



Touring Houdini's New York

By ANTHONY W. ROBINS

AROUND Halloween, at a lonely Queens cemetery, a somber group of magicians converge on the grave of Harry Houdini to conduct a private ceremony on the anniversary of his death. Standing in a semicircle in front of the impressive Houdini monument, they re-enact the "breaking of the wand" ritual performed at his funeral service in 1926. The bust of Houdini gracing the monument is a replacement, the original having been stolen long ago. But many of the sites associated with his life and work survive around New York City.

Houdini has become an icon, a name known around the globe, a figure dangling upside down in a straitjacket or plunged into a Water Torture Cell. But Harry Houdini is also a historical figure, an immigrant boy who turned 21 in the 1890's. And though he was born in Hungary and achieved much of his greatest fame in Europe, Houdini went through life a New Yorker. It was in

New York that he grew up, kept house and was buried, and in New York, the country's premier magic city, that he presided over the national magic scene.

Houdini's life straddled the decades separating the 19th-century Victorian city from the Jazz Age metropolis. Before 1900, as an anonymous immigrant, he lived in a tenement, worked in the Garment District and tried to break into the music halls of the Bowery and Coney Island. After 1900, as a world-renowned celebrity, he lived in a brownstone and played the great Times Square theaters.

Houdini was deeply interested in spiritualism during his life, though mainly as a debunker of frauds. He promised

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that after his death he would try to communicate from beyond the grave. Were he to revisit his old New York haunts, here is what he would find.

Yorkville

HIS BOYHOOD HOMES. Harry Houdini grew up as Ehrich Weiss, a Hungarian rabbi's son, in Yorkville, a neighborhood of Germans, Austrians, Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians, both Jewish and gentile. Young Ehrich and his family first stayed in Mrs. Leffler's boarding house at 244 East 79th Street; eventually they found a permanent home at 305 East 69th Street. It was here, on the tenement's roof, that he first practiced escaping from tightly bound ropes. On hot days he swam in the East River.

Mrs. Leffler's building survives today, its ground floor occupied by the Border Cafe. No. 305 East 69th Street, however, is gone, replaced by an 18-story condominium at the corner of Second Avenue. The last survivor of the building's tenement row stands at No. 309.

Lower Broadway

SITE OF HIS FIRST JOB. Possibly the teen-aged Ehrich's rope-tying led him to find work with H. Richter's Sons necktie factory at 502 Broadway. The Garment District of the 1880's is the SoHo of the 1990's. The building at 502 Broadway, an 1868 east-iron palace between Broome and Spring Streets, now houses the Canal Jean Company.

Union Square

SITE OF HIS VAUDEVILLE BEGINNINGS. Making neckties was not how this boy intended to spend his days. Already practicing magic, he started making his way in the city's world of cheap entertainment. Not as Ehrich

Weiss, however: he adopted the stage name Houdini, after Robert Houdin, the Frenchman considered the father of modern stage magic.

Houdini's early vaudeville forays ranged from the low end to the high. A center for both was Union Square, the New York theater district of the 1880's and 90's, where venues ranged from dime museums like Huber's 14th Street, next door to Luchow's, to the high-class vaudeville of Tony Pastor's, across the street. Houdini played both.

Huber's, part music hall and part freak show, was an indisputable New York institution. The resident poet, "Professor Langdon," described the attractions in impromptu verse, including such wonders as George the Turtle Boy, Myrtle Corbett, the four-legged woman, and the original Siamese twins. Competing with the likes of "Ki-Bo, the Zulu tack dancer," the young Houdini entertained Huber's patrons with magical illusions.

Tony Pastor ran the city's first "clean" variety show, and from his theater in the notorious Tammany Society's headquarters building — Tammany Hall — he helped usher in the era of vaudeville as America's family entertainment. Houdini, now married and working with his wife, Bess, played Pastor's during the 1894-95 season. Their signature act was the famed "Metamorphosis" miracle, in which Houdini, tied inside a sack with his hands bound behind his back, was locked into a wooden trunk. Bess stood on top of the trunk, hidden by a screen. On the count of three, the screen was removed, revealing Harry standing on the trunk. The trunk was unlocked, and the sack inside untied, to reveal Bess, hands bound behind her back.

