

Philippe Beau

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

SHADOWGRAPHER AND MAGICIAN

Philippe Beau has been one of France's best kept secrets. In April I interviewed him after the North American premier of his one-man show *Shadow Magic and Other Effects*. I saw his performance at the TOHU, a giant circus theater next to Cirque du Soleil headquarters. Seeing the newest shows that mix magic and cirque is one of the benefits of life in Montreal. The half-French, half-English-speaking port city is a bridge between France and the United States. I spoke with Philippe about his shadow magic training, his work as a consultant for avant-garde theater creator Robert Lepage's play *Playing Cards: Hearts* and his opera *The Nightingale and Other Fables*, and the French *magie nouvelle*, or "new magic," movement that has influenced performers such as FISM Grand Champion Yann Frisch.

By Joe Culpepper

GENII: How did you become interested in magic and shadowgraphy?

BEAU: Unlike most magicians, it was my parents who forced me to enroll in a magic class. At 14 I found myself in an extracurricular activity called The Magic School in Grenoble, France which began in the 1980s. When I took those classes, something clicked for me. I had two instructors—two mentors—Luc Parson and Maurice Saltano who did some shadowgraphy.

GENII: How long did you take classes there?

BEAU: Classes were once a week, every Wednesday. After about two years, once a month. I was lucky to have two good teachers, which is important when you begin studying magic. Saltano was vital to me because he wasn't only interested in magic. We spoke about graphic novels, literature, philosophy, and film. He was also very passionate about the connection between magic and cinema. My lessons with Saltano went beyond technique. *Shadow Magic and Other Effects* was influenced by those discussions.

GENII: What was the next step for you after that?

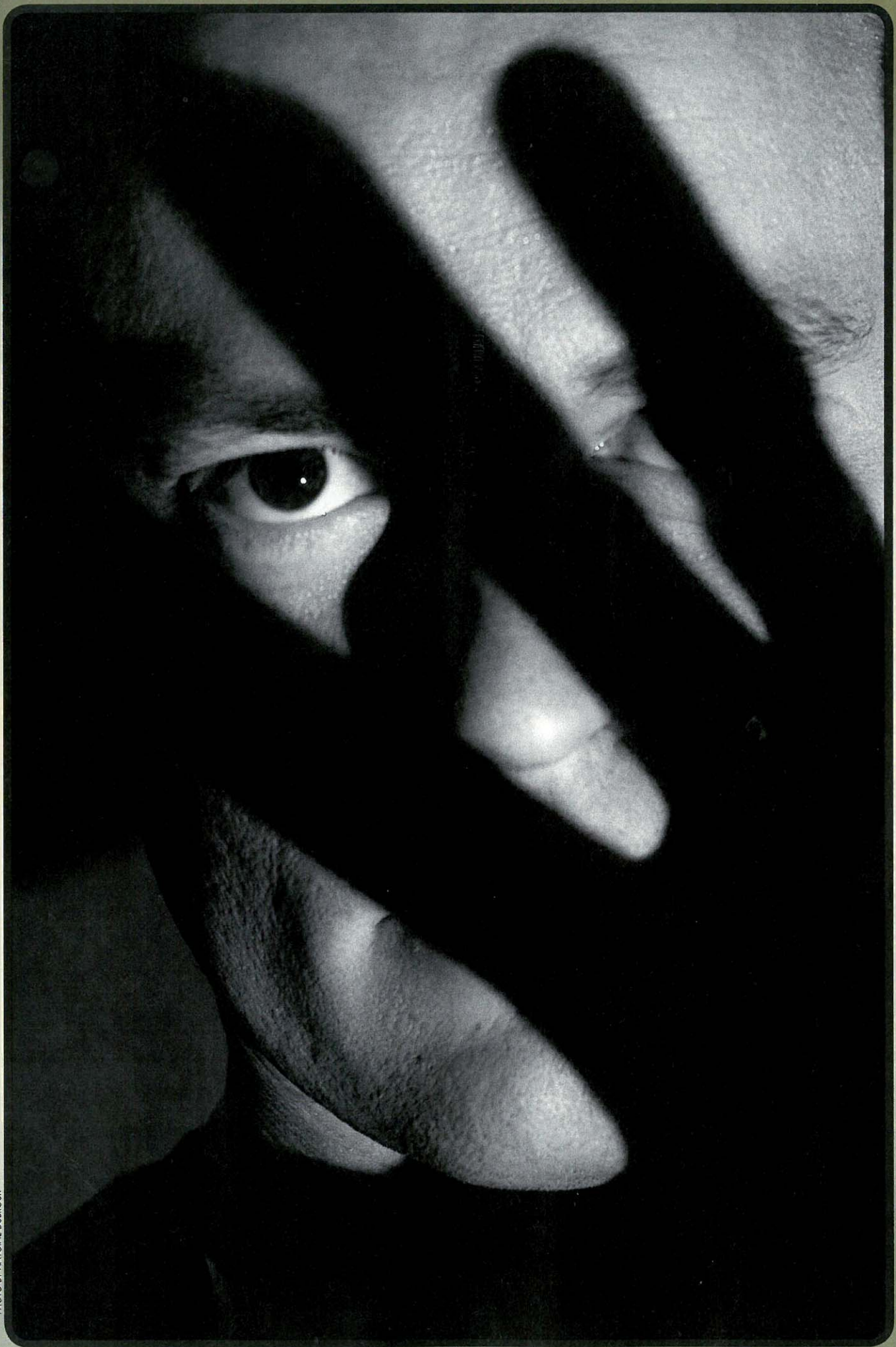
BEAU: I continued studying both shadowgraphy and magic. At 18, I joined a magic club in Grenoble and discovered that side of things: magicians, magic conferences, competitions. That was new for me and I learned how that magic scene, which is fairly exclusionary, functions. That lasted awhile and I learned a lot from watching others perform.

