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MAGIC

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PIT HARTLING

THE **MOST** SUCCESSFUL
GERMAN **MAGICIAN**
IN HIS **WEIGHT CLASS!**



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**VICE WORLD CHAMPION
OF MAGIC
AND THE MOST SUCCESSFUL
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BY RICHARD HATCH

The Giersch Museum, on the south bank of the Main River in the heart of Frankfurt's museum district, is a renovated three-story neo-classical villa built in 1910. Its primary mission, since opening as an art museum in September 2000, has been to showcase artists with a connection to the region but whose importance transcends the region's boundaries. To carry out its mission, it generally stages two major exhibitions annually. The current exhibit focuses on the Italianate landscapes of Carl Morgenstern (1811–1893), one of the city's most successful and renowned 19th-century painters. But recently the museum hosted the first of a planned series of performances showcasing another kind of artist: Frankfurt-based magician Pit Hartling.

The son of a hospital's head doctor and the executive secretary to the CEO in charge of licensing of Disney products in Germany, Pit was born on January 25, 1976, in the village of Nieder-Erlenbach, now a section of Frankfurt. Eight years later, Pit discovered an old magic set in his maternal great-aunt Emma's basement. "There was no one particularly interested in magic in the family," Pit recalls. "Why she had that old magic set is somewhat of a mystery." The wooden props made fascinating playthings. This discovery was the start of an increasingly obsessive interest in conjuring.

During a vacation trip two years later, he saw his first live performance of magic. It was a show performed by one of Germany's leading magicians, Marvelli Junior. For the first time, Pit saw the classics of magic performed in a classical style: Professor's Nightmare, the Linking Rings, a Four Ace trick with jumbo cards. More than twenty years later, Pit can still recall details of that show. He soon discovered the joys of the brick-and-mortar magic shop, visiting Boretis in nearby Neustadt, and the famous Zaubert Bartl shop in faraway Hamburg. He began to order props by mail, mostly on special occasions such as his birthday and Christmas, and also learned of the existence of the German Magic Circle, which had a local branch that met regularly in Frankfurt.

At age twelve, having only performed magic for family and friends, he found himself part of a 1988 gala stage show organized by the Frankfurt branch of the Magic Circle, performing a version of the classic Spot Card in front of the curtain. That same year, he attended lectures in Frankfurt by Thomas Hierling — author of *New Wave Close-up*, an extremely influential book that first brought close-up magic to the attention of magicians in Germany — and José Carroll of Spain. Both were a revelation to him, the latter in particular being Pit's first exposure to the Spanish school of card magic. Influenced by these performers, and by Frankfurt's "brilliant and eccentric" Baron Wolff von Keyserlingk, Pit began to study close-up card magic.

Most of the cutting-edge magic literature was written in English. Pit learned English at school, but it was his interest in American magic texts that provided a real impetus to master the language. Pit began with *The Secrets of Brother John Hamman*, received as a confirmation gift and read by Pit with an English-German dictionary in his lap. This was followed by *The Complete Works of Derek Dingle*, along with several more Kaufman & Greenberg publications. Gradually, Pit's magic shifted from prop-centered routines to sleight of hand. While Pit's stand-up effects still consisted of such standards as the Rice Bowls, Hippy Hop Rabbits, and the Change Bag, his close-up repertoire soon included such classics as Vernon's Cutting The Aces, and Ascanio's All Backs (*Todos Dorsos*).

In 1992, Pit attended his first magic convention. There, in Leverkusen, Germany, Pit won first prize in the junior competition with variations on David Williamson card routines and Aurelio Paviato's Coin Matrix. More importantly, that convention was Pit's first exposure to Juan Tamariz. The experience left a profound impression on the young card worker. Pit began to study Spanish in order to have access to the works of Tamariz and the Madrid *Escuela*.

During his high school years, Pit performed professionally at private and corporate events. He also teamed up with another teenage magician living nearby, Nikolai Friedrich, billing their act as *Die Wundertypen* — "The Wonder Boys." While Nikolai did mostly straight magic, Pit played various eccentric characters, such as the scientist "Dr. Pit" or a prince concerned with a woman's ring.