Huber's lasted long enough for its passing to be noted with nostalgia by the newspapers. Its site is an empty lot next to the vacant Luchow's. The Con Edison tower at Irving Place now occupies the site of Tammany Hall.

Harlem

HIS FAMILY HOME. In 1900, Houdini left New York for Europe, where over the next five years he built his reputation. He created public-relations sensations by going to local police stations (including Scotland Yard) and, in front of the press, challenging the police to lock him up

— and invariably escaping. By the time he returned to New York in 1905, the immigrant boy had become the world's master escape artist and Europe's best known vaudeville attraction. No more tenement life for him. He had already moved his mother out of Yorkville and into a respectable brick row house in Harlem. No. 278 West 113th Street, built in 1895, was part of a genteel enclave, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, not far from the northwest corner of Central Park.

Houdini filled his house with what the magic historian (and Houdini's biographer) Milbourne Christopher called "the finest collection of conjuring literature and memorabilia in the world" (today housed in the Library of Congress). The collection grew so large that Houdini hired a theatrical librarian to move in and catalogue everything. Also living with Houdini in the house, besides his wife and mother, was his fox terrier, Bobby, whom he trained to escape from dogsized handcuffs and straitjackets.

Houdini's house survives today, one of four from the original row, on the south side of the street close to Frederick Douglass Boulevard.

Times Square

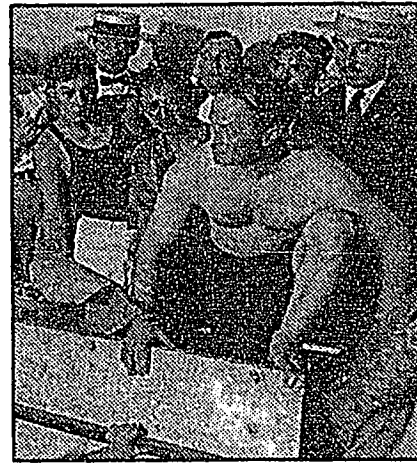
VARIOUS THEATER SITES. Houdini now had his pick of the Broadway theaters at Times Square, which had by now eclipsed Union Square as the city's theater district. The two most associated with his extravagant shows were Hammerstein's Roof Garden and the Hippodrome.

On the joint roofs of his Victoria and Republic theaters, built on the northwest corner of 42d Street and Seventh Avenue in 1898 and 99, Oscar Hammerstein created the Paradise Roof Garden, including a "Dutch dairy farm" complete with cow, goat, ducks, chickens and milkmaid. Houdini introduced some of his most spectacular effects at the Roof Garden. He escaped from the famous Chinese Water Torture Cell. He walked through a solid brick wall, built specially during each performance by bricklayers while the audience watched. He escaped from a giant milk can full of water. On a dare from a prominent local brewer, Jacob Ruppert, he escaped from the same can full of Ruppert's beer.

In July 1912, Houdini had himself chained and put into a crate, the

crate nailed shut and sealed with rope and steel bands, and the whole package dropped into New York Harbor. In less than a minute, he was spotted bobbing up and down in the water. The resulting sensation led to the installation of a special 5,500-gallon tank on Hammerstein's roof in which Houdini nightly repeated the miraculous escape.

The Victoria Theater was replaced with a movie theater decades ago; the Republic Theater, now the Victory, is being renovated as a children's theater. The Paradise Garden is gone.



Houdini stepping out of a coffin at the Hotel Shelton pool in 1925.

The Hippodrome Theater, on the east side of Sixth Avenue, stretching from 44th to 45th Streets, opened in 1905. The theater, built by the developers of Luna Park at Coney Island and advertised as "the world's largest playhouse," seated 5,200. Its vast stage was large enough to support thousands of performers, along with auto races and baseball games.