GENII: Did you visit the automatons of Jacques de Vaucanson in Grenoble?

BEAU: Unfortunately, the original Vaucanson automatons are gone. I was able to see a replica of his famous Digesting Duck at the *Musée des automates de Grenoble*. Grenoble has always had a variety of good magic elements. I frequently saw magicians like Pilou perform. He's a FISM champion. Norbert Ferré, Jean Philippe Loupi, and Jérôme Helfenstein, who have all had important careers, could all be found at the magic conferences there.

GENII: Would you say that all of this has influenced your current one-man show?

BEAU: Yes, I've always worked on magic a lot. What I find interesting about shadowgraphy is also the manual labor the hand must do. It's true that the hand is sort of magic's symbol, but on a deeper level it also represents the hand-made, artisanal aspect of the magician's work. I'm convinced that the best magic is the kind that one human body performs for another. Beyond technique, projection technologies, and illusion boxes, I've always been interested in that primordial relationship. What I've loved about the magic of shadowgraphy since adolescence is that an illusion is produced, but the question of "What's the secret" is absent. In fact, what pleases me about it is that there is no secret.





Prasanna Rao

GENII: We see both how the illusion is created, vaguely, and the illusion itself. It's true two levels of reading a shadow effect are offered at the same time.

BEAU: You get to that little by little. Shadowgraphy takes a long time to learn. For my first show, it took me maybe four years of work to get the right shapes, projectors, screens, technique, and

mise-en-scène. Four years to create 10 minutes.

GENII: Who are the masters of shadowgraphy for you?

BEAU: There are a few, like the Bambergs and Trewey. However, I was always drawn a bit more to Indian shadowgraphy. There are two of particular interest: an Indian performer named Bablu Mallik, and Prasanna Rao who was a big name in India. In India,



Jacques de Vaucanson's Digesting Duck



there is a certain style of hand movement related to Indian dance. There is a well-established tradition of the hand as storyteller. Another great shadowgrapher was Primo Grotti from France.

GENII: I was impressed with how the animals and other figures you created had distinct personalities. Did you spend time studying animals and their movements?

BEAU: I realized pretty quickly that shadowgraphy creates an image. The most complicated thing is to breathe life into that image. For that, I spent a lot of time watching animals and how they moved. That takes years and is the most difficult aspect.

GENII: You also created customized shadows of political figures for Montreal. That was very impressive and got a great reaction from the audience. Do you do that for each city?

