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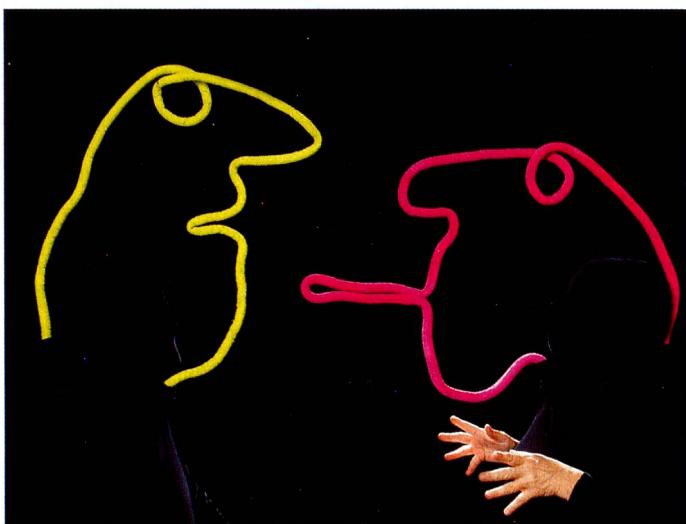
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"The whole world laughs in a similar way"

The Mummenschanz troupe has travelled the globe with a combination of pantomime, mask theatre and the fine arts, presenting shows that inspire the viewer's imagination. More than 30 years of creative ideas and analysis of human behaviour have flowed into the creation of their latest programme, "3 x 11". By Alain Wey



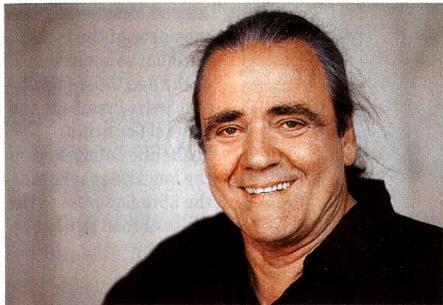
Images from 30 years of Mummenschanz: the joy of being able to disguise oneself and play.

Masked poetry. Emotions in all their forms. A smile followed by intense laughter. For more than three decades, the name "Mummenschanz" has been an important element of mask theatre around the world. Not a single word is spoken, and only the reactions of the audience break the silence. Be it through an enormous hand embracing a body or changeable narcissistic masks parodying a beauty contest, the cast of Mummenschanz have found a universal language. Now the group is back on tour with a programme that looks

back on 33 years of creativity. A few steps away from the Grand Casino in Geneva, we met Floriana Frassetto, the female face of Mummenschanz.

"The whole world laughs in a similar way," says 56-year-old Floriana with a smile. Theatrical plays without spoken words "transcend cultural boundaries and touch people in a direct manner". The Mummenschanz adventure began in the early Seventies. Andras Bossard from Zurich and Bernie Schürch from Berne attended Jacques Lecoq Drama

School in Paris. In 1972, they met Italian-American actress Floriana Frassetto in Rome. Their show „Narren- und Maskenspiel“ ("Fools' and Mask Play") was initially also performed in French. "But because the rhythm was lost in translation, we decided to turn all the sketches with spoken dialogue into sketches featuring masks." This created a new, exclusively visual language that sought "to stimulate the audience's creativity with next to nothing: notebooks, painted-on eyes and toilet rolls".



Bernie Schürch and Floriana Frassetto, the founders of Mummenschanz together with Andres Bossard.

THE ORIGINS OF THE WORD "MUMMENSCHANZ"

"'Mummenschanz' is a very old expression invented by Swiss soldiers of fortune," says Floriana Frassetto. "They liked to play cards, but because they couldn't keep a straight face while playing, they put on wooden masks that were subsequently dubbed 'Mummenschanz'. The

verb 'mummen' means 'to disguise or mask', while 'schanz' is derived from the French 'la chance' (luck). 'Mummenschanz' therefore represents the luck of being able to disguise oneself and play, and that's what we identify with." In other words, the perfect name for the group? "Yes, but

we are mercenaries for peace. We like rebellious ideas, but we don't go beyond that. Our message stimulates imagination and triggers a whole host of emotions, but most of all it caresses the human soul with a little poetry."

