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Send In the Skinny, German, Juggling, Lederhosen-Wearing Clown



Ross Mantle for The New York Times

At the Fayette County Fair in Pennsylvania Michael Hilbig performed for 11-year-old Elijah Harris, left, and handled flaming sticks, right.

By DEBORAH SONTAG
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IT is a ritual of summer: after the pig races and before the lion show, a lanky, 40-year-old man in lederhosen hoists onto his shoulders a plump, bespectacled girl in face paint, clammers atop a unicycle, pedals and then demands some loving, auf Deutsch, from his audience at the fairgrounds.

“O.K., people, if you want to hear more, say ‘Ja,’ ” Michael Hilbig, the entertainer, instructed a crowd on a recent Saturday night at the Fayette County Fair here in southwestern Pennsylvania.

So Bill Galbraith, a retired steelworker, and Gigi Patrignani, who works in lumber, and Gabrielle Springer and Sarah Scully, the tiara-wearing queen and princess of the fair, all obediently cried “Ja!” Mr. Hilbig next asked how

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Ross Mantle for The New York Times

Michael Hilbig juggles both words and objects at county fairs: here, basketballs.



Ross Mantle for The New York Times

Michael Hilbig

many in the audience were fellow Germans, counted the few raised hands and muttered, “Ach, well, I need more than 10 to take over the midway.” And the joke, an aside really, sailed out over the crowd’s heads, up past the funnel cakes, the antique tractors and the yo-yo ride into the sticky sweet Appalachian evening.

He calls himself Hilby, “the skinny German juggle boy,” and that is the first big wink at his audience, a signal that he will be poking fun at himself as well as at the conventions of his trade. In his act he juggles both words and objects, including, at one rivetingly absurd point, a bowling ball, a toilet plunger and a cordless hedge trimmer.

He maintains a fast-paced comic banter, gently mocking himself and his audience, especially its desire to see him fall or get hurt. (“Americans love accidents.”) He is highly skilled technically but does not mind dropping things because comedy, he believes, is more entertaining than precision (a view, he said, that his occasional all-German audiences do not share).

Offstage Mr. Hilbig is an earnest, mellow, [yoga](#)-practicing father of two who lives in Ithaca, N.Y., with his girlfriend, a photographer who has two children. On official forms he lists his occupation as clown, and from [Memorial Day](#) to [Labor Day](#) every year he is one of hundreds of variety entertainers — jugglers, magicians, hypnotists, mentalists, impressionists, Dadaists — who travel the fair circuit, bringing, to borrow a German term, *echt* performance art to the land.

As Mr. Hilbig and others see it, the midway is the chief setting for what remains of vaudeville in this country. It is the principal platform for quirky noncelebrity performers, those who are not overly polished, produced, homogenized or, in some cases, talented. And with some 3,000 county, state and regional fairs, according to the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, these performers are at the front lines of populist arts and leisure, especially during tough economic times.

The 10-day Fayette County Fair, a tradition for 55 years, serves as “the summer vacation for many families in our area, which has one of the highest poverty rates in the state,” said William K. Jackson, president of the Fayette County Fair Board. Most fairgoers interviewed said that the annual fair was their sole exposure to professional live entertainment — and, in the case of Mr. Hilbig, to anything Teutonic. “It was just different because he was German,” Ms. Springer, the queen of the fair, said of his act, “and I’ve never met anybody German.”

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Raised in Wiesbaden and Berlin, Mr. Hilbig was 21 and studying to be a social worker when he left Germany to travel the Trans-Siberian Railway. He learned how to juggle from a Swede on a houseboat in the Ganges River and began busking during what turned into a couple of years in Asia. He never returned to Germany or to social work. Agile and silly and charming, he was a good entertainer, and he enjoyed the nonrooted, free-spirited life of a street performer.

In 1993, after getting involved in a relationship with an American woman, Mr. Hilbig settled in Ithaca. Although he jokes in his shows about needing a green card — “I almost got one yesterday, but I was two minutes late on eBay” — he has been a legal permanent resident of the United States since shortly after his arrival. A chance audition for Busch Gardens Williamsburg led him from street performing into theme parks, which gave him a chance to polish his act and his persona. And before long he was getting steady work with festivals and fairs during the summer and cruises, resorts and private events for the rest of the year; having traveled to Antarctica 20 times, he concludes that juggling in the Drake Passage is a particular challenge.

It was a cruise-ship waitress, calling him her juggle boy and then her skinny juggle boy and then her skinny German juggle boy, who gave him his handle. Mr. Hilbig’s English is so thickly accented that he had to incorporate his Germanness into his act: “If you can’t hide it, paint it red,” he said.