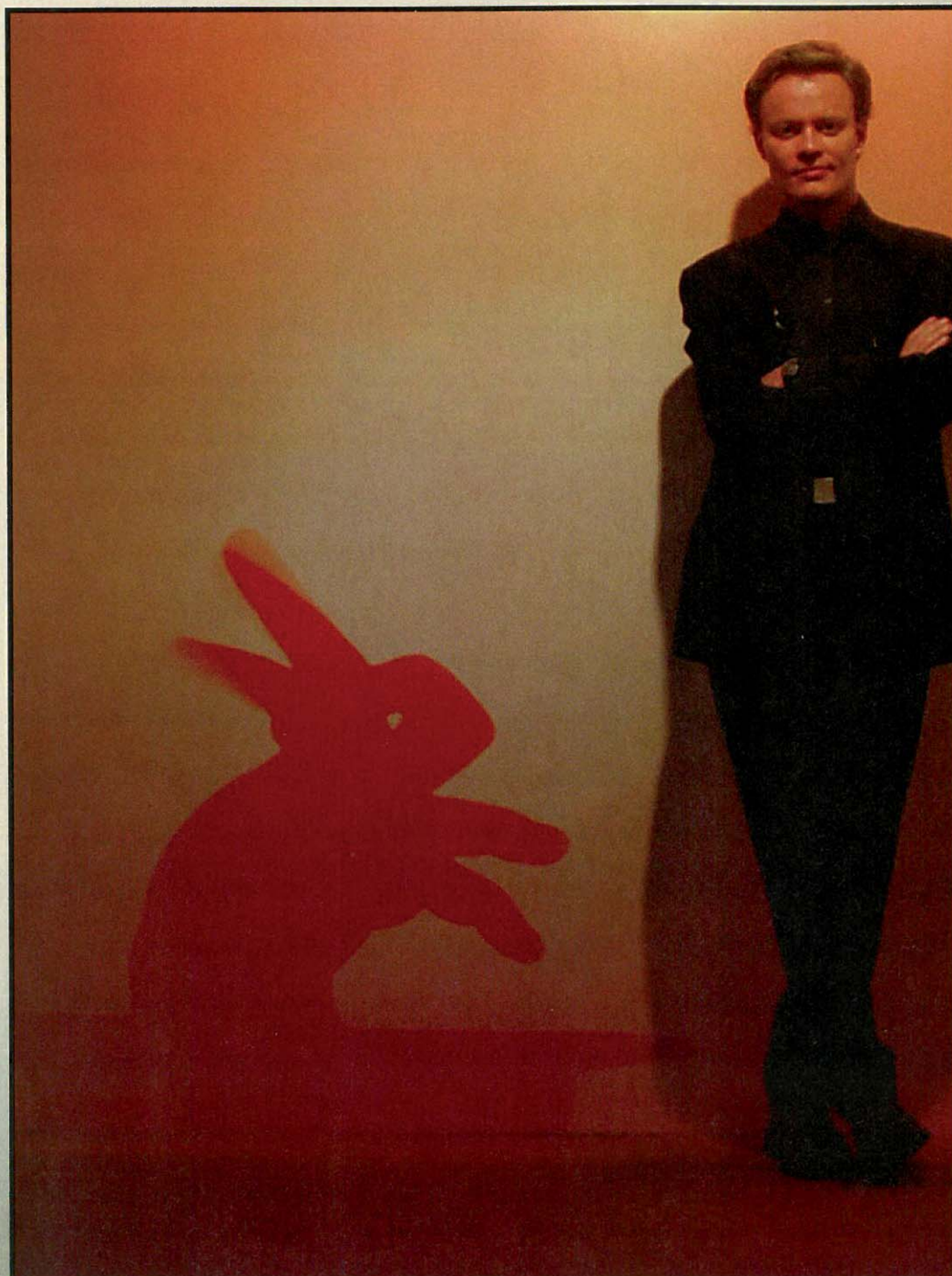
BEAU: That's from a show with a sequence of political personalities set to music by Gainsbourg. The show has remained in France and is filled with French caricatures. When the TOHU decided to bring me here, I had to remove some personalities and adapt others for audiences in Montreal. But I don't do that often. I once did it for a Hermès event in China with Chinese personalities. It took a lot of time looking at photos to work on those profiles for this show. I learned about which politicians are famous here and worked on their silhouettes.

GENII: I hope that you continue doing that, because it's great. As for the magic side of things, what were the sources of inspiration for the effects you chose?

BEAU: I'm not sure how well-known the magicians who influenced me will be in Canada and the United States. The writings of Jacques Delord, a French magician and poet, inspire me. I read his work often. His approach to magic is focused more on "belief in magic" than technical skill. His philosophy is to push beyond technique to attain artistry. He says that if we don't believe in our own magic, then the audience won't believe in it, either. Jeff McBride and Michael Vadini are two more. Christian Fechner's care for the history of magic, his respect for knowing the origins of the art, fascinates me. After moving to Paris, I met Georges Proust who runs a magic shop and a magic museum there. He hired me as a demonstrator. Gaétan Bloom, of course.



