

Genii

THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE



Olmedini

Olmedini el Mago is a man of another era. Born Olmedo Renteria in 1940 in Guayaquil, Ecuador, his magic, style, and soul all sing the memories of a simpler time. Forty years ago, Renteria saw a future for himself that followed the path of fame and fortune from Ecuador straight to New York City. Today, he can't see at all, but after all these years, the octogenarian's dreams are finally starting to come true.



Olmedini el Mago



By Chloe Olewitz
Photography by Jaime Permut

Magnifico!

At age 18, Renteria joined a local Guayaquil circus, first as a booking agent before training on the trapeze. Two years later, in 1960, a Spanish magician named Memper visited the circus on his South American tour. From the front row, Renteria watched fascinated as his first live magician took a wooden egg from a seemingly empty handkerchief and transformed it into a real egg—cracked, raw, and oozing yellow yolk.



Later that night, Memper found Renteria training with the other acrobats. He told Renteria he had noticed him in the audience, and had seen how captivated he was by the show. When Memper offered to teach him magic, Renteria leapt at the chance.

“Memper taught me my first few effects,” Renteria told *Genii* in a bilingual interview this spring. He learned Vanishing Cane, Color-Changing Handkerchief, and Milk Pitcher routines, and a trick in which the magician scrambled a raw egg in an audience member’s hat—the spectator thinks

his hat is destroyed, but when he tips the hat back onto his head the egg has vanished and the hat is pristine.

Then Memper set Renteria loose. “He told me, ‘From here on out, the world is yours.’ I practiced every night in front of all my circus colleagues, and after a few years of practice, the owner of another circus called me to perform magic in exchange for the opportunity to lose my stage fright,” Renteria laughs. On the road with those touring circuses, Renteria performed magic throughout Ecuador, in Lima, Peru, and in Santiago de Chile.

Renteria had left the circus completely by 1964, with plans to focus on magic full-time. He started performing in the Guayaquil school system, until one day the phone rang—it was local television channel, Canal 4. That first TV appearance sparked a handful more, spread throughout the late 1960s. By 1970, Renteria had graduated from the local channels to Canal 10, the national television network in Ecuador. A few years later, someone suggested he invent a better stage name, something more suitable to his glamorous character and to his newfound fame. Renteria thought immediately of Harry Houdini, and promptly transformed his given name; Olmedini was born.

In the early 1970s, Olmedini met an Argentinian couple, Marcel and Dalila, who were ready to leave behind their magic act and retire from show business. They gifted Olmedini their “Zig Zag” and sawing in half illusions; to this day, he believes the wow factor of presenting those stage illusions on national television is what made him a household name. “From then on,” he says, “I was a famous magician. I was a celebrity in my beloved Ecuador.”

As Olmedini watched his fame grow throughout the '70s and '80s, he started planning his move from Ecuador to the United States. He intended to continue developing his act and expanding his reputation, and



dreamed of joining the upper echelons of the magical elite. “I wanted to translate my South American fame into a larger, international, worldwide fame,” Olmedini says. “I wanted to be a famous magician in New York.”

Olmedini had gotten to know Richiardi, one of his magical heroes, early in his career. But he yearned to know the magicians he idolized from afar, performers like David Copperfield and Lance Burton, who had achieved the kind of global clout he craved. These were the stars of magic that illuminated Olmedini’s journey North. “The rest of us, the little ones, we call them the greats,” Olmedini says. “I always maintained faith and hope that someday I would be one of them.”

But trying to make it in show business in New York proved more difficult than Olmedini had anticipated. He tried to find work performing at nightclubs, restaurants, and special events, but he never quite found his way in. “The nightclubs never hired me,” he says. “They said to try back in a few months, or that they would book me if I had three or four beautiful showgirls.” Time, he had little, and showgirls, he had none.

As the rejections piled up, money was running out. Olmedini remembers seeing other New York magicians working the streets. He thought to himself, “I can do that.” On his first day, he set up on Broadway and 44th Street, right in the middle of Times Square. He performed from 11 in the morning until four in the afternoon and made \$6. On the second day, he went south to 6th Avenue and 34th Street; he made \$14. On day three, he made \$30 on Wall Street. It was a backup plan with a tough learning curve, but he slowly started to find a groove.

