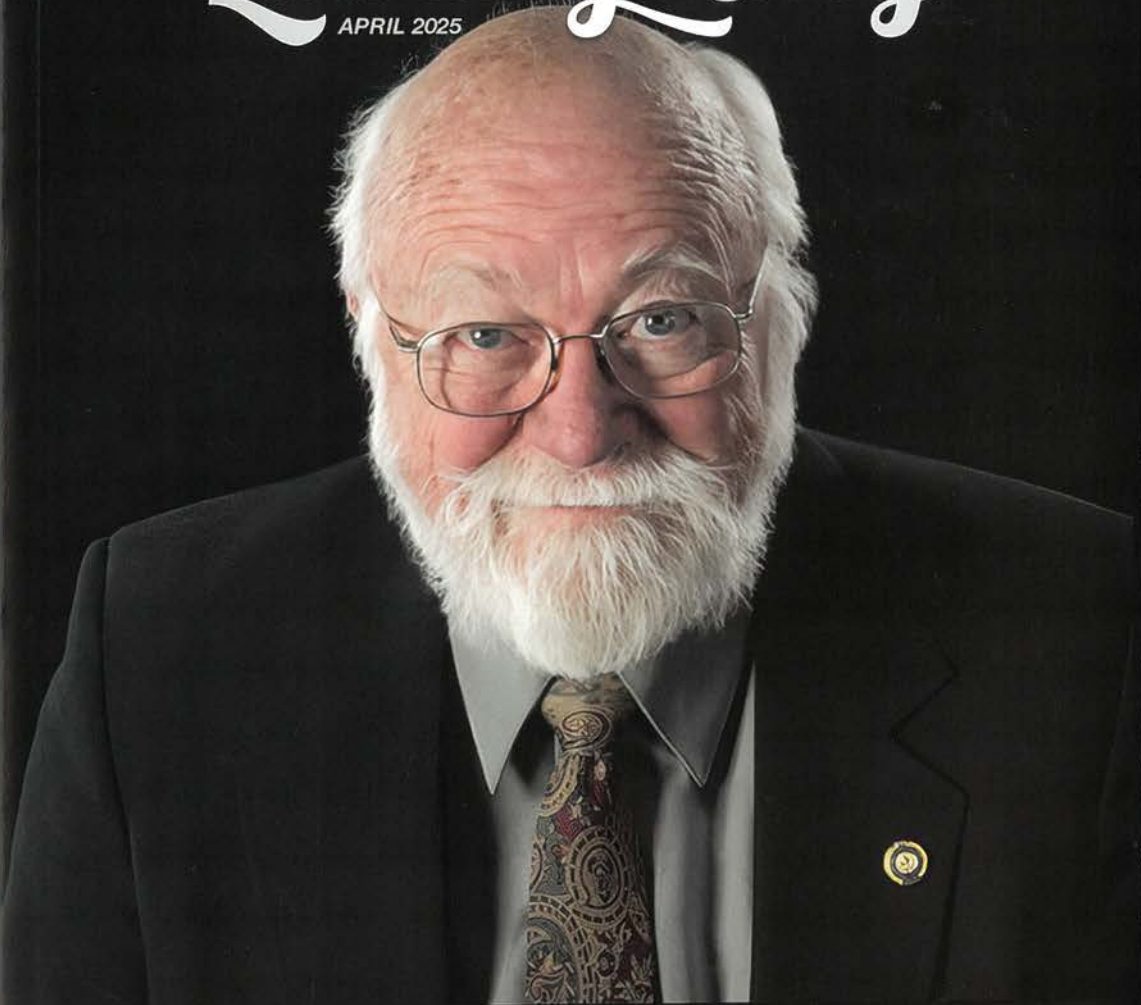


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RHETT BRYSON

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RHETT BRYSON'S MAGICAL JOURNEY