Jacques Delord



It's not enough to reproduce what already exists. We must play with spectators, try to find new ideas, and add something new. The creative aspect is important in my work, so I'm inspired by Bloom's ability to adapt and build upon what's already been done. This is my task too. I didn't invent shadowgraphy, but I adapt it. I try to bring either a new gesture or a new way of thinking about the images created to the table.

GENII: You've worked as a magic consultant for Robert Lepage's opera *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* and the play *Playing Cards: Hearts*. What was it like to teach shadowgraphy and magic to performers in these productions?

BEAU: Well, the idea of working on an opera or a theater project produces both excitement and panic. Adapting shadowgraphy to an opera is a little crazy. So is adapting magic to theater in the round.

GENII: You're talking about the stage in *Hearts* ...

BEAU: Exactly. You feel as though you're stepping out onto something that's floating. It's unfamiliar territory. At the same time, you commit to finding ideas and solutions. In *Hearts*, the difficulty was designing magic for a 360-degree performance environment. Few effects are possible. In that play there are no wings or backstage. There is an under-the-stage, which creates enormous constraints. At the end of the day, that was one of the limitations I had to work with. So, I had to find solutions.

GENII: What role did you play in adapting the story of Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin in *Hearts*?

BEAU: I consulted on the history of magic and on Robert-

Houdin. We discussed those subjects at length. We tried to be as faithful as possible despite several adaptations made for the theater. *Hearts* remains pretty faithful to the story of his performance in Algeria. This is the first time that we've adapted this story. I swear that the first time I saw it onstage, it moved me. It spoke to me, because it became possible to project oneself into this historical scene. It was a challenge to reconstruct the duel between Robert-Houdin and the Algerian in Lepage's style. It was also difficult to capture the life-or-death tension and the scale of what this showdown would have represented at that time.

So, it was interesting for me to really dive into the history of Robert-Houdin. I took many details from the incredible books on him written by Christian Fechner. Characters like Colonel Neveu and Robert-Houdin's wife appear in the show. It was wonderful to work on this project and present ideas to Lepage, who obviously already knew this story. He is the one who incorporated this piece of magic history into the performance, but we worked on it together through a process of exchange.

We tried to reconstruct the effects that Robert-Houdin presented. We tried to preserve the spirit of his "Miser's Dream," for example, as he would have presented it in Algeria. Robert-Houdin was conscious of the fact that performing magic tricks wasn't going to change anything politically over there. So, he had to adapt them to create an event that would surpass the theater. That was necessary to make the locals who saw the duel say to themselves "This French magician has powers. We have to respect the French here in our country." This was the principal at



Robert Lepage's play *Playing Cards: Hearts* is a quartet of plays, each corresponding to a playing card suit and designed to tour a network of European theatres-in-the-round.

work as he wrote his acts. Robert-Houdin was more than a gifted technician. He carefully scripted and researched his works both abroad and at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in Paris. Whether it was magic with automatons, money, or in Algeria, everything was carefully conceived, scripted, and reflected upon.

GENII: What was it like to work with the actor who plays Robert-Houdin in *Hearts*?

BEAU: I remember that, originally, Robert Lepage wanted me to perform in the show. That became too complicated. I didn't feel sufficiently at ease in a theatrical sense. I was aware of the fact that I haven't been traditionally trained as an actor. I certainly wanted to participate in the project, but I said "no" and chose to remain the magic consultant. Then it became a question of whether or not we chose a magician or an actor for the role. I told Lepage that it should be an actor, because as Robert-Houdin said himself "The conjuror is an actor playing the part of a magician." I strongly agree with that statement. For a project like this one, which required someone to embody the role of a conjuror even better than a magician, an actor was better equipped. Magicians are often attached to their own personalities. I decided that task would be easier for an actor than a magician.

And Olivier Normand, the actor who plays Robert-Houdin, does a wonderful job. So, it's necessary to train such actors. But this is less complicated than it seems. In fact, it was easy to explain the stakes of playing Robert-Houdin and his significance. That actually allowed them to detach themselves from technique to emphasize the *mise-en-scène*, the delivery of lines, and how to create dramatic tension. All of that is extremely important, more so than technique.

GENII: You've had these experiences combining magic and opera, magic and theater, magic and shadowgraphy. Which combination of all these arts is your favorite?