Pit's 1992 convention win set him on the road to FISM two years later. He explains, "In Germany, the system was to have regional competitions. The first three winners of each category go on to the national championship the following year, and the winners of the national competition are qualified to go to FISM the next year."

Although he'd won in the Junior category in '92, Pit chose to enter the Card Magic competition in '93, where he would compete against adults. Pit won first place, earning himself a spot at FISM.

In 1994, as Pit began to prepare for the upcoming FISM in Japan, he and Nikolai got together with nine other young German magicians, mostly close-up specialists at the time, at a small theater in Munich. Their goal was to refine their magic by critiquing one another's acts. This group — Hartling, Friedrich, Thomas Fraps, Joerg Alexander, Manuel Muerte, Helge Thun, Ben Profane, Gaston, Stephan Kirschbaum, Rainer Pfeiffer and Joerg Willich — provided a safe and supportive environment for brainstorming and experimentation. They began to evolve performing personas (Gaston as "Gisbert," Pit as

"Heinz") and ensemble routines, eventually calling themselves *Die Fertigen Finger* — "The Flicking Fingers."

In the summer of 1994, Pit traveled to Yokohama, Japan, to compete in his first international competition and the first FISM held outside of Europe. Performing as himself, rather than a character, his set consisted primarily of a Travelers routine inspired by an item in the lecture notes of José Carroll. In Pit's handling, the four signed Aces ended up distributed in unexpected locations: inside the card case, in his shoe, on his back, and under his watch. At just seventeen years old, he was awarded second place in the Close-up Card Magic category, leading to his current billing as "vice world champion." First place was awarded to Ramblar from Argentina, with Henry Evans of Argentina and Yuji Wada of Japan sharing third place.

After FISM, *The Flicking Fingers* began to perform as an ensemble, with Pit's character Heinz quickly becoming a popular feature. A self-absorbed nerd who fancies himself a ladies' man, party animal, and "titan of card magic," his hilariously oblivious persona masks diabolical magic. Pit says, "Originally, the Fingers were mostly doing close-up magic, and at one point we realized that we were all very much alike. I had goofed around doing Heinz as a private little joke, and Helge and Gaston, who already had some experience

in improvisational theater, suggested I try that onstage. Never having played such a character before, I was quite horrified at the thought, but also curious. So, that same night, I just gave it a try. No costume, no lines, no act. But it got *very* good reactions. Let me mention here that the other Fingers were also just great. They would say 'Don't worry, we'll put that here, and we'll follow it with a surefire act, so if it doesn't work very well, we have the other acts to cover it,' and so on. It was always about the show, never about individuals. I thought that was just wonderful and it made me feel safe." Today, the Heinz character's blue sweater, white



PHOTO: JÖRG PUCHMÜLLER



PHOTO: DAVID VASICEK

shirt, string bowtie, and oversize glasses are instantly recognizable and even jokingly offered as a do-it-yourself Heinz package at magic conventions.

After graduating from high school, in lieu of the military service that was then required of German males, Pit spent nine months as a volunteer worker at a school. The head teacher was a fellow magician, so most of Pit's time was spent entertaining the students!

In 1996, Oliver Erens included a Hartling routine in his anthology of modern German card magic, *Inside Magic 2*. Translated as "Jolly Jumper" in the English-language edition *Concertos for Pasteboards*, published by Hermetic Press in 2000, the routine is a triple transposition of a selected card.

The Flicking Fingers were invited to participate in the 1997 FISM in Dresden, Germany, with the troupe giving an innovative group lecture, and Pit as Heinz sharing the close-up bill with Ali Bongo, Eugene Burger, John Carney, Tim Ellis, Paul Gertner, Ramblar, and David Williamson. Mike Caveney, in his convention review for *MAGIC Magazine*, described Pit's next-to-closing spot as "the close-up show's secret weapon." Pit "only did a card prediction and the dove pan, but a brilliant character, exquisite timing, and hilarious presentation added up to an unqualified star turn." The

Fingers were the unexpected hit of the convention and were jointly awarded the title of 1997 German Magician of the Year by the German Magic Circle. A Flicking Fingers book, appropriately titled *Das Buch*, was launched in Dresden and included seven contributions by Hartling. It was translated into English the following year, and published as *The Book, or Don't Forget to Point*.

