



A-B-C of FISM

Supplement to magic magazine „Magische Welt“
Issue 4, August/September 2022, Volume 71

MW-Special #18
Published by Wittus Witt

High Level

Interview with Eric Eswin
FISM honorary president

Eric, you are one of the few people who have witnessed ALL FISM conventions, starting with the one in Amsterdam in 1970. And in many of them you have been involved in their organisation. After having been nominated Vice Secretary General in 1997, you have been leading this federation as its International President from 2000 to 2012. During this time you have done a lot for FISM and the art of magic. One of the most important changes which you created was dividing FISM into six continental chapters, to enhance the quality of the contestants for the World Championship. Not all of your decisions met with the approval of all the magicians and societies. For example, I remember that you wanted to drop 'Comedy Magic' as a separate category and replace it with one or more awards for 'comedic presentation' which could be awarded in all categories. A majority of the associations did not agree and "Comedy Magic" is still one of the categories in the competition. It did not stop you however from continuing to think of changes aimed at the future of magic and of FISM. Let me now ask you a few questions about the latest FISM WCM, as was held this year in Quebec, Canada

Personally what was your absolute highlight during this event in Quebec? Did it pay off that there were national FISM conventions to improve the quality?

Definitely! The high standard of the contest was certainly due to the pre-selections at the continental championships. Competitors realise more than ever that the road to the top is a stepped one: A FISM WCM cannot be entered without prior successful performances at national and continental competitions.

There are a couple of highlights to mention. First of all, the beautifully choreographed Opening Show, culminating in the entry of all 109 competition participants in the theatre. It should be the standard for the future.

Then the quality of the competition. The Close-up contest was of a high calibre. Almost every performer was a hit and there were many serious attempts to raise the bar and to keep track with the social and technological changes.

The stage contest was certainly worthwhile, but less innovative and sparkling. Quality raised at the end, but there were still quite some acts that were absolutely below FISM standard.

For some unknown reason to me the red lamp system, with which a low level performance can be ended prematurely, was not at the jury's disposal.

A sure highlight was also the awarding of a special award to Max Maven, for all the good work he has done for the FISM during a long period of time. It was an emotional and memorable event. Seemingly unmoved, Max endured the praise, but how moved he was by the warm words was clear from the last words of his acknowledgements: „This means a lot to me“.

Do you believe it was a good choice that FISM went to Canada?

Generally speaking it is fair that FISM World Championships rotate across the continents, so magicians around the world do have a chance to attend and participate in the championship without having to travel far and wide. However the requirements for the organization and hosting of a FISM WCM must always be met.

So it is good that the North American magicians were offered a FISM WCM in their continent.

Nevertheless I was disappointed to notice that there were only a very few Canadian and American competitors. For years in a row the American associations face difficulties in selecting FISM qualified representatives.

As far as I can tell all the jury members were „magicians“ – no non-magicians (lay persons) from showbusiness, theater, film etc. in the panel. Shouldn't this be changed?

As it concerns a MAGIC competition, a jury at a magic contest should have magic judges in the first place. The performers should be judged according to magic criteria. Only competent fellow magicians can do so as they know about the necessary techniques, misdirection, timing, ways of presentation, etc..

On the other hand non-magic jury members should also have a say in the judgment as they have a wider knowledge of the theatrical aspects and the entertainment value.

In conclusion, the judgment of a magic act should be done by both magicians and non magicians from other cultural disciplines.

This can be done by including non-magicians in the jury. In such a case, a second performance is not strictly necessary.

But it can also be done - as we have done in the recent past - by firstly having the contestants tested by magicians, and in a second round by a mixed jury of magicians and non-magicians.

Since 2003 FISM elects two Grand Prix winners, for stage and close up. A rule which you also introduced. To elect the Grand Prix winners they have to compete one more time. Do you still think this was a good decision – competing again?

It is not strictly competing again, but more the election of one star over another. In the first round all contestants are ranked. In a second round the first of every category, that is to say the best of every category, will perform again and out of these best performers a jury chooses the one that is outstanding.

Did you ever consider finding a permanent place for FISM conventions like there is for movies (Cannes, France)?

Actually I have not, as during my term as FISM President there were always convention centers that met the FISM requirements and generally organizational matters were handled satisfactorily. Only once or twice there were serious complaints about organizational matters. Moreover, as I said before, the member-societies should all have an equal chance to attend a WCM in their continent or country. However, as WCMs grow in size and intensity (and they have been doing so for some time), the need for a tight, professionally supervised organisation arises. Not all associations can meet these increasing demands. In those cases, serious consideration could be given to establishing a permanent group of convention organisers and also to having a permanent venue for FISM WCMs.

Let me ask, what makes a FISM convention different to any other magic convention?

