

December 16, 1986, Tuesday

STAGE: 'THE MAGICIAN,' WITH PETER SAMELSON

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

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But unlike typical magic shows, "The Magician," at the Nat Horne Theater, is not a sequence of increasingly spectacular pyrotechnical feats but an informal examination of the roles and meanings of the term "magic." Mr. Samelson is a soft-spoken conceptualist of sorcery who examines his profession from multiple perspectives, relating it to standup comedy, practical joking, psychology, poetry and, ultimately, to social commentary.

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When asked "How did you get into magic?," his stand-up comic replies, "I was tricked into it." The practical joker stretches a piece of rope taut, describes the breathtaking antics of an invisible daredevil named Hercule, and then twits the audience for having watched a piece of string for five minutes. The psychologist talks about why relationships come apart as he cuts a piece of string into sections that eventually reunite. The poet-philosopher discourses on the myth of the phoenix and its relationship to Egyptian sun worship and Christian resurrection, all by way of introducing a trick in which he creates, partly cremates and restores to its uncharred state an origami bird.

The second act of Mr. Samelson's 90-minute show revolves around more elaborately staged conceptual set pieces. In the most ambitious skit, a man's thoughts while reading the newspaper become bulletins broadcast on his bedside radio. Events also come alive before his eyes. As an announcer insists that "there was no U.S. involvement," miniature war toys rise up to detonate miniature explosions. The newspaper itself enlarges and metamorphoses into the sidewalk teepee residence of a homeless man, whom Mr. Samelson evicts. This attempt to make a cumulative statement about magic, fantasy, governmental lies and social inequity makes for visually clever theater, but its political message is far too unfocused to carry much weight. Mr. Samelson is an engaging entertainer who sniffs ideas without really biting into them. **LEGERDEMAIN - THE MAGICIAN**, conceived and produced by

Peter Samelson, with the Nat Horne Musical Theater. Directed by Annegret M. M. Reimer; lighting design, Nadine Charlsen; costume design, Gail Cooper-Hecht and Robert Locke. At 440 West 42d Street. WITH:
Peter Samelson