Ms. Morgan: Cover Girl!

By Ryan Roschke Oct 12, 2017

Editor’s Note. The Chainletter begrudgingly reviewed the Stephen King novel Gerald’s Game in January of 2012. While there is an escape from handcuffs, that is not the main premise of the story. Now it is a movie, and worth revisiting.

Note: this review is (relatively) spoiler-free, so dig in!

At the end of September, Netflix released the last of the month's new slate. Among the additions was an original film from the streaming site called 1992 novel of the same name. The adaptation promised a pretty straightforward plot: Man and woman go to woods to save their marriage. Man handcuffs woman to bed for kinky sex times. Man dies of heart attack. Madness ensues. You might be asking yourself how a woman chained to a bed makes for a compelling horror movie, but I'm hoping I can adequately peel back the layers and show you that the movie goes way beyond that seemingly basic premise.
Don’t let the title fool you. You do not have to be an escape artist, or have a super hero physique to do the escape-themed routines on this DVD, one of L&L Publishing Dan Harlan’s Pack Small Play Big series. In this, like the others in the series, the show really does pack in a rather small briefcase. The show as Dan presents it runs about 30 minutes, but every routine on the DVD can stand alone, or work in concert with one or two others to provide a unique interlude in a regular stage or parlor show.

You will recognize most of these tricks from even brief descriptions. However, Dan Harlan seems to have an encyclopedic mind about things magical; many of you will find subtleties, tips, twists, and new techniques that elevate the impact of the effect several times over.

You are encouraged to run through the complete presentation of the act without checking the methods, as many are tempted to do. By doing so you get a sense of how the act is set up and how it plays to an audience. You will also determine whether or not you should use the whole act or use only parts of it. Study Dan’s professional pacing – the routines move quickly, are fun to watch, and will fool you. This kind of act can be deadly if it drags. Maybe Houdini could take 20 minutes to get out of a rope tie, but today’s audiences won’t put up with it.

The opening routine is a three-phase knot-tying demonstration using thick white rope that is much more visible than standard magician’s rope. This is followed by a double thumb cuff routine with lots of comedy, then a great hostage rope tie in which the escape takes place under the cover of a borrowed jacket. Dan then uses the jacket and two ropes for the tried and true jacket release, with the ropes threaded through the sleeves of the jacket, but with a subtlety you may not have seen before.
The thumb tie is followed by the old loop of ribbon threaded through two steel rings. The ribbon is passed around the waist of a lady from the audience who holds the rings in front of her. When two other spectators pull on the ropes, which had been passed through the steel rings, the ribbon passes through the lady. This is a very effective routine using three spectators, which as shown on the DVD took up a lot of space! It did indeed “play big.”

Taking up the most space in the briefcase was regulation straitjacket, from which Dan escaped after being secured by a gentleman from the audience. While many will still want to use a gimmicked jacket, Dan does explain how he performs the escape with the real thing. This routine was funny and very strong, perhaps on a par with the thumb tie. In fact, it is probable that a lay audience would rank the straitjacket number one, where magicians, understanding the intricacies of the thumb tie, will prefer the latter.

Possibly the best routine on the tape is Dan’s thumb tie, using two shoelaces. While it really did seem impossible for him to get loose, he caught steel rings between his hands and hooked the spectators elbow, as well. We magicians know how it must happen; the lay audience has no idea. And it is a good bet that you won’t know his method either. Very nice.
Finally Dan explains the importance of finishing the act with something not quite so dramatic and energetic: a simple release of a playing card, a King for Houdini, from a ribbon under a black cloth.

In addition to a full explanation of the methods, Dan also discusses how he packs the case, why various effects fit in the act, where they do, how he keeps records of his performances, and various other bits of wisdom. As we stated in the beginning, don’t let the title fool you. The Escape Artist Show is for magicians who are not escape artists. Well done, Dan.

Some world records are fallen into by dumb luck. My own record of performing the world’s first and only zero-gravity straitjacket escape falls into that category. I did not planning, no fundraising, not publicity work to get it done. I simply received an anonymous email from someone at Northrup Grumman inviting me into zero gravity due to my day job as a Physics teacher. They did not know then that I planned to bring a straitjacket onboard. The point is that someone might, perhaps rightfully, accuse me of not paying my dues, yet reaping the benefits.

With Stuart Burrell, this is not the case. Stuart currently holds thirteen world records, and may be heading toward number fourteen.
Think about the factors that go into spending 1 hour lifting weights, or doing anything for that matter. First you need a rhythm, if you don’t keep a rhythm going you will lose pace. Once pace is lost, so go your chances. As Tom Hanks said in the movie, A League of Their Own... “If it was easy, everybody would do it.”