No sooner had Olmedini started getting the hang of busking in Manhattan than a cruel Northeastern winter blew into town. “The cold came, and the snow,” he remembers. A friend named April Rivera—“I’ll always remember her name”—warned Olmedini that he would get sick if he continued working the streets through the unforgiving winter months. She suggested he start working in the subways, where he could keep warm while still performing magic and hatting crowds. New Yorkers may not linger outside during the winter, but



they still have to get around town.

Olmedini started by exploring Columbus Circle, a hub of a station through which as many as six train lines pass depending on the time of day. It was 1990, less than a year after his arrival in New York. “I started to get to know the subway,” Olmedini says, “until I felt at home performing there.” As his navigation confidence grew, he started working different train lines and exploring the broad, multi-borough system. “I’ve been performing in the subway for 29 years and even today, I don’t



know every single line. The show is free, you don't pay for a ticket to see me, but I'm hard to find."

If you've ever ridden the New York City subway, you may have witnessed the underground buskers—musicians, singers, poets, dancers, kooks—offering up their talents to the commuting masses. You may have heard the shouts of "showtime" clearing the aisles for a breakdancing act on the Q train between Manhattan and Brooklyn, or on the L train's long passage underground between Bedford

and 1st Avenue. These impromptu performances are commonplace now, but they're only sometimes special.

As he continued to work the subways, Olmedini eventually started to secure some of the New York City bookings he'd originally envisioned for himself. He hung out at Flosso's Magic Shop, where he met magicians with whom he collaborated and performed. Olmedini says his most important shows in New York were his three performances at the United Nations, culminating in an appear-

ance at the UN's 50th anniversary celebration in 1995. "But for me, every show is special," he says. "I approach each one with lots of responsibility."

During his 10-minute stage act, Olmedini performs a Vanishing Birdcage and produces the two live doves that live with him in his East Harlem apartment. He considers the Garden of Flowers bouquet production to be one of his signatures, and he closes on a Vanishing Cane that turns into a flagstaff production, with a silken flag and sturdy flagpole intact. "I interject other sleight of hand effects between those larger tricks, working from my pockets," Olmedini

says. "I know lots of tricks, but I don't want to do them because of my condition."

In December 2012, Olmedini suffered a stroke that resulted in total blindness. "I lost my sight from one day to the other," he explains. His eyes filled with blood; he has been blind ever since. Olmedini spent all of 2013 inside his apartment—it was a year filled with hardship, discouragement, and pain. "I fell a lot, and I got lots of wounds and injuries from hitting door frames, falling in the bathroom, trying to shower ... 2013 was very difficult for me."

One day, a neighbor stopped Olmedini out-



side the entrance to their apartment building and urged him not to give up. “She took me by the hand and said, ‘Olmedini, you have to continue. You have to overcome this. The show must go on.’ I told her it would be very impossible.” The woman invited Olmedini to be her guest and to perform at a party she was hosting that same evening. He accepted, and he remembers the audience cheering him on after he performed his Multiplying Bottles routine. “I received a lot of applause that night, but I know it was for my condition, that I couldn’t see.”

Inspired by that low point, healing steadily,

and slowly recovering his strength, Olmedini decided to recommit himself to magic. He started practicing again, and worked to put together a routine that he could master as a blind magician. From 1990 until 2012, Olmedini’s subway act consisted of three productions: a handkerchief, a rabbit, and a dove. Now, his routine features a Vanishing Birdcage, a vanishing handkerchief, a dove production, and an Appearing Cane.

Twenty years ago, when Olmedini still whistled to accompany his act because he spoke no English, his magic caught the attention of a young Guatemalan photographer named Jaime Permuth. “Olmedini walked onto the train wearing a tuxedo—he made a big impression on me,” says Permuth. “His act was exactly the type of magic I had experienced growing up in Latin America. I felt right at home when I saw him perform.”

Permuth remembers connecting with Olmedini on the subway at that first meeting, and thanking him for the magic, but they didn’t stay in touch or see each other again until last summer. Permuth woke up one morning with Olmedini on his mind: “I remembered his name perfectly. I remembered his magic. And I decided to look for him.” It wasn’t easy to track him down, but after a few cold calls to a number Permuth had found through an Olmedini fan page on Facebook, they closed the two-decade-long loop.

