



MASS &  
FIEBER

# HOUDINI. The Last Liberation

Opens on February 23rd 2006  
On the show stage of the Club Mascotte in Zürich

**“Ladies and Gentlemen, step down this hall...”**

The Swiss theatre group MASS & FIEBER’s spectacular new show revolves around magic, rock music and the intricacies of security management in the modern world. Its centrepiece is an entertainer who calls himself “Houdini” – after the great magician and escapist Harry Houdini, possibly the greatest showman and self-promoter of all times. However, this show master and his assistants are not what they appear to be. Through a stunning series of transformations we are led from the stage of a magic show to a psychiatric ward and on into a torture cellar with Jack Bauer, the star of the TV series “24”, who threatens “Houdini” with the deaths of his wife Bess and his mother Cecilia if he does not talk. Just what are the team from a sinister transport organisation, “World Prisoner Service”, trying to find out? Before we know it, we are back in the show, where the magician is being handcuffed and bound and packed into a crate. But when the crate is opened, “Houdini” has disappeared.

**“...here you will find a clever young man...”**

“Look at this man. In normal circumstances, he would have lived his life without conceiving one single original idea. Now he is dreaming up whole new worlds. We have made an artist out of him. And even more, a complete human being.” The twisted pride of the torturer in Danilo Kis’s story *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* is one trigger point for the transformations in HOUDINI, where a torture suspect finds release in imagining himself as the great self-liberator Harry Houdini. However, this young man may be no more innocent than his tormentors, who find pride in their own „creative“ interrogatory techniques. „Bring him on stage!“ his assistants/captors have decided. „He’ll talk soon enough.“ And talk he does. About magic. About his mother. About his poor father Rabbi Samuel Weiss. About the monkey king from Chinese mythology, the ape who stole immortality from the heavens. One of the magician’s female assistants falls in love with him. One of his male assistants has second thoughts about the whole operation. And in the end, the question remains: who is playing with whom? Is „Houdini“ actually Monkey, the Chinese trickster god known for his giddy prowess as well as for his cruelty? Has he vanished into the clouds after having led mankind to forego its humanity and better instincts in the name of „security“?

**“... he will mystify you if he can.”**

“He never even took the trouble to learn our names.” These are the girls talking, after their victim has disappeared. The disappointment is real, and “Houdini”’s duped wardens remain charming. Such nice people, and such wonderful music! “Bad Girl” sings “Masquerade” – “Are we really happy with these lonely games we play?” Before, we have “Bad Cop” singing Schumann’s song about the carpenter building a coffin inside our hearts – a real tearjerker. And then there is “Good Cop” bemoaning his dead end life in the signature song of the evening, “What keeps me going is Houdini”. “Nice Girl”, of course is completely smitten with the main man from the beginning: “I give my love to you willingly” she cries towards the end of a superbly choreographed Tim Burtonesque “Monkey Musical”. You can’t help but like this immensely talented cast. You can’t help but think with growing unease about what their characters are doing. “I do what I do with a smile. And if you smile with me that makes you complicit!” “Good Cop” explains to the audience at one point. That is the unsettling truth at the heart of all manipulations in politics – and in the theatre as well.



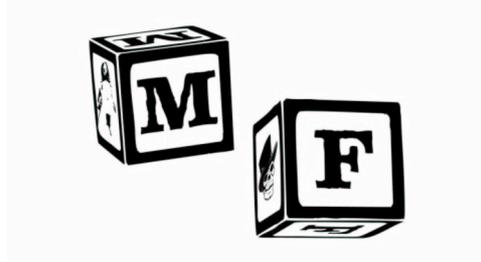


## Houdini: Cast & Crew

HOUDINI	Philippe Graber
NICE GIRL	Vivien Bullert
BAD GIRL	Fabienne Hadorn
GOOD COP	Phil Hayes
BAD COP	Markus Schönholzer

Text:	Brigitte Helbling, Niklaus Helbling
Music:	Markus Schönholzer, Martin Gantenbein