So Stuart had to find and set his pace. With any physical effort, breath control becomes vital. You must keep your body oxygenated. In his book Stuart goes into the downside of not maintaining proper breathing during physical exertion. He explains that the road it leads to is not one of setting a world record. In fact, it is physically gruelling. Yet, with proper training, obviously it can be done. Of course it helps to have a good bit of perseverance. One of the best ways to keep that up is to surround yourself with people you either don’t want to let down, or you’d be embarrassed to fail in front of.

Half of Stuart’s records are for escapes, while the other half are for weight lifting efforts. Can you imagine what it takes to set such a record? Well, first you must be aware of the previous record, and then you must train until you can do better. I suppose the same is true of his escape records such as, “most handcuffs unlocked in one minute.” But how to train? No half measures for Stuart. His records are just plain amazing. There was a famous film shown on various sports shows of a very powerfully muscled man named Ted Arcidi setting a bench press record. He lifted 718.1 pounds. He had a spotter, but otherwise no assistance. Not to belittle Mr. Arcidi’s work, but he only had to be the best for a few seconds, and lift a massive amount of weight once. None of that for Stuart, his record include a major endurance component. Things like most weight lifted in one hour. So, how do you train for this? Practice... Lots and lots of practice. No one sets an endurance record casually. It takes planning and preparation, and hope for no surprise wild cards dealt.
What kind of physical specimen is Stuart? Well, he has literally “broken a chain.” He did this by snapping a pair of regulation cuffs apart. Spreading his arms and pulling at his wrists till the cuff’s chain broke got the job done. This would suggest a real power-house of a man, yet he looks fairly normal. This suggests layers of strongly compacted muscle. He probably has the right body type to pull that off. Aside from breaking a chain, there is a photo of him tearing a chainmail jacket off bare handed. Is he impervious to pain? Perhaps.

Even if he is not superhuman, the tenacity required to do what he does is off the charts.

How would like to try to escape from 301 pairs of handcuffs in one hour? Seems simple huh? But there are problems to deal with. The people at Guinness have very exacting standards that must be adhered to if one is to earn a world record. The 301 pairs of cuffs had to be put on correctly. Because this is done by someone else, it is not in Stuart’s control how fast it happens. Then there is the act of the escape itself which obviously must be done without a key, but by some other means. This must be done 301 times, or rather 602. Each escape has two cuffs. Did Stuart get tired? Too bad; press on.

Having read Stuart’s book “Twelve Times to the Max,” it becomes obvious that every time Stuart has gone for a world record, Captain Edward A. Murphy of Murphy’s Law fame was there to make sure he was not only well prepared, but able to overcome the adversity that comes with any endurance effort.

Thirteen times Stuart has succeeded. Has he ever failed? I leave that up to you and Stuart, but do buy and read the book. You will get a fascinating look at the efforts involved in setting such records.

Now Stuart... About number fourteen?

Anyone out there care to write about all the various world records escape artists have set?
Occult Esapology
Thumb Tie Magick
by S. Rob

If anyone feels offended by this topic, you have every right to. I won’t do anything about it, but if you do feel offended, you will have to deal with it. Either way try to keep your mind open as there absolutely is some value here.

This book was written and published by S. Rob this year. (2017) Mr. Rob suggests that he is the first person to come up with the idea of mixing escapology with the occult, and as far as I know, this is the truth.

The first thing we learn in this book is a very simple form of the thumb tie. This is a time honored classic of escapology, and Mr. Rob shows us one of the easiest to learn, while it is every bit as effective as some of the other more complex methods. This was done intentionally as it is designed for beginners to learn and masters to play with.

Once you have played around with the escape and feel comfortable doing it in front of an audience, now we can begin to bring in the Occult aspect of the book.

First we meet Papa Legba. He is a powerful voodoo practitioner and a man with a limp (as part of him is in a different world) and a walking stick. You can invoke him to help you with the escape and to be free of weakness using the suggested incantations in the book. Later you will meet and learn from other creatures from hell including Leviathan and others each of whom will help you with an aspect of your body or personality.

Why would you do this? I can think of two reasons. First, if you are into the occult, you will find this material pleasing and enjoyable. You will also find it useful.

If you are not into the occult, I still see this book as being very useful as a design guide. I could easily see this book as being used to set up a show. You would have to choose your audience well, but what a show that could make. You could have a cast of actors ready to play the nether deities you are summoning and have a series of fine production numbers to go with your show.

This book is available on Amazon.com
### 1. It's a Simple Concept That's Well-Executed

As I already mentioned, the story itself is pretty basic. That said, there are other elements that add tension to every scene. For one, there's a hungry stray dog that seems adamant about snacking on the very dead Gerald (Bruce Greenwood), while Jessie (Carla Gugino) desperately tries to fend it off from her spot on the bed. Jessie also hallucinates a physical manifestation of her subconscious (which looks exactly like her, except not as sweaty and not as chained to the bed), as well as one of her dead husband. The two interact with Jessie in a sort of "good cop, bad cop" dynamic, helping her figure out how to get free.