“When I heard his voice on the other end of the phone, we clicked right away,” Permuth says. Their first photo shoot took place shortly after that phone call; Permuth accompanied Olmedini on his usual 4-train route from 59th Street to 125th Street. In January of this year, *The New York Times* published a series of Permuth’s photographs from that day and other trips since, capturing Olmedini performing in the subway, at home with his magic collection, and living life in New York.

Olmedini was thrilled when Permuth told him about the two-page spread in the *Times*: “I feel like we’re playing the World Series in Yankee Stadium, bases loaded, bottom of the ninth, and we just hit the ball clear out of the park!”

Permuth says that despite his blindness, Olmedini is very involved in the process of image-making. “Olmedini has a very sophisti-





cated sense of how he wants to be perceived, as any veteran performer would.” Permuth describes every image to Olmedini in great detail, identifying what’s in the foreground, what’s in the background, from what angle he shot the photo, and what moment in a magic trick is captured in the frame. “I wish I could show him the pictures,” he says.

Olmedini and Permuth have been working together ever since, and are now in the midst of collaborating on a long-term documentary

project that will take the form a photography book treasuring Olmedini’s magic. “I have survived all these years from the donations of the public,” Olmedini says, “and I’m not ashamed of it. I give a million thanks to Jaime for having kept me in mind from 1999 until today. He is my discoverer—it’s thanks to him that all of this is happening.” Although *The New York Times* had published an article about “Olmedini, El Mago Magnifico” in 2001, it was Permuth’s photo-essay this year that



earned Olmedini this surge in attention from New Yorkers, the international media, and the magic community at large.

When Peter Samelson first saw the *New York Times* story, he shared it with Michael Chaut (they are both founding producers of *Monday Night Magic*, a staple of the New York City magic scene that has been running weekly since 1997). “I kept thinking about Frank Brents, who was part of our founding collective at *Monday Night Magic*,” Samelson tells *Genii*, “and

about people who don’t normally get a chance to appear on a stage in New York. Olmedini’s story really struck me.” From Samelson’s initial interest in getting to know Olmedini, they extended an invitation to the show that quickly evolved into an invitation to perform.

Olmedini was surprised by it all: “I wasn’t prepared to go back on stage.” Shock aside, it was a triumphant return to one of New York City’s better-known stages. He performed an extended version of his subway routine, in a special guest appearance at the top of the second half after Torkova and Francis Menotti’s opening and middle sets and before Samelson’s headlining act.

“The fact that he’s working without sight is amazing,” Samelson says of Olmedini’s performance at *Monday Night Magic*. “The audience loved it. It’s so clear that he’s confident and comfortable, which is proof of all that flight time.” By all accounts, Olmedini’s striking presence and sense of awareness on stage shine as a testament to his many decades of professional performance.

For Olmedini, that appearance was a step in the right direction toward his larger life goal. But more than that, the surprise performance was, to him, deeply meaningful. “I felt very happy at *Monday Night Magic* because I could feel the audience’s love,” Olmedini says. “Although I am blind, or perhaps because I am blind, I feel their love more strongly. I have learned something about love since losing my sight.”

This past June, Permuth—who has become Olmedini’s unofficial translator and has guided him through many of the opportunities that have materialized this year—received a phone call from the New York Yankees. “It felt surreal,” Permuth says. “What they had planned for Olmedini felt like they were going to give him the keys to the city. I kept trying to wrap my head around what was happening.” The Yankees wanted to honor Olmedini at their 10th annual HOPE Week—Helping Others Persevere and Excel—a celebration of locals and fans who have contributed to their communities by spreading hope, sharing encouragement, and performing acts of goodwill.

Permuth called Olmedini to warn him that something big was about to happen, but he kept all the details close to his chest. “I told



him to get a haircut and wear his best suit. He has this red sequin jacket—he looks like a million bucks in it. I told him: ‘Stay home on Wednesday, because that’s the day you go from being a respected magician to becoming a legendary magician. Trust me,’ I said, ‘This is going to be one of the best days of your life.’”