He used to wear a variety of clownish clothing but recently decided on “lederhosen all the way all the time.” He has one pair, which he bought in the Bavarian-theme town of Frankenmuth, Mich. He pairs them with a red gingham shirt, a very short necktie and a red Alpine hat, the overall effect being, well, better than a dirndl. (“My friends in Berlin, if they only knew,” he said.)

The heart of Mr. Hilbig’s approach is to mount a charm offensive: “If you’re charming, you can knit a sweater onstage. You have to make the audience feel there’s no other place you’d rather be than right here right now with you people.”

In truth, that is not what Mr. Hilbig felt when he first arrived at the Fayette County Fair, a new booking secured by his agent. (Yes, clowns have agents too.) He found the setting dispiriting. His stage was strewn with litter and the small sign advertising his presence, “The Herald-Standard presents Hilby the Skinny German Juggle Boy,” hung above a trash can.

His dressing room was a storage closet, and there was no hospitality lounge as provided by high-end fairs, like the one in Dutchess County, N.Y., where he is scheduled to perform from Tuesday through Sunday. Worst of all he was situated beside the Big Cat Encounter Tiger Show, and “there’s really no way to compete with a 700-pound carnivore,” he said on the day he arrived.

Further, Mr. Hilbig worried that Fayette County was “not exactly my

demographic.” His show works best, he said, in areas where Priuses outnumber pickup trucks. He likes to bait his audiences when they do not laugh by saying that his humor requires at least a high school education, but in Fayette County, where a quarter of the population over 25 does not have one, that would not be terribly funny.

Gradually, however, the place grew on him. He found the livestock auction fascinating, the monster trucks impressive and the large Army recruiting station, in an area where unemployment is especially high, “depressing but real.” He admired the majesty of the lions and tigers and befriended their handler, Clayton Rosaire, a 10th-generation wild-animal trainer from Sarasota, Fla.

“I’m intrigued by his family history,” Mr. Hilbig said. “I’m a first-generation skinny German juggle boy.”

During the five days he worked the fair Mr. Hilbig drove his minivan from his motel to the fairgrounds each afternoon and changed into his lederhosen in the back of the fiddlers’ hall. When the “Pigs Gone Wild!” race started blasting “Sweet Home Alabama,” he readied his own sound system and loosened up by chatting with early audience members.

Before one show the fair’s queen and princess, in matching tie-dyed T-shirts, settled into the front row. “By the way, girls, the next time you do laundry, you should really separate the colors from the whites,” Mr. Hilbig called out to them. The girls laughed, adjusting their purple pageant sashes; they were itching to be selected as volunteers.

But alas for them, Mr. Hilbig chose instead a dimply young girl named Madison (“Is that your mom there, Madison, taking pictures for the insurance claim?”), a corrections officer from the town of Fairchance (“Wow, that must really stink being a prisoner in Fairchance”) and a burly, tattooed electrician (“Can I call you Papa Smurf?”).

As he balances swords atop knives in his teeth and mounts six-foot-tall unicycles, Mr. Hilbig especially likes to tease men. He prances around the stage and (during fire juggling) refers to himself as “a flaming German.” He squeezes men’s muscles, blows them kisses and urges them to hug to the song “Feelings” — although in Fayette County he never coaxed more than a handshake from his male volunteers.

“People used to ask me all the time if I’m gay,” Mr. Hilbig said. “What a weird question. So I try to blur the boundaries. The more uptight the guys are, the funnier it is.”

Sometimes Mr. Hilbig’s friends tell him he is “so good he should be famous.” But Mr. Hilbig, shrugging, said, “Famous doesn’t really exist in terms of juggling.” He is content, he said, to be his own boss, to earn a decent living (“I do fine; I can buy organic vegetables”) and to savor the sweet moments when he electrifies an audience. Over the years he has developed a loyal following, and in Fayette County

he added at least one particularly ardent fan: Mr. Galbraith, the retired steelworker, who attended 11 of his 15 performances, crying out “Wow!” and “Ha ha ha!” and “Hot pants!” (when Mr. Hilbig crouched over a flame).

Episodically, Mr. Hilbig persuaded his audiences to sing a song from “The Sound of Music,” sending ragged choruses of “doe a deer” out over the midway. And in the end, despite his initial anxieties, he seemed to have won them over. Summing up an apparent consensus, Ms. Scully, the fair princess, said, “The pigs are very popular, but I liked him better.”

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