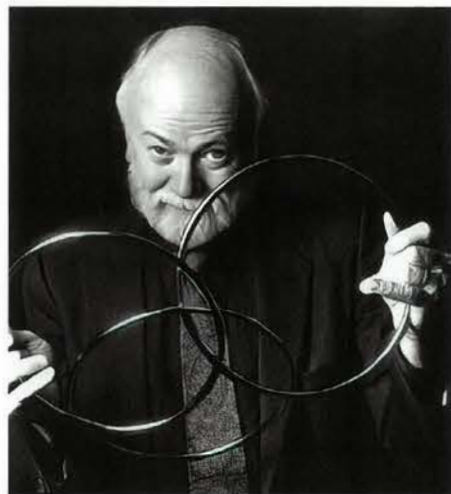
By Paul DiLella

Rhett Bryson is undoubtedly one of South Carolina's most iconic and respected figures in the world of magic. Ring 63 (Greenville, South Carolina) immortalized his legacy in January 2025 when it officially renamed itself The Rhett Bryson Ring. A continuous Ring member for more than forty-nine years, Rhett is now its longest-serving member. His contributions to the magic community are immeasurable and he's received the Magician of the Year award multiple times. Rhett has also played a pivotal role in bringing world-renowned lecturers to the Ring through his longstanding magic network.

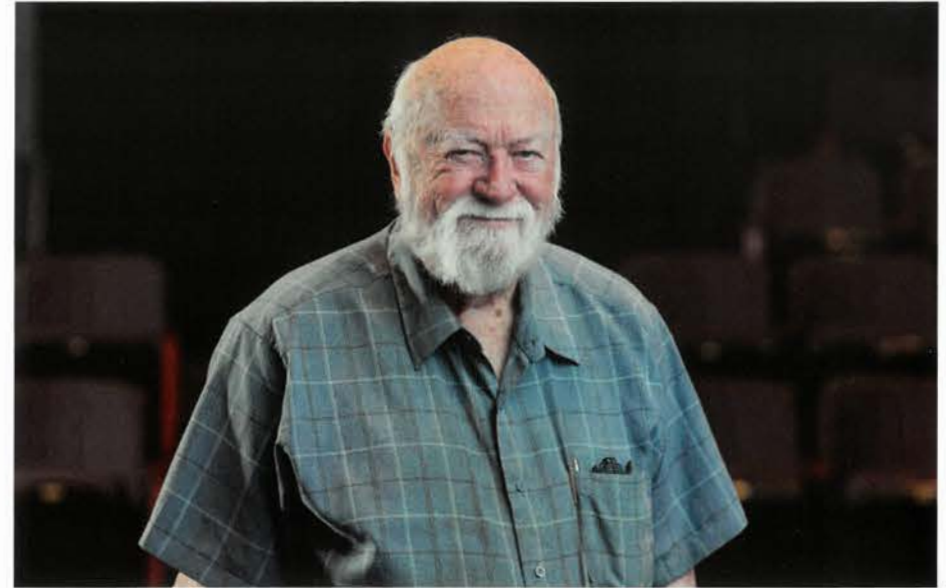
In addition to performing, Rhett is a prolific author with numerous books on magic to his name, and boasts one of the largest and most comprehensive magic libraries in South Carolina. His dedication to the craft has earned him the title of expert in his field. Beyond his literary and performing contributions, Rhett's legacy includes attending three Fechter's Finger-Flicking Frolic and earning his FFFF bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from Obie O'Brien for his performances.

Born in 1943 in Dothan, Alabama – far away from any magical influences –

Rhett's first exposure to magic happened on a Sunday morning, one of many when he and his brother would lunch downtown with family after church. The boys would often finish before the adults, after which they could go up the street to buy comic books from a newsstand. (Children in those days were allowed to safely go into the community without fear of what might happen to them.) The newsstand had racks



Rhett Bryson.



Rhett Bryson is a highly respected scene and lighting designer who has been at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, for more than forty years.

of Adams novelties and magic tricks. Rhett was fascinated by the tricks and remembers the first two he ever bought: the Ball Vase and the Coin in the Matchbox. Enthralled by these objects, he began performing for family and friends.

