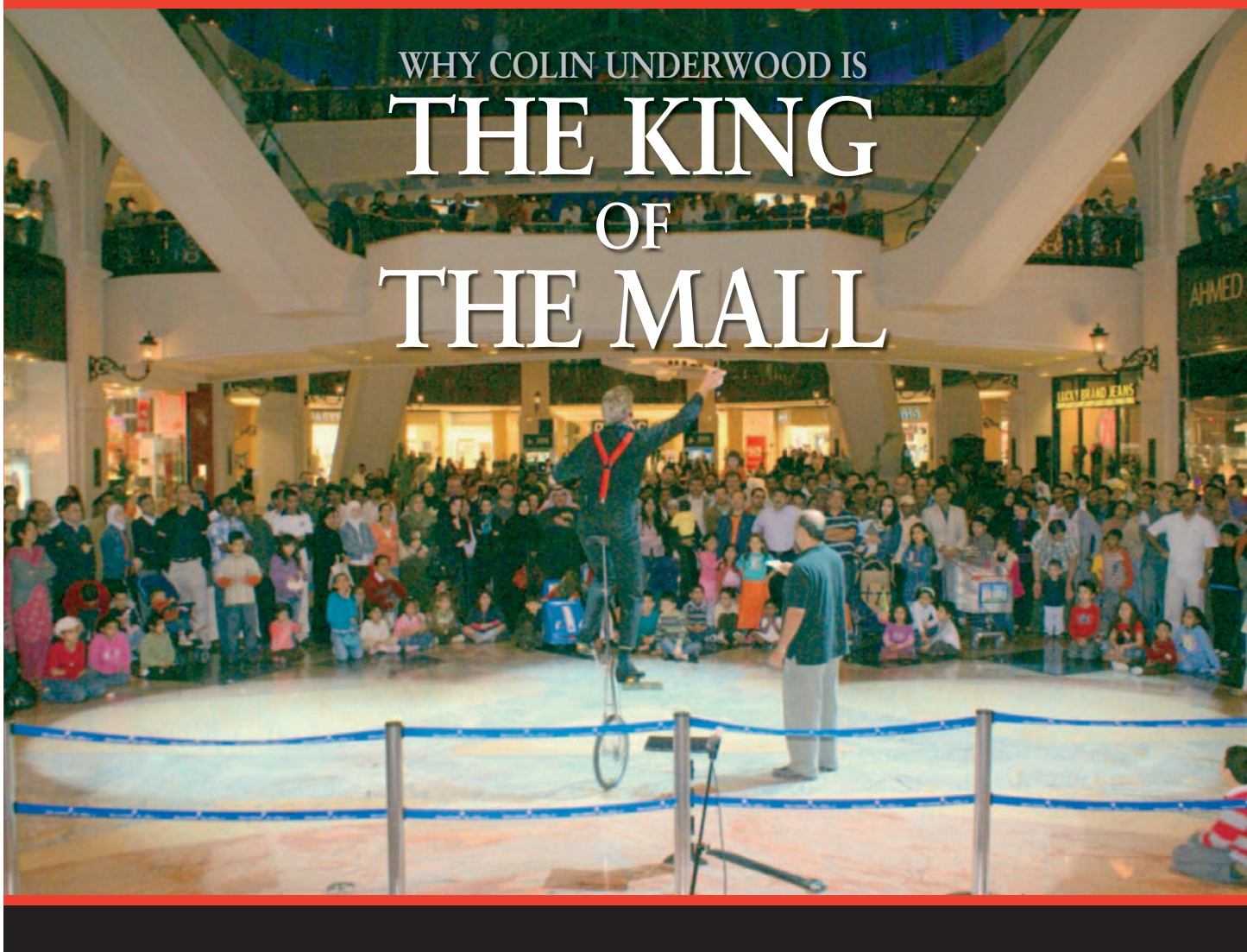


WHY COLIN UNDERWOOD IS THE KING OF THE MALL



BY CHRIS VAN DER MAAS

If you haven't heard of Colin Underwood before, it's because this 47-year-old South African has been delighting primarily local audiences, with only occasional forays into Europe and the Middle East. He's been performing for the past thirty years, twenty-five of which have been as a full-time professional. He is a two-time South African comedy magic champion, has a number of television credits to his name, and has performed close-up magic for luminaries ranging from the Governor of The Reserve Bank to a Royal Command Performance for H.R.H. Prince Edward.

It's difficult to put Colin in a box. He's not what you would term a magicians' magician, does not belong to magic clubs, and rarely attends conventions. Perhaps the words "comedic magical variety entertainer" describe him best. But it is not only the variety of skills that Colin displays — juggling, unicycle, stilt-walking, mime, comedy, and magic — that make him so entertaining, it's that he's so good at all of these disciplines. The magic and comedy is always the common thread, and as

a magician he shines as close-up performer, cabaret artist, and family entertainer. Oh yes, did I mention that he is also an accomplished street performer and pickpocket?

I first met Colin Underwood about 1977, when we were both attending junior high school in Johannesburg. After I proudly showed him my prop-driven apparatus, he opened his self-made roll-on table and removed books from Slydini, Hugard, Malini, and Ross. He also, in turn, showed me a Chop Cup routine, a slick Multiplying Balls routine done with painted Ping Pong balls, fooled me badly with Slydini's Torn-and-Restored Newspaper that I was seeing for the first time, and did a flawless rendition of Vernon's Symphony of the Rings — all effects he performs to this day. And the juggling clubs, of course. Colin had first been introduced to magic after receiving a magic set as a Christmas present. After local magician Ernie Mills had given him a few past issues of *Magicgram*, the in-house publication of Supreme Magic in the United Kingdom, he was properly hooked.

