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MAGIC

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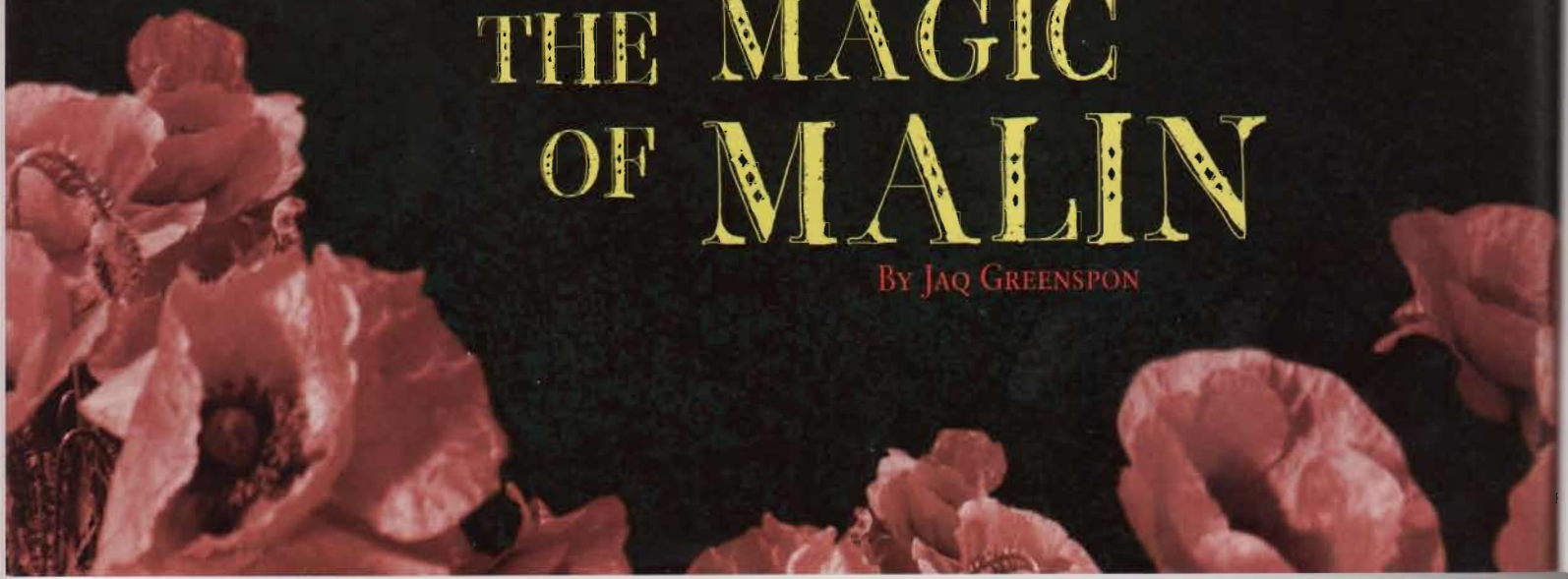
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Making a Smoked Herring Swim:

THE MAGIC
OF MALIN

By JAQ GREENSPON



When I first met Malin Nilsson, she was wandering the dealer's room at *MAGIC Live!* I was introduced to her by English mentalist Ian Rowland, who opened the conversation by exclaiming, "She's figured out how to make an entire town disappear! She's amazing!" How could I not be intrigued? On a convention floor where you couldn't throw a Zombie ball without hitting a famous magician, this was a pretty serious claim, especially considering he was talking about a magician who has yet to reach thirty and is relatively unknown in the United States. Of course, it only took a few minutes of talking to her before I realized he was right. She is amazing. And magic is only one of her many talents, although it is the one around which all others gravitate.

Malin is not your normal magician. She didn't come to the art via an uncle pulling coins from her ear or by seeing a magician in her school or at a fair. Instead, she was born in Skillinge, a little village on the Southern coast of Sweden, and grew up surrounded by magic paraphernalia — but not actual live performances.

"My dad isn't a performer," Malin says. No, Lennart Nilsson is a construction worker with an interest in magic from a purely aesthetic point of view. He sees it as an art form. For the past fifteen years, he has been building the Skillinge Theater into a magician's paradise of a stage. There are trapdoors everywhere, and there's a handyman who can fix or whip up any illusion, made to order. "To my great advantage," Malin says, "he has been a collector of 'magic things.' Not just props, but old posters and books, too." So while live magic was not part of her everyday existence, it was always her calling.