As Rhett grew older, he became fascinated by a marionette he saw at Atlanta's FAO Schwarz. He convinced his parents to buy him several for Christmas. With these marionette characters, he felt a necessity to build a stage/theatre, paint scenery, write stories, construct props, and produce lighting and sound. Many shows ensued as more marionette characters were acquired and built. The stages became more elaborate and the shows became more advanced. Soon he was charging to entertain at birthday parties and community functions. The performances lasted until his high school graduation. During this time, he acquired more magic, experimented with card tricks, and presented impromptu shows for family and friends. However, his prime focus was on marionette shows and high school theatrical performances. Little did he realize he would someday take his passion to an even higher level.

Rhett began attending Florida State University in 1961, where he was a theatre major who participated in every department production. He also worked next door to the theatre department at an educational television station next, taking on almost every job in the facility (camera, graphics, art department, and on-screen talent, including two children's shows with puppets interacting with adults).

Rhett spent two summers working for the Asolo Theatre Festival in Sarasota, Florida, occasionally performing card and other tricks for company members in the theatre department, television station, and theatre festival.

After graduation, Rhett was hired as an assistant professor of theatre (scenic and lighting designer and technical director) at Lenoir Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina. For the college's production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, he crafted a levitation illusion to be used when Prospero's daughter floats while he discusses his magical powers. After four years at Lenoir Rhyne – briefly interrupted by his time at the University of Georgia, where he received his MFA in theatre –



Left: Rhett's college yearbook photo circa 1961, when he began attending Florida State University as a theatre major.

Right: Rhett performed several mentalism experiments at Asheville, North Carolina's Biltmore House in the late 1990s.

Rhett was hired by Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina in 1972. Today, Rhett is in his fifty-first year of teaching at Furman University as Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts, where he is highly respected in scenic and lighting design. In fact, Rhett received Furman's Meritorious Teaching Award in 2019.

Greenville, which had an I.B.M. Ring and the Up the Stairs Magic Shop, was the first place Rhett lived that had any sort of magic scene. The shop's owner, John Murray, became Rhett's lifelong friend and mentor. Rhett rekindled his passion for magic when he joined the I.B.M. and started hanging out at the magic shop. He put together a magic show suitable for birthdays, after-dinner shows, and small stages. Operating on word of mouth, he performed many shows a year.

Rhett developed a special interest in older magic and began a collection of classic apparatus that continues to this day. Through a felicitous set of circumstances, he was able to purchase the complete library and apparatus collection of W.T. Poole from Poole's widow. The books formed the beginning of a magic book library that now approaches two thousand volumes, a wonderful research archive.

Part of Rhett's magical apparatus collection was a goodly number of effects

from Edward Massey, which raised Rhett's curiosity about this inventor he knew nothing about. He discovered that Massey invented and built the original finger chopper, sparking a desire in Rhett to learn all he could about the man who conceptualized the ubiquitous finger chopper. He has spent more than forty-four years gathering biographical information, apparatus, instructions, catalogs, advertisements, books, and articles about Massey. He often acts as a consultant and expert for magicians seeking authentication or information on props that may be ascribed to Massey. As a result of his interest in Massey's finger chopper, he has collected more than seventy-five different examples of finger choppers. His specialized collection also includes more than one hundred and fifty moneymaker machines and eighty card ducks and variants.

By meeting all sorts of magical minds at John Murray's magic shop and many conventions and lectures, Rhett eventually became good friends with Algonquin McDuff and Dexter Cleveland. The three of them established a publication entity called Jester's Press, devoted to small magical publishing projects of utility with more than the usual component of comedy and humor. The first volume of what eventually became known as "The McDuff



Four examples from Rhett's collection of wooden automata, including two custom designs featuring "Little Rhett," each one performing a different magical action.