Director:	Niklaus Helbling
Stage design:	Dirk Thiele
Costume design:	Judith Steinmann
Choreography:	Salome Schneebeili
Video:	Daniel Hertli
Artwork:	Thomas Rhyner
Technical direction:	Peter Affentranger
Director's assistant:	Norina Nobashari
Stage assistant:	Holger Bruder
Advisor on magic:	Thomas Luz
Light design:	Björn Salzer
Make up artist:	Miria Germano
Tour management:	Matthias Frense
Management:	MASS & FIEBER – Martin Gantenbein, Niklaus Helbling



## About MASS & FIEBER

### **“Switzerland’s most intelligent theatre collective”**

The “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” calls them “Switzerland’s most intelligent theatre collective”. The musicality, versatility and exuberance of the performers are praised on a regular basis. “So much fun that it hurts!” wrote the Rheinische Zeitung. On the other hand, more settled viewers have been known to experience dizziness when confronted with the rollercoaster-rides of associations, songs, and choreographic inserts that structure these shows. Such symptoms recede on a second or third viewing of the shows. MASS & FIEBER plays are renowned for attracting repeat offenders among their audience.

### **Where they come from**

Founded sometime in the Nineties, MASS & FIEBER was a label for music and parties before turning its interests to the theatre in 1999. One reason may have been a growing ennui experienced by founding father Niklaus Helbling with the state theatre in Hamburg, where he had spent ten years as a dramaturg. Joining forces with like-minded habitués of the dance, music and literary business, this group of thirty-somethings proceeded to set up their first theatrical production BAMBIFIKATION, which was immediately proclaimed an “underground smash hit” by the media, not least owing to the ravishing young actress Fabienne Hadorn who played Bambi, as well as the singer-songwriter Markus Schönholzer in the role of her sidekick Rabbit. At the Impulse-Festival Germany, BAMBIFIKATION won both the festival prize and the audience prize.

### **What happened then**

Since then, much has happened. MASS & FIEBER has produced one play per year, (plus spin-off performances and radio shows) and has toured with its shows from Hamburg, Cologne and Berlin to Graz and Lisbon. While Niklaus Helbling remains the group’s guiding force as director, author and initiator of new projects, MASS & FIEBER co-founder, the musician Martin Gantenbein, has been known to take to the stage himself, all the while handling finances and composing for the shows. Actress Fabienne Hadorn and composer/musician Markus Schönholzer remain vital mainstays for conception and performance, and

set designer Dirk Thiele and choreographer Salome Schneebeli are not only essential in every MASS & FIEBER project, but also regularly work with Niklaus Helbling at state theatres in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, where Helbling is in constant and growing demand as a director. As a playwright, Helbling develops and writes the scripts for all MASS & FIEBER plays with Brigitte Helbling, who was lured from writing comic book scripts and newspaper articles to the composing of theatrical plays and songtexts by the promise of heaps of money and adventure.

### **Adventure? What's happening now**

With HOUDINI, MASS & FIEBER will leave the conventional theatre rooms that have until now hosted their openings, showing the play instead on the show stage of the Club MASCOTTE which not only boasts a spectacular view of Zürich, but also prides itself in a century-long vaudeville and entertainment tradition that has included the appearance of Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, KISS and the first Go Go Girls in Switzerland.

While profiting from the atmosphere of this singular venue for the first ten shows, next steps are already in preparation: even before opening, HOUDINI has attracted the interest of theatre and festival directors in Germany, Holland and Switzerland.

### **MASS & FIEBER play list**

1999: Bambifikation. Plastikmenschen schauen dich an.

1999: Bambifikation: the radio play. For Deutschlandradio

2000: Präriepriester. Eine Western Projektion.

2000: Dead Cowboys Radio Show (Expo Hannover & Steirischer Herbst Graz)

2001: Krazy Kat. Die Liebe im Zeichen des Pflastersteins.