Houdini's most extravagant routine at the Hippodrome, in 1918, was staging the disappearance of Jennie, a 10,000-pound elephant said to be the daughter of Barnum's famed Jumbo. Houdini put Jennie and her trainer in a wooden cabinet; when he fired a pistol, elephant and trainer disappeared. The effect was perfect for such an elephantine space: even more appropriate, given that the chief ornamental motif of the auditorium was a series of golden elephant heads sporting electric lights. (The

elephant connection resurfaced, in 1935, with Billy Rose's production of "Jumbo," the Rodgers and Hart circus musical starring Jimmy Durante.)

Earlier, Houdini organized an enormous World War I benefit at the Hippodrome, culminating in an emotional "farewell performance" by Kellar, dean of American magicians, whom Houdini had coaxed out of retirement for the occasion. To build publicity for the show, Elsa Maxwell obtained a city permit allowing Houdini to do a straitjacket escape while dangling in the air upside-down over Broadway. Maxwell got the permit from her friend, Mayor John Purroy Mitchel, who was then up for reelection. In return, the upside-down Houdini shouted "Vote for Mitchel!" while wriggling free. Houdini escaped, but Mitchel lost.

The Hippodrome, demolished in 1939, has been replaced by an office building housing the Hippodrome Garage, billed as "the world's largest."

Upper West Side

THE 79TH STREET BOAT BASIN. Houdini's love of public relations brought him to many peculiar locations. In 1913, on a dare from its captain, he was locked in irons and thrown into a small cell on a prison ship, the Success, docked at the 79th Street Boat Basin. He escaped in an hour, jumped out a porthole and swam to shore. The Boat Basin is famous today for its landlocked boats with year-round residents.

Midtown

THE FORMER HOTEL SHELTON SWIMMING POOL. Reversing his usual water escapes, in 1925 Houdini mastered the necessary breathing skills and had himself submerged in a metal box for an hour and a half. For full effect, he arranged to use the Olympic-sized swimming pool of the brand new Shelton Hotel at 527 Lexington Avenue, between 48th and 49th Streets, among New York's most talked about buildings, for both its design and its representation in Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings. The Shelton survives as the Marriott East Side Hotel, along with its pool in the lower lobby.

DESCENDANT OF MARTINKA'S MAGIC SHOP. As a boy, Houdini had visited

Martinka's, New York's premier magic shop, which opened in 1875 at 493 Sixth Avenue, between 29th and 30th Streets. In its back room in 1902, several magicians founded the Society of American Magicians. In 1904, Houdini was sworn in (he was unanimously elected president in 1917, holding that office continuously until his death). As part of his initiation in the back room, Houdini was locked in handcuffs by Francis Martinka. He escaped in 20 seconds. The following day, the cuffs appeared under glass in the shop, where they stayed for the next 35 years.

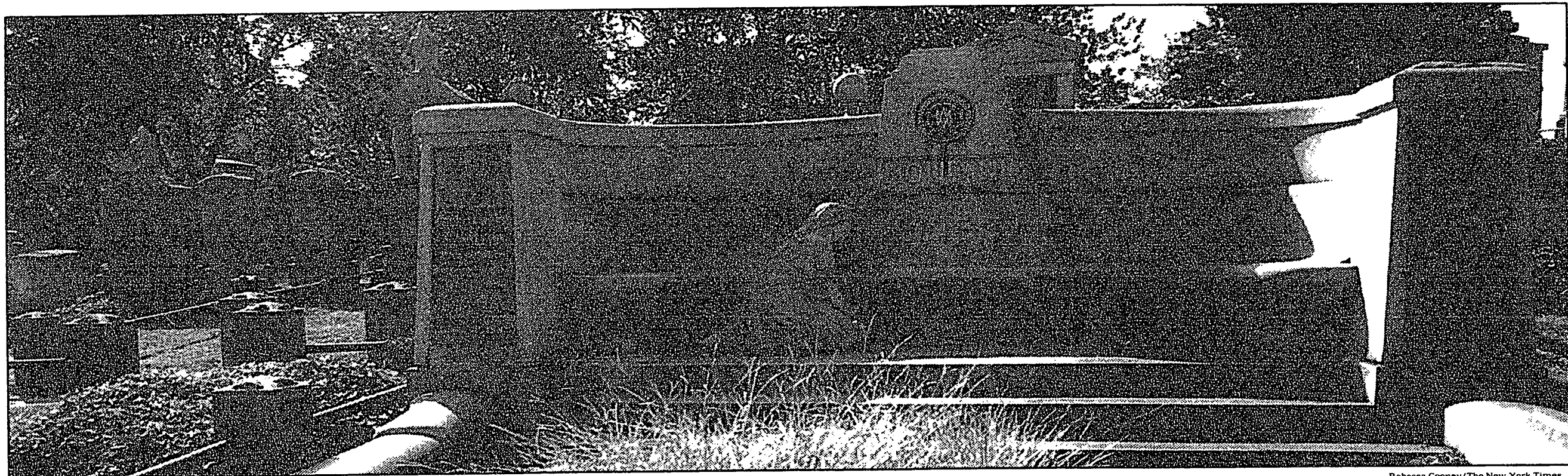
In 1919, Houdini bought Martinka's, keeping it for a year before becoming absorbed in other pursuits. After passing through several owners, the store was bought, at auction in 1939 by Houdini's friend Al Flosso. On obtaining the keys and entering the shuttered shop, Flosso looked for the glass-encased handcuffs from Houdini's initiation, but they had mysteriously vanished.