Pit's first independent literary effort was self-published in Germany in 1998, then in English in America that same year as *The Little Green Lecture Notes*. The book contained five complete routines with cards, and it marked the start of a lecture tour in the US and elsewhere. *Little Green Lecture Video* was also released that year. Jim Krenz's rave review in *Genii* stated, "I can't say enough good things about Pit's ingenuity. His methods range from the superb to the downright devious."

In December 1999, Pit entered the sixteenth annual MacMillan International Close-up Magic Competition in London, performing as Heinz. Although Pit regards the Heinz character as purely comedic and not a "comedy magician," he was awarded first place in a crowded field of 24 contestants, becoming the first German to win that prestigious title.

Around that time, Pit found that his studies at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, where he

Pit Hartling at the Giersch Museum, November 25, 2011. [Facing page] Pit with his 1999 MacMillan International Close-up Magic Competition trophy. An early performance by Pit as Heinz. Young Pit with the Spot Card in 1988.

was majoring in literature, with a minor in psychology and philosophy, were interfering with his education — so he terminated his academic career to pursue magic fulltime. He was invited to attend Tamariz's annual *Escorial* workshop in Spain in 2000 and has been a contributing member of this exclusive event ever since.

That same year, he teamed up with Kay Schmid, Michael Leopold, and Rainer Ewerien in Frankfurt to present *Magic Monday* on the last Monday of each month, at the satirical cabaret *Die Schmiere*. Each member of the comedy quartet performs as a character, with Pit reprising his Heinz character. Pit still performs there each month, whenever he is available, and does so exclusively as Heinz, a persona he now only takes on for *Magic Monday* and Flicking Fingers bookings. The *Monday* performances usually sell out the intimate venue of fewer than 100 seats; in fact, they have become so popular since their debut in 2000, they often include shows on the following Tuesday as well. Pit also formed a trio with Schmid and Stefan Sprenger, and



PHOTOS: ARTO AIRAKSINEN

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together they offer a show called *Downtown Magic* in Frankfurt. The trio then expanded to a quintet, adding Michelle Spillner and Andreas Fleckenstein, to offer *Zauber-Dinner*, a full-evening event with strolling close-up magic during the champagne reception, and stand-up magic between the main courses and after dessert. These events are staged at various venues, including restaurants and cruise ships on the Main River.

Pit self-published his first full-length book of card magic in 2003: *Card Fictions — Seven Performance Pieces with an Ordinary Deck*.

Written in English, it has gone through several printings and has since been translated into Spanish (*Cartoficciones*), French (*Carto Fictions*), and Italian (*Finzioni Cartomagiche*). The Spanish and Italian editions feature a prologue written by Juan Tamariz.

It was also in 2003 that The Flicking Fingers traveled to Australia, performing in both Sydney and Melbourne. In June 2004, Pit and fellow Flicking Finger Thomas Fraps debuted a two-hour theatrical performance they call *Metamagicum*, a title taken from the German edition of a collection of Douglas Hofstadter's

Scientific American columns. The show presents magic in a scientific framework, using quantum mechanics, relativity, and recombinant genetics as presentational themes.

While Pit is very interested in science, particularly math, he has no formal training in it past high school. Fraps, however, has a master's degree in physics. In their performances, gene splicing is illustrated with a Cut & Restored Rope sequence, a sock sealed in a milk bottle is transported to a parallel universe, and a dancing top quark makes an appearance. A one-hour version of this show

has proven to be a popular keynote event for scientific and corporate gatherings. It has been featured at the famous CERN laboratory for high-energy particle research outside Geneva, the Gathering for Gardner in Atlanta, and at Max Planck Institutes throughout Germany. In June 2008, Pit and Thomas premiered a sequel: *[Metamagicum]*².

Thomas says, “We do the full two-hour theater shows only four or five times a year, with about as many corporate shows, so we never get ‘in the zone’ long enough.” As a result, the duo has suffered some comic mishaps. One classic example was the theater performance in which they walked onto the stage at the top of the show, and Thomas announced, “Welcome and good evening everybody; my name is Pit Hartling.” Pit looked at him and burst out laughing, then said, “And my name is Thomas Fraps!” As Thomas says, “Almost nobody in the audience knew us, so they didn’t understand why we were laughing and having so much fun — which, for some performances, pretty much sums up the general meta-atmosphere anyway!”

