

THE TIMES

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MIME

Jeff McBride Purcell Room

EACH time the London International Mime Festival comes round, the boundaries of mime have expanded a little. This year's fortnight of shows, playing at half a dozen venues, includes groups who contort their faces and a troupe who are said to act with their knees. Some mimes remain silent, others speak as many words as they might in a play, and yet others will probably utter those curious yip-yip noises like the warning notes of excited birds. And there is Jeff McBride, who wears a score of masks and, whatever else he may be, is a conjuror of genius.

American, with strong, dancer's legs and a habit of standing with feet astride like an upturned Y, his face, when at last he shows it, is faintly smiling and strangely

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androgynous. At his first appearance his black riding coat gives him a Byronic air, and as he stalks and stamps around the stage his hands pull the white mask from his face to reveal another mask below it; covering this with a third, he pulls it off to reveal a fourth. One mask is golden, another is a skull; a green one becomes red although his hands are nowhere near it. The speed of the transformations is exhilarating.

Likewise his agility with cards. These behave like animate creatures, vanishing into his ears and emerging on his tongue. At last he stands holding out hands that are empty but which somehow shoot cards like bullets over our heads.

What stays in the memory is the split-second timing and a delicacy of imagination that can create a trick from two paper flowers and a Japanese fan, where the beating of one keeps the others high aloft, fluttering like courting butterflies.

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