

## A Magician Debunks the Paranormal in Beguiling Doc 'An Honest Liar'

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on March 19, 2015 - 2:19pm

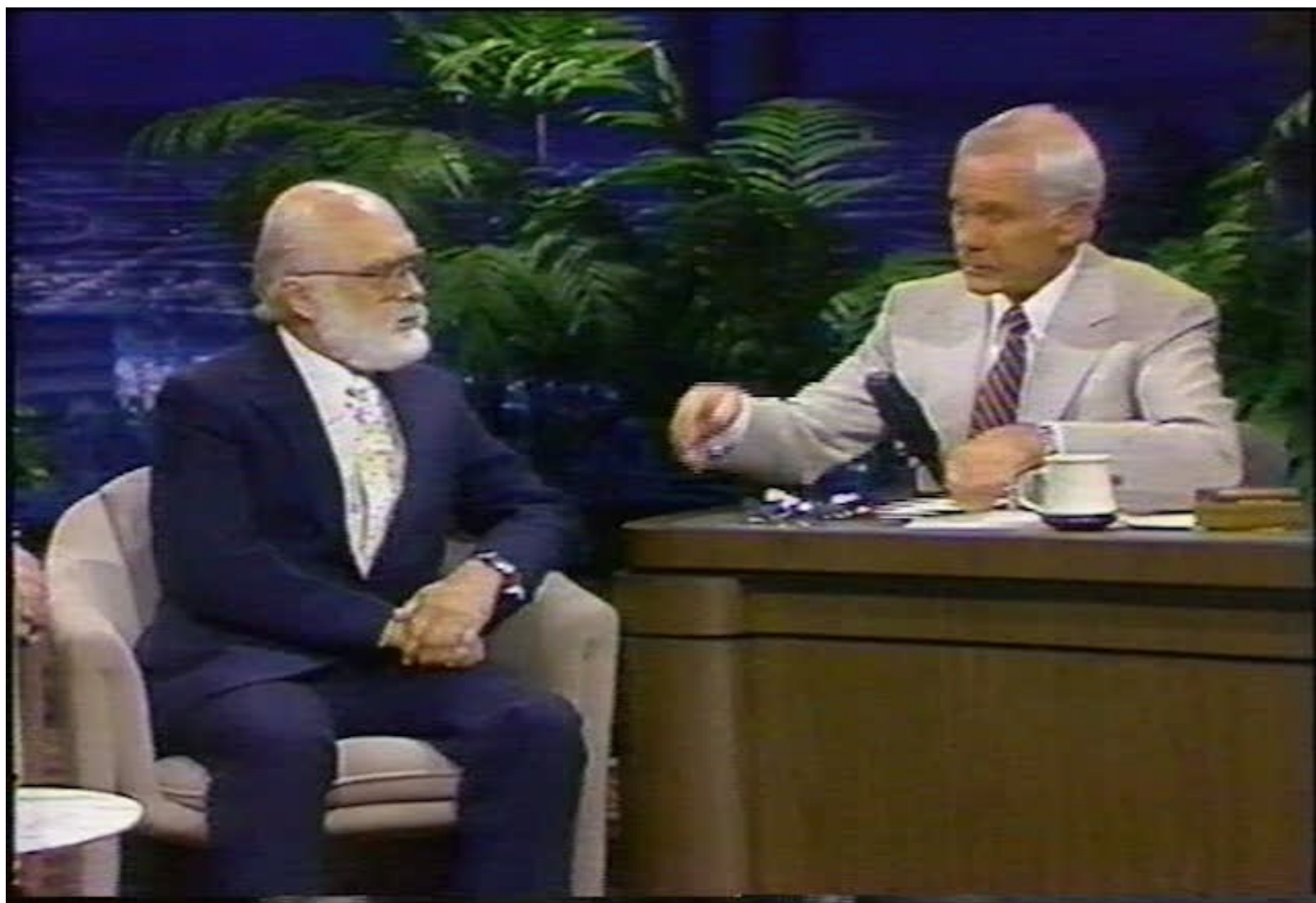
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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Magician James Randi, or “The Amazing Randi,” has made a legacy in using his love of magic to show audiences how they’re being tricked by evangelists, spoon-benders, psychics, etc. A ruthlessly charming Houdini-wannabe with instant showman charisma, he exists as the humbling gravity to a world that can convince itself that unattainable answers are to be found in ideas beyond science. When someone claims that they’re able to talk to spirits from over 35,000 years ago, or can push a pen with extreme focus and the wave of their hand, Randi shows up at the scene, and throws down with logic at his side. It often happens on the stage of talk shows, whether it’s Johnny Carson or Larry King, and it’s glorious. He never loses. In a world where a sucker is indeed born every minute, he’s a hero as much as he is a necessity.

