



PHOTOS: KARI HENDLER

THE MAGIC OF  
**Levinson**  
**& Link**

BY PETER SAMELSON

The phone rings. Caller ID says it's William Link.

"Hi, Bill."

"Hi, Peter. You know this piece from David Regal? I think I'm going to get that one, he's a real clever fellow..." And so we start talking magic.

Bill Link is sharp as a tack. Oh, sure, maybe a name or two might take a few seconds longer to come back, and his legs don't work so well these days, but heck, he recently celebrated his 81st birthday and just look at all the work he has created and the success he has earned. His is a true Hollywood success story, and even though he might not be known in the industry for his conjuring, he has always been a magician at heart.

If all he and his writing partner, Richard Levinson, had done in their careers was to create *Colombo* and *Murder, She Wrote*, it would be enough. But there is so much more. As a team, they've written books, novels, over thirty short stories for periodicals and anthologies, radio scripts, films, plays, and several musicals, including one for Broadway — the magic musical *Merlin*, which starred Doug Henning. They created magician Alexander Blacke as the lead character in their mystery series *Blacke's Magic*, bringing magic to network television each week. That show was just one of 14 original television series Levinson & Link created, along with 26 made-for-TV movies. Their backgrounds in thinking magically aided the team in their plotting, and they occasionally were able to insert magicians and illusions into the storylines of the more than 100 other scripts and teleplays for other series. The list of shows they've worked on over the years includes *Dr. Kildare*, *The Fugitive*, *Mannix*, *Banacek*, *Burke's Law*, *Johnny Ringo*, *Ellery Queen*, and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*. After Dick's untimely death, Bill continued producing and writing, and he still works daily from his home office.

Every conversation with Bill is illuminating, shining a spotlight on some of the most creative and innovative writers, actors, and producers in television history. He knew them all. I can sense his ease with language, an ease that comes from a craft honed over nearly seventy years of daily effort. Forget 10,000 hours — he'd achieved that before he was out of college. He and Dick had their first story published during their last year in high school. And by the time they graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, they were professional authors.

At Wharton School of Business, they found a senior thesis topic called "Publica-

tions," then cleverly wrote three television drama scripts to fulfill the requirement — scripts that they sold to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. The "powers that be" at the school considered the submission of scripts to be exploiting a loophole and closed it behind them, apparently not recognizing that show business is indeed a business. It was an auspicious start for two business school graduates, succeeding in business by doing what they loved to do.

Though you'll not see a picture of William Link or Richard Levinson as teenagers wearing top hats or cradling rabbits, it was magic that brought them together and became the connective tissue when they flexed their creative muscles. And their love of magic never left them.

Bill's parents relocated from the New York area to Philadelphia, where his father became a successful textile broker and an inveterate lover of gadgets. He shared that love of technology with his children, bringing home one of the new wire recorders, becoming an early adopter of television — complete with gigantic magnifying lens — and even, at one point, buying a real Geiger counter for Bill's brother to search for uranium in the woods behind the house.

But even before those days, he began taking the family to see the touring Blackstone show whenever it came through town. When Bill turned eight, he was the happy recipient of a *Mysto Magic* set. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and shortly thereafter, young Bill, dressed in his Sunday best, was attending the spectacular Blackstone show with all its mystery and audience participation. When children were called up onto the stage, Bill made sure he was part of the group, and seeing that Blackstone was about to begin a routine with Joanne, the Card Duck, he spoke up, setting the stage, he thought, for a smooth transition into the

next phase: "Why don't you blindfold the duck?" Blackstone, a little less thankful than anticipated, gave Bill's foot a kick and said in a low voice, "Keep out of this kid!" But he made up for that by attaching a pencil with a loop of string through the buttonhole on Bill's suit coat, leaving him with a puzzle and a souvenir to talk about at Sunday School the next day. Ah, show business.

By then, as his father's business was succeeding, they had moved from a suburb of Philly to the upscale Elkins Park area of the city, where two school districts were being amalgamated. It was on the first day of junior high school that Link and Levinson met. Bill describes it like this: "I was tipped off by some of Dick's friends to look for a guy named Dick Levinson, who was tall, loved and performed magic, and wrote mysteries. Dick was tipped off to look for a short guy who wrote mysteries and did magic. We met at lunchtime and were best friends by the end of the school day. We went home and started writing. It lasted over forty years."