The original Martinka's building is gone, but what is now the world's oldest magic store survives as the Hornmann-Flosso Magic Company at 45 West 34th Street, where it is run by Al Flosso's son Jack. The shop looks like a cluttered museum of magic, its walls adorned with magic memorabilia, including some Houdiniana.

SITE OF THE ELKS CLUB. On Houdini's death, the Society of American Magicians held funeral rites in the Elks Club ballroom at 108 West 43d Street, a block from the Hippodrome. While 2,000 people watched, a society official broke a wand in half in a ritual composed for the occasion. The broken-wand ritual is now performed for all deceased members of the society. The Elks Club, later the Hotel Diplomat, was recently demolished.

Queens

THE CEMETERY. The society maintains Houdini's grave at the Machpelah Cemetery on Cypress Hills Street in Glendale, Queens, and it is members of the magicians' group who gather at the site each year to re-enact the wand-breaking ceremony. This year, departing from tradition, the ceremony is not being conducted on Halloween. It will be held today, the anniversary of Houdini's death according to the Jewish calendar.



Rebecca Cooney/The New York Times

In memory of a magician: At the Machpelah Cemetery in Glendale, Queens, a striking monument adorns the gravesite of Harry Houdini, who grew up as Ehrich Weiss in the Yorkville section of Manhattan.

Pumpkin Time: Halloween Treats for Active Spirits

Halloween is on Monday. Here is a sampling of Halloween activities this weekend and Monday in the metropolitan New York region.

Today

HARVEST FESTIVAL. South Street Seaport and Marketplace, 19 Fulton Street, lower Manhattan. A weekend of activities features selections from the Broadway musical "Show Boat" by cast members today at 12:30 P.M. There will be mask-making and pumpkin-decorating tomorrow and Sunday from noon to 4 P.M. and ghost stories tomorrow and Sunday from 1 to 4 P.M. Free. Information: (212) 732-7678.

"HAUNTED AND HISTORIC GREENWICH VILLAGE." A walking tour past the area's infamous murder sites, graveyards and haunted houses. Meets at 6:30 P.M. in front of 110 East 14th Street (the former Luchow's Restaurant). Also tomorrow and Sunday at 3 P.M. Fee: \$9. Sponsored by the American Renaissance Theater of Dramatic Arts. Information: (212) 924-0862.

"DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL." Chapter 3 Theater, 344 Third Avenue, at 25th Street. A play by Tony Sokol presented by La Commedia Dei Sangue: The Vampire Theater. Tonight at 9; tomorrow at 11 P.M., and Sunday at 7 P.M. Tickets: \$15; \$12 if in costume. Information: (212) 465-3239.

"ART AND DEATH ON ALL HALLOWS' EVE." Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue and 82d Street. A lecture by Anna Gendel about several European paintings in the museum. Tonight and tomorrow

night at 7. Free with museum admission: \$7; \$3.50 for students and the elderly. Information: (212) 535-7710.