Although they lived in Zurich and Paris, Mummenschanz first performed in Berlin, where the trio came to the attention of a distinguished German art critic who described their work as "a wonderful spectacle that combines fine art, comedy, poetic irony and subtle criticism while still leaving much to the audience's imagination." In France, Mummenschanz packed the house at the Avignon Festival. Encouraged by good reviews, they appeared in Paris before heading back to Switzerland. Floriana recalls the strong personalities of her fellow actors, who "had very opposing characteristics. Andres was a satirist and very eloquent, while Bernie was more of an aesthete; a movement artist, minimalist, watchmaker and poet."

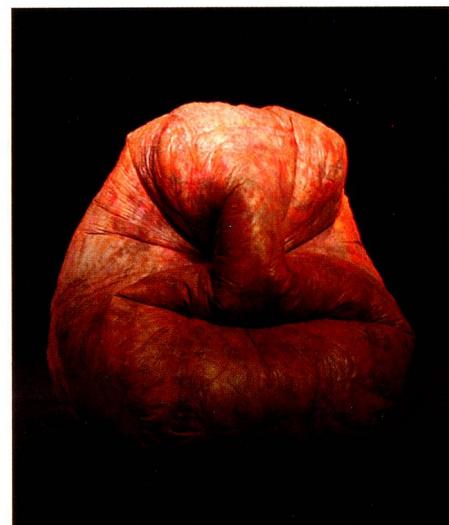
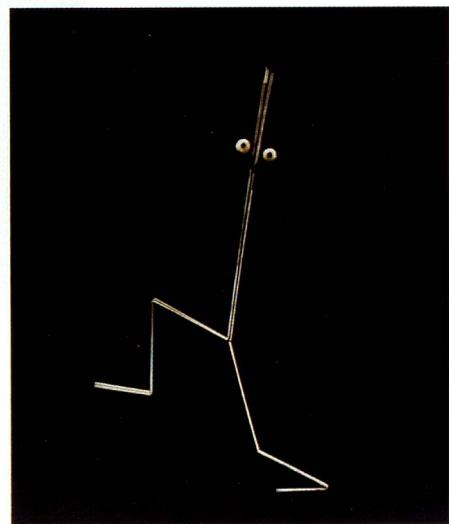
The artists perform on a dark stage dressed in black, the only illuminated part of their show being their changeable masks, which have been shaped with infinite precision into a variety of expressions. The result is a cross between fine art and commedia dell'arte. A variety of real-life situations reveal their poetic side through close-fitting shapes made of foam rubber or cardboard. "A ball falls off a huge pipe as if a head falls off a neck. We've always been interested in the way greed makes people lose their heads." The extension of the human body through objects is always at the heart of their creations, be it larger-than-life costumes and masks, large,

inflated figures or metamorphosing robot caterpillars.

In 1973, Mummenschanz performed their show in New York. Convinced by the praise heaped on them by a New York critic, an American agent decided to hire them for four months. They then toured through France and Italy. Mummenschanz have built an illustrious name for themselves. In 1976, the trio finally overcame a series of hurdles and opened on Broadway. The critics were enthusiastic, but the audiences were initially reticent. "From one day to the next, the theatre was suddenly fully-booked for six months. It was an American dream!" says Floriana. Four months after opening, they even had to hire a second set of players to stage the show. Mummenschanz remained on Broadway for three years, from 1977 to 1979. Since then, various Mummenschanz troupes have toured Europe, South America, China and elsewhere.

Elements like their ball-playing air vents and the wedding dance of the plugs made the group so famous that they were even asked to appear in advertising. The year 1992 provided a huge blow. Andres Bossard died of AIDS, but his two comrades-in-arms promised to continue the adventure. "It was a difficult time, but we managed," Floriana recalls. A long-time friend and businessman provided the necessary funding, located sponsors and venues, and set up the Mum-

menschanz Foundation. The group put together new programmes and added two new members, Italian Swiss Raffaella Mattioli and Jakob Bentsen from Denmark. A theatre was built specially for Mummenschanz at the Expo.02 show, in which daily performances were given and even "mask courses" were offered. The current tour, "Mummenschanz 3 x 11", runs to a total of 60 dates in Switzer-



land, and performances are planned in Latin America, South Africa, Germany and Italy.

So what is the Mummenschanz philosophy? "Restrict the action to the absolute minimum. Don't forget to listen to your heart and your feelings. You don't need anything to dream. You just have to be ready, let yourself go and be creative for a few moments. Mummenschanz is a game. The game of life!"

www.mummenschanz.com