"It was very rare to see any kind of magic around here. I probably didn't see more than a handful of live magic performances before I was fifteen, when I did my first gig." This sense of learning the history first goes part of the way toward explaining what makes this Scandinavian magician so special. The remainder of her background explains the rest: "I have been lucky to grow up around a theater, where I had actors, directors, musicians, and variety performers around me. Thanks to them, I understood pretty early that a performance wasn't about the tricks."

Even so, learning magic was hard for Malin. She didn't have a mentor to teach her, someone to give her advice or correct her mistakes. Instead, she had to learn from films and TV shows, books and tapes, teaching

herself — quite literally — the tricks of the trade. Being somewhat isolated from other magicians meant that she had to develop an instinct for finding creative insight. "I can get inspiration from anything," she explains. "When it's totally dry in my head, but there is a will to create something, or if I have a gap to fill in my show, I go to toy stores and secondhand shops. It usually gets my brain going. I love the way styles and quality are mixed in secondhand shops, and sometimes I find something that has a history. Maybe not something antique, but something with a personal history. On the inside of one of my first

tricks, though. It taught Malin what worked and what didn't, and how to make changes on the fly. It also helped her define what she did and did not want to do as a performer. Part of this was defining her character, something all magicians have to go through. "Not having a mentor, it was extremely hard to navigate in the broad and messy world of magic." So again, she had to find her own way. In this case, she started with the classic image of a male magician and twisted it to fit her own personality. She turned the cliché into a real human by adding some cracks and imperfections, and is able to bring out her own femininity and use it to her advantage. Since she is not the svelte, waif-like creature we're used to seeing here in America, she uses her curves as part of her comedy or for misdirection. Her bosom becomes a camel for a shadow act or her skirt is used to hide and produce various props, such as wands or a two-foot machete.

Keeping her connected to the stage are her boots, the right one of which holds her wand when it's not in use. She is not the type of girl you put into high heels. And the crowning achievement, so to speak, is her hat. "Yes, my top hat!" she exclaims proudly when asked about it. "It's not just a prop! It's a body part that just happens not to be stuck on, like arms and legs. I use it more to express a feeling than to make stuff appear. My hat and wand are character props more than 'magic props.'"

My inspiration comes from the black-and-white movies and how the gentlemen wore hats back then."

This idea of the feminine overtaking the masculine cliché is not that unusual when one looks directly at Malin's philosophy of creation. "Contrasts inspire me. I think everything needs contrasts to be interesting, or to connect, especially characters — to communicate that you are for real. I allow myself to be funny, intelligent, and beautiful, but also ugly, angry, annoying, and uncomfortable. I like drama mixed with comedy, people who cry when they laugh. Morbid humor is a contrast in itself, just like irony. In the right hands, these tools can be used to create magic."

The practical view of this study in contrasts was on display last year during Malin's run in the Palace of Mystery at The Magic Castle. She opened with a routine entitled



PHOTO: JENNY HARGNE

magic bags was written 'for Göte — still in love.' Well, there's a story to tell right there, even a magic routine."

When Malin graduated from school, she took off for the big city, the southern Swedish town of Malmö. There she found private gigs hard to come by, so she had to take side jobs, teaching juggling at the local circus school and performing at children's parties at "one of those places where they have nightclubs, bowling, pool tables, and bars under the same roof. This wasn't a big chain or anything, quite a nice place, but during the weekends they had turned the concept of children's birthday parties into an industry. I worked there for one season and from September to December that year I did approximately 400 parties. One weekend I did 34 birthday parties. I don't perform for kids anymore."

This kind of baptism by fire had its posi-

Malin and the giant rabbit mixing the cards for a large-scale version of Simon Aronson's *Shuffle Bored*.

PHOTO: KARL LARSSON



"The Fat Ballerina," wherein Malin enters wearing an overly large tutu. Immediately, she juxtaposes images, putting the audience on guard by presenting a stereotypical stage picture but tweaked slightly. As she starts blowing soap bubbles, one of which transforms into an acrylic contact-juggling ball, it becomes apparent that she is having trouble with a part of her costume. She reaches in to readjust and pulls out the aforementioned two-foot machete. There is a laugh, certainly, but it's a nervous laugh. The audience is not sure where she's going, but her stage presence doesn't give them the option of turning away. By the time a second machete has been introduced and she starts juggling the two blades and the ball, the audience sees that there is a method to the madness. At the end, when the acrylic ball transforms into a delicate water balloon, which is then pierced by the sharp blade, she has the crowd in the palm of her hand.

