

GERMANY'S MAGIC-THEATRE FESTIVAL

By ALAN HOWARD

Within the last ten or fifteen years, a new genre of magic show has been gaining popularity, especially in Germany, where quite a few magicians have created their own two-hour theatrical productions. These are not the traditional illusion shows, but more akin to classic drama, one- or two-person shows in which magic effects help to define the characters and further a narrative story. At the same time, the magic is much more than merely special effects used to enhance a drama.

It is the ideas behind the presentation that are most important to this form of magic-theatre. The artists realize that, on their own, magic tricks rarely make sense without a framing context; they can be seen purely as puzzles. But an artist can use magic to truly touch an audience while engaging them in a larger story.

With added meaning behind the magic, the magician becomes more of a narrator, or

an actor who has something to say beyond: "Watch this, isn't this amazing?" Truly reaching out to people and affecting their emotions is theatre, offering new ways to think about life and the world around us. Like the best of traditional theatre, magic-theatre seeks to reveal something that may have previously been unseen — not how a trick works, but how we all relate to nature, and each other.

When Witus Witt developed his first solo magic-theatre show back in 1992, he knew of no one else who was working in such a direction. As the genre was unheard of at the time, he had difficulty in finding places to perform. His show was not designed for restaurants, concerts, or the street, but was intentionally crafted with the theatre in mind. But theaters were more interested in *Hamlet*, Bertold Brecht, and more traditional forms of drama — not a magic play, despite illusions of grandeur.

"Today," says Witt, "there are about

twenty magicians in Germany who have developed magic-theatre shows, and they are quite successful theatrical extensions of their magic. Yet the general public is still not aware of this 'new' art form. And there exist no qualified magic critics among the general media. Whenever there is a magic show of any kind, you will find all sorts of critics, students, hobby writers, etc. But you do not find an educated critic for magic, like you find within the rest of the theatre world."

Wittus held a long-time dream of a magic-theatre festival to display some of these unusual shows to the public. "I wanted to show the audience that magic is not limited to ten- or fifteen-minute acts," he says, "but magic is not merely tricks, and can be performed in many different and theatrical ways."

A long weekend with two shows a night would offer the public a chance to alter their own perceptions about magic. Last winter, Witt finally convinced a theater to give it a try.

The first half of the show is about how philosophy works with magic; the second part explains how magic works with philosophy.

Thomas Fraps and Pit Harding are both members of the Flicking Fingers, their two-man show, *Metamagicum*, demonstrates physical knowledge versus magic

hoit — *Ganzes Vergnügen* [Half Truth — Whole Pleasure], was about "the secret of magic, the secret of life." In this show, audiences were given a glimpse of how things can happen. "But you will never get the full truth, otherwise you will be disappointed," says Witt. "If you have discovered all mystery in life, it will

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possibilities. Within their act they show that people can be deceived by Einstein's theory. While Thomas explains this difficult concept, Pit takes a fresh Coke can, which he opens with a *psch...* and then drinks from it. When Thomas has finished his explanations, Pit responds as a normal person would, saying, "Ah... that means, things which might have been real have not happened in the course of time... Hmm, that means, this can of Coke would still be filled and I could have another drink..." While he says this, Pit again opens the can, pulling the tab to freshly break the seal with a *psch...* and then drinks from it.

Wittus himself offered two different magic-theatre shows. The first, *Halbe Wahr-*

[Left to right] While Pit Harding (in lab coat) explains laws of physics, Thomas Fraps appears dressed as a large quark. In a Midsummer Night's scene, Gaston finds a rope continually threaded through his clothing; a can at the end gets magically crushed. Andino demonstrates Hegel's thesis and antithesis; the card represents an idea, while the feather floating above is a contradictory concept.

The final performance of the weekend was a two-hour show presented by Gaston, another member of the Flicking Fingers. Having studied acting, his performance in *Zaubernachtstraum* had Gaston portraying Faust, Hamlet, and others from classic drama. Gaston combines monologues of these famous characters with magic effects. He plays Bottom from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and demonstrates his power by destroying a gentleman's jacket with a knife. As Cyrano de Bergerac, he toys with time and love while performing a salt trick. As Romeo, he again plays with love and performs a one-ahead feat with a girl from the audience.

The festival was a success, with about 900 people attending the weekend, the majority of whom were not magicians. The theater was happy with the turnout, the artists were pleased with the response, and the audiences went away entertained, satisfied, and better educated about the possibilities magic-theatre can encompass.

The festival also received very good press both before and after the event, including write-ups in major national magazines. At least one theatre critic watched every show in the series, and proclaimed themselves fascinated by the weekend as a whole.

There will be a second *ZauberTheaterFestival* this year, to be held again in December.



PHOTOS: WITUS WITT