"PRIEST! A MAGIC SPECTACULAR." Holy Trinity School Hall, 14-45 143 Street, Whitestone, Queens. A performance by the Rev. Jerry Jeczewicz, the Conjuror Clergyman, who will recreate a Houdini escape from a locked packing crate. 8 P.M. Tickets: \$7. Information: (718) 746-1479.

Tomorrow

RICHARD ROBINSON'S MAGIC SHOW, the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea. 8 P.M.; also Sunday at 8 P.M. and Monday at 10 P.M. Tickets: \$12. Information: (212) 255-5793.

GHOULISH GREENWICH VILLAGE. A walking tour, led by Arthur Marks, including Washington Square Park, the site of a cemetery in the late 1700's and of public executions in the 1800's; a cemetery on East 11th Street dating to the mid-1800's and the former Mark Twain residence, said to be haunted, on East 10th Street. The walk is followed by high tea. Meets at 1:30 P.M. in front of the Washington Square Hotel, 103 Waverly Place. Fee: \$20. Information: (212) 254-1200.

"MONSTERS AND DEMONS IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM," Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue and 82d Street. A lecture by Aimee Larmore that explores multi-cultural expressions of evil with African masks, Southeast Asian sculpture, Pompeian frescoes and paintings by Jan Van Eyck and Peter Breughel. 11 A.M. Also Sunday at 1 P.M. Free with museum admission: \$7; \$3.50 for students and the elderly. Information: (212) 535-7710.

"SAY BOO! MYSTERIES AND SPINE-TINGLERS," Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street. A stroll through the museum and a talk about the art, for children and their parents. Fee, including museum admission: \$5 a family; \$3 for members. Information: (212) 708-9795.

MASQUERADE BALL, Radio City Music Hall. Music by Otis Day and the Knights, Martha Wash of the Weather Girls and others, with dancing. 9 P.M. to 1 A.M. Sponsored by Aladdin Fellowship for Children's Aid. Tickets, \$95 at the door. Information: (212) 505-9474.

HORROR STORIES, Beatrice Books and Pix, 33-18 Broadway, Astoria, Queens. Free participatory reading of horror stories. Noon. Information: (718) 204-5775.

"NOSFERATU SCREENING AND MUSIC," Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity, 157 Montague Street, at Clinton Street, Brooklyn Heights. The 1922 film "Nosferatu," with music composed and performed by Al Kryszak on electric and acoustic guitars and cimbalom, a large dulcimer used in Hungarian folk music. 7 and 9 P.M. Tickets: \$15. Information: (718) 858-2424.

"A WILD HALLOWEEN," Theodore Roosevelt Bird Sanctuary, 134 Cove Road, Oyster Bay, L.I. Annual party with games, hikes, pumpkin-decorating and nocturnal animals. 7 to 9 P.M. Admission: \$5; \$3 for members. Information: (516) 922-3200.

HARVEST AND HALLOWEEN FESTIVAL, Planting Fields Arboretum, Oyster Bay, L.I. Performances by Tom Chapin, the folk singer, and Jim Day Owl, a storyteller, plus a magician, pony rides, face-painting and parade. 11:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Tickets: \$8. Information: (516) 922-0001.

HALLOWEEN WEEKEND, Waterloo Village, Exit 25 off Route 90, Stanhope, N.J. Storytelling, a parade, "ghost walks" and dunking for apples. Noon to 6 P.M. On Sunday, from noon to 6 P.M., there will be ghost walks and a hayride. Admission, \$8; \$7 for the elderly; \$6 for children. Hayride: \$3; \$2 for children. Information: (201) 347-0900.

Sunday

HAUNTED MANHATTAN, Adventure on a Shoestring. Two walking tours past some "haunted" sites. The first, at noon, covers the East Village and includes St. Marks Church in the Bowery and Chumley's Restaurant. At 3 P.M., midtown will be explored, including the Osborne apartment house and the former Belasco Theater. Each tour is \$5. Reservations and meeting places: (212) 265-2663.

HALLOWEEN COSTUME PARTY, Toy Center, 200 Fifth Avenue, at 23d Street, Manhattan. A party with a magic show, games, a tattoo artist, a raffle and a parade. Tickets: \$90; \$45 for children. Noon to 3 P.M. Sponsored by Kids of New York University Medical Center; proceeds benefit children's health services at the hospital. Information: (212) 263-5870.