They wrote that day and every day after school. On one day, Dick would take two buses to Elkins Park to write at Bill's home, and on alternate days, Bill would take two



Bill Link at work in his office [facing page]. A photo of Link and writing partner Richard Levinson still adorns his desk.

buses to the row house in Oak Lane, where Dick lived. They were fourteen, they loved to write, and they loved magic. Every Saturday, they'd take the bus downtown to Kanter's Magic Shop in search of new mysteries.

There are no artifacts from those early years. None of the early cartoon drawings still exist from the time before Bill could write words, and none of the fully illustrated storybooks from a few years later. There are no photographs of Link and Levinson as young magicians performing their shows for birthday parties and bar mitzvahs, only memories of lugging their suitcases through the snow on the way there. Dick's was larger, containing magic props and a vent figure. They always talked and thought about magic they'd seen and how it worked.

They'd take turns doing tricks during their thirty- to forty-minute show, but when Dick started with the vent, Bill would hide, cringing at the act, which only got one laugh, when Dick spun the dummy's head in a circle. At one show, when Bill needed a coat with an open weave for his next number, the Knife Through Coat, none were to be had, except for the one Dick was wearing, so off it came, exposing all the gimmicks and ropes for Dick's Cut & Restored Rope number and leaving the audience howling with laughter. For a while, Bill's brother Warren came along as a clown, but was so mean to the kids that the parents, when booking the pair back for the following year, asked "Oh, Mr. Link, could you

leave the magic clown at home?" So they were back to strictly a duo act, which was fine with them.

Amazingly, in the 42 years of their collaboration, they never fought. They never argued. Of course, roadblocks arose, perhaps a plot problem with no immediately obvious solution, so they would break for the night. In the morning, one or the other would invariably show up with the solution. This formula succeeded from the start, and the work they created was so good that it led to an unbelievable series of awards.

Richard Leighton Levinson and William Theodore Link received six Emmy nominations and two Emmy Awards for their work. There were also two Golden Globe Awards, four Edgar Allan Poe Awards from the Mystery Writers of America, the Ellery Queen Award in 1989, an Image Award from the NAACP, a Christopher Award saluting media that "affirms the highest values of the human spirit," a Writers Guild of America Laurel Award, the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award, and the Producers Guild of America Hall of Fame Award. Although Dick Levinson died of a heart attack in 1987, at the age of 52, he (posthumously) and Bill Link were inducted into the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Hall of Fame in 1995. They were nominated for a Tony Award, Broadway's highest honor, for their writing of *Merlin* in 1983. Levinson & Link created a record of success that is untouched to the present time.

They wrote mostly during pre-computer days, with Dick banging away at his Swiss-made typewriter for hours a day, every day. At one point it got so hectic, they were working so hard, with Dick banging away at the keys, that his fingers were getting bloody. He solved that problem by taping thimbles to his fingertips so that he could keep working. Bill is a happy convert to a Mac, but Dick never made the change before his untimely death. Sharing his feelings about the loss of his friend and partner, Bill quotes George Bernard Shaw, who once said, "There are some people so valuable and so important in your life that you only lose them with your death." Bill adds, "And I find in the case of Dick Levinson, that's very, very true."

Obituaries in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and others recognized their remarkable lifelong friendship and writing partnership. Friends said that they were "much more than collaborators, they were more like brothers." Steven Bochco — known for developing, among other shows, *Hill St. Blues*, *NYPD Blue*, *LA Law*, and *Doogie Howser, M.D.* — said, "They not only finished each other's sentences, they began them." The old saw is that you can pick your friends but you can't pick your family — in this case, they created a family in which their shared creativity was a bond stronger than blood.

Perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself. How did this partnership of Levinson & Link evolve?

