

Fast & loose

‘Covering only 100sq km of the Sahara Desert with PC cells would generate enough energy for the whole world’

Petter Sjöström, head of operations and planning at Switchpower – a renewable energy company currently displaying its range of solar powered cells at Knowledge Village – offers a solution to the world’s energy problems.

‘I have no objection’

Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** gives Oscar-winning director Oliver Stone the OK to make a biopic of his life.

‘There was no noise, the wall fell just like that’

An **eyewitness** at International City describes the scene as a wall under construction collapsed killing one worker and injuring four.

‘I’ve got to sleep 15 hours to sing the way I want to’

Mariah Carey reveals the secret to her success. Here’s hoping she suffers a bout of insomnia soon.

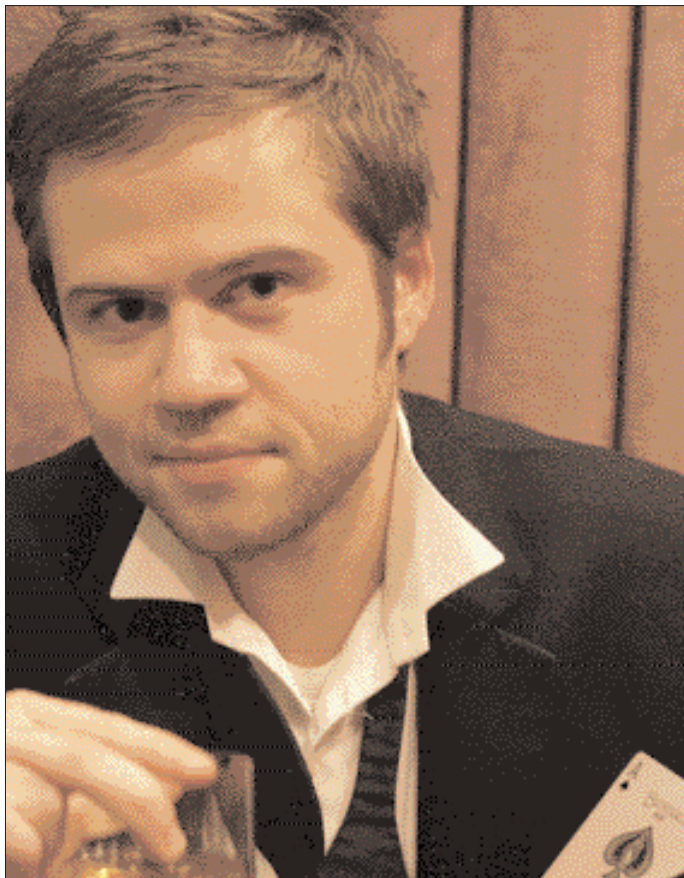


GETTY IMAGES

Hot seat

John van der Put

Gone are the days of children’s parties, conjuring rabbits from hats and sawing pretty girls in half. According to UK contemporary magician, **John van der Put**, the art of magic is going through something of a revival. **Becky Lucas** caught up with the sharp-suited showman, currently wowing crowds around Mall of the Emirates, to find out why card tricks are cool



Have you always been a magician?

I started playing about with magic when I was 15. Then my parents suggested I get a back-up career, so I went to university and did computer science. I hated every single second of it. All I did was go around practising magic tricks. I worked in IT for a charity for a couple of years, before I nearly died from pancreatitis and had to stop working. That made me think, ‘What am I doing? I’m leading my back-up life before even trying to lead the life I want’. So I left work, retrained as an actor. Since then I’ve been working as a magician, actor and writer and running a theatre company called Stand Not Amazed with a choreographer friend of mine called Lucy Cullingford.

What first attracted you to magic?

It’s strange. I personally don’t like magic. I never liked it on television or at kid’s parties. Then I saw this show called *Stuff The White Rabbit* with Jerry Sadowitz. It was all about card tricks and I loved it. So I found a book on card tricks and spent three weeks practising them on my own before showing a friend. Luckily, I pulled it off and they freaked out a bit. After that

I knew I could perform. Nobody will teach you any of the good stuff until you’ve shown them your worth as a magician, so it all has to be self-taught in a dark room for hours and hours. When I was 18 I joined The Magic Circle – the most prestigious magic organisation in the world. As soon as I did that I met lots of other magicians. You can do card tricks in a room, but to go up and change people – that’s a different game. It’s about trying to create wonder in people, just for a moment. Everyone’s all ‘routine, routine, routine’ and then ‘bam’ magic can take them out of that.

What sorts of shows have you been putting on?

We’ve done a few plays using magic to heighten the surreal in everyday life. For example, our first one was about giving up smoking and featured a lot of cigarettes appearing and disappearing. We’ve also created a few workshops on ways to focus attention in shows, because as soon as you produce the magic, an audience will immediately pay no attention to anything else. We were creating a new language, by putting magic in a new setting. Recently we’ve been doing the high-profile stuff. In

London I have residences at The Criterion, Piccadilly, and Frankie’s [Marco Pierre White and Frankie Dettori’s restaurant which has also just opened in Dubai]. We’ve created magic for the National Theatre, the award winning Fat Duck restaurant in the UK and at the Cannes Film Festival. But our vision is really in theatre. I came over here to have a bit of space to write some more plays.

What else are you doing in Dubai?

I’ve been performing magic in Sezzam restaurant in the evenings and then doing bigger, what we call ‘street theatre’ around the Mall of the Emirates the rest of the time. It’s more interesting here because often you have to work around a language barrier. It’s a massive joy to work here, because it’s new to people and they’re not at all jaded.

Why call yourself ‘contemporary’?

For me it was the only way I could live with myself. I don’t like the showbusiness style of magic. I don’t do kid’s parties and try and avoid anything with hats and rabbits. Although strangely I’m coming back round to that now – in my latest set Alexie Terry, one of our actors, sings a Bob Dylan song called ‘I Will Be Released’ as I cut her in half.

What’s your most impressive trick?

It’s best if I show you...

[John gets out a card, and asks me to write my name on it. Then he puts the pack on the floor and, by waving his fingers, gets it to fall open on my card. But it’s not my card – that one’s in his wallet.]

How did you do that?

One of the reasons I always hated magicians was because they’d never tell you how they did it. But you really do puncture the wonder if you give away your secrets. If you still want to learn, it will take about 10 years practising in a cupboard.

Can anyone learn magic?

Anyone can, but it’s all about how you use it. We’re going to start working with teenagers soon and we’ll be encouraging them to think about different ways to use magic. The world has enough rabbits and scarves and doves – why not conjure up more oil or water or food?

So you believe in real magic?

I suppose I do. I have a faith, which I lost for a while and found again when I was ill. It helps, being close to the door. For me it’s love and grace. Magic becomes real in that moment when it’s happening. People may think it’s rubbish, but it helps them transcend for a moment. ●

See John work his magic at Sezzam (04 341 3600, every night between 8pm and 10pm) and around Mall of the Emirates (from 12pm to 2pm, follow the crowds) until Sept 12.

Visit www.standnotamazed.com for information on new shows, or see www.vanderput.com/blog for John’s blog.