

A game of chance invented by God

Ricky Jay's 'Dice': Ruminations and ruinations

By Todd Leopold

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(CNN) -- Ricky Jay didn't know what to do with his decaying dice.

Well, let's back up. Ricky Jay is a magician and actor, perhaps best known for his roles in David Mamet films such as "House of Games" and "Heist" and for providing the arresting opening narration for Paul Thomas Anderson's "Magnolia." He's also an expert close-up magician, one of the finest sleight-of-hand artists in the world and a collector of many, many things.

Including old dice. Hundreds and hundreds of old dice.

Some of these dice were made of celluloid, the same stuff as old film stock. Old forms of celluloid contain nitric and sulfuric acid, and the material has a nasty habit of decomposing without warning. Jay's celluloid dice were turning into a reeking mass of imploding crystals.

"I was putting them in more and more remote closets," Jay says in a phone interview from his home in Los Angeles, California. "My wife would say, 'What's that smell?' But I couldn't bring myself to throw them out."

Then one day it hit him. He had a photographer friend named Rosamond Purcell whose specialty was photographing aging and decaying objects, such as a book that had been slowly eaten by termites. He called Purcell and told her, "I have a collection of decaying dice."

There was a long pause.

"That's the best news I've heard in months," Purcell said.

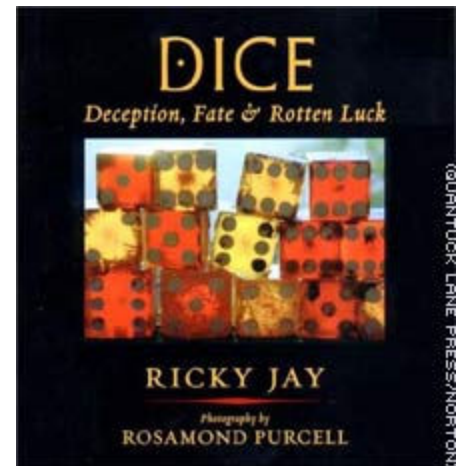
'They're so alive'

The result of their collaboration is "Dice: Deception, Fate and Rotten Luck" (Quantuck Lane Press/Norton), a book of 12 short chapters containing Purcell's loving photographs of Jay's crumbling dice, and his own elegant history of the humble cube, which touches on two subjects dear to Jay's heart: the vagaries of chance and the clever ways humans try to circumvent it.

Dice, Jay writes, have been around since ancient times. According to Plato, God invented dice. ("God does not play dice," Einstein famously said, but how would he know?)

The Egyptians used a form of dice called astragali, made from the heel bones of hooved animals. The Romans were fond of the game; rulers of the Middle Ages rolled the bones. Whenever there have been games of chance and attempts at divination, there have been dice. They've taken on a life of their own.

"Some people have described the photographs as picturing a living organism," says Jay. Perhaps early dicers didn't imagine their cubes of bone as being animate objects, he adds, "but when you see them break down, I agree -- they're so alive."



And then there are the lively folk tales that surround dice, many involving invocations of the deity. Jay writes about an 11th-century Norwegian king who managed to win a disputed island by intoning a prayer, then beating a roll of 12 from his competitor by throwing two sixes -- following which one of the king's dice split in two, giving him an improbable, amazing score of 13.

Another man, an 18th-century Swiss gambler, incurred the wrath of God when he threw his dagger at heaven after a poor roll, Jay records. Three drops of blood fell from the sky, and the gambler and his two partners met quick, violent ends.

Dice stories have even carried over to America, where the story of Stagger Lee has become an oft-echoing legend. In the '50s, Lloyd Price had a hit song with the tale. In Price's version, Stagger threw a seven; his competitor, Billy, "swore that he threw eight." Stagger, furious, shoots Billy, an all-too-common end in dice tales -- particularly when they involve cheating, or "loading," the ivories.

Jay, being a master of prestidigitation, has manipulated cards in countless ways to the enjoyment of his audiences. But even he pauses when asked if he's ever tried to fool with the devil's boxes.

He finally replies, very softly. "Yes," he says.

From mathematicians to guys on the corner

But Jay admits he likes cards much better. He may have hundreds of dice, but he has thousands of books and prints, as would befit a man who has contributed entries on magic for the Encyclopedia Britannica, as well as written two books, "Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women" and "Jay's Journal of Anomalies."

"I'm a guy who likes paper," he says. "I take enormous pleasure in paper."

The origins of "Dice" -- as opposed to the origins of dice -- only go back to 2000. After Purcell photographed Jay's dice, Jay showed them to New Yorker writer Lawrence Wechsler, who suggested Jay pass them on to New Yorker editor David Remnick. Three photos, and an edited version of Jay's text, appeared in an issue late that year. A book allowed Jay and Purcell to restore their work to completeness.

Jay had intended to do more with his text, but his New York show, "Ricky Jay: On the Stem" -- a rapid-patter narrative history of Broadway illustrated with illusions -- was extended several times, delaying his work (and exhausting his stamina, he adds).

He'll get his chance this week at a lecture on New York's Lower East Side discussing "The Splendors of Decaying Celluloid" with Purcell and filmmakers Errol Morris and Bill Morrison.

And what of the dice themselves? The frail, decaying pieces -- which, Purcell writes, she had to handle with tweezers -- may find a home elsewhere in Los Angeles, at the wonderfully named Museum of Jurassic Technology, a home for relics and curiosities of all kinds.

It sounds like an appropriate resting place for such humble yet dramatic items. After all, dice have entranced everyone from "eminent mathematicians looking ... at probabilities to guys on the street looking for an edge," Jay says.

What are the odds of that?