Well, it was always about sharing the stories with others, not just writing them. In Bill's earliest memory of crafting a story about his own heroes and villains, he was telling it to an older cousin. In the late 1940s, radio drama was big, and by then both the boys had their Webster-Chicago tape recorders. They would cast the roles from their schoolmates, then rehearse and record their shows in Dick's basement. The first of the monthly shows they created was *Metropolis*, about a corrupt mayor of a big city like Philadelphia. Already their stories encompassed a social conscience, and they always would.

They were both very good students. Bill was getting straight As throughout junior and senior high school, except for math. To the end of his life, Dick still counted on his fingers. They were writing



*Levinson & Link, arguably the most successful writing team in TV. [Left] Some of their many awards displayed in Bill's den, shelved behind wire in case of earthquake.*



every day, and to say they were ambitious would be an understatement. They were driven. Obsessed. During their senior year in high school, they sold their first story, “Whistle While You Work,” to *The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, which published it in the November 1954 issue.

Together, they moved on to the University of Pennsylvania where, it would be safe to say, practically every one among the 16,000 undergraduate students knew of them. They edited the university’s newspaper, wrote articles for it, and cofounded and contributed to *The Highball*, the campus humor magazine. During their time at the university, they together wrote six of the famous *Mask and Wig* musicals. These were huge productions, funded by the school’s athletic successes, reportedly to the tune of \$100,000, which is nearly \$900,000 in today’s dollars. The shows were grand productions, touring up and down the East Coast and even making an appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. That Bill and Dick created six of these was an incredible accomplishment. Even the university knew it was a big deal, touting their work by saying it was the most incredible

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collaboration in the 200-year history of the University of Pennsylvania.

They graduated from the University’s Wharton School in 1956 as professional writers, with three scripts sold to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* for broadcast on the fast-growing new medium, television. The Army occupied several years of their lives after graduation, sending Bill to Germany while Dick was stuck stateside, forcing them to continue their writing by mail — which of course they did. Being big fans of the television industry, they knew they needed to write for it and struck out for New York, only to find that the television mysteries and dramas that were previously taped there had vanished and were now coming out of Hollywood.

In 1959, *TV Guide* chose “Chain of Command,” their drama of army life produced as an installment of the *Desilu Playhouse*, as the best program of the season. With this recognition, it was time to make the move to California. Dick knew a bit about Los Angeles — his father had taken him on visits there several times — so he preceded Bill, who drove out with a friend.

They started out freelancing in Los Angeles, doing work on *The Untouchables*, *Michael Shayne*, *Johnny Ringo*, and other TV shows. Four Star Television put them under contract, where they met Aaron Spelling, who loved their work. He began feeding them multiple script deals. It was a great opportunity, writing for shows such as



*The Fugitive*, *Dr. Kildare*, and *Burke's Law*, introducing them to movie stars like David Niven, Charles Boyer, June Allyson, and others. Years later, Aaron Spelling told their agent that he knew the boys were special, but he had no idea just how far they would go in the industry.

In the early days, every Thursday they'd go to eat at Chasen's. Thanks to being mistaken for the more famous writing team of Lawrence & Lee, creators of *Inherit the Wind*, Levinson & Link were seated at a top table in the horseshoe, among the rich and famous. One night, they were seated next to Alfred Hitchcock and Anthony Perkins as they talked about the adventures on the set during the shooting of *Psycho*. After a few months of borrowed status, the error was discovered and Bill and Dick were moved back with the hoi polloi. But that would change as their stars rose.

After leaving Four Star Television, they sold their stage play *Prescription: Murder* to Universal, which produced it as a made-for-television movie. Universal also insisted on a seven-year exclusive contract — a contract that kept being extended, eventually spanning decades. Those decades solidified their place in television history. Norman Lloyd, who produced all of Hitchcock's television shows, recently

said, "Bill and Dick, in their era, *were* American television."

While they didn't perform much magic during the university days, and not in New York or later in Los Angeles, they always talked about it, comparing tricks, buying tricks, and fooling each other. At one point early on, Dick re-created the moment Vernon fooled Houdini, using a double-backed card and a double lift to amaze Bill. They were fascinated by the puzzles that magic offered. On two occasions, they had seen a performance of Robert Harbin's spectacular Zig-Zag Girl illusion, and it completely baffled them. They had to know how it worked, so they wrote an episode of *Columbo* in which a murder is connected to a stage illusion, and they had the studio order the prop. When the shoot day arrived, they ran down to the set like children on Christmas morning, ready to open their special gift. But the Zig-Zag was nowhere to be seen. The prop department, in placing the order, had picked out the wrong illusion. The two of them left, completely disappointed.

