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Fröhlich-Zauberkongress 2026

Bill Cheung's *Secrets Session IV*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WELCOME

03 Foreword ..... Hanno Rhomberg

IN FOCUS

Aladin's Featured Topics

04 Four Days of Magic in Bad Aussee ..... Hanno Rhomberg
10 Next Generation of Magic ..... Maurice Grange
12 'We Need to Be Braver Again!' ..... Interview
15 Thomas Otto – Standing Ovation ..... Toby Rudolf
16 Thomas Otto's Chop Cup Secrets ..... Dieter K. Golf
17 My Passion Project - Magic of Africa ..... H. Rhomberg
20 A Journey That Changed Us ..... Hanno Rhomberg
24 The Magic of Togetherness ..... Daniel Furxer
25 Close-up as It Should Be ..... Alex Ray
28 Giobbi Lets the Numbers Speak ..... Franz Kaslatter
29 Imperfection as a Strength ..... Andrea Bahn
30 Monday on a Saturday ..... Franz Kaslatter
32 Failing Better ..... Franz Kaslatter
34 MRA Championship 2026 ..... B.Pirolt, M. Krassnitzer
37 Austrian Magic Championship 2026 ..... MRA
38 Fröhlich Award 2025/2026 ..... Hanno Rhomberg
40 'Small, Special and a Little Different' ..... var. authors
42 My First Magic Convention ..... Markus Hofmann
43 A Brilliant Event ..... Don Fernando
44 Some Personal Thoughts & Feelings ..... Alexander Römer
45 Random Thoughts ..... Dieter K. Golf
46 When Magic Becomes a Media Story ..... var. sources

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Shows, Galas, Events

48 *Secrets Session IV* ..... B. Pirolt, M. Krassnitzer
52 *Secrets Session IV* – Backdrops ..... Hanno Rhomberg
56 Impressum

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Fröhlich-Zauberkongress 2026, Bad Aussee, Photo: Peter Kainrath

MRA Championship 2026 (Richard René and Rudi Heuer)

Secrets Session IV in Bill Cheung's Theater, Wiener Neustadt

Dear Magic Friends,

What an exciting couple of months we have had! Two extraordinary events take centre stage in this special edition of *Aladin*.

The ***Fröhlich Zauberkongress*** in Bad Aussee is now behind us, and we bring you extensive coverage of this remarkable event. In October, **Bill Cheung's** sensational ***Secrets Session IV*** took place in Wiener Neustadt, and it certainly deserves a special place in this publication as well.

Both events were unique in their own way and attracted considerable attention far beyond Austria's borders. They brought together outstanding performers, creative minds and magic enthusiasts from many different countries.

In this special edition, we take a closer look at these events, share personal impressions and offer an interesting behind-the-scenes look at what goes into organising an international magic convention.

We are particularly pleased to make these reports available in English. Magic is an international art, and the exchange of ideas, experiences and friendships across borders has always been an important part of our community.

Behind the scenes, we are already working on *Aladin* 2027. There will be some changes, new projects are in preparation, and our editorial team will be welcoming additional members.

As I will be stepping down as President of the **Magischer Ring Austria** (MRA) at the end of this year, I will once again have more time to devote to Aladin and finally put into practice some ideas that have been waiting for far too long.

One thing, however, will not change: *Aladin* will continue to cover unusual, critical and sometimes controversial subjects. Our editorial policy will remain completely independent, even after my departure as MRA President.

Sadly, the magic community has also experienced a tragic loss. **Andreas Pfalzer**, who attended the *Fröhlich-Zauberkongress*, lost his life in a mountain accident on the Loser, Bad Aussee's local mountain, just four weeks after the convention. Our heartfelt condolences go out to his family and loved ones.

We also wish everyone currently facing health problems a speedy recovery and hope that our shared passion for magic will continue to bring joy, inspiration and friendship.

We wish you all a successful autumn and winter season, filled with wonderful magical encounters.

Thank you for your interest in *Aladin* and for being part of our international magic community. We hope you enjoy reading these reports!

