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A Magician Breaks Out of the Mold (and the Pack)

By GLENN COLLINS

Prowling a cabaret stage, wearing a sorcerer's robe embellished with stars and moons, the magician Jeff McBride is definitely not David Copperfield: clean-cut is hardly the description that leaps to mind. It is instantly apparent, too, that this magician is no cheery Doug Henning, as he peers through a forbidding white-face mask and performs a show dense with drama, mystery and occult symbolism.

Mr. McBride combines magic with mime, dance, Kabuki theater and martial arts. He wields the primordial weapons of the magician -- the wand, chalice and sword. He wrestles with titanic unseen forces. He does not do rabbits.

If Mr. McBride's nightly magic act on the stage of the Ballroom would seem fairly uncategorizable, it has not deterred Mr. McBride from describing it.

"I call it renaissance Kabuki from Mars," he said with a wry smile after a recent show. Certainly there is an otherworldly quality to Mr. McBride's magic, his alien choreography and his striking costumes of red, yellow, blue and black, traditional color signs for the shaman's elemental tool kit of fire, air, water and earth.

Mr. McBride displays his legerdemain to the accompaniment of a high-decibel electronic score by composers including Vangelis and Alexandros. On a West Side stage known for its celebration of the torch song, this is a decided change of pace, and indeed, Mr. McBride is the first magician ever to perform there.

During the show, Mr. McBride's powerful and precise illusions turn a handkerchief into a coat of samurai armor, transform a feather into a magician's wand, transmute sand into milk, and dramatically materialize cards and coins.

He eats fire, generates a show-storm of Japanese rice paper from his hand and seems to levitate on beams of light. These light rays do not emanate from lasers: they're beamed from aircraft landing lights, which impart an eerie brilliance to the stage.

At one point in the act, Mr. McBride launches his transformations from a table modeled after the one in Faust's study,

but Mr. McBride corrects any who deem his show alchemical. "Alchemy came long after magic," he said, "and magicians were there first."

Mr. McBride is the youngest magician ever to receive the Star of Magic Award from the International Brotherhood of Magicians, and honor that has eluded both Mr. Copperfield and Mr. Henning.

The speed and power of his illusions derive from his early experience performing as the opening act for rock groups like Santana and Cheap Trick. "You had to go out and dazzle people, blast their eyes out," he said.

To do this, Mr. McBride developed what



Anna Ubell

Jeff McBride conjures up theatrical magic at the Ballroom.

he referred to as "commando mime." "The word for most mime is wimpy, but rock audiences won't stand for portrayals of dying butterflies," Mr. McBride said. "I incorporated a kind of attack mime, thanks to my training in aikido and judo."

It took four years for Mr. McBride to put together his show, and it takes more than four hours for him to prepare for each performance, what with the readying of apparatus and the arrangement of makeup. There is also the half-hour of stretching, warm-ups, and the daily card- and coin-manipulation exercises he religiously performs.

Changed by Kabuki

Mr. McBride was born in Goshen, N.Y., grew up in nearby Rock Hill, and at the age of 8 -- the year he started studying judo -- he also performed his first magic shows for his parents, after stealing a copy of "The Golden Book of Magic" from the Rock Hill Public Library.

At 10, he began charging a quarter for his magic shows in the McBride basement; at 12, he was performing at children's camps in the Catskill hotels, and at 16, he was appearing as the opening act for a salsa show touring Japan. "There I saw Kabuki for the first time, and it changed my life," he said.

After this first of eight trips to Japan, Mr. McBride began performing in a Kabuki-inspired whiteface mask, blending mime with his magic, and incorporating Oriental influences in his costuming. "All of this enabled me to detach myself, and create a more magical ritual level for the audience," he said.

In the show at the Ballroom, Mr. McBride performs eight magical "experiments," he said, "rituals based on the symbolism of the tarot deck." Enacting the myth of a sort of wizardlike Everyman, he materializes from the primordial void, discovers and manipulates the four elements, and after mastering the universe, wrestles with his own soul.

Unmasked in the End

In the finale, a balletic frenzy of quick-paced illusion, he battles with a series of demonic masks until, ultimately, he stands before the audience as himself.