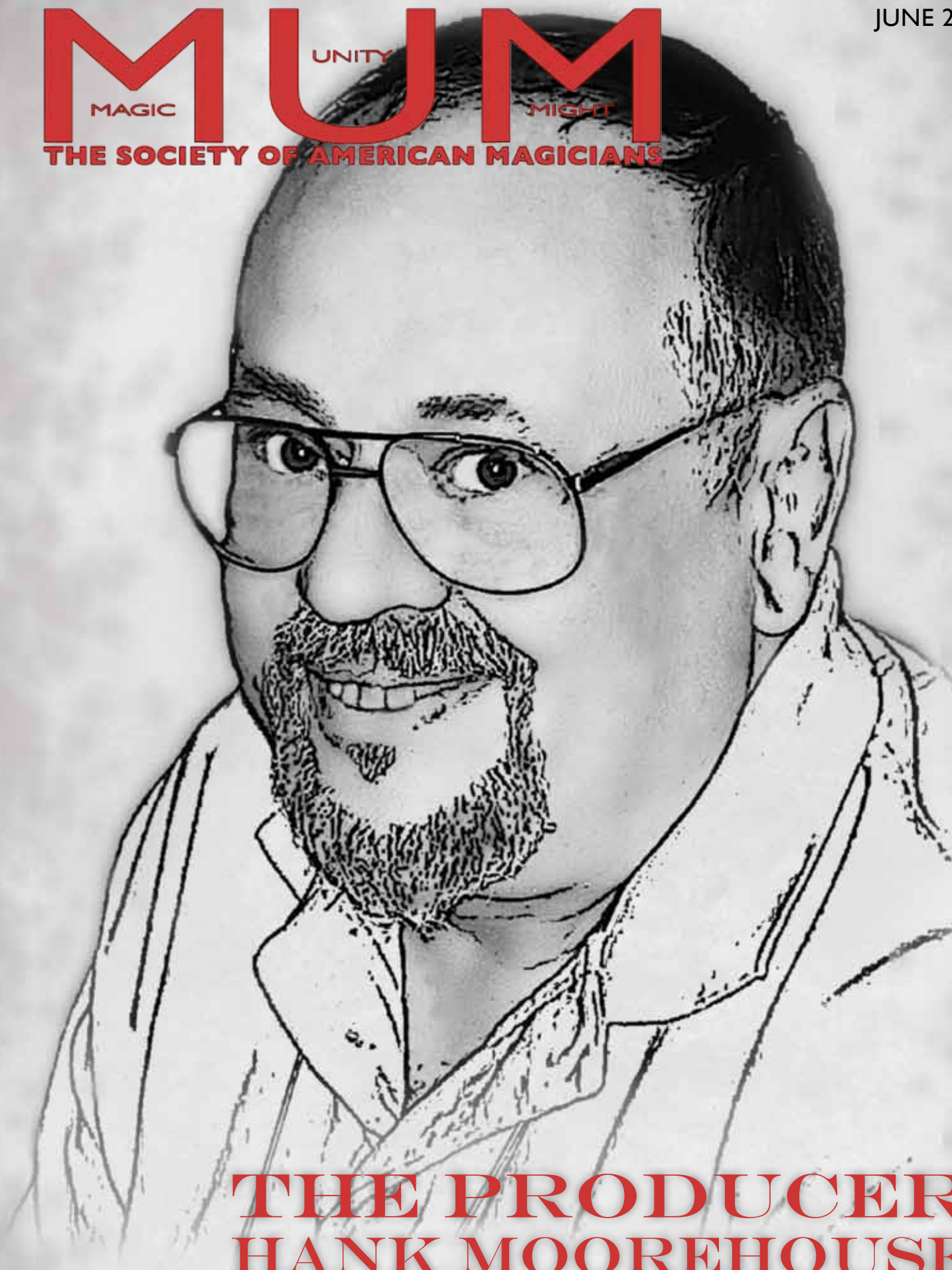


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**THE PRODUCER**  
**HANK MOOREHOUSE**

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# HANK MOOREHOUSE

## MAGIC'S PRODUCER EXTRAORDINAIRE

BY BRADLEY JACOBS, PNP



How does a guy with a red clown nose, bomber helmet and goggles, trussed in a straitjacket, working a gig in Ann Arbor, Michigan, become a world class magic impresario for the Chinese government Federation of Literary and Art Circles and responsible for introducing contemporary sleight-of-hand and illusion to the people of China?