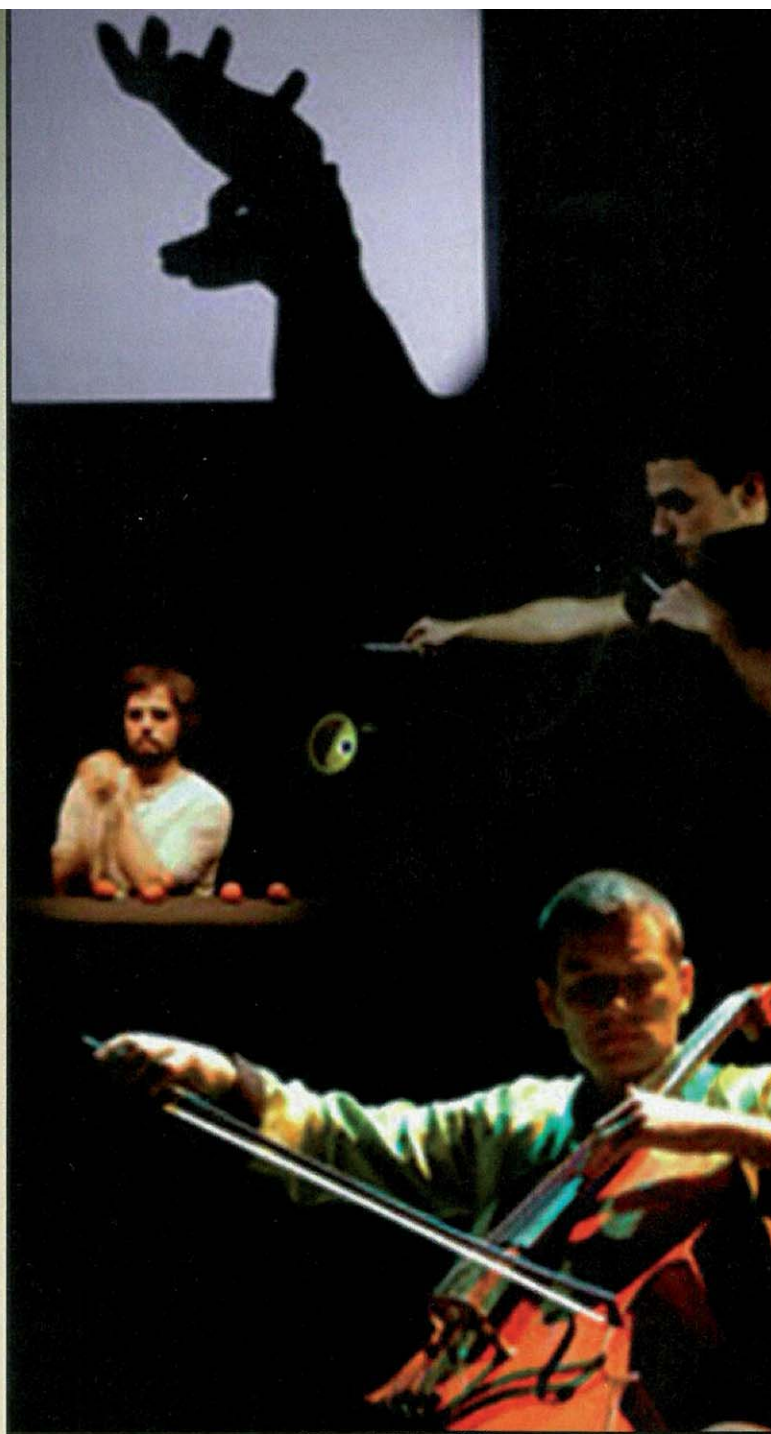
BEAU: I like all of these experiences. I love it when we bring shadowgraphy to the opera. I think that we're living in an interdisciplinary period when things cross boundaries like that, becoming hybrids. Over the last few years, magic has opened its doors wide to let in dance, theater, and the digital arts. It's a moment of open-mindedness and that's very good for magic. Therefore, I really like all of these experiments.

As a consultant, I've approached jobs with contemporary artists, with costume designers, and others. Really, I don't have a preference. I've enjoyed all of it. After all of that, shadowgraphy is really a return to my roots: me, the magician, alone onstage.

I also really like the idea that magic must be associated with a character. It pleases audiences. Spectators like seeing a man who does magic tricks. That doesn't preclude all of the other possibilities: avant-garde magic and cross-disciplinary stuff. But I also think that audiences take a special pleasure in watching a human, a single character, performing magic onstage.

