meet Timo kulmarkko

comedy magician, producer, director, promoter, driver, cook, etc.

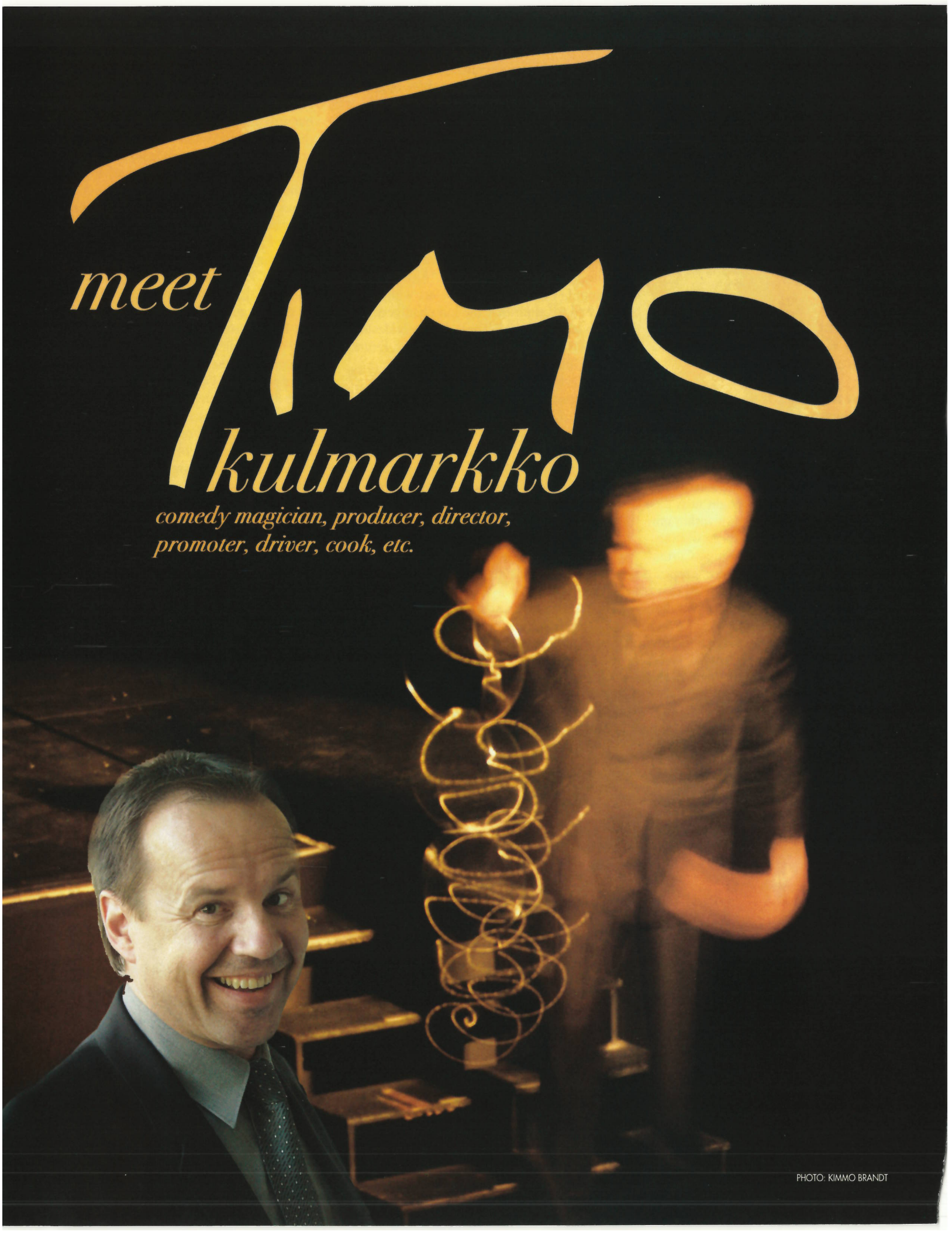


PHOTO: KIMMO BRANDT

The city of Rovaniemi, Finland, located on the Arctic Circle is where Timo Kulmakko was born and raised, and had it not been for Tivoli, a traveling amusement park that visited his hometown every summer, he might still be quietly living there. Which might not have been so bad since, as he quickly points out, Rovaniemi is the official home of Santa Claus.