**L**ike most of us who aspire for a life a bit out of the ordinary, Hank started with a dream. He was going to be a great Broadway producer. After all, he had majored in theater at the University of Illinois and had been on stage performing magic since he was thirteen. But a stint in the Army overseas, with a wife and small child to support, put the dream and the practice of magic on hold. After discharge, Hank found he needed a real job; so he settled for directing community theater in Illinois and Michigan while picking up the magic he had put aside during his time in the service.

Now back into magic, Hank had become a member of Magic Masters (with people like Don Wiberg, Bill Dunbaugh, and Jerry Schnepf) as well as a regular at Abbott's. With a little persuasion, Recil Bordner decided to book Hank to emcee a Friday Get-together show. The only problem was that although he had performed and lectured many times, this was to be Hank's first turn as an emcee. Hank recalls working up a lot of new and original material for his gig – even bird calls. The show review by Clarke “the Senator” Crandall in *Tops* magazine was pithy and characteristically caustic: “He should have taken the advice of his lecture – and been entertaining.” Hank remembers that if you're not well prepared, it can take you a long time to live it down. “A decade later, people were still talking about my bird calls.”

Undaunted by Crandall's critique, Hank took notice of what Recil was putting together at Abbott's each year and decided that he and pal Ken Diamond (with whom he had formed Aladdin Productions) should host what turned out to be one of the early one-day magic conventions. Think of this line up forty-three years ago: Duke Stern (who Hank knew well from hanging out at Abbott's), Johnny Thompson (one of the better acts in Chicago, who could also be caught playing a mean harmonica), Jay Marshall (whom Hank had known from hanging out at Magic, Inc.), Norm Nielson (who would present his floating violin for only the second time), and Jack and Anne Gwynne (who were friends with Ken). The registration was \$12, which included morning donuts and coffee, deli lunch, and roast beef dinner. Hank and Ken each lost \$125 on the venture. It was an expensive lesson in producing conventions and it marked the time that Hank decided he needed to get a day job.

To those who have seen Hank perform, lecture, or work behind his dealer booth, it will come as no surprise that he excelled as an energetic traveling salesman, building a million dollar business. The business owner also took notice and, with a bit of a stretch, decided that Hank's sales skills and college major in theater might also prepare him to successfully run a wire plant in Ypsilanti. It worked well for five years, but when he and the owner decided to shut down the business, Hank



Hank behind the booth demonstrating for Muhammad Ali.

again turned to what gave him the most fun: magic and magic conventions.

Fast forward a few years; Hank gathered regularly with a few magicians in Ypsilanti and decided they would form Assembly 88 (later renamed in honor of Hank). This led to Hank becoming active at the national level as a Regional VP and ultimately as S.A.M. National President in 1981.

While all this was going on, Jim Zachary (who preceded Hank as National President) had been making magic equipment for Jack Hughes in England, and that alliance enabled Jim to bring a number of acts to the UK for Jack's Wizards Weekend conventions. Hank found himself on an early tour in 1978 with fellow magicians Jay Marshall, Father Cyprian, and Rick Johnson. On this tour he met Ali Bongo, Bob Read, and Terry Seabrooke for the first time; it would be the first of many such trips to the UK.

Later that same year, Paul Diamond (who Hank knew from his days as president and convention show producer for the Magic Dealers Association) had set up a lecture tour in Germany and included Hank. He was a hit, and was subsequently invited to perform and be a dealer at the big German Magic Circle convention. This led to meeting three key, influential European magicians: Manfred Thumm, Wolfgang Sommer, and Eberhard Riese.

In the mid 1970s, Hank started working at the Magic Castle, something he continued to do twice a year for over sixteen years. It was there that he met two magicians who invited Hank to perform in their home country of Norway. All of a sudden, for someone who had been stateside bound, this led to his third trip to Europe in one year and to making more international friends. Hank recalls: "It sort of kept building. One convention led to another; one friend led to several more."

Hank would tell you there were a series of defining conventions in his life as a magic show producer: Abbott's, Magic Hands, Blackpool, S.A.M., FISM, and the 2008 SAM/IBM combined convention. "After the German Magic Circle trip," Hank recalls, "Manfred Thumm invited me to the Magic Hands as a dealer and performer. In Sindelfingen, I saw that Manfred ran a really class convention in a modern European tradition. He had put something together in a way that just was not being done in the U.S.

"Manfred also staged a magic contest of such significance that it drew competitors from all over Europe – even some from Asia. The cash prizes given to contest winners were modest, but the winners were given offers of work, and people like Joe

Stevens, Jeffrey Atkins, Domenico Dante, and Ron McMillan jumped all over the opportunity to book these guys."