I have always emphasized that FISM cannot compete with any other magic convention, because a FISM convention is only once every 3 years and during that time new and modern magicians will emerge and will be offered at many a convention. Because the FISM is a truly international magic organisation, composed of a great number of recognised world-wide magic societies as its members, the international competition is the only distinction to any other magic convention. I introduced the phrase “The competition is the CORE-business of FISM” (a phrase that is still abundantly used by the FISM Board) and changed the name ‘FISM convention’ to ‘FISM World Championships of Magic’ as of 2003.

I am not going to ask what you would have done better. There are always other options possible. But have you identified serious shortcomings in Quebec?

I would first like to make a distinction between the magical content (competition; lectures, shows, dealers, etc.) on the one hand and the organization of the other programme components on the other. The magic part was definitely good. The level of competition was high. The competition went almost flawlessly. Gay Ljungberg, Joan Caesar and Mike Miller were the face of the technical staff that as a whole cannot be praised enough. There were high-quality lectures galore. In short, in the field of magic, all attendees have got their money’s worth very well.

Despite the unwavering care of Renée-Claude Auclair and Pierre Hamon, who worked very hard for four years under difficult circumstances to make FISM Quebec 2022 a success and for which they deserve our utmost thanks, there were many areas of improvement on the organizational level.

The registration went very smoothly. The issuance of a scanty backpack also contributed to this.

Delta Marriott as a conference hotel was with the lack of a lounge, a bar or other space where conference participants could meet, the very limited breakfast room, the miraculous change of elevator to get to the hotel rooms, etc, etc. a wrong choice, which the FISM Board could also have prevented.

Unimaginably incomprehensible was the lack of a congress App where all information, such as program, backgrounds, news and all kinds of competitions could be disseminated. Such a tool should not be missing in 2022.

It took a day before you knew how the halls were divided and where they could be found. The signposting consisted of welcome signs with „Bienvenue“ and references to room numbers such as e.g. 2000D instead of to destinations such as dealers, lectures, workshops, close-up theater, etc.

A serious matter: little attention has been paid to safety measures. In the event of a fire or other calamity, it would not be possible to indicate how many people and who exactly were in which room.

COVID measures were not a priority. Face masks were certainly necessary in the dealerships’ space, but not mandatory. The long lines of people standing close together without face masks in front of the closed entrance doors of the theater halls prior to a show have already led to infections, according to culminating reports on the internet.

The banquet and the farewell party were examples of compulsory programme points, which were organized without inspiration.

Over time, a more or less standardised programme has emerged for FISM World Congresses. How was the overall programme in Quebec?

The overall programme broadly followed the usual custom. Yet it seemed that there was more empty attendance than usual. The opening on the first day started late at 19:30 hrs and could actually be considered a lost day. The days were long, starting at 08:00 and ending at 01:00.

There were rightly many complaints about the early starting time of the competition (08:00). In view of the vacancy, this can be moved to 09:00 hrs without any objection. There is always a discussion whether lectures should be offered during or outside competition times. In Quebec, this was solved perfectly by offering both possibilities. All in all, it is worth considering a FISM WCM shorter than 6 days.

There were also board elections during the congress. Especially for a new International President. Can you elaborate?

In the run-up to the Quebec congress, the FISM Board paid little attention to the elections.

The two vice-presidents are not subject to a board limit. In my opinion, this is wrong, but there seems to be no enthusiasm to change this rule. Peter Din was re-elected, with no opposing candidates. Saturo Yamamoto, elected in 2018, is still in his first six-year term and therefore held his position until 2024/2025 without re-election. As far as I know, member associations were not made aware of the important statutory change of International President and were not urged to put forward candidates. Nevertheless, there was one candidate, the Italian Andrea Baioni. He was (is?) the President of FISM Europe in which position he worked mainly under the wings of the incumbent President.





In the absence of any opposition candidates, he was elected early in the congress with a large majority of votes. During the rest of the congress, however, he was not very visible. This was most noticeable during the award ceremony and the closing of the congress, prime moments for a sitting President to confirm his position.

In his brief maiden speech, he showed openness and accessibility and emphasized cooperation with the member associations. I know Baioni as an intelligent and amiable person.

I sincerely hope he will take the opportunity to present himself as such.

All things considered, how would you rate FISM Quebec 2022 on a scale of 1 – 10?

I would definitely give the magical content an 8.

As far as the organizational side and the many omissions are concerned, I do not get any further than a 5.

It is a pity that once again, the organisational imperfections will not contribute to a professional organisation of a FISM WCM. Rightly so, however, because of the good magical content the overall verdict will be that it was a good and successful convention.

Thank you Eric.

You Must be Special

Interview with Craig Mitchell

Craig, what was your first FISM convention?

That was in Dresden in 1997.

Did you make written notes at that time?

No. I didn't get around to it at all because I was so enthusiastic about the congress. And it is still one of my favorite FISM congresses. Not because it was my first, but in general. Above all, I was impressed by the organization. If the program booklet said it would start at 7:30 p.m., you could set your watch after that. That was fantastic. I think the organizer was Wolfgang Sommer.

