



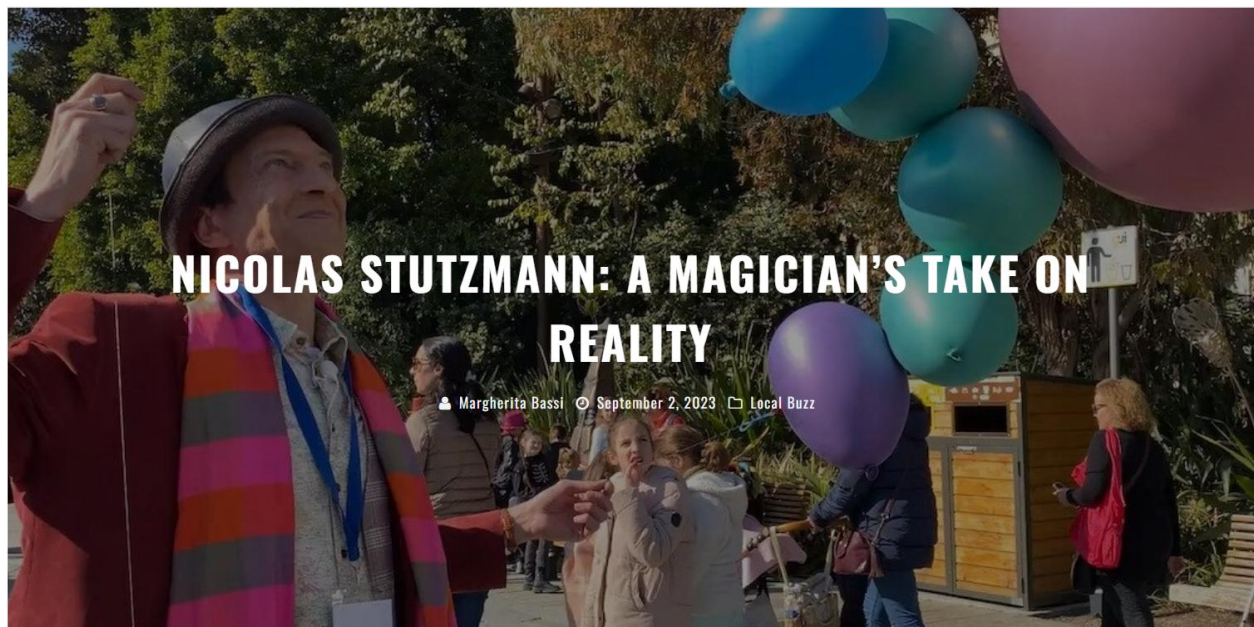
**FEATURE:**  
**Nicolas Stutzmann: A Magician's  
Take on Reality**



*By Margherita Bassi*

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Short version [here](#)



*From a mute child to a professional storyteller, Stutzmann reveals what he thinks about magic after a lifetime in the profession*

If you Google the name “Nicolas Stutzmann,” you get several results, including: Nicolas Stutzmann, balloon twister; Nicolas Stutzmann, YouTube DJ; and Nicolas Stutzmann, murderer.

But the tall, thin man that sat across from me at a cafe four separate times was undoubtedly [Nicolas Stutzmann](#), balloon twister—despite the fact that the only things he brought to the interview sessions were a yellow notebook, loose-leaf tobacco, rolling papers, and a lighter. He wore a multi-colored jacket and a bright

orange scarf at each rendez-vous. He has wildly expressive blue eyes that are often at odds with his soft-spoken voice, and a slightly crooked nose.

The first time I met Nicolas was at one of his Verballon performances at the Bibliothèque Les Moulins - Alain Lefevre in the fall of 2022, at a children’s event I was covering. The name Verballon is a clever combination of the words verb and ballon (balloon), and the title's meaning was immediately clear. For about an

hour, Nicolas entertained both children and their parents with balloon twisting, fairy tales, and jeux-de-mot (puns) that meant one thing for the younger members of the audience and another for the older. Nicolas challenged children to sword-fights, twisted wings onto their backs, and produced a bouquet of brilliant flowers under their mesmerized gazes as he told rhyming adventures of nature and animals.

The double-entendre he frequently inserted into his narrative was called “le langage des oiseaux,” he later explained to me.

The language of birds”: a sentence that can mean several things at the same time, depending on how one hears it.

Stutzmann says that it was a secret language used in medieval France by Troubadours to send messages to the Cathars, a religious sect that challenged the authority of the church. French author, intellectual, and philosopher René Guénon writes that several ancient traditions did understand the language of the birds as a

way to communicate with “higher states of being.” It was even called an angelic language.

After his show, I asked Nicolas for his contact information so that I could send some follow-up questions for my article, including how he got started in the balloon-twisting business. Nicolas readily supplied it, but told me that it would be better to organize an in-person interview. His story was apparently too complicated for a simple email.

He also told me that as a young man he would have liked to be a journalist himself; in fact, he’d pretended to be a journalist to learn about magic in the first place.

The following Saturday, we sat at a small wrought-iron table outside a café near a tram. Between the noise from the tram line, my not-yet-perfect French comprehension, and Nicolas’ quiet and ethereal voice, I struggled to put together a cohesive timeline of his life. But I did pick up on several interesting themes: failure, homelessness, resiliency, hope. Lots of magic.



He was right—it would have been tough to tell his story in a brief email.

After the interview, I certainly had more than enough for my article about his children’s show, but my instinct told me that there was more to this story. So several months later I invited him to sit for another interview, this time for a proper feature.

I found a quieter cafe and had the good sense to put a Lavalier mic on him. He arrived in his multi-colored jacket and usual bright orange scarf, and arranged his yellow notebook neatly on the table. When I asked him to start at the beginning, there was little hesitation on his end. Clearly, he’d been waiting for that cue for a long time.