Then there was the performance in which Thomas forgot to switch on a certain onstage custom-made \$3,000 wireless electronic gadget; so Pit, backstage, couldn’t receive anything and write the prediction for the finale of that routine. And there was Pit’s classic gaffe during a time-travel routine, in which he has to secretly seal a spectator’s watch in a peanut can and



switch it for the peanut can on the table. For the finale, the spectator is allowed to take the can and open it himself, with Pit and Thomas at his side asking, “And what do you find?” This time, as Thomas relates, “The spectator says, ‘Peanuts!’ And there really were only peanuts in the can. Pit had sealed the watch in the other can but had forgotten to switch them — and then he forgot that he had forgotten! So he really was convinced that the watch was in the can, and he was as astonished as I was at the miserable ending. Since then, he’s got the inter-

nal nickname ‘Can Dude’ or ‘Peanut Idiot.’ But I wouldn’t like to ‘switch’ my little friend as a stage partner for anybody else in the universe.”

Hartling and Fraps make a good team, despite — or perhaps because of — their different backstage habits. “The work part of our twenty-year friendship is a little miracle in itself,” says Thomas, “since my order system is simply to keep heaps of stuff lying around, remembering in which of those ‘magic mountains’ my props are. This is in high contrast to Mr. Hartling’s perfectionism. Pit needs checklists and content-lists for everything, and ninety-degree angles on his tidy desktop, and so on. This of course is so much more professional, tidy, and effective — if you can find the checklist! If not, he’s somewhat lost, and then my memory system of orderly chaos kicks in to improvise and sort things out so the show can start on time.”

Pit’s more recent team-up involves another Flicking Finger: Ben Profane. The duo’s show *Corriger la Fortune* — French for “correcting luck” or advantage play — exploits the rapid rise in public interest in Texas Hold ’Em Poker, offering an evening of gambling demonstrations and scam protection advice to private and corporate audiences.

As a soloist, Pit occasionally customizes performances for clients, which has made him successful at working tradeshows and doing product introductions for his corporate clients. In that capacity, he has taught a computer to read minds, made a late-model car vanish to make way for the new model, and magically simulated stock market predicting for financial planners. Pit finds his presentational inspiration in numerous sources outside of magic. Among his favorite non-magical inspirational sources are American filmmaker Woody Allen, French and Spanish surrealist painters Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali, Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher, American cartoonist Bill Watterson, and

YOU DON’T KNOW PIT!

7 THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT PIT HARTLING

- 1 Pit does have a drivers license, but he does not drive and has never owned a car.
- 2 For the first years of the *Magic Monday* shows in Frankfurt, Pit and company used to control the lights using the fuse box.
- 3 Pit loves classical piano music and classic stand-up comedy. His favorites include Mozart, Beethoven, Carlin, and Izzard.
- 4 During the Munich Magic Weeks, Pit once missed his entrance onstage because he was doing cards tricks on the dressing room floor.
- 5 After being introduced to the work of Scott Kim, Pit has designed about 65 ambigrams. Enjoying wordplay, he has written “dozens of funny/clever/terrible short verses.”
- 6 At age sixteen, Pit and a friend participated in an illegal poker game in Hamburg’s red-light district because they wanted to see real cheating. “They did cheat, and we actually cheated back!” Pit says, shaking his head at their foolishness.
- 7 Other than magic, Pit has never had a job.



Heinz, the nerd triumphant [facing page]. Pit presents card effects to spectators at his Magische Soirée [top], and to compatriots Helge Thun and Thomas Fraps in a Flicking Fingers show. [Bottom right] Heinz makes a bold fashion statement.





British author Douglas Adams. If these influences have something in common, perhaps it is that they illuminate reality by distorting it.

With his solo, duo, trio, quartet, quintet, and Flicking Finger performances, Pit's magic career has taken him to 33 countries on five continents, performing in German, English, and Spanish. In December alone, the partial schedule on his website showed Pit doing a dozen engagements throughout Germany and in Turkey, with private and public performances, and solo and ensemble shows — including both *Metamagicum* and [Metamagicum]², the first at a corporate event, the second at a theater.

