

A one-man 'Christmas Carol'

Magician/historian brings tale to Waukesha library

By Ian Bergersen

262-523-2654

ibergersen@conley.net.com

WAUKESHA — Dressed in clothing from the Victorian era, William Pack regaled the audience with the tale of Ebenezer Scrooge and his transformation from a cold-hearted miser into a model of generosity and kindness on Thursday evening.

Although just one man, Pack imitated every character from the beloved Christmas story with varying voices. He switched between modulated narration to Scrooge's cold, gruff voice and the Christmas spirits' haunting wails. Each scene Pack created orally was visually represented by a slideshow that included engravings from Charles Dickens' original copy of "A Christmas Carol" and scenes from films about the story. The captivated audience's facial expressions changed from amusement whenever Pack shouted "bah humbug" to fascination during Scrooge's haunting.

The Waukesha Public Library is one of the hundreds of libraries Pack has brought his programs to that range from dramatic retellings of "A Christmas Carol" and works by Edgar Allan Poe to interactive shows on magic and cognitive science. Performing for audiences ranging

from 150 to two, the size of the crowd doesn't matter as long as Pack can share his knowledge in an entertaining way and inspire others to go out and explore some more.

"All of my programs are really an expression of things that I'm curious about and things that I'm passionate about," said Pack.

A lifelong love of libraries

The author, historian, and magician found a love for books at a young age that started his career in performing and educating others.

"Libraries have been very important to my life," Pack said. "All the programs I do can be directly tied to my experiences in the libraries, and the worlds, that were opened up to me."

William Pack grew up on the south side of Chicago, and at 8 years old, he became obsessed with his local library. Pack would frequently take his little red wagon to the library and fill it with a wide variety of books that drew his curiosity.

"I became a sort of a library rat, in which I spent all my time there," said Pack. "The librarians were so wonderful to let me have the run of the place, and I become almost like their mascot."

He developed a growing interest in the history of magic and iconic showmen like P.T. Barnum and Harry Houdini. He started practicing magic at 12 years old and turned the art into a career of performing magic for audiences. Pack became engrossed with the history of magic and could be found at various magic conventions.

Pack worked in magic shops for 23 years, the last 13 years at Magic Masters at Navy Pier in Chicago. During this time Pack taught magic techniques to customers, including actor Will Smith for his portrayal of Muhammad Ali in the film "Ali." Pack taught Smith one of Ali's favorite magic tricks involving a sleight-of-hand technique with a silk handkerchief.

But spending 40 hours a week running the magic shop put Pack's show business career on hold. In 2008, Pack decided to leave the shop and rebuild his performance career. He started with creating library programs for adults, which he believed was an underdeveloped opportunity.

His first program was a ghost show that incorporated magic techniques to give the illusion of paranormal activity, and the program became a hit. Pack then decided to offer another one about the leg-



Ian Bergersen/
Special to The Freeman

William Pack's performances range from magic shows to retellings of stories to educational lectures.

endary escape artist Harry Houdini.

"It's a subject I've lived with all my life," Pack said. "Magicians are always kind of overshadowed by Houdini."

As a historian of magic, Pack tells the true story of the legendary magician and sorts fact from fiction. As a professional magician, Pack turns the lecture into a dynamic presentation by performing some of Houdini's escapes.

"It really took off from there. I went from doing 20 programs my first year to 50 programs to doing at least 70 programs a year for the last 10 years," Pack said.

Pack said that he owes much of his career to libraries, and will continue to bring audiences the sense of wonder that he found as a kid.