So when six New York Yankees pitchers showed up on Olmedini’s doorstep one Wednesday morning, Olmedini hardly knew what hit him. Permuth had watched each Yankee arrive in his own limo one by one, and marveled while they lingered on the East Harlem sidewalk for almost an hour, waiting

for the full group to form. CNN en Español, Univision, and the Yankees’ YES Network were all there waiting when Olmedini emerged from his apartment building into a street full of Yankees players.

Each pitcher shook Olmedini’s hand and introduced himself. “Olmedini played it cool,” Permuth says, “but later he told me he felt his blood drop from his head into his feet.” Together the crew rode the 4 train to Yankee Stadium—a fitting tribute to both Olmedini’s career and to his identity as a New Yorker. He performed for the pitchers on the subway, naturally, before performing a 20-minute rou-



time for the group of school children waiting for him at Yankee Stadium.

The New York Yankees Foundation presented the Society of American Magicians' Magic Endowment Fund with a \$10,000 donation in honor of The Great Olmedini. The Parent Assembly No.1 members who accepted the check (including dean George Schindler and president-elect Joel Zaritsky) then officially inducted Olmedini as a member of the S.A.M.

In one of the biggest shocks of the day, Olmedini was also given a Presidential Volunteer Service Award and accompanying letter signed by President Trump, "in rec-

ognition and appreciation for commitment to strengthen our nation and communities through volunteer service." Olmedini said a few words in acceptance of these accolades, but they were mostly short and sweet. He has been learning English, but still mostly communicates in Spanish. He ended his speech with a simple "Viva los Yankees." Viva los Yankees? Viva Olmedini.

After the awards, Olmedini was called into an on-field huddle with Yankees PR; he was going to throw the game's ceremonial first pitch. Permut was concerned: "How does a blind man throw a pitch from the mound

at Yankee Stadium?” He suggested Olmedini throw the ball underhand, like a softball pitch, figuring it would sail straight to the catcher. “But Olmedini wasn’t too happy about that,” Permuth says.

If all the major league pitchers throw overhand, then Olmedini wanted to pitch overhand, too. He acted out a pitching parody, pretending to chew tobacco and spit. Everyone around him was laughing, but Olmedini wasn’t playing around. He all but demanded something to chew—he had a role to play, a character calling to him. A Yankees staffer was sent on a gum run.

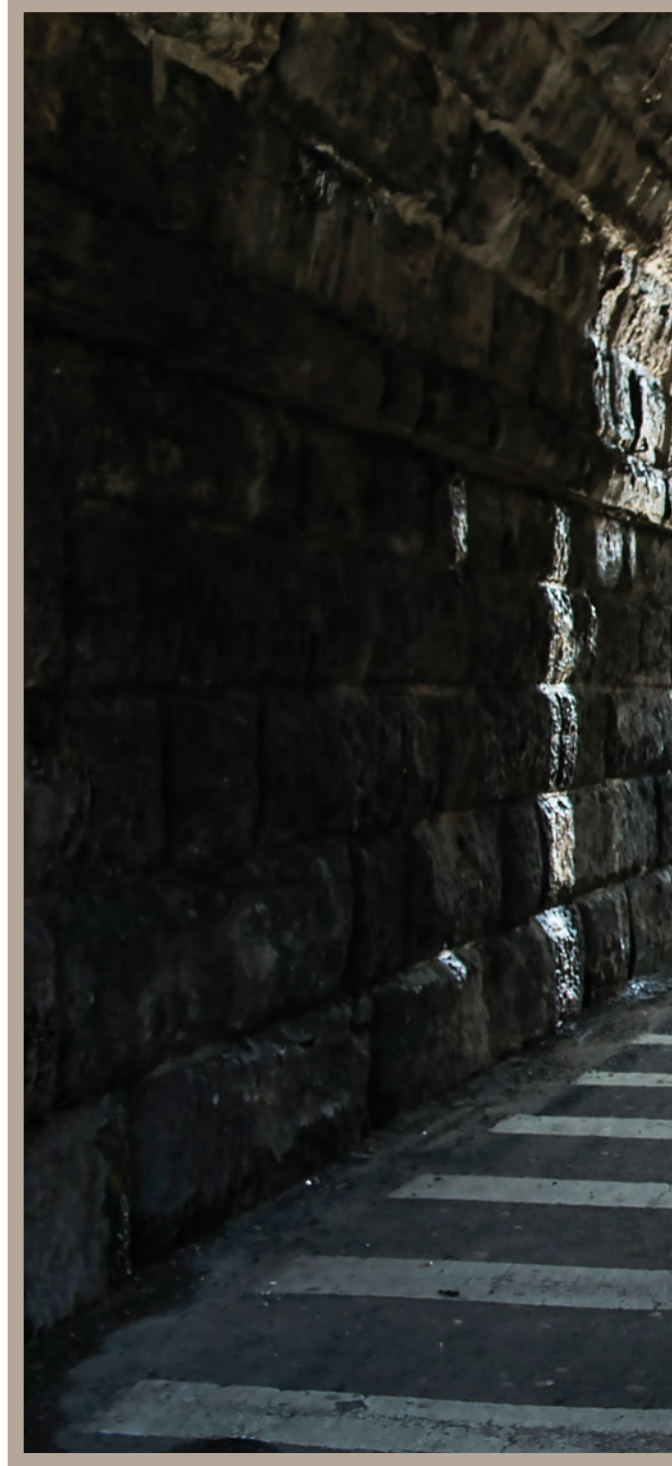
Olmedini was escorted into position to throw the first pitch, and he went into his pitcher act on the mound, winding up and hoofing the ground. He took his time, as 50,000 people in Yankee Stadium cheered him on. In the end, Olmedini faked from his overhand windup into an underhand throw that landed straight in the catcher’s mitt. Permuth says CC Sabathia, the starting pitcher for that day’s game, was grinning from ear to ear.