Beyond all those opportunities to perform, Pit has always aspired to have a regular venue in his hometown for his solo work. Last May, he was invited to perform at a special open house event on Frankfurt's annual Museum Night at the Giersch Museum. The invitation was extended by Dr. Astrid Jacobs, the museum's director of communications, who also independently organizes personalized cultural tours in the Rhein-Main region through her own agency. Pit's appearance at this special event was such a success that Dr. Jacobs began to discuss with him the possibility of staging solo performances at the museum on a regular basis. Calling these one-man shows *Magische Soirée* ("magical evening"), a brochure to promote them was produced, and the event was featured on Dr. Jacobs' website, allowing tickets to be reserved in advance. Attendance was limited to 42 guests, both to allow for a close-up performance in the second half and in hom-

age to one of Pit's heroes, author Douglas Adams. The first performance, on Friday, November 25, sold out in advance at a ticket price of 64 Euros — more than \$85 at current conversion rates.

The Museum's exhibits close at 6 p.m. on Fridays, but on this occasion the gift shop reopened at 7:15 to allow for purchase of the tickets reserved in advance. Dr. Schmidt handled the ticketing formalities, and at 7:30 guests were invited to leave the gift shop for the museum foyer, where complimentary champagne and orange juice were offered. At 8 p.m., Dr. Jacobs rang a gong, and the doors were opened to an adjacent chamber where 42 seats had been arranged to form a performing space. As soon as all of the guests were seated, Jacobs gave a brief welcoming talk about the museum and its history, then introduced Pit as "Germany's thinnest magician" and the most successful German magician "in the weight class less than 60 kilos." (That's 132 pounds to folks in the States.)

Pit began by warming up the audience with some interactive and surprising hand exercises, then conditioned the audience responses by humorously reintroducing himself. A paper bag sealed with a clip was displayed and placed on a side table, with a member of the audience instructed to keep an eye on the sealed bag throughout the performance. A Tabary-inspired rope routine created the first magical moments of the evening. Pit then magically changed a ten



euro note into a hundred euro note. Acquiescing to a spectator's request to perform the same effect with his bill, Pit had the gentleman sign his ten euro note before the change. The borrowed and signed bill was changed, not into a hundred euros, but into an IOU from Pit. The IOU then vanished in a flash of fire, to the consternation of the spectator.

Forging ahead, Pit had three of four books chosen by spectators, who then thought of words in their books. Each word was then divined under increasingly impressive conditions, with the final word magically appearing on the inner surfaces of two old-fashioned slates. Attention was then returned to the sealed bag on the side table. A spectator opened the bag, which contained a knife, a napkin, and a lemon. The knife was used to cut open the lemon, with the napkin helping to protect the spectator from the lemon juice. The signed ten euro note was discovered inside and returned to the spectator, who was also allowed to keep the lemon.

The audience was then invited to leave their seats and step closer to Pit, who told about his

Pit Hartling [inset] joins with other members of the *Flicking Fingers* in a classical moment. [Facing page] Pit and Thomas Fraps [right] demonstrate their *Mobile IQ Scan* in *Metamagicum*.

belief as a ten-year-old that magic was real, and that all he needed was some magic powder. Opening a small box on the table, he sprinkled glitter on the table, which then began to rise and float at close range to the audience. A young man barely eleven years old himself was invited to assist, and the table rose once again, this time with the youngster holding the corners of the tablecloth. After this effective and nostalgic presentation of Losander's masterpiece, the audience was invited to return to the foyer for an intermission with refreshments.

In the premiere performance, the intermission lasted nearly as long as the first half of the show, with the wait staff serving five different courses of food, including a vegetable salad, meatballs, ham and peas, salmon on a bed of cucumber salad, and a tiramisu dessert. Meanwhile, Dr. Jacobs distributed packets of four playing cards to each attendant. Pit circulated as well, placing loop pencils (with his website on them) into the buttonholes of jackets and challenging spectators to remove them.