2001: Krazy Kat: the radio play. For Deutschlandradio

2002: Red Cross Over. Ein Sing- und Lehrstück über die Neutralität (on the boat of the AMJ at the Swiss World Exhibition)

2002/3: Villains and Sleepers in the theatrical three month-performance „Bad Hotel“ at the Theaterhaus Gessnerallee in Zürich

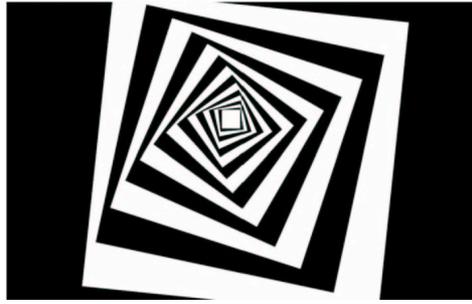
2003: Autodrom. Eine Expedition ins Leben mit den Autos

2005: King Placebo. Eine Reise ins Pharmaland. (for Theatre Basle)

2006: Houdini. Die Rock'n'Roll-Show der letzten Befreiung. Opens Feb. 23 in Zürich

More information, pictures and surprise extras can be found on

**[www.massundfieber.ch](http://www.massundfieber.ch)**



## BIOGRAPHICAL DETAIL

### who is who in HOUDINI

**Philippe Graber (HOUDINI)**, born in 1975, Graber studied acting in Zürich and was part of the Berliner Ensemble for two years, beginning in 2000, where he worked with the likes of Robert Wilson, Leander Haussmann and Claus Peymann. After interrupting his stage career for television and the movies (NVA with Haussmann) he is now almost free of debt and delighted with the chance to pull a vanishing act every single night in the HOUDINI show .

**Vivien Bullert (NICE GIRL)**, born in 1973, was working as a barmaid when a good friend of Mass & Fieber discovered her overwhelming charm and acting abilities and casted her in several of his productions in Hildesheim, Hanover and Berlin where she played Claudia Cardinale in a theatre version of „Once upon a time in the West“ at the Schaubühne. Since then, her acting career has taken off, leaving just enough time for shows with the Band Super Pussy Plays Guitar which features Bullert at bass guitar.

**Fabienne Hadorn (BAD GIRL)**, born in 1975, was still in acting school in Zürich when MASS & FIEBER whisked her into the main role as Bambi in their first production. She has since finished her diploma, worked at state theatres with Marthaler and others, and founded her own theatrical production company which does plays for children and adults. One production, „Heidi“ with Hadorn in the title role, just came back from a tour in Japan. Hadorn is also often seen on Swiss TV, making her the red-haired darling of a very large audience

**Phil Hayes (GOOD COP)**, was born in 1966, grew up in Worthing and studied acting in Newcastle upon Tyne, after which he travelled the world with the „Natural Theatre Company“. He then fell in love and took abode in Zürich, where several cult bands made use of his extended range of gifts, musically and otherwise. He has lately produced a Rockabilly LP under the name of „Jerry Nixon“, conceived a theatrical evening on Rod Stewart for a festival in Basle, and danced and sang as a geisha in Salome Schneebeili's 2004 production „Japanese Cowboys“

**Markus Schönholzer (BAD COP, music)**, born in 1962, spent the first 9 years of his life in Ohio and was then forcibly moved by his family to a mountain village in Switzerland, where he met Martin Gantenbein and was thus spared a career as a professional skiing instructor. Schönholzer and Gantenbein founded their first and second and third band together, Schönholzer working in advertisement and as a teacher until he decided to take the leap and cut all ties to a normal working stiff's life. Since then, he has been scraping along as a composer of giant musicals, songwriter for successful groups and stars in Switzerland and Germany, theatrical composer and musician, and lots of MASS & FIEBER which he claims to like best of all he does.

**Niklaus Helbling (text, director, management)**, born in 1959, founded his first theatre group during university in Zürich. After graduating, he narrowly missed becoming a teacher and instead moved to Hamburg where his wife had decided to earn a PHD in literature. There, he found a job as a dramaturg at the Thalia Theatre and during ten years learned everything there was to know about the business, after which he switched sides and became a director. He has since directed plays in Hamburg, Cologne, Bochum, Mannheim, Zürich, the Salzburger Festival, and will soon be seen at the Burgtheater in Vienna. MASS & FIEBER is his personal playground for writing as well as directing and generally doing everything that state theatres are reluctant to allow.