The Tivoli show that Timo saw was presented by Mr. Nigest, a white-haired distinguished gentleman magician in tails, reminiscent of Blackstone Sr. who worked with his beautiful wife and two assistants. His repertoire consisted of a three-sword suspension, sawing in half, levitation, rising cards, miser's dream, and various rope tricks. Six-year-old Timo, sitting in the front row, watched dumbfounded as the great magician reached out and pulled a coin from his ear. The magic bug took its first bite. But as you might have guessed, there was not much other magic going on in that region. His mother, a schoolteacher, discovered a book in the library written by Finland's most popular magician, Solmu Makela. "She took me there and we got the book. I didn't know how to read yet, so I badgered her into reading it to me as much as she could bear, and we finally came to an agreement that she would read two tricks to me every Sunday. Finally she used it to teach me to read."

Several years later Helsinki magician Reijo Salminen was touring the country's department stores. He made two visits each year to Rovaniemi and would present six or eight different 20-minute shows throughout the day. Timo was there for every single show. He watched Mr. Salminen year after year, but was too shy to introduce himself until he was 15 years old. As it turned out Mr. Salminen was very friendly and they remained close friends until Mr. Salminen's untimely death three years ago.

It was during his time in the army in the early seventies that he finally made a career decision. All thoughts pointed towards magic in some form, but he wasn't clear on a specific direction. Then in 1976 he went to FISM in Vienna and saw someone performing and selling balloon sculptures, which triggered the idea of doing comedy magic for children. In his home town it would be difficult to survive as a magician so he moved to Tampere, one of the larger cities about 120 miles northwest of Helsinki. It was there that a Finnish TV station approached him to do a series of programs for children. The show became popular and lasted 13 years.

After all those years of childrens' shows, he decided to venture into performing for adults. Corporate shows seemed a logical choice, so he moved to Helsinki where there are many more companies, and to this date corporate work is his main source of income.

The other advantage of moving to Helsinki was that it gave him the opportunity to be more connected to the magic scene and to finally become close friends with his childhood idols Solmu Makela and Reijo Salminen. In 1995 he was elected to a three-year term as the Finnish Magic Circle president. Mr. Makela had held that position for 35 years and was ready to retire. That year it was Finland's turn to host the Scandinavian Magic Convention. These events rotate between Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland. Drawing from his recent experience as president of the Finnish Artists Association, which consists of professional and semiprofessional acrobats, jugglers, magicians and other variety artists, he was able to put together a very successful convention, including an international show. In 1997 he was called upon again to put together an international show honoring Solmu Makela's 75th birthday, for which a well-known Finnish artist was commissioned to design a commemorative medal that is now in the collection of the National Museum.

When the Finnish Magic Circle decided to celebrate their 60th anniversary in January of 2005. They asked for Timo's help again. At that time his good friend Markku Purho's term as president was about to expire, so they persuaded Timo to take on the presidency one more time.

Timo assembled a list of international acts he would like to have on the show. By his calculations, in order for this show to pay for itself there would have to be more than just one performance. Maybe two or three, and in a venue larger than the 400-seat theatre they had used in the past. He felt that the public would appreciate seeing





Facing page: Timo Kulmarkko performing Linking Rings as emcee of his international magic show. Above: Timo with one of his childhood idols, Solmu Mäkelä; Logo design featuring the entire cast and used on posters and flyers

three-chair test. Finnish people already have a good understanding of English. Combine this with Max's ability to use just the right words and at the right rhythm so that he can be easily understood by non-fluent English speaking audiences, proved very effective. Norm Nielsen was next performing his classic act with card and coin manipulations, and ending with the floating violin. The ever-inventive Finn Jon, with his charming, almost non-performing style created miracles with soap bubbles and smoke, his version of multiplying tennis balls, and ending with his new floating table. Then it was my turn with the cleaning lady act. Closing the show and completely stealing it was Marko Karvo and Elena (see their story elsewhere in this issue).