While not the first film to be amazed by Randi, this documentary from Tyler Measom & Justin Weinstein opening at the Music Box Theater this weekend provides a broad overview of his career, touching upon his unique celebrity, and also his private life. Broken into greatest hits chapters and bouncing around in time, the film goes wide not deep when exploring a man who started off wanting to be Houdini’s descendent, but then factored those skills into a crucial intellectual movement. Capturing him in his sprightly 80s, the movie aptly presents his different life roles, as magician, skeptic, and loving, closeted partner to artist Jose Alvarez.



'An Honest Liar'

Photo credit: Abramorama

Undoubtedly, Randi is a great subject for a documentary film, or even a narrative one, hopefully someday. Dealing with an existence that resides entirely in the stranger-than-fiction, his supporting cast is an odd lot of characters. To see many of them speaking in this film, from the two young men that Randi had play psychic for months, to spoon-bending nemesis Uri Geller, is a geeky joy. Their episodes are fascinating



tales on the fringe of kitschy scientific lunacy. With his unimposing tininess and white beard to contrast his razor-sharp wit, Randi's life is a treasure trove of weird cultural movements, providing the brief bits of sense into the fascinations behind Peter Popoff (who still shills miracle water today), or Geller (who still claims to bend junk with his mind today).

In telling his story, the spirit of Randi is teased with distinct editing choices, of what to show and not to show. His historical debunks are conveyed (such as when he bends Barbara Walters' keys), but footage of Randi's explanation, either from the moment or later, is not expressed. The same goes for a moment in which Randi's two former-teen psychics recall how they were able to get a fan to move, even though it was covered in a glass jar. Or, even in the manner in which Randi was able to guillotine Alice Cooper years ago. This is a movie expresses Randi in tricks, and asides to the mysterious magician mentality of Randi's work over his TED-talking logical standpoint, and as a figure who has the explanations that paranormal-believers didn't know they needed. (There are less mystical editing options as well, such as mentioning but not defining his famous million dollar challenge against his own skeptics, and also in repeating his voiceover from the beginning at the very end, with no artistic flourish.)



‘An Honest Liar’

Photo credit: Abramorama

In a strange way, “An Honest Liar” lacks its own curiosity about the fascinating Randi, and avoids the bigger questions behind his work. By not exploring why people insist on believing in psychic powers, the film props Randi up to be an ideological hit man, but not the vivacious discussion point that marks his true significance. There's more intrigue here raised by its cast of talking heads (all whom revere Randi) than the entire package itself.

Taken for its colorful bigger picture, there's plenty of joy to derive from this aptly engaging review of an entertainer's unusual career. Along with presentation of a magnificent human being, “An Honest Liar” is a celebration of the truth, for the small victories won by science in the battle that continues to wage on against suckers.

*“An Honest Liar” opens at Chicago’s Music Box Theater on March 20. Featuring James Randi, Uri Geller, Bill Nye, Jamy Ian Swiss, Penn & Teller, Adam Savage, and Michael Shermer. Screenplay by Tyler Measom, Greg O’Toole and Justin Weinstein. Directed by Measom & Weinstein. Not Rated.*



[11]

By [NICK ALLEN](#) [12]  
Editor & Staff Writer  
HollywoodChicago.com  
[nick@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:nick@hollywoodchicago.com) [11]

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