**Dirk Thiele (stage design)**, born in 1963 in Oberhausen Germany studied art in Cologne and was the singer of a rock band called „Supreme Machine“. After the band got a recording contract with Sony, things started to deteriorate and Thiele took refuge at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, where he met Niklaus Helbling and realized several projects with him. He also worked there with Robert Wilson and other stars, after which he started doing tons of stage designs all over Europe. His works are legion, and the largest of all is the monumental theatrical installation „Bad Hotel“ which he realized with Brigitte Helbling, assisted by all MASS & FIEBER friends and lots of strangers that later became friends. No Mass & Fieber play without Thiele's stage designs and paintings.

**Martin Gantenbein (music, management)**, born in 1959, studied literature and music theory in Basle and Zürich and played drums in many bands, several of which he co-founded. Does not enjoy jokes about drummers. Has worked as a composer and musician in theatres from Mannheim, Vienna and Madrid to Lucerne and Zürich, is also known as a composer for dance and for animated movies. While Schönholzer is an old friend from school days, Gantenbein met Helbling, Helbling & Schneebeli at university. His need for a label for CD productions with two bands was originally one of the reasons for calling MASS & FIEBER into being. Since 1999, only one more CD has been included on the label: thirteen songs from the M & F Comic-Musical „Krazy Kat“.

**Brigitte Helbling (text)**, born in 1960, met Niklaus Helbling when still in school and got him to emigrate with her (and their two daughters) to Hamburg, in this way gaining back life as an expat. Helbling grew up in New Jersey which is why Schönholzer and her get to write lots of english songs together. After completing her PHD in Hamburg, she started working for publishing houses and newspapers, also writing comic scripts for a horror comic publisher with a very

small but dedicated readership. She used to do lots of translations but not anymore. She is still inordinately proud of having discovered and translated James Robert Baker's histrionic Hollywood spoof novel „Boy Wonder. Apart from writing plays with Helbling, she has worked several times as a texter for and conceptionist with choreographer Schneebeli.

**Salome Schneebeli (choreography)**, born in 1962, studied dancing and choreography in Amsterdam and New York. After returning to Switzerland she founded the dance company „mama tanzt“ and worked with musicians such as Zef and David Moss. Choreography for MASS & FIEBER led to many jobs as choreographer and trainer at productions in Swiss and German state theatres. Schneebeli has two lovely daughters and continues to realize her own productions, though it's a mystery how she manages to find time. Last works included „Muscle Memory“, „Japanese Cowboys“ and she is now developing an evening on sex and the body called „My Favorite Game“.

**Judith Steinmann (costume design)**, born in 1978, did several costume assistences for Dirk Thiele with MASS & FIEBER and for other productions before taking over the costume department herself (with AUTODROM). She studied fashion design in Zürich and used to work with huskies in Alaska, but not anymore. She still has a large dog, though. Owing to a growing demand in the film and theatre area for Steinmann's costumes, the dog is more and more often sent to spend quality time at the farm of her parents.

**Daniel Hertli (video)**, born in 1972, studied visual communication in Zürich and did exhibitions, short movies and music videos. Is the director of the film department at the F&F art school in Zürich and has only recently started doing video work for the theatre, among others for „Richard III“ and „Homo Faber“ at the Schauspielhaus Zürich. If there was no mention of his videos for HOUDINI before in this text, that is not because they aren't amazing, but because they are.

**Thomas Rhyner (artwork)**, born in 1961, hails from the same small mountain village as Schönholzer and Gantenbein. He now lives in Zug and enjoys paying almost no taxes there, an indication of the loads of mullah he has been earning with his graphic art work for Pippilotti Rist and others during the last ten years. MASS & FIEBER has no part in this accumulation of wealth, since they pay little in coins (but lots and lots in appreciation). MASS & FIEBER is simply no longer thinkable without the posters, postcards, buttons and many many extras that Rhyner designs from the beginning and right up to the opening of the show.