GENII: What do you think of the *magie nouvelle* program being offered by the National Center for the Circus Arts in France? It's now possible to complete two years of training in their Châlons-en-Champagne school, which has only been offered since 2007. Most Canadian and U.S. magicians haven't heard about it yet. I'm thinking of the work currently being done by Etienne Saglio, Raphael Navarro, Clément Debailleul, and others.

BEAU: In fact, I'm pretty close with those guys. They're all



Magie Nouvelle is a program offered by the National Center for the Circus Arts in France

friends. I was the magic consultant for the shadows in Etienne Saglio's show. Raphael Navarro and Clément Debailleul from Company 14:20 are two people who I really like. We see each other often and work on quite a few projects together. They created a magic cabaret that includes Saglio, Yann Frish, myself, and others. There's a juggling-in-the-dark number created by Debailleul too.

So, yes, we share a common desire to show spectators that there's more than the traditional magic cabaret. There are ways to bring magic to other kinds of music and silences—other ways to give it a breath of fresh air. Sometimes this means magic without a magician. In Saglio's *An Evening of Monsters*, for example, there are objects like a little spring that walk around by themselves. These object effects are a combination of magic and puppetry. I



Philippe Beau in the 2012 romantic comedy *Populaire*, by the French director Régis Roinsard

think that in addition to amusing ourselves, we're reflecting upon magic as an art. We think to ourselves: There are other things that can be done with magic! I think that Raphael, like me, isn't really seeking to break away and position himself as totally different

from traditional magic, because we like it. We carry that knowledge of tradition with us. What we're doing is really linked to traditional magic, but we're trying to add other images, tones ...

GENII: Disciplines?

BEAU: ... and disciplines. Yes. These magicians are creating remarkable work by combining dance with levitation, for example. Like me, they're very open to experimentation. If there is a director who has an interesting project, they love to support it and to apply their expertise to it. It could be a Shakespeare play. It could be a set design by fashion designer Jean Paul Gauthier. The key phrase is "open-mindedness." I sometimes work with Raphael as a devisor. I completed the two-year *magie nouvelle* program at Châlons-en-Champagne that you mentioned. It's designed for circus artists, puppeteers, and other performers.



It's really a beautiful program—the only one of its kind in the world. Even more importantly, Châlons-en-Champagne is a circus school that has built part of its foundation based on magic. They have a research center with an enormous number of magic books. They also have a rehearsal space where magicians can experiment and create. What's great about them is that they are dedicated to searching for, and finding, new avenues for magic. And that requires a lot of research.

Therefore, it's necessary to have a place like that where you can experiment with levitation, video projection, and other elements. It's wonderful. Magic is pretty active in France right now.

GENII: Do you think that other circus schools will follow the lead of Châlons-en-Champagne with magic programs of their own?

BEAU: I hope so!

GENII: I've also heard that there's a *magie nouvelle* manifesto in the works. Will that be coming out next year?

BEAU: Raphael Navarro, Clément Debailleul, and Valentine Losseau, who's an anthropologist, are currently working on it. It'll be coming out next year. With Debailleul, we worked on my second, newer show *Hommes aux mille mains/The Men with a Thousand Hands*. It's based on a lovely poem that Jean Cocteau wrote for magicians. We created the videos and soundscape for the show, which combines those elements with shadowgraphy. I really wanted to create a strong link between shadowgraphy and video art in particular. A lot of work was done on spatially located sound to immerse the audience. It was a good collaboration.

GENII: Last questions: What's the future of your *Shadows and other Magic Effects* show? Are you returning to France to tour it there? In other countries? Or will you move right along to working on the Cocteau-inspired show?

BEAU: We'll see. I'm letting myself be guided by the natural path things take. I think it's a show that could

travel. It's a good vehicle for bringing spectators to the theater. I'd like to travel with these two shows. *Shadows and other Magic Effects* is two years old, which makes it pretty young. There are still some possibilities for staging it in France. *The Men with a Thousand Hands* is only 15 days old. It's extremely young.

I'm also working on another project that opened in September. It's a shadow show accompanied by a pianist called *Les ombres errantes/Errant Shadows*. We performed it in an abbey in Noirlac, France. It's a magnificent place. That's part of an evening dedicated to *magie nouvelle*. Raphael and Clément presented work as well. My contribution includes compositions by the French composer Francois Couperin, who composed wonderful music for the king. The music hasn't really aged.

GENII: I'm looking forward to seeing these shows, Philippe. Thank you for sharing your work with us. •

PHOTO BY ANTOINE DUBROUX

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From the show *Ombres Errantes*

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