

## Houdini: the Copenhagen Affair

by Johan Ahlberg



**The Cirkus Building in central Copenhagen, circa 1900 (Envig circusbog)**

In many biographies on Houdini there has been a controversy regarding Houdini's 1913 performance in Copenhagen. Did he perform or did he fail? There is a story about how Houdini arrives in Copenhagen and at the central station gets the tragic telegram telling him about his mother's sickness.

In the early 1990 I decided to investigate this story. I spent many hours in the Royal Library archives also talking to old Danish magicians.

I have managed to gather some light on what actually happened. Copenhagen, the capitol of Denmark, was in the turn of the 1900 a growing city. People were moving in from the countryside and the town was expanding vastly. Demands for shows and spectacles were in the vogue and many famous artists had great success in Copenhagen

Houdini was first performed in Copenhagen in 1901. He wrote in his pitchbook *America's Sensational Perplexer*. "First half of

October, 1901. Packed them in at the Scala Theatre, Copenhagen Denmark. Manager Lorenson wanted Houdini to stay the full month, but being contracted in Manheim, it was impossible for him to accept."

Houdini the showman had great success with his handcuff act and the Danish public really liked him.

In Copenhagen the Tivoli had performances and amusements. Close to Tivoli was the Circus building which opened on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1886. In the Circus building it was possible to have shows both in the summer and in the winter. Director Beketow had seen Houdini performing in Germany and drawing big audiences. Beketow wanted Houdini as a main attraction in his new spectacular show scheduled for the summer of 1913.

Houdini arrived in Copenhagen with his wife Bess, and his assistants. He brought with him a sure fire attraction, the water torture cell he previously had featured in Germany.

In the Copenhagen newspaper **Ekstrabladet** there was an advertisement on 16 July 1913, Cirkus Beketow grand opening today Wednesday at 8 o'clock. In the program the central act is HOUDINI. The modern Prometheus that nobody can catch with fetters or hold as a prisoner! Also a reward, 5 000 Kr to anybody that can prove it is possible that to obtain air the water torture cell!

In another newspaper, *Politiken*, there is a review the following day on Thursday 17 July 1913 of Wednesday's grand opening and of Houdini's act. The Danish public was amazed and thrilled by the escape king. In the end of the article the reporter is asking himself: "*God must know how the man did it or did he blind the public's eyes?*"

*Extrabladet* also featured an article about the performance. Houdini baffled the public with his water tank and he had a long speech in

Danish to the public demonstrating his handcuffs and fetters. Houdini put a lot of work into his act trying to speak in Danish. In the audience the two royal princes Aage and Axel watched the show.

The same day, Wednesday, at 12 o'clock Houdini had been called to a press meeting in the Circus building and was going to do a special show. At noon about fifty people had gathered. Houdini was just going to address the public when a telegram messenger brought him a telegram. Houdini was in a cheerful mode when he was addressed "telegram for Mister Houdini."

Houdini broke the red seal on the envelope reading the lines and fell unconscious to the floor. In the telegram he had read the tragic message informing him of his mother's death.

The papers go on how the poor artist was carried to his dressing room. After recovering he was hiding his face with his hands crying my mother...my dear mother.

For Houdini it was a terrible blow since he was attached to his mother. He sent a message to Director Beketow that he was sick. Later a doctor examined Houdini and stated that he suffered from a serious kidney disease.

On Friday the 18 July 1913 there was a notice "The escape king HOUDINI, after receiving the telegram yesterday of his mother's death broke down, couldn't perform last night." The circus direction put their hope in his young wife trying to console him. But Houdini couldn't perform and the Circus refunded the tickets. By telegram the director Beketow was called to Copenhagen from Budapest and Houdini contract was ended.

On Tuesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1913, there is an article that Houdini has left the town, without an operation. He has been escorted by a Danish doctor to Bremerhafen Germany where he is to board the steamer Kronprinsse Cecilie. Houdini has promised to return to Copenhagen.

Circus Beketow was later managed by Schumann. The outbreak of WW1 in 1914 put an end to the plans and Houdini never came back.

A close friend to Houdini, the magician Leo Leslie, had told several old magicians that he

**Cirkus Beketow**  
Idag, Onsdag Kl. 8

**Stor ekstra Premiere.**

Nyt Program, sammensat af fremragende første Klasses Artistnumre, som i Nobelbed og Kunst overtræffer alt og vil henrykke enhver til Beundring.

**HOUDINI**



Særligt fremhæves:  
**Den moderne Prothosa,**  
som Ingen kan fængsle eller fastholde. Den menneskelige Skarpindigheds- og Smidigheds Møsterstykke. Houdini betaler 5000 Kr. Belønning til enhver, der beviser, at han kan få Luft under sit Ophold i Vandcellen (se Afbildningen).

Nyt! Orlando og Borenko, dobbelt Jockeyridt. Nyt! Miss Zehora, Lynrytterke Nyt! Miss Maude Wulff, Sko'orytterkernes Dronning. Nyt! Alex Trio, excentriske, musikalske Clownner. Nyt! Arrigonia, kaldet de 4 røde flyvende Døvlæ. Nyt! The Hamamura, 7 japanske Hol'kunstnere, ankomne direkte fra Tokio. Desuden mange andre Nyheder og nye Heste.

Billets: uden Forh. fra Kl. 11. Tlf. 2192.

Advertisement promoting Houdini (Extrabladet)





**The Cirkus Building today. (Johan Ahlberg photo.)**

had tickets to the Houdini's performance and that it was a success. The public went wild.

The reports in the papers end here, but not the story. Houdini left Copenhagen in a hurry. Later a man working in the Circus building found some hand and leg irons in Houdini's dressing room. These irons were given to a Danish magician Truxa.

Truxa was a professional performer with more than 50 years in show business, he also became a close friend of mine and later the irons were presented to me.

Among the cuffs were a set of heavy plated neck-hand-leg irons that could have been seen all over a big theatre. The irons seem to be the same as can be seen on the

poster from Circus Busch Germany. Armed with them, and regulation police cuffs, Houdini would have been more than ready to pull off a publicity stunt or meet a challenge from a Danish locksmith.

In Houdini's own accounts of the Copenhagen tour he never mentions that he had made one performance, but on his letterhead he stated that he broke out of the city jail in Copenhagen. No records exist that he actually did that jail break. It's likely that the officials in Denmark would not have allowed such a stunt.





Set of irons found in Houdini's dressing room.

**Sources and acknowledgements:**

*"Americas Sensational Perplexer"* by Houdini

The Royal Library - Copenhagen

*Politiken* and *Extrabladet* Newspapers - Copenhagen

Truxa, the Danish master magician



Truxa - the Danish master magician is cuffed by the Swedish police as he accepts their challenge during a 1950 circus tour of Sweden.



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