Warmest regards,

Hanno Rhomberg
Editor-in-Chief, *Aladin*

Three Days in a State of Magical Exception

Our Behind-the-Scenes View of *Secrets Session IV*

TEXT AND PHOTOS: MARIO KRASSNITZER & BARBARA PIROLT

When an email from **Bill Cheung** lands in your inbox in May, it's worth reading twice. Bill warmly recalled our shared visit to the Christmas dinner show the previous year and thanked us for the subsequent report in Aladin. But the real reason for his message was an invitation that would make any magician's heart beat faster: an exclusive allocation of places at *Secrets Session IV* for the Magischer Cirkel Kärnten (MCK).

Within just a few years, this event has become one of the most exclusive and sought-after gatherings in the international magic community. It's an invitation-only convention strictly limited to 100 selected participants from more than two dozen countries – including no fewer than fourteen FISM world champions. They don't come to perform for a lay audience but to share, test, challenge and refine the magic of the future among fellow performers, critics and friends.

Since our esteemed editor-in-chief **Hanno Rhomberg** did not put me under deadline pressure for this article, I decided to take a deep dive. To do justice to those three days in Wiener Neustadt requires more than a few superficial lines; it calls for a report from the heart of the action.

FRIDAY, 16 OCTOBER
A Warm Welcome and Magic at the Highest Level

The trip began with a relaxed Friday morning. In Austria, when you stop for lunch at a restaurant and notice people at the next tables casually handling coins and cards, you know you're approaching the centre of a magic convention. At exactly 2 p.m., the doors of the *Bill Cheung Magic Theater* opened.

Even in the foyer, it was clear how lovingly every detail had been prepared. Magischer Ring Niederösterreich provided energetic logistical support. Particularly notable was **Alexander Lechner** (Softie David), who seemed tirelessly to be learning names, welcoming guests and relieving Bill Cheung of the organisational burden. From the first moment, you felt not like a registration number but like an invited guest at a large family celebration.

The convention gift underlined the high standards: an exclusively designed deck of playing cards, an elegant collectible coin, a personalised card holder engraved with the guest's name and further surprises. The constant presence of playing cards already suggested the weekend's direction: if anyone in the room were to ask for a deck during the next 72 hours, a hundred hands would instantly shoot up.

After an atmospheric introduction in the darkened theatre, our host welcomed 100 guests from 29 nations. The programme immediately got down to business. In Session 1, **Bill Cheung**, **Sara Rodríguez** and **Tino Plaz** opened proceedings. Their technical precision was breathtaking. Although English was the main language spoken in the room, the performers' visual language was universally understood. Watching their sleight of hand, you quietly wondered whether decades of practice might make it biologically possible to twist finger joints into entirely new positions to create an impossibility on the table. The teaching format was ideally structured: first pure astonishment, then a joint exploration of the method, valuable practical tips from professionals and finally an opportunity to examine the material further at the dealers' stands.

Liam Ball took over immediately in Session 2. With a fragrant rose and refreshing British humour, he demonstrated routines from which even the enthusiastic amateur could take ideas directly into their own repertoire.

THE FQC COMPETITION
Excitement at FISM Level

With our accommodation conveniently located in the adjacent hotel, there was just time to change before the prestigious FQC close-up championship began. Eleven contestants took part: **Alex Cahill** (UK), **Harry Fontaine** (AT), **Thomas Genias** (CY), **Harald Hoffmann-Tombor** (AT), **Stepan Smid** (CZ), **Owan Némo** (FR), **RuoYue Dai** (GER), **Andrei-Catalin Artenie / Arcan** (GER), **Augusto Amen** (DK), **Klaus Wiedermann** (AT) and **Joshua Kenneth** (SP).

Anyone who has organised such a championship knows the effort involved: setting lights, balancing audio, preparing props, briefing volunteers and timing the programme to the second. The distinguished jury reflected the event's international importance: FISM world president **Andrea Baioni**, FISM Europe President **Xavier Tapias**, **Magic Christian**, guest of honour **Michael Vincent**, Christian **Engblom**, **Rudolf Heuer**, **Hanno Rhomberg**, **Shimpei Katsuragawa** and host **Bill Cheung**. Two experienced colleagues, **Wolfgang Moser** and **Gleb Tsarou**, also gained their first experience as jurors in training.

