David Copperfield has one of these in his collection. It’s an insanely rare piece.”

Speaking of Copperfield, the famed magician and illusionist (and TERROR TRAIN co-star) lends his writing talents to this publication. “It happened in a fantastic and rather magical way,” Schneider says of Copperfield’s contribution. “A great magician I know named John Carney was familiar with the company’s weird works and suggested I contact a man named Bill Smith, a brilliant builder of illusions. He knew David Copperfield well, and had worked with him. Copperfield is known as a *serious* collector of DeMoulin devices; he has a true, obsessive love and passion for them. I was in Las Vegas at the World Magic Seminar and met Smith there—who pulled out his cell phone and called David. We spoke and got along very well, talking about these crazy machines like enthusiastic kids. Several phone calls later, he suggested himself what I had hoped for—to write a piece, an appreciation, for our book. It is incredible and funny. It also led to getting a tour of his private magic museum, the experience of a lifetime. Seeing Houdini’s original props and books blew my mind.”

For those interested in discovering some of the most diabolical pranks ever made, the book hits shelves and will be available on-line in July for \$22.99. See more info at Fantagraphics’ site [he re](#)

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