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NEW YORK POST, FRIDAY, MAY 8, 1998

WEEKEND PLUS

Illusions of grandeur in old-time tricks

A few weeks ago I accepted, with some trepidation, an invitation to review Monday Night Magic. It has been running for a year in the Village, with some different magic acts each week.

Having seen famed magicians like Doug Henning and David Copperfield, on Broadway and TV, and having once been entertained by the Amazing Randi at his own home, I feared a modestly priced show in the Village might be a letdown.

But no! It was fascinating — more involving even than many big-budget magic shows I've seen, with an old-time carnival feel. It produced in me a small boy's sense of wonder.

The bizarrely entertaining Todd Robbins, who was the emcee on my visit, is a recurring feature, as is parlor magician Michael Chaut (who impressively demonstrated his skill by undetectably pick-

pocketing my guest's wristwatch during intermission).

Robbins, who is a show unto himself, ate glass, walked on glass, set his tongue on fire, put out a lit cigar on his tongue and more — while keeping up engaging patter. When I saw him hammer a nail up

his nose some years back on Joe Franklin's TV show, I wondered if

he used some kind of trick collapsing nail. For who believes anything on TV? But sitting in that tiny theater — where we could examine the 4½-inch steel nail before and after his unsettling stunt — was something else.

Miss Roxy, a trained dog, answered audience questions in arithmetic, eagerly accepting the edible rewards ("kosher only!") offered by her trainer, Mr. Lucky.

Jeff Moche turned an old-fashioned straitjacket escape into something humorously new by

making his "loser" persona the act's focus. Strapped helplessly into the jacket, he implored us to call out encouragingly, "You can do it, Jeff," and not use put-downs like "You suck," which he said he'd heard so often at home growing up.

Sullivan Street Playhouse, 181 Sullivan St., (212) 307-4100. Tickets \$20 in advance, \$27.50 at the door, except for the open-mike jam on the first Monday of the month, when they are \$12 in advance, \$17.50 at the door. Mondays at 8 p.m. Open-ended.

Magic review

By Chip Deffen