Trilogy" was *The M.C. Bit Book* (April 1, 1980). It was followed by *McDuff on Close-up*, *Algonquin McDuff's Spirit Cloth Book*, *Algonquin McDuff's Watch Winder Handbook*, *The Baby Bag*, *The Money Maker Machine Manual*, *The Money Maker Machine Manual Supplement*, and *The Money Maker Machine Manual Addendum to the Supplement*. Rhett authored and published three books by himself: *Small Magical Ideas* (1989), *The LF Book* (1997), and *The Devil's Prayerbook* (1999). He also collaborated with the quirky Bruce Dunn on numerous "wee books" and put out a limited-edition collector's series of thirteen wee books called *A Magic Collector's Omnibus*.

In collaboration with other Ring 63 members, Rhett was a leading force in organizing and presenting several notable

close-up magic conventions in Greenville. Many of the era's best close-up magicians attended or performed at these conventions. One of his most noteworthy convention events was the "Battle of the Bars," in which two tables and painted bar backdrops (executed by Rhett) became the scene of a face-off between battling magicians Eddie Fechter and Tom Mullica (the funniest, most entertaining, and best magical performer that Rhett has ever seen). Other notable performers involved in these events include Dai Vernon, Slydini, Tom Ogden, Frank Garcia, Obie O'Brien, Karl Norman, Jerry Andrus, and Del Ray (the most amazing close-up magical performer Rhett has witnessed).

In 1976, thanks to a grant from Furman University, Rhett spent the summer performing street magic in New York City.



Rhett's collection includes both wind-up and battery-operated wooden automata, such as these four models from the 1950s, which were made in Japan.



He performed on Broadway and worked Central Park, Washington Square, and Battery Park. During this time, he took the opportunity to interview and document many of the fascinating street performers working across the city.

In April and May of 1996 and 1997, Rhett Bryson appeared at the Biltmore House in Asheville, North Carolina, in a series of weekend performances presented as a part of the Spring Festival of Flowers – Amusements of the Gilded Age. Rhett appeared as Professor Pepper (an homage to the real Professor John Henry Pepper, who invented the Pepper's Ghost Illusion) and with the help of spirit guide Anton Hebble, attempted several experiments in mentalism. The performances were based on the entertainment and atmosphere that George

Washington Vanderbilt would have provided for his houseguests in 1901, taking place in the basement Halloween Room. In its second season, Professor Pepper performed a magic show in the style of nineteenth-century conjurers.

Rhett served many years as the official magician of the Greenville Drive minor league baseball team, an affiliate of the Boston Red Sox. Using his custom-designed rolling magic table, he entertained fans with his unique brand of street and close-up magic while they entered the stadium for weekend home games.

Rhett's personal magic collection is a testament to his love of magical artifacts, particularly wooden automata and magic-related toys. Among his most prized possessions are fifty hand-crafted wooden automata, each of which perform some sort of magi-



Rhett is the former official magician of the Greenville Drive minor league baseball team (an affiliate of the Boston Red Sox), where he entertained fans with street and close-up magic as they entered the stadium.

cal action. He also owns all ten automata created by Pierre Mayer of France. The centerpiece of his collection is a custom-designed commission of "Little Rhett," performing four different appearances under a magic hat on a tabletop. It was made by Dave Goodchild of England. The rest are wooden hand-cranked automata and Japanese tin-lithographed magic automata, joined by other magic toys like Wando the Great, a very rare toy made by

Galooob Toys. Rhett wrote an article about the Wee Magicians for *Magic Magazine*. His collection of automata and toys may be the largest collection of such devices in the world.

Rhett's signature magic trick, influenced by Howard Albright's Gileegaloo Bird and Don Alan's Ranch Bird trick, is his personal method and handling of the trick in which a wind-up woodpecker locates the spectator's card. He originally used a toucan but changed it to a hopping yellow woodpecker, because it allowed him to locate a significant number of backups (the cheap hopping mechanism is notorious for failing).

At eighty-one years young, Rhett Bryson remains as passionate and driven about magic and theatre as ever. He continues to live his dream, doing what he loves every single day, and his influence on the world of magic and education will resonate for generations to come.



Rhett poses with just a portion of his massive collection of magical apparatuses and props.

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