ARTS AND WITCH-CRAFTS, Newkirk Plaza, between Newkirk and Foster Avenues, East 16th Street and Mariborough Road, Flatbush, Brooklyn. Crafts, entertainment, tarot and palm readers, and a costume contest. Noon to 6 P.M. Sponsored by the Newkirk Area Neighborhood Association. Information: (718) 471-5790.

PACKER PUMPKIN FESTIVAL, Packer Collegiate Institute, 170 Jerome Street, Brooklyn Heights. Games, rides, crafts, food. Noon to 5 P.M. Admission: \$1; rides: \$1. Information: (718) 876-6844.

ANNUAL HALLOWEEN HARVEST PARTY, Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers. A festival with a Caribbean flavor; with music, dancing, mask-making and a costume parade. 1 to 4 P.M. Admission: \$3; \$1.50 for the elderly; free for children under 12 in costume; otherwise, \$1.50. Information: (914) 963-4550.

Monday

VILLAGE HALLOWEEN PARADE, Avenue of the Americas, from Spring Street in SoHo to West 22d Street in Chelsea. Begins at 6 P.M.

COSTUME CONTEST, A Different Light, 151 West 10th Street, Chelsea. A contest sponsored by the bookstore; prizes include cash, books and T-shirts. 8 P.M. Information: (212) 989-4850.

HALLOWEEN MASQUERADE, La Belle Époque, 827 Broadway, at 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Music and dancing. Sponsored by Howard Kaplan, an antiques dealer. Tickets: \$75; benefit for the American Foundation for AIDS Research. Information: (212) 682-7440, Extension 155.

ANNUAL VILLAGE HALLOWEEN COSTUME BALL, Theater for the New City, 155 First Avenue, at 10th Street, East Village. Free outdoor performances, by Ray Santiago and his Salsa Band and others, begin at 6 P.M. Inside, at 8 P.M., music and dance by Penny Arcade, the Ninth Street Theater, Hot Peaches, Tuli Kupferberg and others, as well as palm and tarot readings. Admission: \$15. Information: (212) 254-1109.

THE VOLUPTUOUS HORROR OF KAREN BLACK, Webster Hall, 125 East 11th Street, East Village. A concert by the glam-punk band. 10 P.M. Tickets: \$13 in

advance; \$15 at the door. Information: (212) 353-1600.

CELTIC NEW YEAR'S EVE, O'Lunney's Restaurant, 12 West 4th Street. A celebration of the Celtic holiday that coincides with Halloween, with music with Tim Wechelaer, a fiddler; Katrina Patton, a singer and guitarist; and Bob Luska, a folk singer. 7 P.M. Donation: \$5. Information: (800) 628-2358.

"SCREAMS ON SCREEN: 100 YEARS OF HORROR FILM," New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center. An exhibition of posters, photographs, props, special effects and videotapes of movie trailers. Through April. Hours: Mondays and Thursdays, noon to 8 P.M.; Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, noon to 6 P.M. Free. Information: (212) 870-1630.

SLOVAK PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA, Kaye Playhouse, 68th Street between Lexington and Park Avenues. Works by J. L. Bella, a Transylvanian composer. 8 P.M. Tickets: \$24. Information: (212) 772-4448.

HALLOWEEN WITH CHICAGO CITY LIMITS, Jan Hus Playhouse, 351 East 74th Street, Manhattan. A performance by members of the improvisational theater's national touring company, followed by a party. 8:30 P.M. Tickets: \$10; \$8 for students. Audience members in costume will be admitted free to the performance and party. Information: (212) 772-8707.

"WRITERS AND GHOSTS," 92d Street Y, at Lexington Avenue. Readings from their works by Brad Lettisher, editor of the "Norton Book of Ghost Stories"; Allison Lurie, author of "Women and Ghosts," and Joyce Carol Oates, author of "Haunted." Benjamin Cheever will read from works by his father, John Cheever. 8 P.M. Tickets: \$10. Information: (212) 988-1100.