

Genii

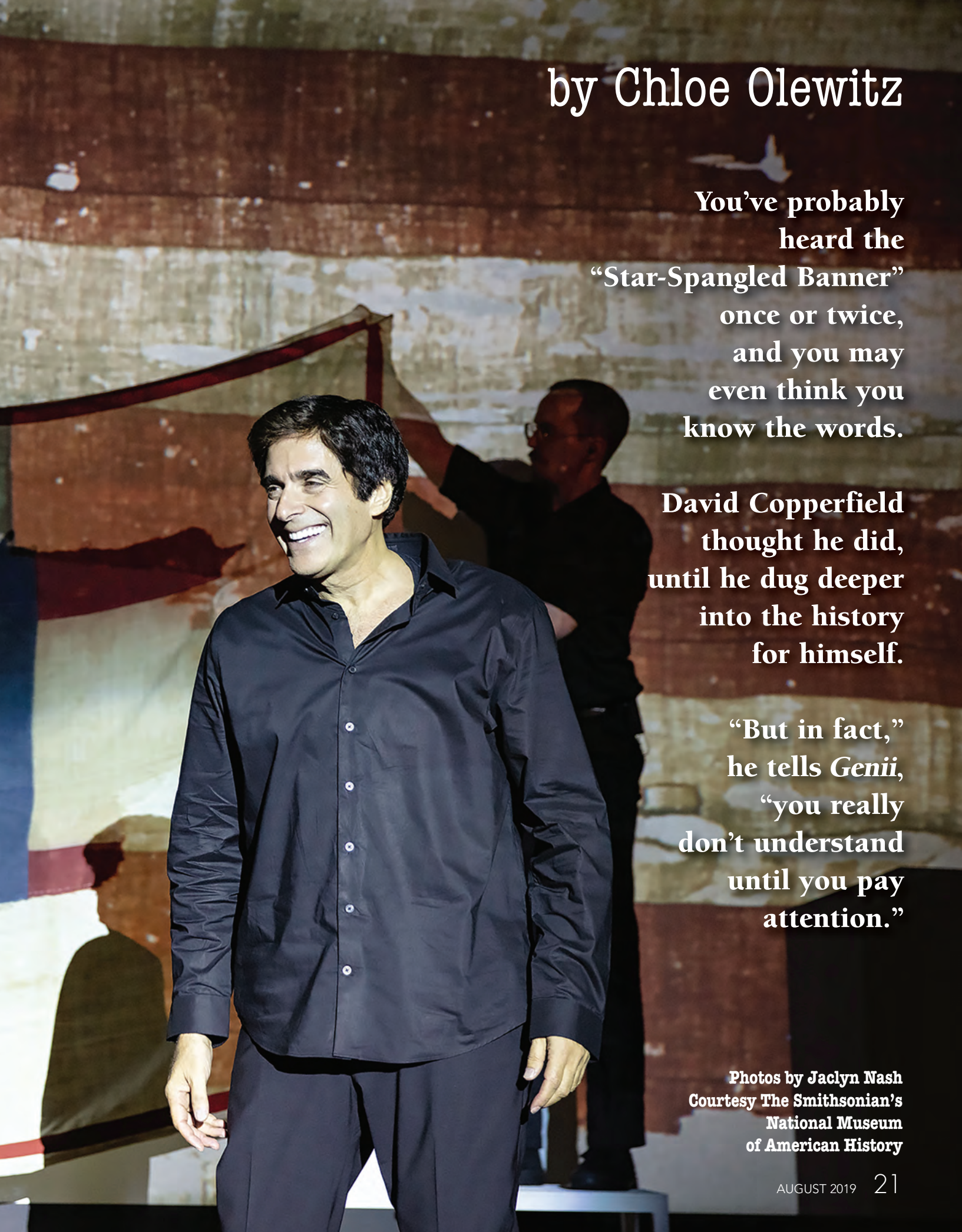
THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE



Olmedini



David Copperfield's
**American
Metaphors**



by Chloe Olewitz

You've probably heard the "Star-Spangled Banner" once or twice, and you may even think you know the words.