The real magic of Levinson & Link was that they were able to be so successful and yet have such compassion and progressive thinking in their work, with social relevance in even their most popular writing. As producers and writers, they placed strong

emphasis on their strict edict that there be no smoking or drinking in their series. Their sensibilities extended much further. Even though these were crime and murder mysteries, the act of violence was never seen onscreen. They were aware that children might be watching and felt strongly that there was no reason for kids to see such things. The knife or gun might be seen beforehand, and there might be a body after, but never was the assault itself depicted. In fact, *Columbo* would never carry a gun and never be involved in a shooting or a car chase.

*Columbo*, as a series, was born in 1971 as part of the NBC Mystery Movies series. Lieutenant Columbo had appeared in the play *Prescription: Murder* in 1962, and a TV movie of the same name was scheduled for release in 1968.

That Bill and Dick loved the classic locked-room mysteries of John Dickson Carr is clearly evident — especially in the later *Blacke's Magic* — and they paid their respects to Ellery Queen, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy L. Sayers in construction and characters. The triumph of working-class cop *Columbo* over the highborn and wealthy was more a dramatic necessity than a political statement. But it did not go unnoticed.

And let's not forget magic. The locked-room mystery is itself a kind of magic trick,

and mystery surrounded their famous TV sleuth, Lieutenant Columbo. Bill Link once described Columbo as an enigma “who comes from nowhere and goes back to nowhere.” We never see his real life; we never see his wife or family or even his office. Columbo’s story is more than a police procedural, it’s a mythical tale.

The team of Levinson & Link continued their great success with *Murder, She Wrote*, featuring a woman detective who was not “saved” by a male counterpart. Instead, she stood on her own and triumphed as a woman, not as an adjunct. It was a hallmark of theirs that entertaining television could encompass socially relevant imagery and role models that were progressive and uplifting.

While *Columbo* and *Murder, She Wrote* were the series that made them famous — Dick always joked that his tombstone would read, “He was the co-creator of *Columbo*” — the work they were most proud of included two serious movies, *That Certain Summer* (1972) and *The Execution of Private Slovik* (1974), which won them a Peabody Award. It was in the exploration of social and cultural themes that they found their greatest challenges and their greatest satisfaction.

Bill refers to *Slovik* — the World War II story of the only US soldier to be court-martialed and executed for desertion since the Civil War — as “our finest, most powerful movie.” *That Certain Summer* was the first TV movie to take a serious, compassionate view of a homosexual relationship. In keeping with their belief in social justice, Levinson & Link adapted the novel and play *My Sweet Charlie*, presenting an interracial friendship that came as close to being an interracial love story as they could get and still have it broadcast on television in 1970.

Their one real magic series was *Blacke’s Magic* (1986). It starred Hal Linden and Harry Morgan as a father-and-son detective team, comprising retired magician Alexander Blacke and his finagling con-man father Leonard Blacke. The focus was less on figuring out who did the crime and more on how it was done, very much in keeping with the lifelong obsessions of Bill and Dick. The magic in the show was done without camera trickery and was developed under the supervision of Jim Steinmeyer. Full episodes are currently difficult to find, but a clip of

the opening-credits sequence with sleight-of-hand magic and the episode titled “Ten Tons of Trouble,” split into segments, can be found on YouTube.

The magic consulting was contracted with Doug Henning’s company, but due to the complexities of crediting, the sole listing was for Jim Steinmeyer, who in reality did all the work. The opening-credits manipulations feature his hands doing the magic as Hal Linden’s character, and Earl Nelson did the hands of Harry Morgan. There are a few, but only a few, moments during the actual episodes when they hand-double the actors. Interestingly, it was Ricky Jay who was originally slated to work with Jim, but scheduling changes necessitated replacing him with Earl.

