



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Signor Blitz at the Lyceum

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After management changed its policy of not allowing magic shows in Alexandria's Lyceum, magicians staged shows at Lyceum Hall through the 1840s, beginning with four performances by Signor Blitz in February and March 1843. Signor Blitz was perhaps the most famous magician of his day and performed at Lyceum Hall early in his career.

Blitz was born in England as Antonio van Zandt in 1810 and moved to the United States in 1834, eventually settling in Philadelphia. He performed professionally for 50 years, traveling the country, including shows for former President Martin Van Buren and Presidents Millard Fillmore and Abraham Lincoln.

Blitz's act was varied, mixing magic, ventriloquism, animal acts and plate spinning. His Lyceum Hall show ads promised readers that:

"Interesting Illusions will be Introduced. To conclude with Ventriloquism and the Dance of the Six Dinner Plates on a Common Table."

A writer for the *Alexandria Gazette* noted that "Signor Blitz's performances at the Lyceum Hall continue to amuse and delight old and young. He is not only one of the most expert adepts at his art, but his vivacity, and good humor secure him the approbation of his audience." Accounts throughout his life noted his genial good humor.

Ads in other newspapers reveal more details of Blitz's act. Just prior to appearing at Lyceum Hall, he performed five shows at Carusi's Saloon in Washington, D.C., and the ad in the *Daily Madisonian* noted, "Signor Blitz can create more laughter and amusement, during his performances, than any other Professor. He can produce, from a small quantity of Bird Seed, the choicest Sugar Plums and BonBons [sic] for the Ladies. He can also obtain from – nothing – an abundance of the choicest Fruits &c. &c. for his Fair visitors." An attendee at one of the shows confirmed, "He did, as stated in his advertisement, produce a box of choice Apples, from nothing."

Ads did not mention magic at Lyceum Hall "to delight old and young" again after 1849. In the 1850s and 60s, famous magicians including Blitz and others performed many more times at competing venues Liberty Hall and Sarepta Hall. But Lyceum Hall primarily hosted lectures and meetings in the 1850s.



'The Plate Waltz, composed and played nightly at the entertainments of Sig. Blitz by J.A. Janke, Jr.' Reproduced Jr.' Reproduced on the March 1946 cover of The Sphinx. PHOTO/THE JOHN MULLHOLLAND COLLECTION.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

During the Civil War, Lyceum Hall served as a hospital and meeting space. After the war, it became a private residence and in the twentieth century an office building and, later, the first United States Bicentennial Visitor Center. It now houses The Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum and the restored lecture hall again hosts lectures, meetings, concerts, and, occasionally, magical performances.

The Alexandria History Museum at the Lyceum's tradition of magic shows continues with the Family Holiday Magic Show on Dec. 7. The show is free, but reservations are required and can be acquired at alexandriava.gov/shop

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.