Hank also paid a lot of attention to the growth of the Blackpool Convention, which was run by a tightly knit Blackpool Magic Club. When Derek Lever took over leadership, the convention drew 700 to 800 people. Over the past twenty years, it has grown dramatically to today's staggering 3,200 registrants. Results like this are not lost on Hank. He likes to compare notes with Derek every chance he can. "I might not agree with every move Derek has made, but the guy is definitely doing a lot that's right for his market."

It was in 1983 that an opportunity came for Hank to put together everything he'd been absorbing, this time as show producer for the newly formed S.A.M. convention committee. Chairman Ed Campagna had produced the first convention in Houston in 1982. It was a fledgling operation for the S.A.M., with no expense money and less experience. Ed was a masterful jack of all trades, but soon learned that the area where he needed help the most was staging shows. Following Hank's successful year as S.A.M. National President, Ed asked him to take over booking talent for the shows; Hank said, "Sure". Still, with almost no budget, Hank called in a lot of favors that first year in Grand Rapids: Earl Ray Wilcox, Harry Blackstone Jr., Jay Marshall, Karrell Fox, Marvin & Carol Roy, Neil Foster, and Harry Riser – all great performers. But he also began to test international talent with acts like Kovari and Petrick and Mia.



Hank with England's Edwin Hooper



Hank and Jackie Moorehouse with Ali Bongo and Bob Little



Hank with Sid Lorraine and Bruce Posgate

“Look it—” Hank uses that expression a lot to politely signal that he is about to tell you something important and that it is time for you to pay close attention. “Look it. When booking a show you have to target about twenty-five percent of your acts as headliners, fifty percent of your acts who are solid performers, and the other twenty-five percent who are newcomers – acts that are hardly known, and that you can afford to experiment with. You might wind up with someone who brings down the house or you could hit a dud. But you have to give them, and your audience, a chance.” Before Hank brought them to the S.A.M. stage, who had ever heard of show-stopping performers like Veronin, Svetlana, Mahka Tendo, Peter Marvey, Topas, Arden James, Franklin, and Galina? “Yes,” Hank sighs. “That’s the same Galina who did a Linking Rings routine and ended her performance by passing one twelve-inch ring over her head and completely down her torso. No one in the audience could believe it.”

By following his philosophy during the sixteen years that he was S.A.M. executive show producer, Hank racked up an unmatched body of work: he produced ninety-four shows, booked 387 stage acts, 102 close-up performers, 116 lecturers from thirty-five countries and five continents. He introduced, for the first time in America, magic by Peter Kersten, John Salisse, Mark Leveridge, Cha’Peau, Peter Heinz Kirsten, Kurt Freitag, Ken & Sue de Courcy, Peter Scarlett, Kovari, Topas, Vladamir Rudnev, Jorg Weber, Mystina, JJ & Chris Powers, Juan Mayoral, Ken Makasi, and Shintaro Fujiyama, to name just some.

“From the very beginning,” Hank will tell you, “the reaction of the performers, not only to their audience reception in the States but also to their treatment during the convention as someone more than just a hired act, got back to other performers in Europe and Asia. It made it a lot easier for me to negotiate with and successfully book acts when they heard the positive experience from those who went before.

“For a few years I had the luxury of no history before me, so I could kind of make it up as I went along. Sure, I made my share of mistakes, and there are some things I’d like to do over. But, like the magic trick, you’re the only one who knows how it’s supposed to come out. So you fix it for the next time and move on.”

That is why Hank paces. During every gala show he produced for the S.A.M., his regular seat was the last row in the audience. It gave him the perspective he needed to assure

himself that the product the audience was seeing fulfilled his vision. It also gave him room to pace the corridor behind the last row when things weren’t going just right and were out of his control, at least until intermission.

Hank recalls: “I had a philosophy about every convention show I put together. The first one and the last one had to be the very best. I thought, ‘What act will get people talking?’ I wanted people who didn’t go to the convention, or who arrived late, to hear the buzz, ‘Boy, did you miss so-and-so. You missed a great act.’ I wanted the performers to *want* to come as opposed to *asking* them to come. And in the end, I wanted to send them away feeling very good that they came.”

While Hank was busy booking acts and staging shows for the S.A.M., he found that regular attendance at FISM conventions increased his knowledge of the acts that were coming out of Europe and Asia. In Den Haag in 1988, Hank first saw a sixteen-year-old kid take second prize in manipulation with an act so dramatically different that he knew he would be a sensation, and he immediately booked Topas for Tampa in 1989.