The acts covered the entire spectrum, from classical, elegant manipulation and subtle storytelling to highly inventive approaches. As a spectator, you genuinely wondered how the jury could produce a fair ranking, since the styles were scarcely comparable.

Anyone who imagined the day was finished after the championship was mistaken. The invitation said the bar and lounge would open at 8 p.m., but the small print contained a late-night session with **Kiko Pastur** at 11 p.m. With his 'invisible friend', he performed highly intelligent, almost poetic card magic, rounding off the first convention day perfectly at one in the morning.

SATURDAY, 17. OCTOBER

In Dp tL e rig , FiF ood ad a Gala F ework Dis play

After a short night, the programme resumed at 10:30 a.m. The schedule was tight – academic discipline in the best sense. Joshua Kenneth opened with a specialist session on marketing, brand identity, brand books and typography for magicians. What might initially sound dry proved a visually brilliant and extremely practical presentation. The subsequent questions and comments from seasoned masters added enormous value for anyone wanting to present themselves professionally.

While the jury withdrew over lunch to make mathematically precise assessments of the competition entries, participants had an opportunity for some exercise. Dining options in the industrial estate were limited, but the walk did us good: Saturday still had a long programme ahead. (See Hanno Rhomberg's insider account from a jury member's perspective.)

AN AtF ERNOON FULL OF MAGIC

His tory ad Systen s

At 2 p.m., special guest **Michael Vincent** took the stage. His session was far more than a demonstration of tricks; it was a deeply moving tribute to magic. Vincent intertwined memories of his own life and gratitude towards his mentors with masterful technique. When an artist of his calibre shares life stories while casually making miracles happen before the audience's eyes, you completely lose track of time. His passion for quality, aesthetics and respect for the audience was palpable throughout the room.

Christian Engblom followed. He gave a fascinating demonstration of how complex principles can be organised logically and made practical. Concepts such as the 'political shuffle' – in which an enormous amount happens but absolutely nothing changes in the end – provoked both laughter and moments of revelation. Even attendees with limited experience discovered first-hand how a carefully thought-out structure can allow someone to memorise an entire deck in a remarkably short time.

Gala Dia ad tb Art of Enb antme t

After the seminar, it was time for a quick change in the hotel room! Meanwhile, Bill Cheung's team and Softie David had transformed the theatre with impressive speed for Christian Engblom's seminar. Despite more than 130 people in the room, the atmosphere was intimate and family-like.

The buffet offered plenty of variety, service was excellent and conversation at the tables was lively. Between starters and main courses, cards flew, coins travelled and newly purchased props were tried out at almost every table.

At 8 p.m. came the evening highlight: the International Gala Show, hosted by Liam Ball. What followed was an artistic firework display. **Giancarlo Scalia**, **Sara Rodríguez**, **Shawn Farquhar**, **Wolfgang Moser**, **Hernán Maccagno**, **Kiko Pastur** and **Michael Vincent** demonstrated world-class stage and

The 2026 Winners: 1st Place: Augusto Amen, 2nd Place: Joshua Kenneth, 3rd Place: Owan Némo.

close-up magic. The fascinating aspect of this format is the immediacy of the transition: the colleague with whom you'd been discussing a technical subtlety over dinner two hours earlier suddenly stands in the spotlight, enthralling the entire theatre. Camera work, lighting design and sound were flawlessly coordinated.

Anyone looking for a quiet moment after the gala found it in the late-night jam sessions. Perhaps the convention's most memorable image occurred at around three in the morning: magicians of different generations and nationalities sitting together on the lounge carpet, sharing knowledge freely, perfecting minute details of movement and simply celebrating the joy of their art.

SUNDAY, 18. OCTOBER 2026

Sunday offered no chance to feel tired either. At 10:30 a.m., **Hernán Maccagno** took over. With infectious energy, he challenged fundamental routines that had been performed for decades. His humorous yet carefully considered reworking of the classic 21-card trick, together with his concepts of visual camouflage and the perception of space and time, were intellectually explosive. Maccagno showed convincingly that even apparently exhausted standard effects leave endless room for innovation.