Both Hal Linden and Harry Morgan were the epitome of professionalism on set. Which is not to say creating the magic was easy. Early on, it became clear that Hal had absolutely no interest in magic. When Jim offered him props to rehearse with, the actor politely declined. For Jim, it was a terrifying experience. He spent the entire show panicked, looking for good self-working material. It’s to Jim’s credit that Linden always did well, but he would not practice. He’d look up and say, “Oh, you’re on the set — are we doing something today?” Jim would nod and get the response, “Oh, that’s right, there’s a trick in here — so show me what that is.” As Jim describes it, “He always wanted it put into his hands and shown how to do it. I’d say, ‘Nope, do

this, not that,’ and he’d do it. My memory of the shoots were that they’d say ‘Cut,’ and Hal would look for me, hand the prop back to me with, ‘Here, Jim. Thanks.’ He had no interest in it.” At one point, he was standing around and said, “What’s the trick with these rings?” and Jim performed half of the *Symphony of the Rings*. Hal Linden looked impressed and said, “Wow, I can see how you could spend a couple of hours working on that.”

Ah, show business.

So why didn’t the show continue after the first season? There was a rumor that attributed it to a high network executive not being a fan of magic. But according to Jim, the real reason was very well documented. The networks decided that they wanted more ownership in shows, and the deal at that time was that Universal owned the shows. When shows go into syndication, that’s when they make money and the networks wanted a piece of that. NBC had said “We want co-ownership of the shows.” Universal, which owned *Blacke’s Magic*, was the big holdout and said “We’re not doing that.” At which point, Universal’s production that season went from fourteen hours weekly to roughly four hours. People were shocked that *Blacke’s Magic* was cut back, but it was one of many shows that got canned. There was even talk about it going to another network, because it was a popular, successful show. But that never happened.

Bill Link still hungers for magic. Just look at his desk. In his workshop — his



Bill Link at work in his office, with computer, magic, memories, and inspirations. And always a deck of cards.

private escape, which you discover only after entering under the bright yellow crime scene tape — you will find the walls covered with photographs and cartoons. And on the desk, where he can turn when he pauses in his writing, are some of the most current mysteries and a selection of classics: tricks, decks of cards, props, DVDs, and of course, books. Bill is an avid reader of books. Not only magic but in far ranging fields — and his list of friends would be a Who's Who in Hollywood, including writers, agents, producers, directors, actors, and magicians. One close friend is Jim Steinmeyer.

His friendship with Steinmeyer dates back to their collaboration on *Merlin*, the 1983 musical conceived by Doug Henning

and Barbara De Angelis, written by Levinson & Link. Although *Merlin* was not a financial success, it was a magnificent show, as can be attested to by all who saw it. For the writing partners, it was a dream come true. Even if Bill does describe it as being involved in an automobile accident, Dick always wanted them to write a Broadway musical, and they did. They were the perfect writers for the show. The Creative Artist Agency that represented director Ivan Reitman also represented Levinson & Link; and someone at CAA, knowing their writing and their knowledge of magic, put the three of them together.

When Reitman called on them to write *Merlin*, these guys were ready for it. In fact, there was nobody who could have even

come close in talent and preparation for writing that musical.

The writing was fun. “We wrote the book for that show in a month. It was so easy. It was so great, working in our living room, and because we did magic and were incredible magic fans, we would create these illusions that Charlie [Reynolds] and Jim [Steinmeyer] had to make work. It was fabulous, that we could do that.” And sometimes, even after thinking up illusions, they were completely surprised and fooled by them. But then again, so was Doug.

Robin Wagner, a multiple Tony Award winner for his work on Broadway, did the spectacular scenic design for *Merlin*, earning him a Tony nomination. He tells of the time Doug asked how the levitation worked. Doug floated in and among tritithons reminiscent of Stonehenge, columns with lintels across the top that seemed to eliminate the possibility of wires or rod suspension. Robin avoided answering, telling Doug that he'd taken the oath and was sworn to secrecy. Even Bill and Dick were surprised and thrilled by the midair vanish of Doug seated on a horse. Bill remembers it stopping the show, every performance. The audience just had to catch their breath, they were so stunned.

