



**Publication Date: Friday, March 14, 2003**

## **The magic of Mummenschanz**

*Swiss troupe brings its unique style of visual theater to Stanford Lively Arts*

**by Robyn Israel**

There's no music, no words, no scenery.

Just 35 masks and costumes worn by four performers who act in complete silence, injecting personality and character into everyday objects. On stage, wheelbarrows become heads. A bag of leaves cops an attitude. Geometric shapes perform an odd ballet.

Such is the playful, inventive handiwork of Mummenschanz, the world-renowned Swiss troupe that deftly blurs the line between mime and puppetry. Elements of dance, theater, art and even architecture are also incorporated into their shows.

Locals can sample the magic and merriment of Mummenschanz tonight and Saturday, when the troupe performs its latest show, "Next," at Stanford University's Memorial Auditorium. Presented by Stanford Lively Arts, the performance will be only the third new show in the company's 30-year history.

"Our show is really about playing and communicating. It's much more than telling stories," co-founder and director Bernie Schurch said in a recent phone interview from San Luis Obispo. "All our characters who come and play on stage, you can look at them as toys. As an individual in the audience, you're taken by the way the characters evolve on stage. They move, they have their own choreographies, their own drama, things they want to say and do, but they're not confined to a singular story."

Much is left to the audience's imagination. For instance, a wordless dialogue ensues between a male and female who rearrange their faces (actually foam masks) in a game of outdoing the other. Or a huge sheet of white paper flaps in the breeze, then stands up, crinkles its corners and becomes a large oval face.

"For everybody, there's the space to either participate with fantasy and imagination, or you can take it just as it is," Schurch said.

Mummenschanz typically kicks off its shows by exploring the basic elements -- earth, wind, fire and water. Shapes are at first abstract and amorphous, then gradually evolve in the second act into more human-like figures.

"This is the point of doing a non-verbal show -- to talk about us human beings. We are communicating without speaking, without words, just visually. It lends itself to start in the amorphous world of elements and animals and plants and then evolves, like a discussion, an encounter, an interaction. We have this tendency in our life to evolve, to become something, to get better. So we take this natural tendency and we lay it under the performance."

First performed in Switzerland in March 2000, "Next" has also evolved, Schurch said, as it dropped some props and added others. New to the production are a variety of materials, including "super-light, airy" foam, cardboard and plumbing hoses.

"They are always a constant process of change," Schurch said of the shows. "They come onstage in a first version that we judge presentable to an audience. If we see it works, then we go on. The second phase, that's the work of sharpening the edges, to bring the essence out, to have all the right movements at the right time and the right intention. We master each and every mask and costume."

A native of Bern, Schurch was a student in the late '60s at Jacques le Coq's famous mime school in Paris, where he met countryman Andres Bossard. Both men were equally fascinated by the possibilities of masks and non-conventional storytelling.

"I pushed to be more abstract, to discover a universally understood visual language," Schurch said in a previous statement. "As a Swiss, growing up in a country where four languages are spoken, I had a great desire to go beyond language."

In 1972 the troupe hooked up with Floriana Frassetto, an Italian-American who had studied pantomime in Rome, and created Mummenschanz (the name roughly means masquerade). The trio's first major success was at the Avignon Festival in southern France, which led to engagements around the world. In 1979, Mummenschanz opened on Broadway and remained at the Bijou Theatre for a three-year run, an unprecedented feat for a group whose show contained no words or music. Film and television work followed, bringing the maverick company to an even wider audience.

The death of Bossard in 1993 was a great loss for Mummenschanz, but Schurch and Frassetto eventually regrouped, and recruited American mime artist John Charles Murphy. Raffaella Mattioli, a classically trained dancer and choreographer, joined the group three years ago, giving Mummenschanz a company of four for the first time.

"We looked for a person who was knowledgeable about movement, someone who was good at moving, at mastering his (or her) own body, to speak through movement. She had those qualities."

Asked about the inherent challenges of getting older, Schurch replied with the wisdom of a 50-something performer.

"The body is decaying slowly. We're not 20 years of age anymore, that's

true," he said. "But we realize we can still be as agile, thanks to our experience of using our masks and costumes.

"And the experience of 30 years, of doing this theatre, gives you a maturity in movement, so that you don't have to do a leap of 15 feet. You can say the same thing with a leap of 5 feet. The leap of 5 feet makes up for the leap of 15 feet, because it's done in such a way that there's nothing to be questioned. It is mature. It's better."

Two years ago, the Swiss town of St. Gallen adopted the company and provided them with a spacious new studio, where they assembled "Next." The troupe still tours half the year, with upcoming stops in Eastern Europe this spring and China in the fall.

Asked whether Mummenschanz had ever been tempted to incorporate music into its repertoire, Schurch replied that they had experimented with the use of sound, but saw it more as an underlying score, rather than being a true "partner" on stage.

"It never showed itself necessary. It didn't add anything. It might have even taken away something. (But) it's still in the back of my mind, to have a couple people on percussion, a couple people blowing wind instruments."

Mummenschanz may be entering its fourth decade, but the performances are always fresh, Schurch said.

"Each performance is a new challenge (because) we're improvising. There is nothing that will tell us that the performance will work. Nothing is giving us this assurance. We are always proposing something to an audience. We wait and hear and feel the reaction, whether there's silence or tension or laughter -- we feel all this. We have invisible antennae. This is how we receive the signs from the house, if they are with us."

Upon taking the stage, the group will try to quickly ascertain the mix of the audience -- how many kids, adults, elderly, etc. -- as this will affect the way the show unfolds, Schurch said. Establishing a connection with the audience is key; it is a goal the quartet strives to accomplish within the first three minutes.

"That's the big challenge. It makes us have stage fright, even after 30 years!"

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**What:** Mummenschanz, presented by Stanford Lively Arts. A post-performance discussion will take place tonight at 9:45 p.m. and will be free and open to the public.

**Where:** Stanford University's Memorial Auditorium.

**When:** Tonight and Saturday at 8 p.m.

**Cost:** Tickets are \$40/\$34/\$26. Half-price tickets are available for young people ages 15 and under, and discounts are available for students.

*Info:* Contact the Stanford Ticket Office at Tresidder Memorial Union or call (650) 725-ARTS (2787) or visit <http://livelyarts.stanford.edu>.

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