David Copperfield thought he did, until he dug deeper into the history for himself.

"But in fact," he tells *Genii*, "you really don't understand until you pay attention."

Photos by Jaclyn Nash
Courtesy The Smithsonian's
National Museum
of American History



While conducting research for the illusion at his International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts, David Copperfield examines an image of the first known photograph of the Star-Spangled Banner, taken at the Boston Navy Yard in 1873.



● **OVER 200 YEARS AGO,** U.S. soldiers raised an enormous flag over Baltimore's Fort McHenry in celebration of their victory over the British. It was 1814, two years into the War of 1812. That very flag—the Star-Spangled Banner—inspired Francis Scott Key to pen the poem that went on to become the United States' national anthem.

It was through his long-standing collaboration with the Smithsonian, the world's largest research complex, that Copperfield first became aware of the Star-Spangled Banner's deeper historical intrigue. The Smithsonian team proposed a Flag Day performance to commemorate the treasured banner and all the U.S. flags that have followed it, and also to celebrate the naturalization of a group of new U.S. citizens.

"I didn't even know about the missing star until the Smithsonian folks brought it to my attention," Copperfield says. "Then the lightbulb went off. It's an enormous flag, 30 by 42 feet, and it's made of very thin, gauzy material. And it has a missing star. Well, a magician hears 'missing star' and starts to think, 'What can I do with this?'"

Although the fate of the 15th star has never been completely confirmed, historians agree it was most likely cut from the flag and given away as a memento of the troops' victory at Fort McHenry, just like the other striped pieces that disappeared from the flag's periphery.

What's left of the original Star-Spangled Banner is not just revered, it's also protected and preserved under painstaking conditions. The pressurized chamber where it's kept regulates the flag's climate and light exposure. Only four people have been allowed to enter the chamber since it was returned to the public eye at the National Museum of American History in 2008.



Since Copperfield wasn't going to be the fifth, he turned to that milieu in which he has shined for so long: metaphor. He invented his own lore to facilitate the symbolic restoration of the flag's missing 15th star, working hand-in-hand with Smithsonian staff to integrate fact and fiction respectfully.

"It was extremely important to the Smithsonian to make very clear what was illusion and what was real," says Copperfield. "We went through it word by word. It's based on a true story, as they say in show business, but the truth has to be clearly defined. The historians like that we talk about historical facts

from a new point of view, and doing magic is good because it allows people to hear the story again, and to understand it. We made a very clear definition that the illusion part starts with a Copperfield mythology."

On Flag Day, he delineated that mythology with a simple invitation: "Dream with me." Jennifer Jones, curator of the Star-Spangled Banner Exhibit, helped draw those dividing lines. She had armed Copperfield with some speculations about the missing star's trajectory, in addition to details about the flag's composition, from size and color specifics down to the fabric's stitch count.

Homer Liwag and Chris Kenner—Copperfield's closest collaborators—helped brainstorm how they might find the missing star in a magical context. "We had all kinds of methods and ideas for how to produce it," Copperfield says. "I had been working on an illusion involving the Ali Bongo principle. I always liked that effect, but I thought it had one big flaw: You never saw the box empty. I couldn't let that happen—it was a little imperfection we had to figure out to give it the Copperfield team 'extra'."

Although they'd been planning on reinvigorating the Ali Bongo principle for something else entirely—"I might revive it for that other purpose, after people forget about this a little bit," he says—the team reverse engineered the work they'd done to fit the Flag Day mythology. What if the recipient of the star had sewn it to bedsheets and hidden it under the floorboards of a Baltimore home for safekeeping? Copperfield knew he could source authentic bedsheets from the 1800s, and that his rectangular replica would hold up to handling.

"Then what if that spot burned during the Baltimore fire?" Copperfield asks. "It would have been destroyed, so you would have to go back in time. We knew we had an interesting production of a human being ... I wanted to turn him into a time traveler."