At 9:45, Dr. Jacobs rang the gong again and the 42 guests were ushered into a second adjacent chamber, featuring just two rows of chairs around a large round table covered in green felt, with smaller tables behind the two rows of chairs for standing spectators to lean on. Two portable spotlights helped focus attention on Pit for the close-up portion of the evening.

The second half consisted almost entirely of Pit's signature close-up card magic, much of it inspired by Pit's study of Tamariz and his preferred working conditions — seated at a table surrounded by spectators. The opening effect featured a novel premise: it would be the reverse of a regular card trick. Rather than finding a previously chosen card, an unknown card would first be found and isolated (trapped face down under a spectator's finger), then a card chosen (via fingertip peek) and subsequently shown to be the card "found" at the outset, the peeked selection having cleanly vanished from the deck. (Pit released an earlier version of this effect on the *Fingers* DVD under the title *Back to the Future*.) This was followed by a variation of Vernon's *Cutting to the Aces*, in a handling by Pit's good friend Stefan Sprenger. The four cards were then used to locate and trap three selections in a very nice handling of Larry Jennings' *Distributractor*.

Next was a sequence of improvisational magic, à la Vernon's *The Trick That Cannot Be Explained* or Tamariz's *Mnemonicosis*. A card was freely called out by a spectator named Petra. Another spectator cut off a portion of the deck and turned it face up — Petra's freely named card was discovered by spelling her



name from the face of the upturned portion of the deck. A second deck was introduced, and a spectator placed an unknown card in his pocket. A dozen spectators were invited to choose cards from a second deck. This bunch of chosen cards was reduced to just one card, which was shown to match the mystery card in the spectator's pocket.

Pit's friend Denis Behr's handling of the *Oil & Water* separation of red and black cards was then performed to excellent response from the largely lay audience, no doubt contradicting the expectations of some magicians. Attention was then turned to the four cards given to each spectator during the intermission. Woody Aragon's *How to Find Your Other Half* was then performed, in which each spectator shuffles his or her four cards, tears them in half, mixes the halves, puts one half aside, sight unseen, and then mixes and eliminates the remaining halves in a seemingly random fashion, only to find the final remaining half matches the half previously set aside — all while following a theme of finding one's perfect mate. Pat Page's *Flash Cash*, changing seven blank pieces of paper into hundred Euro notes, was used to introduce an impressive poker demonstration. After showing how a series of shuffles can distribute the Aces to be dealt to the cheating dealer, Pit invited a spectator to be his partner and receive a four-of-a-kind less ostentatious than the Aces. His supposed partner received the four Tens but was bested in turn by the dealer's other secret partners, who received the four Queens and the four Kings, respectively, with the dealer giving himself the Aces once again — this being Pit's current handling of *Cincinnati Pit* from *Card Fictions*.

Following this strong finish to his formal close-up set, Pit informed those who wished to

stay a bit longer — it was nearly 10:30 at this point — that he would be willing to discuss some of the methods and principles behind modern card magic for those interested. Despite the late hour and the presence of a few youngsters, everyone stayed! Pit then gave a demonstration of how binary mathematics can be used to position any card at any position via a series of faro shuffles, work he credited to Alex Elmsley. The demonstration was greeted with appreciative applause, so Pit offered to take the demonstration one step further. The shuffled deck was cased and given to a spectator to hold securely. Another spectator named a number from 1 to 52, and a card was chosen from a second deck. Without any faro shuffles — indeed, without touching the cased deck at all — the selected card was discovered at the designated number.

After receiving a prolonged ovation, Pit warmly thanked Dr. Jacobs, the hard-working wait staff, the museum, and the audience.

Pit's next *Magische Soirée* at the Giersch Museum is scheduled for Friday, January 13. While it is unclear whether Pit's solo performances will remain at the Giersch in the long term — in attendance at the premier performance was the director of one of Frankfurt's five-star luxury hotels, who hopes to host Pit's performances there beginning in February — there was no doubt that the audience at the premiere agreed that Pit's performances perfectly fit the museum's mission of spotlighting important regional artists whose work transcends the region's boundaries. **M**

Richard Hatch began his research for this article during a year he spent living in Pit's birthplace, Nieder-Erlenbach, five years before Pit was born there. How's that for a prediction effect?