## MASS & FIEBER

# EXCERPTS FROM REVIEWS

### **BAMBIFIKATION**

\*\* So this is how simple theatre can be, and how brilliant, made not out of plastic, but art-ificially. (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) \* With an anarchy, concentration and dedication which we hardly ever experience outside of childhood. (Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin) \* Mass & Fieber is storming the country with their cult piece Bambifikation. (Schweizer Illustrierte) \* The stage turns into a mind opening drug. (Die Weltwoche) \* A small stage wonder. Trash Hitparade as a low tech event with high fidelity quality. (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) \* Bambi, we love you. (Generalanzeiger Bonn) \* So much fun that it hurts. (Rheinische Post) \* This will not be the last that we hear from Mass & Fieber. (Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung) \*\*

### **PRÄRIEPRIESTER**

\*\* Saddle your horses, bicycles and mustangs and off we go to Arizona. (Zeitung am Abend) \* A brilliantly strange mixture of musicians and theatrical art. (Hamburger Abendblatt) \* Stage magic with grand stories and without formula. (Sonntagszeitung) Puppetteatre à la Andy Warhol. (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) \* A masterpiece. And the audience knew it. (Basler Zeitung) \* Not to be topped in their exuberant performance and imagination. (Berner Zeitung) \* Boundlessly imaginative. Really funny. (Der Bund, Bern) \* Präriepriester is a must not just for John Wayne fans. (St. Galler Tagblatt) \* Comical and trendy. (Tages-Anzeiger, Zürich) \*\*

### **KRAZY KAT**

\*\* Krazy Kat, mad mouse, a knowledgeable pleasure (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) \* without smoke there's no revolution (Basler Zeitung) \* Music, drive, power, uninhibited comedy (Tages-Anzeiger Zürich) \* Subject matter, in a vaudeville-

rock-kind of way, is everything that preoccupied the Sixties, and after them the Eighties (Aargauer Tagblatt) \* A cast that manages to realize, with hallucinatory sureness, even the most absurd ideas (Berner Zeitung) \* More anarchy than ever before (die tageszeitung Berlin) \* A remix of the revolution (Hamburger Abendblatt) \* The mess is a dramaturgic principle, the absence of style a stylistic decision (Berliner Zeitung) \* You could probably call it postdramatical or neo-dadaistic (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) \*\*

## **RED CROSS OVER**

\*\* The political theatre is dead, long live the political theatre! (NZZ am Sonntag) \* Le plus important spectacle conçu par l'AMJ (La Presse Nord Vaudoise) \* The renowned theatre group Mass & Fieber has set sail, with course towards Switzerland and its myth of neutral innocence (SonntagsZeitung) \* C'est provocant et subtil (Le Nouvelliste) \* A tender monument for the humanitarian junkie (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) \* Dunants nightmare: the red cross show for the swiss exposition (Die Welt) \* Croisés humanitaires passés à la moulinette de l'arteplage mobile (Le Courrier) \* Look to the side-program for substance and critical views. One of its highlights is the theatrical show «Red Cross Over» (Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung) \* The take on the red-white twin of the white-red Swiss Cross demonstrates the self-irony that the supposedly humorless Swiss are capable of. (Süddeutsche Zeitung) \*\*

## **AUTODROM**

\*\* The Hyundai is my shephard (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) \* Human beings will evolve into automobile reptiles: forever on the road, hallelujah! (Zürcher Oberländer) \* Theatre on the fast lane: with speed and comedy and the roaring performance of nine actors. (DRS2 aktuell) \* In Mass & Fieber, music is always more than just fuel. The bitter-sweet song structures of hits such as the „Apocalypse-Waltz“ or «Warm Leatherette» are the stuff of international pop giants. (die taz / Kultur Hamburg) \* Autodrom is a mixture of Hamburger and Marthaler School ... a noteworthy potential. (Frankfurter Rundschau) \* «Autodrom» will be known as the first play by Mass & Fieber that is not only a pleasure to watch, but also easy to understand (Sonntagszeitung) \*\*