Yes, that's right.

So Dresden still remains my favorite FISM congress.

Now let's move on to Quebec. On a scale of 1 to 10, where do you rank this 28th FISM Congress?

I would give a strong 6 almost a 7.

Do you see a difference between the organizational and the artistic content?

Well, the organization went pretty smoothly. The events all started pretty much on time. On the purely technical side, Quebec was absolutely on top of its game. All the equipment, the stagecraft, the backstage staff. All of it was at a very high level, unlike any FISM congress before. However, the organizers also had to deal with many problems, including Covid. Numbers had to be canceled, contestants dropped out, but overall they handled it quite well.

What was the highlight of the congress for you?

The highlight was without question the opening show. They had specially hired one of the top directors from Cirque de Soleil, from the show „Joyà“. I think this was one of the most important insights that came out of this congress. Namely, to have someone from „outside“ stage a gala show. Only professionals can do that. In other words, someone outside the magic scene, someone who is professionally familiar with shows. The problem with the usual gala shows at magic conventions

With thanks to Richard Hatch for corrections and additions.



is that they are pretty much zero-eight-fifteen. They're almost always the same style: there's an MC, then an act, 6 or 7 minutes, then the MC, then another act, and so on. But this show was so fantastic that you could have even toured with it after FISM. It was a great concept, very exciting. I hope that this will also raise the level of the gala shows at the next FISM congresses. And that would already be a good result for FISM-Quebec.

What was your biggest disappointment at the congress?

Hm ... I have to think about that for a moment. There are often many small things that can lead to a big disappointment. For example, the schedule was not good. The first day was completely wasted until the opening. The schedule for the competitions were also not optimal. They started at 8 in the morning and the last events ended after midnight. Then there was the dealer fair. I think it was a big disappointment for everyone. There were only about 30 booths in the huge space. It could have been done much better overall. Even through Covid or other circumstances like customs, for example, you have to give a lot of attention to the dealers. They are one of the most important parts at a congress. A few weeks before there was the congress „MagicLive“ with Stan Allen and there was an absolutely full show with dealers from everywhere, also from Europe. And even if the customs should have been an obstacle, then the dealers could have been offered more favorable conditions at the fair. If you know some time later that there will be just a few dealers, then you make the space smaller and don't go into a huge room where half the booths are unoccupied and there are only empty tables.

Okay, so much for the general part of the Congress. Now let's move on to a few comments in your daily reports that caused some confusion for some. For example, you wrote about one performance that it was „below FISM level“. What does „FISM level“ mean to you?

The best way to explain it is to look at the good acts at a FISM congress, then you realize very quickly what FISM level means. Not every act that goes down well at a company party at home goes down well at the FISM Congress. Because here it is about more. FISM has its own atmosphere and keen observers. A performance must be „special“ from several points of view. It is not enough to make a few crude jokes. That's how I had described a performance, which had started under „comedy“, but simply brought flat jokes. It's not funny when a man performs dressed as a woman and then one of his breasts falls

off and then the other. Imagine a woman performing as a man and having a penis appear here or there. That's not funny and rather offends the male or female viewers. And that's why I wrote, we don't want to see men in women's clothes at FISM. But that has nothing to do with the gender issue. You have to make a difference there.

You also didn't find the winners in Mental Magic really convincing. What was your criticism here?

I have already seen Anna and Luca at several FISM congresses and they have always demonstrated straightforward mental magic with the personality they also show in private. But now they have slipped into a role that in my eyes diminishes the strength of mental magic. They perform in „Gipsy costume“. When you present a mental performance in a role that is not authentic, it can either tip over into the comical or it takes away some of the seriousness of the effects. Mental magic and mind reading are so powerful and have such a direct effect that this strength is lost considerably by the performed role of the performer. At least in my eyes. Others have seen it differently and the jury has also given them a prize. So congratulations.

I can relate to that and I'm glad I asked you about it. Thank you for your time and stay well.

Craig Mitchell is a recipient of the David Berglas Millennium Award for his contribution to the art of magic

Craig Mitchell (40) has dedicated over 20 years of his life to the performing arts and has been the driving force in bringing many of magic's top international stars to South Africa.

He has distinguished himself not only as a producer of numerous shows and special events – including the innovative International Magic Experience convention in Las Vegas, FISM Africa and multiple national championships and specialist seminars – but has also made a name for himself as producer of live entertainment in Africa for one of the world's largest global family brands.

Besides the world of entertainment – Craig pursues various endeavours in the world of Information Systems. He has worked extensively with youth development having served on the College of Magic Board for over 10 years. He was instrumental in the launch of the International Youth Magic Championships and his love of the performing arts has seen him judge at multiple events – both nationally and abroad – including two FISM continental championships as well as serving on the global FISM Executive Board for over 3 years. He has been a fan of FISM since his first World Championships in 1997 – and has yet to miss one since.