Moving from juggling through more traditional magic routines — Linking Rings, disappearing wands, or even simple card tricks transformed into stage-size effects, often accompanied by live music and comedic actors acting as assistants — Malin creates an environment perfect for entertaining an audience

of any size or any age. But more importantly, she is entertaining herself — a big step in her evolution as a performer. "I thought entertainment was about pleasing the masses; I always tried to please everybody with my shows," she explains. "Wanting that is starting a show with a failure. Because you can't possibly be liked by everybody. People might think you are good, but still not like you. In my case, I don't even think I gave people the chance to like me or dislike me, because I didn't let them get to know me for real. Not that I

The audience is not sure where she's going, but her stage presence doesn't give them the option of turning away.

was hiding behind boxes or ballet, but I didn't let go and wasn't really present. I took myself way too seriously."

For Malin, part of finding the love of performing came from doing her own thing. Sure, her bread and butter comes from doing corporate parties or close-up gigs in countries ranging all over Europe. She performs regularly not only in Sweden, but also Denmark, Spain, England, and Germany, and performs in Swedish or English, or a smattering of other languages depending on the audience. Rarely will she do a whole show silently, although she could. But where she finds her home is in the annual show she does at the Skillinge Theater. Since 2003, she has created an

original two-hour show every summer. These shows are a labor of love and an explosion of creativity. They are her way of giving full expression to her magic — theatrical experiences that go beyond simply doing tricks. For the show in 2008, Malin created a storyline involving dreams and reality and invited German magician Marcus Zink to participate, along with regular co-conspirators Jörgen Thorsson and Sonny Lindbäck. These shows at the 220-seat theater sell out every year; she's even had to add matinee performances to accommodate demand.

The challenge for Malin is that, since her two-hour show has become a regular event, she feels an obligation to take people someplace new — but not necessarily in terms of topping what she did before. This is no big production show, where the props get bigger and the stunts more dangerous. Instead, she wants to challenge people's perceptions of what magic is and what it could be. For her show in 2007, she made a castle near the theater disappear and had a goat find a missing card, while in 2008 she had a motorcycle drive through the audience as a backup plan, an extra out for a trick. Each idea worked within the context of the show as a whole and none of them would have worked outside of that context.

And this is the thing to realize with Malin's shows: She comes up with the concept and script long before she comes up with the magic that will advance that story along. For *Malin: Unplugged*, the 2008 show, every-

thing centered around a red balloon (symbolizing the spirit of magic) and two characters, besides the magician herself: an angry musician (Thorsson) who has been told he is not allowed to be funny because someone else has been hired for that job, and an overgrown rabbit (Lindbäck) who is frustrated because he has grown too big and fat to fit into the hat. She also had Zink, a friend with whom she shared her concepts and who was willing to go along and make sure his pieces fit (including a Gypsy Thread routine in which he restored the cord for the balloon). From a magical standpoint, the only thing she knew in the early phases of creating the show was that, at the conclusion of the performance, she wanted to end up in the bunny suit. She didn't have a method in mind, but that wasn't a concern. "The method is just a matter of putting in the time and talking to the right people. The hard part is the idea." Her cast shares her views — or at least they are willing to go along and see where her vision takes them. For instance, she could have fit more people into the house if she had sacrificed the biker gag or changed it to be more accommodating to the confines of the theater. But that wasn't what the effect needed. In the end, it was the effect that won out, garnering a quiet respect from the cast. "We were all very impressed with her choices," says Lindbäck, a nationally renowned modern dancer. "She could have put in more seats, but what she did was better for the show."

Malin took a characteristically unconventional approach to promoting *Malin: Unplugged*. Two months before the show opened, she began writing a weekly column for the Southern Sweden regional newspaper, *Ystad Allehanda*, in which she invited readers to suggest ideas for magic effects to include in the show. And she specifically asked them not to limit themselves. The ideas that came in ranged from turning into an angel and flying to heaven to making a candy company logo (which is made from various candy shapes) come alive. The one she chose to do, though, she chose for a multitude of reason. The suggestion involved a local legendary figure, a town drunk who, upon seeing a goldfish for the first time, exclaimed "I didn't know smoked herring could swim!" The appeal of the story is easy to see. First, it's local to the region of the theater, so people will know it; second, it has an inherent sense of wonder; and third, it's a magic trick. So now Malin had an idea: to make a smoked herring swim.