Giancarlo Scalia followed immediately. He enchanted the room with his incomparable elegance in handling coins, rings and playing cards. His presentation focused on body language, economy of movement and the sensitive guidance of the audience.

After the FISM jury forum, where judging criteria were discussed openly, came the formal finale: the awards ceremony, announcing the prize-winners, followed by the Award-Winning Gala Show. Mentalism duo **Anca & Lucca** provided the crowning conclusion, once again astonishing the room with their perfectly coordinated performance.

By late afternoon, it was time for us to take the train back to Carinthia. The three-hour journey flew by. Neither of us touched our phones: we spent the entire time discussing the countless impressions, techniques and encounters we'd experienced.

With *Secrets Session IV*, Bill Cheung once again demonstrated what makes a successful specialist gathering. It isn't the sheer number of participants that matters, but the quality of the content, the warmth of the hosts and the space for genuine exchanges among colleagues.

We wholeheartedly congratulate all the winners, thank **Bill Cheung** and his fantastic team for the invitation and are already looking forward to next time!

Alexander Lechner

Hernán Maccagno

Joachim Solberg

Kiko Pastur

Michael Vincent and Hanno Rhomberg

Giancarlo Scalia

Wolfgang Moser

Andrea Baioni and Xavier Tapias

Shawn Farquhar

Sara Rodríguez

Liam Ball

Owan Némo

Bill Cheung

Tino Plaz

Michael Vincent and Bill Cheung

Wolfgang Moser

Joshua Kenneth

Secrets Session IV

A Look Behind the Scenes of the FISM Jury

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS BY HANNO RHOMBERG

Mario Krassnitzer and **Barbara Pirolt** have already reported extensively on *Secrets Session IV's* outstanding programme and its many international stars. I would therefore like to offer a different perspective. As president of Magischer Ring Austria and a member of the FISM-certified judging panel, I had the opportunity to gather some interesting experiences that went beyond the convention itself.

★ A Valuable Addition to the Austrian Magic Community

What **Bill Cheung** has created in Wiener Neustadt deserves great recognition. His concept resembles the legendary American FFFF – *Fechter's Finger Flicking Frolic*, an exclusive invitation-only gathering of international close-up magicians. Secrets Session is similarly not about size, but about the quality of the participants and personal interaction.

For Austria, this event is a stroke of good fortune. It is by no means a given that so many world-class international artists should come together in our country. With his *Magic Theater*, Bill Cheung has created a venue that attracts attention far beyond Austria's borders.

With the *Fröhlich-Zauberkongress* in Bad Aussee and Secrets Session in Wiener Neustadt, we now have two completely different events that represent Austria superbly on the international stage. Bad Aussee appeals to a broad audience through its extensive programme and several hundred participants, while Secrets Session concentrates on a small, exclusive circle of close-up specialists.

Magischer Ring Austria was therefore delighted to provide the € 1,000 first prize for the championship. We wanted not only to support the contest but also to express our appreciation for Bill Cheung's commitment.

★ Behind the Scenes of the FISM Jury

For me personally, participating in this exceptionally distinguished jury was one of the most interesting experiences of the weekend. Among the members were FISM president **Andrea Baioni**, european FISM president **Xavier Tapias**, **Michael Vincent**, **Magic Christian**, **Christian Engblom**, **Shimpei Katsuragawa** and other experienced colleagues. They possess extensive practical knowledge, and some have themselves enjoyed successful championship and FISM careers.

What particularly pleased me was the constructive collaboration. Despite different artistic backgrounds and viewpoints, the atmosphere in the jury was remarkably objective. Discussions were interesting and decisions clear and understandable. When judging very different artistic styles, that is by no means something to take for granted. Of course, magic is an art that can only with difficulty be squeezed into a scoring system. But the new requirements for juries in FISM-certified championships show the considerable effort FISM is making to ensure fair conditions and fair judging.