## **KING PLACEBO**

\*\* Revue and ruffs: sounds like a wild combination. (Basler Zeitung) \* Voilà, this is the most original, funniest, most entertaining and wittiest new play of the season: King Placebo is a bitter-sweet rock-musical-fairytaleshow on pills and the pharma industry. (Online-Reports) \* Love, sickness, fusions and treason – much is possible on the stage of chemistry. (Basler Zeitung) \* Songs by Martin Gantenbein and Markus Schönholzer are on a par with their heroes, the Tigerlillies. And the well-oiled and often-proven interaction of Helbling's direction, Dirk Thiele's set design und Salome Schneebeli's choreography has no peer. (Aargauer Zeitung) \* For side effects, consult your bible, your Shakespeare or your doctor. (NZZ am Sonntag) \*\*

## **HOUDINI. THE CRITICS in ENGLISH – March 3rd 2006**

© **Neue Zürcher Zeitung**; 25.02.2006; Seite 47; Nummer 47

### **Houdini on the Rocks: The Helbling-Family brings political theatre to the „Mascotte“**

by Daniele Muscionico

*„Houdini“, like the historical escapist, is the title of the latest multi-channel production by the raging hounds from Mass & Fieber. The Rock'n'Roll-Show by Nik Helbling & Co. starts with easy entertainment and ends, a clever feat, in heavy politics*

Theatre in the sign of the brick. Tough, but heartfelt is the genre that the group Mass & Fieber around director Nik Helbling has invented, starting in 1999 with the now-legendary “Bambifikation” – which launched the career of actress Fabienne Hadorn. Their genius, of course, consists in the fact that bricks in the hands of the Helblingian political activists are always artistically tuned in such a way that no power in the world need fear them – not even the most sensitive regents of a state theatre. Productions by Mass & Fieber are both content and form: a fusion of philosophical brain work, noble art work and the musical bindings by Martin Gantenbein and Markus Schönholzer. The latest auditory example is unheard of: a brilliantly broad range from Robert Schumann to David Bowie.

In the “Mascotte”, one of the oldest clubs in Switzerland, Mass & Fieber has successfully pulled off in an especially pernicious act of disturbance. The show begins with a soft-fingered, super relaxed entertainer (Philippe Graber) who calls himself Houdini. Who is he really? An inmate in a psychiatric ward, prisoner of an organization that transports terror suspects in countries not bound by the Geneva Conventions, a bombing suspect from the TV-series “24” – or the don of a Mexican Wrestling Bar? As befits the main theme of the evening and the magician from which its name is derived, the Houdini-Helblings, Nik and Brigitte embark on a game of deceit and illusions. How do they manage to pull it off? That remains as mysterious as the disappearance of the multiple personality H. at the end of the show. Houdini, in any case, succeeds in freeing himself from the clutches of power and the rules of logic. It is the ultimate triumph of art.

One slogan is meant to keep the evening together, with varying success: inner security. In the words of the legendary Houdini: “security lies in risk.” This idea is prolonged in Dirk Thieles functional set design, part strip tease joint, part concert stage, and into the realm of daily politics. Not only towards Guantanamo... Inner security is responsible for Houdini’s will and obsession – being bound in order to free himself – and is contrasted with the security reasoning of politics with priorities set on security not as a means of liberation, but of discipline. So far, so theoretical. Perhaps too theoretical. For when conceptual baggage takes a back seat and the performers do what they most brilliantly are capable of, the show attains its full height – with four multi-talents at the guitars or, as go go girls, at the poles; with slapstick-siren Fabienne Hadorn, with Markus Schönholzer as “midnight cowboy”, with “super pussy” Vivien Bullert and Phil Hayes, an illegitimate member of Monty Python’s. The mixture is explosive, and like Houdini, it manages to blast the walls of reason. Sky high.

© **Tages-Anzeiger**; 25.02.2006; Seite 46 Kultur

## **The Last Liberation**

*Mass & Fieber's latest coup is called "Houdini" and is a Rock-Vaudeville-Show at the Club Mascotte in Zürich*

By Simone Meier

Houdini, a man who spent a long life (1874-1926) permanently escaping from crazy contraptions still retains a certain attraction for contemporary female viewers. Just imagine: this good looking hunk of a youth with blazing eyes submerged himself – half naked – under water in a milk can or allowed himself to be locked into a coffin, working at the limits of his own pain tolerance, to say nothing of that of his audience, flirting with near death experience, liberating himself again and again. Perhaps it was all just an illusion, or acrobatic prowess, or both. Within the range of the human possibilities he remained unchallenged. Houdini could be called the flesh and blood Jack Bauer of his time.