For those who haven't seen it (and in our digital edition there's a button on the first page of this article that will play it), the Flag Day performance starts with Copperfield's brief introduction on stage. Then a video plays, with voiceover from Copperfield explaining the facts of the flag and establishing the mythology that empowers the illusion. When Copperfield returns to the stage, he starts by showing two cardboard boxes "100 percent empty"—that "Copperfield extra" touch on the Ali

Bongo principle—and then stacks one back inside the other. He lifts the box and, after a beat, releases it, only to see it apparently float in mid-air. When he tries it a second time, the box floats more broadly, tilting to extreme angles seemingly in response to Copperfield's signature stage illusion hand gestures we've come to know so well. When Copperfield announced that the box was actually a time machine, the courier he had sent back to Baltimore in the 1800s burst through two layers of box to emerge in a cloud of smoke. From his satchel he brought forth the long-lost

15th star. Together, Copperfield and his time-traveling courier unfurled the bedsheet, and held it up to a projection of the Star-Spangled Banner on the screen behind them. For just a moment, it looked like that final star had, at long last, joined its brethren.

Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear over 35 years ago. We've been talking about it ever since, but on top of everything else he accomplished on that New York night in 1983, the illusion cemented the connection between Copperfield's command of magic and his deployment of metaphor. If the Statue of

Liberty is a symbol of freedom, and vanishing it was a reminder not to take that freedom for granted, we can read into the metaphorical restoration of the Star-Spangled Banner's 15th star a symbol of unity, and a reminder of the way that unity fortifies the country.

"At the end of the day it was really about the people being naturalized," Copperfield says. "Each star represented a state in the union, and the flag represented 15 states coming together. It was about people in America coming together and being united. If I can make a missing star reappear to unite the rest, it's a





reminder of how much strength we get as a nation when we are reunited.”

Copperfield has said publicly that he is the “proud son” of immigrants. He has also said that his performance was not political. But even if it wasn’t a direct commentary on the state of our democracy, the administration, or border policy, it could be considered political in its very nature as a reflection on one of the deeply impactful questions wracking the identity of this country in the current moment.

“What we gain through diversity is undeniable,” says Copperfield. “Even in our political climate, which has a lot of division, you can’t deny how amazing we are as a nation because we have benefitted from people of different cultures and ideas. That’s something you can’t argue with.”

Certainly, some people are arguing. Can a magical metaphor move those people to a new understanding of unity? Can it inspire in them a sudden appreciation of diversity? Perhaps. As a reminder of the illusion’s deeper meaning, Copperfield’s

replica of the 15th star is now part of the Smithsonian collection, joining the 13 other flag fragments that have been recovered to date.

There are also a few hundred Smithsonian staff members and 14 newly naturalized citizens that are unlikely to forget the performance anytime soon. “Originally, there were supposed to be 15 new citizens,” Copperfield says, “because there are 15 stripes and 15 stars on the flag. But at the last minute somebody disappeared, so there were only 14 citizens. It wasn’t quite a match there, but it’s okay, nobody seemed to mind.”

Of course, it was a perfect match in a way—the kind no one could have planned. 14 stars, 14 citizens. One missing piece of the puzzle. In seizing his chance to invent the lost story of the Star-Spangled Banner in his own way, Copperfield has called the 15th star the greatest missing piece in history.

“I think we all need a missing piece—it keeps us going. I know a

lot of people that are very satisfied with what they’ve done, and their career is usually over, artistically. I have always admired people that have one thing they’re still trying to get right. My life is full of that. I’m really trying to go onto the next thing that has to be solved or has to be explained or answered. Or else what’s the point?”

Even though Copperfield metaphorically reunited the Star-Spangled Banner’s original stars—or perhaps *because* he did—it’s still possible that the true 15th star will resurface someday. In addition to presenting this image of strength in unity, Copperfield has said he hopes his performance will inspire a renewed interest in the history of the flag.

“And you never know. They may find the real one. That’s fine too, because there will always be something else. Humanity never seems to learn—there’s always stuff we have to keep relearning over and over again. I think it’s fantastic that we always have dreams to dream.” •