The overall field was good but also quite varied in standard. The three award-winning acts were welcome highlights and their merit was not disputed by any of the jury members.

★ The Winners

First Place: Augusto Amen (Argentina)
A blindfold card-finding routine.
Second Place: Joshua Kenneth (Spain)
An original combination of soap bubbles and coin catching.
Third Place: Owan Némo (France)
A cups-and-balls routine presented in a particularly original way.

★ What Really Makes a FISM Act Successful?

I found the conversations with international FISM officials about the requirements for a successful championship act particularly interesting.

Technical perfection, originality, presentation and the other judging criteria are naturally important. But ultimately there is more to it. An artist must create a complete experience that goes beyond technically accomplished magic. **Being merely good is not enough for a top placing at FISM. An act must be extraordinary and inspiring.**

Xavier Tapias summed it up with a simple question: 'Whom would I book for a top gala?' I think there's a great deal of truth in that. A FISM championship is no light-hearted contest; it is, in a sense, the Olympics of our art. Those who want to succeed must offer more than clean technique and a well-functioning sequence of tricks.

It is sometimes claimed that championship acts impress juries but aren't necessarily successful with general audiences. I don't agree with that sweeping statement. My experience in Bad Aussee suggests otherwise: the overall winners there also won the audience prize. Extraordinary magic convinces not only specialist judges but lay audiences too.

We should also remember that championships are showcases. Among the audience are event organisers and producers looking for exceptional acts. A successful championship can therefore open doors to new engagements.

Front row, from left to right: Hanno Rhomberg, Magic Christian, Xavier Tapias, Andrea Baioni, Christina Nyman, Shimpei Katsuragawa, Michael Vincent; Back row, from left to right: Christian Engblom, Bill Cheung, Wolfgang Moser, Hleb Tsarou, Rudi Heuer.

★ A Missed Opportunity

One observation did leave me thinking.

During Secrets Session, a special FISM judges' forum was offered to interested convention attendees and contestants. It was an opportunity to learn about the new championship rules, ask questions and discuss matters directly with the judges. Attendance was very poor, and only two of the eleven competitors took advantage of it. According to my colleagues, the offer of private, personal feedback from the judges after the championship was hardly used either.

I find that extremely regrettable. All certified FISM judges have completed demanding training and examinations. Many also have decades of practical experience as judges, performers, directors or successful competitors.

How often do you have the chance to hear first-hand from such a group what it takes to achieve a top placing, and to receive a knowledgeable and respectful assessment of your work free of charge? You certainly don't have to accept every criticism. But seeing your act from another angle can be immensely helpful.

I had similar experiences at the two most recent championships in Bad Aussee. A championship isn't only about scores, rankings and prizes. One of its most valuable aspects can be the feedback after a performance. Many successful FISM acts have been developed over years, performed repeatedly, critically examined and improved.

Anyone who misses such an opportunity is forgoing an important chance for personal and artistic growth. Evidently many people shy away from honest feedback – something we unfortunately encounter in our magic clubs too.

★ What Remains from The Weekend

Secrets Session once again reminded me how valuable personal encounters and international exchange are for our art.

Bill Cheung was an excellent host. With his team and the dedicated members of the young Magischer Ring Niederösterreich, he organised an event that ran professionally and yet with a wonderfully relaxed atmosphere.

The *Magic Theater* is rather remote, in an industrial estate on the outskirts of Wiener Neustadt. That's not ideal for accompanying guests interested in sightseeing. For magicians, however, the focus on one venue offers a major advantage: everyone stays together, meets in the lounge and often continues conversations deep into the night. That's a real strength for a specialist magic gathering.

It was a wonderful weekend. In particular, meeting old friends and interesting colleagues from around the world reminded me what makes our international community special.

Thank you to the performers who gave their audiences the feeling of genuine magic. Even very experienced visitors were often left speechless and completely fooled. What more could we wish for?

My heartfelt thanks go to Bill Cheung and his entire team. Not only have they created an exceptional event, they have also made an important contribution to the international reputation of Austrian magic. I'm glad I was there. It will be a regular fixture in my convention calendar!

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