The first time I stepped into Malin's workspace, she had a water dish on the table, a tank of goldfish nearby, and she was working on methods for producing a fish. Scattered around the table were thumb tips, skinny balloons, condoms, construction paper, and electrical tape. And water, water everywhere. It



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[Top] Three views of Malin with rope and Linking Rings in competition at FISM 2006, Stockholm. [Center row] The "fat ballerina" routine, Malin's "knife-juggling and soap bubble act." The knife-wielding magician/juggler amidst a field of flowers for a 2006 promotional poster. [Bottom] Malin onstage with a volunteer, Sonny Lindbäck as the rabbit, and one-man orchestra Jörgen Thorsson.

was like Arts & Crafts Day at magic camp — and a rainy day at that. She still didn't have a method or a storyline, but she had an idea. The trick would be to balance those elements.

But that's the trick to everything in life, isn't it? Balance. It took some drastic life changes for Malin to realize that loving what you do and defining yourself entirely by it are two very different states of mind. For a long time, she thought the worst thing that could happen was to do a bad show. She made her onstage work a matter of life and death, the meter stick by which she measured her own worth as a person. If a show went well, then she was good; if a show went poorly, she viewed it as a personal failure. Her sense of self-worth tumbled, and that affected all parts of her life. "Then I got into a very problematic and dark relationship. When you go through something that's about life and death *for real*, you get new reference points. I'll risk anything onstage nowadays, because I know I won't die if it doesn't turn out well. And when you are risking, you are at the same time taking the chance of being brilliant. It took years to understand that."

While Malin no longer defines her moods by her magic, it is still her passion, her work, and her hobby, in that order. She makes a living doing corporate work and reinvests the money into her own theatrical productions, from which she

hopes to someday earn enough to live on. But even if she didn't have any of that, even if she was working in an office somewhere, her spare time would be filled in her little studio, practicing and performing magic for her dove, Edith, and an imaginary audience.

Her rehearsals before a non-existent crowd are not so uncommon — everyone rehearses in private before going public — but the creation of her routines is also aided by unseen, unconventional advisors. Malin has fantastic conversations in her head with famed magicians of the past, musing on the hows and whys of their work. She also spends time conversing with modern, more corporeal, conjurers, such as Kevin James and Swedish magician and inventor Sven Yngve Oscarsson. Malin says of Oscarsson, "He's my best brainstorming friend. He doesn't even know there is a box to think outside of."

For Malin, magic is everywhere. When you spend time with her, it doesn't take long to understand that. Walking through the streets of downtown Malmö, items in shop windows present themselves as effects waiting to be discovered. Lamps and kitchen gadgets hold the same thrill. The look on her face as she runs her fingers over a particular design feature and intones "Can't you just see this as a magic trick?" makes you wonder why you didn't see it as well. But then you realize that she sees the world differently.

Back in the studio with the water dish and the fish, a storyline began to develop:

Malin is onstage. She places a wineglass on a table (designed and built by her father, of course). A five-year-old girl enters with a wineglass that is ten times normal size and almost dwarfs the child. After Malin produces water from a dry newspaper, the girl exits and then returns carrying a pitcher of water, which she pours into her glass. Malin produces a small fish. The girl brings more water. A second small fish from nowhere, but the audience is laughing at the third entrance of the little girl with another pitcher of water. Now comes the smoked herring. It is wrapped in newspaper and then starts wriggling. Malin walks over to the little girl's wineglass and pours a huge goldfish into the big bowl. The stage lights fade out. When they come back up, the girl is sitting cross-legged in front of her bowl with a fishing pole in hand — and the story is complete.

Between the studio and the stage, methods would be tried and discarded, bits of business changed or deleted. As far as Malin is concerned, nothing is set in stone and every day is an opportunity to learn. She is always striving to be a better magician than she was the day before. "Sometimes I think I understand, and then I see someone perform or I read something that just takes me back to square one. Two steps forward and one backward, those would be okay proportions. But sometimes it feels more like ten steps forward and nine back. A lot of walking. Luckily, I have all the time in the world for this — and good boots." ♦

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