Perhaps “stopping the show” might bring up two other memories for Bill. One is how the rehearsals would just stop as Doug and Debbie would retire for long periods of meditation. “And they thought that they floated into the air. Please.” The loss of rehearsal time was especially problematic because of the expense. The show was so big that it could not be mounted out of town and brought into the Mark Hellinger Theatre for final rehearsals and opening night. The delays, the difficulty with the original director, an extended period of previews with full ticket prices being charged — these problems were especially upsetting to Bill and Dick, who were accustomed to being in control of a production. Too many things were beyond their control.

The second memory is worse. *Merlin* was produced by Columbia Studios. The studio was putting up all the money for the show, along with its associated costs. Studio president Frank Price had a strong desire for the show to succeed, but he needed to be a realist. As Bill tells it, “The



*Bill on Broadway in 1983, at the opening of Merlin, by Levinson & Link. A couple of souvenirs from conventions attended by Bill the magic aficionado.*



worst thing was that Doug said, ‘I’m black and blue from coming in and out of these trapdoors.’ There were like thirty some trapdoors in that huge stage at the Mark Hellinger. And Frank Price said to him, ‘We need you to get through the summer, because then it will pick up in the fall.’ And Doug said, ‘I can’t do it,’ to which Frank replied, ‘I’m being very honest with you, Doug — if you leave the show, I’m closing it like a door.’ And Doug left the show, and Frank closed it. It was horrible. We’d run for nine months. And it had done well. It could have run for four or five years.”

Still, New Yorkers loved the show. We, after all, love the weird and wonderful, and *Merlin* was all that and more. “Did I tell you about the guy with the leopard?” Bill asks me. “Every day, we had a leopard in the show, this huge, beautiful, sleek black leopard. And I once said to the guy who brought the leopard, ‘Do you bring him in the truck?’ He said, ‘No, I leave my truck downtown.’ So I asked how he got the leopard to the theater. He was this big, tall, broad guy. ‘I put him over my back. I walk him to the theater. You know, it’s only 22 blocks.’ ‘What?’ I said, ‘People must be looking at you. You’re walking with this big black leopard on your back. What do people

say?’ He said, ‘Nobody, in all the time I brought this leopard to the theater, nobody except one person made a comment — an elderly Jewish lady who asked, “Is that a big cat on your back?”’ New York is unbelievable, I’ll tell you.”

*Merlin* received two Drama Desk and five Tony Award nominations. For Levinson & Link, their triumph was the nomination for Best Book of a Musical, and more than that, the satisfaction of knowing they had written a great Broadway magic musical.

Dick and Bill returned to Los Angeles and back to television, where they created *Murder, She Wrote* in 1984 — which would run for twelve seasons, becoming one of the longest running and most successful shows in television history — and *Blackie’s Magic* for the 1986 season. In 1987, after over 42 years of collaboration, their partnership ended with Dick Levinson’s death.

Bill and Margery, his wife of 35 years, still live in Los Angeles, but he no longer makes frequent trips down to The Magic Castle. He writes daily in his office, surrounded by his most recent acquisitions of magic props and books. He still creates plots and stories, delighting in puzzles to be solved and mysteries that demand unraveling. He values clever ideas and

invention. He wants to know how things work and, with a critical eye, evaluates whether the idea is intriguing and the solution serves the plot. He still holds that young boy’s need to know how it’s done and retains his lifelong drive to entertain. He wraps his ideas in a good story because, as Michael Weber has been known to say, “He with the best story wins.”

When asked if he has any regrets, professionally, Bill answers, “We made only two mistakes, two big missed opportunities. We passed on writing *Jaws* for Steven Spielberg and *Victor, Victoria* for Blake Edwards. The other regret I have is that we never had Orson Welles as a murderer on *Columbo*. Putting Peter Falk together with Orson would have been amazing!

“And I still haven’t found the Holy Grail, the perfect solution to Any Card At Any Number. Oh, and the Hooker Card Rise.” ■

*Peter Samelson is a producer of Monday Night Magic, the longest running Off-Broadway Magic Show in New York. He performs, lectures, and designs for television, film, and theater, including Broadway. He created and starred in three critically acclaimed one-man Off-Broadway shows and tours internationally.*