In Dresden in 1997, Eberhard Riese asked Hank to be a



With Eric Eswin, Lin Jian, and Domenico Dante

FISM judge. This brought with it increased focus from peers around the world on the elements of performance that make an act a winner. Hank’s continued work on the jury over the next three FISM’s also led to an increased understanding of the inner workings of the FISM political infrastructure.

In 2000, Eric Eswin, then Secretary General of FISM, discussed with many member society delegates possible ways to expand the influence of FISM, long considered a European dominated organization. The reorganization of FISM into eight geographic and relatively autonomous regions was hoped to herald a new beginning and was adopted by FISM member societies in Stockholm in 2006.

Many years earlier, Beijing had won the bid for the Olympic Games in 2008. The country had opened its doors to increasing commerce and arts exchange around the globe. With the eyes of the world soon to be on Beijing, the government had committed to dramatic facilities expansion expressly to support Olympic teams and visitors. What better opportunity for FISM to ride the infrastructure coattails outside Europe than holding its 2009 World Championship of Magic in Beijing.

In China, magic as the Western world knows it is not a world of Linking Rings, Rice Bowls, or Cups and Balls. It is a world of acrobatics, and China’s magicians draw their skills from

acrobatic disciplines. Although the Acrobat School may have been founded in commercially prosperous Shanghai, Beijing is China's political center, and it is there where you will find the Federation of Literary Art Circles and the Chinese Acrobat Association (CAA), the organized magic center for all China.

It was during trips to Beijing in 2005 that FISM executives met with Mr. Lin Jian, Executive Director of the CAA. Perhaps it was FISM International President Eric Eswin's practiced attempts at speaking Mandarin that impressed Mr. Lin, but more likely it was the young translators, all of whom had been taught English since their early days in school, that enabled Mr. Lin to understand the proposition that Eric laid out.

Cutting to the chase, Mr. Lin asked the obvious question: If Beijing were to host a FISM in 2009, what kind of assistance might they expect to receive? After all, he could not risk his career and political future in the Communist Party on a bag of promises. He was quickly assured that in addition to all the resources of FISM, people like Hank Moorehouse, who by that time had developed a strong reputation around the world for his fair and no-nonsense approach to booking magic talent, would be made available to assist. Although Mr. Lin had not yet met Hank, the FISM deal got done in time for an approval vote in Stockholm in 2006.

The first such meeting took place in the fall of 2006, when Hank was at Domenico Dante's Italian Convention. Mr. Lin had come to Italy because many of the FISM organizers would also be there and there would be opportunity to meet and talk. Hank recalls: "It was 10 p.m. in a Chinese restaurant in Abano, Italy, and we huddled around a table until 1:30 in the morning. Mr. Lin had never run a magic convention. If he asked, 'We pay for food?' once during that session, he asked the same question five times. 'No, you don't pay for food,' I told him. But Mr. Lin wanted to pick brains and understand how to go about booking acts." Shortly thereafter, Hank received a letter of appointment as "International Consultant."

Hank's next trip would be part of a delegation of FISM representatives invited to sample the sights and sounds of Beijing and its environs in 2007 and carry back to their respective societies a report on how great FISM 2009 was going to be. Although the vast majority of delegates went "on tour," Hank was engaged in a number of discussions with Mr. Lin about how the FISM contests and shows would be structured and booked.

Even though he speaks little English, Mr. Lin understands plenty and is a cagy student of body language and facial expression. He and Hank hit it off quickly. He understood that Hank was his entrée into the world of western magic, and Hank realized that Mr. Lin's political connections could make things happen the way they needed to. Of course, there would always be a certain amount of push-pull; they both understood that. But it was the beginning of a continuing working relationship –

and trust – that continues to this day.

But how do you start a relationship with someone when you don't speak his language? First, you need a good interpreter. Mr. Lin had several who were all fluent and could be trusted with intimate business details. Although their job was to translate, they, too, had to learn about this new guy in their midst to whom they had just been introduced and who, according to Mr. Lin, would be responsible for bringing all the non-Chinese talent to Beijing. Hank's engaging manner and experience as a theatrical producer quickly won them over; it was obvious he



With Brad Jacobs at FISM in China

knew what he was talking about. It was during this trip that Mr. Lin, two acts, four associates, and three translators were invited to attend the 2008 IBM/SAM Combined Convention in Louisville. They would also be provided with a booth at which they would be able to promote FISM Beijing.