In addition to all these elements, there are flashback sequences that help inform Jessie's current state, as well as one terrifying monster that I'll get to in a little bit. All of these aspects combine to make one sincerely tense and gripping film. Yes, it's a film where a woman is chained to a bed for pretty much the entire running time, but not one minute drags. And that's pretty spectacular.

### 2. It's Chock-Full of Brilliant Performances

One of the things that really helps sell the film is the sheer artistry of Gugino. She offers two incredible performances: one as the real Jessie, who is slowly dying on a bed in lingerie, and the other as hallucination Jessie, who really wants to get her physical body free. There's something about the way Gugino lives the horror that makes her performance so riveting. She seems to be so lost in her character that, in certain moments, you really believe everything she's emoting.
Gugino's performance is supported by the menacing condescension of her smarmy husband, Greenwood, who pulls off the whole "secret douchebag" thing very well. But even the much smaller characters — Jessie's father (Henry Thomas) and the 12-year-old version of Jessie (Chiara Aurelia) — shine in their minimal roles. All of these turns swirl together to make an incredibly believable and powerful story, horror aside.

3. One Aspect of the Film Will Keep You Up at Night
Remember that terrifying monster I mentioned earlier? He's referred to as the "Moonlight Man" during the film, and I promise he'll give you nightmares. During her first night, Jessie hallucinates a large man standing in the corner. He has white skin, a bald head, and hauntingly ghoulish eyes. He's abnormally tall, and his overly long limbs dangle in strange and unsettling ways. As soon as Jessie notices him, he ambles from the shadows in the corner and opens his special box. It's filled with treasures: jewelry and bones and other miscellaneous trinkets.

The Moonlight Man pops up a couple of other times. At one point, Jessie awakens to find he's licking her toes and kicks him off. She comes to believe he's death himself and that he's there to collect her dying soul. I don't want to give away too much else about the Moonlight Man and his part in the plot, but let's just say he's the creature that really stuck with me after watching the film. You're going to be checking the darkest corners of your house for a while, I promise.

4. There's One Especially Gruesome Scene That You Won't Forget
If the slow psychological scares and the horror of the Moonlight Man don't get you, then this one scene will. Again, I don't want to spoil it, but let's just say Jessie's only way to escape is very gruesome and bloody, and it's depicted with brutal and graphic realism. A friend of mine said he literally barfed after watching it. Another confirmed that all of his coworkers were just as disturbed as he was. I'm not too queasy when it comes to things like this, and I definitely wasn't that physically affected, but let's just say it's a lot. There's a treat for every kind of horror fan in Gerald's Game.

5. The Thematic Significance Is Striking and Nuanced
In trying to free herself, Jessie must reckon with the actions that put her in these handcuffs in the first place. This is why we go into flashbacks: to uncover her disturbing past, and to figure out why she married a slightly abusive garbage monster like Gerald. The incredible thing is, each specific recollection gives her information about how she can escape. The more she digs in and processes her own traumas, the closer she gets to freeing herself from the literal shackles that keep her chained to the bed. Once she's truly reconciled with everything that's happened to her, she gets the final piece of the puzzle that will give her freedom.
This kind of thematic payoff is so striking and hard to ignore. While Jessie is literally handcuffed, her emotional journey is so steeped in metaphor that her allegorical story can clearly apply to any victim of trauma. And that chilling epiphany is perhaps what makes *Gerald's Game* such a great film. It's definitely horror, and it will definitely scare you, but once you scrape off the skin and look at all the tendons underneath (wink wink), you'll find that it's so much more.

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Your Editor has watched this movie for himself. He is both an escape artist as well as a die hard Stephen King fan, indeed he is what King himself calls a “Constant Reader.”

Another aspect of your editor’s personality is that having had experiences working in a cadaver lab, he is nearly impossible to gross out.

Having said that, I wanted to take a moment to talk about the actual escape. No I won’t ruin it with spoilers. I just want to point out that poor Jesse spends the weekend chained to a bed complements of her dead husband. Carla Gugino does not. She is an actress and probably not interested in the kind of pain and nerve damage that might occur from wearing a pair of handcuffs tightly for an extended period. This sets the stage for one of the weak points of the movie. The handcuffs are inconsistently tight. Early on, when she first realizes the peril she is in, she tries to slip the cuffs. They are on much too tight and will not budge. Later she sits there in cuffs so lose I could slip them.

Still a great film; enjoy.