Of course, this comparison is phenomenally anachronistic, but it remains legitimate as a way of entering the mindscapes of the Mass & Fieber troupe. Their world negates borders, mixes life and art, the past, the present and the future, throws everything together, working with the resulting associative forces. Add a lot of music (by Markus Schönholzer and Martin Gantenbein) that behaves just as irreverently, mixing grunge with old jazz, Elvis and all kinds of ethnic influences and sounding fantastic. It's the greatest possible "variety", to use an English word, that we find here. And so nothing seems more fitting than to see the new show by Mass & Fieber, "Houdini. Die Rock'n'Roll Show der letzten Befreiung" in a former "Variété" or vaudeville-theatre, the Club Mascotte, situated in the Corso-Haus at the Bellevue, where show-people like Josephine Baker formerly strutted their stuff.

And yet, all this – the show, the glamour, the almost unbearably sexy girls (Fabienne Hadorn, Vivien Bullert) in glitter, Houdini (Philippe Graber) – is nothing more than framework: the measured vessel holding the fever within. No later than the first scene, associative delirium breaks loose: with a story of Houdini being buried alive in a coffin, which reminds the viewer of the scene in "Kill Bill" that has Uma Thurman escaping a coffin. Then we hear of a comic book character who repeatedly escapes from the Nazis – sounds like Thor Kunkels Nazi-porno-novel "Endstufe". Sigmund Freud is called upon, Abraham Lincoln and Queen Victoria meet for a deadly showdown, various apes in the tradition of King Kong make an appearance, a torture expert from Guantanamo gives an interview, and somewhere in between we get a hint of Houellebecq.

A recurrent motive is the outer constraints that guarantee security within. The opportunistic bending of human rights. In a fantastic satire on "24", Fabienne Hadorn plays Jack Bauer who has just got a terrorist to believe that his whole family has been tortured to death. And then we have WPS, the "Worldwide Protection and Security"-Service that specializes in perfect parcel delivery and torture techniques. All this at high speed, high volume and high humor (direction: Niklaus Helbling), brilliantly performed (also by Phil Hayes and Markus Schönholzer, chapeau!) and with a definite glitter in the high kitsch of the script (Brigitte and Niklaus Helbling). Deep? Well, not really, but that's not what we expect from vaudeville.

P.S. Showbiz is also revealed as a kind of torture. This truth is not relevant for this show. On the contrary: we exit from the club with the age-old theatrical insight, which comes only with great performances, that being an actor must simply be the coolest profession in the world.

© **Der Landbote**; 25.02.2006; Seite 23 leben  
**Liberating theatre in a straight jacket**

by Roland Maurer (sfd)

*Mass & Fieber plays "Houdini. Die Rock'n'Roll Show der letzten Befreiung" at the Mascotte in Zürich.*

Harry Houdini. He charmed his audiences at the beginning of the last century with acrobatics, magic and tricks, he escaped from chains, hand cuffs and straight jackets. At the Mascotte, Mass & Fieber has brought him back: with lightening, thunder, searing rock'n'roll, two cops and two nurses, all in black costumes. The entertainer takes the stage in white and states his belief: "security lies in risk".

One hundred minutes full of raging entertainment: Nice Girl (Viven Bullert), Bad Girl (Fabienne Hadorn) and their colleagues, Good Cop (Phil Hayes) and Bad Cop (Markus Schönholzer) pull all musical, acrobatic, facial and actorial registers on their quest to find out who this Houdini (suavely played by Philippe Graber) really is. He is still a stunning magician. But Brigitte and Niklaus Helbling have also introduced WPS into the plot: the World Parcel Service that is really a World Prisoner Service. This makes life dangerous for Houdini: the entertainer could also be a terrorist, and because of this, WPS has to pack him into a crate with unknown destination. Using torture, they try to force him to reveal his evil plans against innocent civilians.