The 2008 IBM/SAM Combined Convention was built around a FISM concept and organized with FISM-like contests at its core. Although he would be greatly dependent on others, Mr. Lin knew that FISM Beijing had to meet Western expectations and

that, on his watch, FISM had to be a success in the minds of the magicians of the world. By coming to Louisville, everyone from China knew they would also have the opportunity to see in action the man in whom they were placing so much faith.

Hank continues, "To be successful, Mr. Lin was smart enough to realize that he had to bring in people from outside China to handle the technical aspect of FISM. English was the accepted language of the performers and no one of his stage crew understood English. So one translator was sent to shadow Mark Holstein, stage manager for the Gala Shows and another translator shadowed Mike Miller, manager for the stage contests. Close-up required another set of skills, so arrangements were made with Obie O'Brien to handle that. I think Mr. Lin felt he should shadow me."

When Hank finished his daily convention work, he immediately segued to a meeting with Mr. Lin to explain what he had done and why he had done it that way. Every night, after the shows were over, Hank and Mr. Lin, with an interpreter, would sit for two hours talking about booking acts for FISM and about acts for a pre-FISM close-up and stage tour through China in May 2009. Mr. Lin correctly felt it was important to make the public aware of the great convention soon to come to Beijing, as well as keeping his political constituents sold that they had entrusted their substantial financial backing with the right guy.

"He was given access and was able to see for the first time what went into the running of a large convention: how people interact, what the logistics are, what was needed. And he borrowed the Louisville banquet idea (with entertainment) that I borrowed from Domenico," Hank says with a grin.

Another trip to China would come later in the fall of 2008 to check out the facilities planned for the convention, to prepare for

TV publicity, and to arrange personal appearances of top talent like Topas, Rick Merrill, and David Williamson for political dignitaries selected by Mr. Lin. Perhaps it was watching Hank in Louisville or observing his organization of the private performances, but whatever the reason, on that trip Mr. Lin took the opportunity to pull Hank aside and say, "You are doing so much work for us, more than we ever expected. You are no longer going to be our International Consultant. You will be our Artistic Director for FISM." This meant that, although he would have final say, Mr. Lin looked to Hank to be his major confidante on every piece of talent, contest, and show, stage or close-up, that was presented in Beijing. There would be no more push-pull; the two would be a team.

If you were to ask, Hank might tell you that China is a work in progress. FISM was an artistic and financial success, with over 2300 registrants. Although officially retired in December of 2009, Mr. Lin is still active – and Hank continues to work for him. He's been back to China twice since FISM. In the fall of 2008 during the ramp up to FISM, Mr. Lin remarked to Hank that the Chinese really have not been exposed to close-up magic. Hank continues: "So, in the spring of 2009, I put together five of the FISM performers on a twenty-day, fifteen-show theater tour, performing just close-up magic. It was a very big hit. So for 2011, as artistic director, I have organized a forty-two-day, sixteen-city, twenty-five-show, close-up tour through China just before the S.A.M. convention. It will be held in proper theaters, seating between 900 to 1,400 people, with two video cameramen with large screens. No country in the world has featured close-up magic in the way Mr. Lin has organized it, giving it as much importance as we give to our stage shows. I am very happy to be part of this

first, world class event."

How often have you read about someone who stops doing one thing, and before you know it you hear about the same person somewhere else doing almost the same thing? Just ask Hank. Sandwiched between the S.A.M. and FISM has been thirteen years (thus far) of organizing shows and booking talent for Abbott's Magic Get-together. Hank says, "It's a lot easier

when you have shows in the same town, in the same theater, and you're working with the same crew, year after year – all within a short driving distance from home."

Ask Hank what magic has done for him and he will likely tell you, "It's given me a chance to see the world. I've made over 150 trips outside North America. I've seen the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, Norwegian Fjords, the Alps, Terra-Cotta Warriors, Stonehenge, Venice, the Tower of London, Tokyo's Ginza, and

Sydney Harbor, spent New Year's Eve in Auckland, and experienced a hundred more memories.

"More important, along the way I developed some wonderful friendships – a lifetime of friends from attending over six hundred conventions worldwide in over forty countries. What could be more magical?"

Not too shabby for a guy who never made it to Broadway. ☆

*Bradley Jacobs was S.A.M. National President in 1971-1972. He is an Honorary Member of the Society, a member of the Hall of Fame, and is M.I.M.C. with Gold Star. Currently, he serves as the Society's representative to FISM and is Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the S.A.M. Magic Endowment Fund. He and Hank are collaborating on a book about their outrageous experiences organizing magic shows and conventions.*




Photo by Dale Farris

Hank at the 2011 4F convention.

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