For a while, Underwood performed a dove act, inspired by the books of Ian Adair, also from Supreme Magic. As a result of his performance abilities, when Colin was conscripted into military service, he made it to the entertainment section, where he was able to further hone his magic act and spend hours a day raising the bar on his juggling skills. A year at Design College followed, before he took the full-time performance plunge and ran off with the *Robert Brothers Famous Circus* in the United Kingdom. Colin worked as a featured juggler, as well as Count Dracula, performing illusions such as a Sawing, Sword Suspension, a coffin Cremation (where his wig once caught fire whilst inside), and the Lion's Bride. When the circus stopped at Bideford, in Devon, home of Supreme Magic, he was fortunate to meet the founding partner, Edwin Hooper, who gave him some personal notes on illusions that he had been working on.

South Africa has a relatively small corporate community and so, after Underwood returned to his homeland, he realized that he would have to be versatile in order to



survive. Thus, in a period of a week on the local front, he may typically spend a few days performing at a shopping centre or at an agricultural show with his Volkswagen comedy vehicle, presenting a school assembly performance, and a cabaret performance at a top class establishment. Good planning and prop organization are vital, keeping Colin from becoming the dreaded “magician for all occasions.” It simply means adapting and innovating in response to a constantly changing market, in a country where a large percentage of the population still believes in witchcraft, and where politics is inextricably woven into the tapestry that is daily life. Clients demand versatility, which Colin is able to provide in an imperfect world. And of course, he always delivers, as most of his work is the result of happy referrals and repeat bookings.

He has been involved in the opening of virtually every major shopping center in Southern Africa for the past 25 years, and has few peers in this field. South Africa, even more so than in US and Europe, has seen tremendous growth of these ubiquitous strips of concrete sameness, devoid of soul and feeling, and offering basically the same brands. His success owes as much to his performances in this field, as it does to changing the mindset of mall owners, convincing them that they needed “shoppertainment” in the first instance. He was getting so much work from these sources that he formed his own entertainment agency for a while, but the old adage, “If you want something done properly, do it yourself” struck home hard, so he closed it down. Like many before him, he is keen to pass on some of his skills to a younger generation, and has taught many a youngster the basics of juggling and stilt-walking, securing bookings for them in the process.

Fast-forward thirty-odd years to May 2007, to Dubai in the Middle East. Like a mini Las Vegas, a kingdom fuelled by petrodollars is arising Sphinx-like from the desert, with construction abuzz 24/7. Outside, the heat is sweltering, but inside The Mall of Emirates shopping center — reputedly the second largest in the world, with its own indoor ski slope and some four million annual visitors — the air conditioners are working overtime. It adjoins The Kempinsky Hotel where Colin occasionally displays his close-up chops. Circular floors of shopping all overlook a giant type of atrium, a perfect



venue for Underwood to showcase his wide range of skills.

There is a buzz on the ground floor as Colin is about to commence his performance.

Like the seasoned street worker — as his ever-growing hat at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival attests to — he first builds the crowd, patiently, very patiently. He intently interacts and connects with his audience, and they with him. Colin is a big fan of Cellini, and whenever he has spare time he takes to the streets, whether it be Cape Town in South Africa, Convent Gardens in London, or on a cobbled town square in Spain. He is also a huge fan of the late Tommy Wonder, with whom he had the privilege to appear on the

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The many acts and faces of Colin Underwood, performing in the streets of South Africa and London, and The Mall of Emirates in Dubai. He features a Card Stab on a giraffe unicycle [facing page], along with a variety of magic, juggling, balloon feats, and clown work, both as himself and as his character, Mr. Barnaby Smythe (in derby and glasses).



2002 program at the College of Magic in Cape Town. What particularly impressed Colin about Tommy was his meticulous preparation, not only prop-wise, but the deep breathing and relaxation techniques he was applying in the process of readying himself to enter his performance zone.

"Mother!" Colin calls out to a lady crossing his path and gives her a hug. She walks off bemused, until he shows her that he has stolen her watch. The shoppers are now starting to gather and shrieks of laughter follow. In fact, if laughter is the true measure of the performer's success, Colin Underwood is a very successful performer. His humor is self-deprecating and, as a result, audiences take an almost instant liking to him. He offers "mother" compensation and puts some money on the floor. "Come fetch it," he beckons her. She steps forward with trepidation, but before she can reach the money Colin has scooped it up. Not to worry, as he slowly changes it into a higher denomination before giving it to her. A giant red sponge ball materializes in the spectator's hand after she and Colin have been holding and waving hands. More laughter, more applause, and Colin has the shoppers in the palm of *his* hand. Next up are some of Colin's personal effects that he has developed over the years, commencing with a comedic chain escape, followed by the production of three bowling balls from an office chair, and ending with a stunning visual production of a large watermelon from his hat.

Time to up the speed, as the music comes on and the performer does a super-slick juggling routine. Both in his cabaret work and mall performances, his favorite types of performances, Colin alternates between music and patter, each segment in turn complementing the other. A Card Stab whilst on his unicycle is next, all the time interspersed with madcap comedy. In a flash, his forty-minute performance is over and the audience have been royally entertained, their applause warm and sustained.

What's in the future for Colin Underwood? With his son and daughter now grown up, he is able to accept longer engagements outside of South Africa, such as in 2006 when he successfully performed cabaret in Spain for a number of months. He has been penning down his thoughts for some time now, so who knows, a book or lecture could be in the offing. He is returning to Dubai later in 2007, and with engagements lined up in other Gulf States, the future is looking bright. 

Chris van der Maas is a lawyer and occasional weekend performer who was born in Amsterdam but grew up and still lives in South Africa.

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