At this point at the latest the Houdini character and the troupe from Mass & Fieber arrive in the dire present with their show. The perfection of the performance often submerges the factual seriousness of the content.

©**NZZ am Sonntag** 26. Februar 2006 Bühne

**Houdini. Die Rock'n'Roll-Show der letzten Befreiung. A Mass & Fieber Production.**

by Regula Freuler

*Ladies and gentlemen: the great Houdini!* His name was synonymous with magic. They called him „the escapist“. Hand cuffs, straight jackets, jail cells – he escaped them all. But Harry Houdini, born in 1874 as the son of a Rabbi from Budapest who emigrated with his family to America, also wanted to free mankind from the bondage of parapsychology. The only chains he could not escape were those of his own psychology. He loved his mamme with the oedipal devotion, he was well acquainted with the melancholy of a caged monkey and the social incompatibility of King Kong, and his „white lies“ brought fear into the heart of his contemporaries much as a terrorist's „dirty bombs“ do today... *Ladies and gentlemen:* Mass & Fieber, Switzerland's greatest association machine onstage! Their name is synonymous for intelligent pop theatre. In a blinding vaudeville show they present feats, neuroses and the absurd death of the self-liberator between psycho rock and mamme-swing (Fabienne Hadorn at her best). Enforced Disappearance and Girl's Wrestling. And no doubt Houdini would not turn around in his grave – even if he surely could.

©Basler Zeitung; 27.02.2006; Seite 8 kultur / tri-bühne

## **Music that scratches in your throat**

He was a superstar and terribly exalted: Erich Weiss (1874-1926), known to the world at large as Harry Houdini. Born an Austrian from New York, the son of emigrants let himself be buried alive, jumped chained into the Seine, escaped from straight jackets and milk cans, in short: he was the greatest self-liberator of his time. And now the most famous Zürich rock theatre group of its time, Mass & Fieber, has packed the great Houdini into a backstreet club format. Philippe Graber, actor from Berlin with roots in Zürich, grounds the magician as a pasty faced performer with glued-on hair, mama syndrome and gum problems. Keeping the audience on its toes with tricks and strip tease girls, this Houdini is no grand master of illusion, more a hero from a con man's vaudeville. And as is usually the case with Mass & Fieber: at a certain point, the plot keels over and reveals its glaring and pitiless love of the exalted. What remains of the magician with his top hat is a madman with a paper crown. Mother Weiss (fabulous: Fabienne Hadorn) dead though she may be, spits into her handkerchief and wipes the lipstick off Houdini's face. Is this man a terrorist that has been kidnapped by killer agents? Is he an innocent victim of torture? We will never find out. Somehow, we missed a turning point leading the Houdini story by Brigitte and Niklaus Helbling into the globally synchronized synthetic world of the CIA. No matter. Mass & Fieber live music trashes and crashes and scratches so blissfully in your throat that it makes up for anything. sr

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## **Harry Houdini is back!**

by Kaa Linder

Mass & Fieber has found the perfect venue in the venerable club Mascotte. Founded at the beginning of the last century as a vaudeville theatre for international entertainers and bands, the club is the fitting address for this cult evening full of loud music and lots of action, and the adequate place for a show about the most legendary magician of all times. ... The story of Harry Houdini, alias Ehrich Weiss ... serves Mass & Fieber as a starting point for a sophisticated, roaring reflection on the connection between magic and effects, on illusion and security ... but the rules of the stage also apply in real life. The magician morphs into a suspicious person, is clapped into a madhouse, and then declared a terror suspect. When conspiracy theories and torture are introduced, Houdini becomes the prime defender of inner security. The play with illusions has taken on a political dimension... as is their wont, Mass & Fieber does not tell a straight story ... Houdini's entourage, two cops and two nurses, are a musical Sturmtruppe, and the audience's sense of orientation is visibly strained ... all this is entertaining and witty. But in the end, the magic box remains empty. The magician has evaporated with a grin, taking the audience's remaining questions with him.