Perhaps that’s Olmedini’s real magic. How seriously he approaches every performance, with honor and respect, whether it’s with doves and handkerchiefs or with a New York Yankees baseball, in a subway car, or on the mound at Yankee Stadium. How he transports us to another world, steals us away to another time, even just for a moment.

Footage of Olmedini being interviewed and performing in the subway played on the stadium jumbotrons periodically throughout the game, honoring Olmedini’s life’s work. The Yankees gave Permuth and Olmedini the VIP treatment, with prime seats right above the dugout and an extravagant meal. “It was lavish,” Permuth says. “It made Olmedini feel like a king.” Between Permuth’s translations and the energy of the crowd around him, Olmedini pieced together what was happening on the field in his own way. “In his head, he was reconstructing the game,” Permuth says. Olmedini had been a sports fan during his youth in Ecuador, and had visited Yankee Stadium a few times, years ago, when he still had his sight.

“I don’t think there’s a greater tribute to a New Yorker,” Permuth says, “or a greater show of love for this city, than to throw a ceremonial first pitch in Yankee Stadium. I just don’t think there’s anything bigger than that.”

Olmedini is slated to be honored at Magi-Fest next year, surrounded by many of the



magicians he has always admired. Permuth’s *Times* photos have earned Olmedini a good deal of international attention, too; television networks from around the world have reached out to interview Olmedini and film him performing magic, from TV Globo in Brazil to stations in Russia, Colombia, France, and Spain.

“I’ve been able to survive all these years as a magician, and to raise a family, thanks to magic,” Olmedini says. “I haven’t found fortune or great wealth, but I’ve always been able to make a living.” His daughter and three



sons live in Australia, Argentina, and Ecuador, and when they talk on the phone, they tell Olmedini how proud they are of him. After so many years of unyielding hope, despite the skepticism that has always surrounded him, nagging, pulling at his shirtsleeves, their father has started to find his success. “They ask me, ‘Papa, how were you able to pull it off?’”

The dream with which Olmedini left Ecuador 30 years ago is still his guiding light. The fact that he hasn’t yet realized his dream hasn’t caused Olmedini to give up or lose his

way; it has only inspired him to continue on. Now, after so many decades of hard work, that hope is paying off.

“I wanted to be among the great magicians, in the books and the lore of the magic world, and I don’t feel that I am there yet. But I’m starting to feel I’m becoming famous. I was driven from Ecuador to New York by my desire that the great magicians of the world would one day recognize the name ‘Olmedini.’ It’s been my lifelong dream to be recognized in the pages of *Genii*. Today, finally, I can say, ‘Eureka.’” •