Promoting this show once more presented challenges. Again Timo invited every newspaper, magazine, radio and television station to see the show, and got no response. "This is all so new to them. I just couldn't get them to understand that here was a rare chance to see all these top international magicians, and that they would all be on the same show." He did finally get a return call from the Oulu newspaper. They agreed to have a journalist from their office in Helsinki meet with him and write a story that would appear in the newspaper on the show's opening day in Oulu. However instead of just writing about the show, they thought it would be a clever idea to have Timo present a trick and then explain the secret to the readers. Feeling frustrated, but keeping his cool, his answer was, "That's a really 'interesting' idea, and we can talk about it some other time. But I think it's important to send someone over to see the show and write about it. We are offering Finnish people the rare opportunity of seeing international magic stars. And we normally don't allow photos to be taken during the performance, but we will make an exception for you. If you want something special we can have you meet the performers afterwards and interview them." The misdirection worked perfectly. A journalist and photographer came that evening, took photos, interviewed us and left very satisfied.

After the Thursday night show in Helsinki, we boarded an all-night sleeper train to Oulu. Timo had arranged for our own train car, and in Timo fashion he took it upon himself to prepare a dinner for all of us on the train.

The show took place at the Madetojan Sali, a beautifully appointed concert hall. Not the perfect place for a magic show because of limited lighting, with no proscenium, wings or backstage area, but fortunately all of our acts were simple enough technically that we were able to adjust.

Timo and Robert Jägerhorn had gone there a month earlier and papered the city, passing out fliers and putting up posters in the shops. He was welcomed by most businesses as they had remembered him from his television shows many years before. "I also applied some restaurant table hopping techniques when it came to approaching store owners. Instead of shyly asking if they would put up posters for our show. We just went in and enthusiastically talked about our terrific show and what a nice store they had, and how nice the posters would look on their walls."

He is often asked how he manages to take on so many aspects of a project like this. "When I decide to do something I simply assume it can be done, and I never consider anything a problem. I won't even use the word. There's a solution to everything, maybe not the one I first thought of, but I know it's there. Of course there are always compromises. It's like playing chess: there are different moves, different strategies. I try them all until I come up with a reasonable solution."

When asked why he doesn't just delegate some of the work to others, he responds, "All of what I'm doing here is new to me so I feel that I have to discover what I need to do, and make my own mistakes before I can ask someone else to do the work."

New challenges are always popping up, where he needs to make quick decisions, like in Oulu, just hours before the show he found out that no one there had made arrangements for selling tickets at the door. He rushed to the bank to get change, bought a box to keep the money in, got a seating plan, and set up an area to sell tickets. To compound matters, in the process of making sure all of us had everything we needed, he discovered that he had left his performing suit on the train. Some quick calls to the train's final destination station resulted in their being able to send it back on the returning train. Coincidentally a friend of his was on that train on her way to see the show, and she got it to him two hours before showtime, at which point he put her in charge of selling tickets at the door. By the time the show started he was his calm self, ready to emcee a show that was most enthusiastically received.

To a comment like, "Isn't all this really hard to do?" He smiles and responds, "It's fifteen times harder than you think." Still, he says he wants to continue doing it. When asked what he's getting out of all of this he briefly scratches his head, smiles and says, "Bald!" To which he quickly adds his familiar refrain, "Finnish people really love magic."

In the works is a three-week tour for February 2006 that will begin in Helsinki and then continue onto Tampere, Lahti, Kemi, Oulu and his home town of Rovaniemi, Acts booked so far are Ardan James, Finn Jon, Tina Lenert, Peter & Sonja Moretti, Jay Niemi, and a variety act to be announced.

In addition he is working on a series of shows for November of 2007 and 2008.

Personally, I am looking forward to my return to Finland. Especially to Rovaniemi to see where Santa Claus lives. I want to meet this man who spends all year working very hard so he can spread joy to the rest of the land. Hey, wait, I think I already met him.... It's Timo Kulmakko! ◆



From left: Max Maven, Black Man (Risto Paujimen), Norm Nielsen, Marko Karvo, Tina Lenert, Timo, Finn Jon, Elena Karvo, and Robert Jägerhorn at the Oulu Madetoja Concert Hall.