It was immediately evident that Nicolas Stutzmann, balloon twister, was undoubtedly also a storyteller.

### A Troubled Childhood

Nicolas Stutzmann was born in 1967 in a small village at the foot of a mountain in northeastern France called le Ballon D’Alsace, literally meaning “the balloon of Alsace.” He was born prematurely, and so spent the first two and a half months in an incubator, which at the time apparently also looked like a big plastic balloon. The irony of the balloon imagery at his birth was not lost to either of us.

But Nicolas’ isolation from the outside world did not end when he left the hospital. In his own words, his childhood can be summarized “by a refusal to speak, to vocalize.” He was essentially mute until the age of six years, and he suffered from what he now understands to be irritable

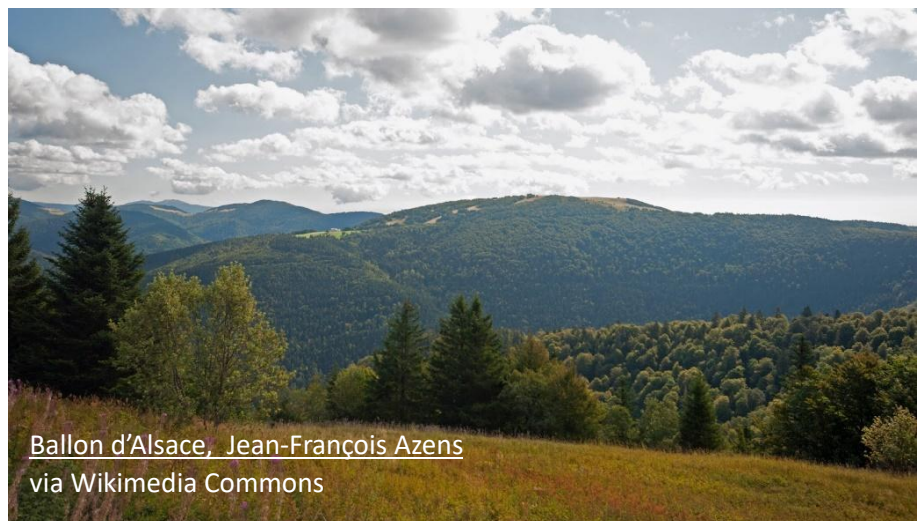
bowel syndrome (IBS). His doctors at the time claimed his symptoms were psychosomatic.

“I was too young to understand the word psychosomatic, but they made me understand that the pain that pushed me to vomit all my meals was in my head.”

Though the stomach pains eventually subsided, Nicolas developed nervous ticks, became extremely anxious, and continued to isolate himself. His parents’ divorce when he was 11 precipitated the situation. By the age of 15, he was still struggling with his symptoms and began to party and experiment with soft drugs.

At school, however, he was an acceptable student until eleventh grade, when shortly before a parent-teacher conference he had a sudden fit of anger during which he insulted a professor in front of the entire class. Decades later, Nicolas admits that he still isn’t sure what came to him at that moment.

After his fit of rage, young Nicolas stopped going to school but continued pretending for his mother’s sake, with whom he had a difficult relationship. “In any case, verbally aggressive and violent.”



[Ballon d’Alsace, Jean-François Azens](#)  
via Wikimedia Commons

Then came summer break, and when the academic year started up again in September, still no one knew about his grand façade. Nicolas then claims to have done something



strange. On the first day of classes, he showed up at the most expensive private high school in Strasbourg, the Gymnase Jean Sturm. He walked into a classroom with the other students,



Gymnase Jean Sturm. Credit: Claude Truong-Ngoc

Via Wikimedia Commons

waited patiently through roll call, and after they had finished, launched into “a lie so big it worked.”

Nicolas told me that he informed the teacher that he was Australian, and that the reason his name wasn't in the roll call was because his documents were a bit late, but that he was sure everything would be figured out quickly. The professor apparently believed him. It wasn't until the first parent-teacher conference that the administration realized something was wrong. As you might imagine, Nicolas eventually left the school, and then he also left his mother's home, “shutting the door without a goodbye.”

At the age of 16, Nicolas began working odd jobs, from salesman to waiter and even a brief stint at a radio station as an audio storyteller. By the time his twenties rolled around, life was looking significantly better. He had a cat, an apartment, and a girlfriend (listed to me in that order). Everything was going fine, until in 1991 he got drafted for a year and a half of mandatory military service.

But Nicolas, then aged 24, had a plan. He went to get a psychological evaluation during which he pretended to be deeply disturbed.

“I remember being very convincing, to the point that I scared myself,” he told me. Apparently, this wasn't the first time he'd pretended to be someone else. Earlier efforts to escape the difficulties of his childhood and youth had included behaving like a handsome, self-confident man—someone that at the time, Nicolas clearly didn't believe himself to be. He'd even given this second person a name, an act that the

Nicolas of today self-diagnoses as potential schizophrenia.

Whether or not Nicolas was really acting or not during his evaluation, the psychologist was convinced enough to write a letter declaring him unfit for military service, and Nicolas maintained his façade when he was nevertheless summoned for an evaluation at the military barracks for conscripts in Nancy. For the three days before his departure he didn't let himself sleep, drank lots of coffee, and rough-housed with his cat to make the pet scratch his hands and arms. He arrived with a trash bag full of dirty clothes. He smelled so bad that on the train ride there, he had an entire compartment for himself.

Nicolas was deemed unfit to serve for the rest of his life. He received a P5 status, which signals the presence of a psychological pathology that makes the individual in question incompatible with military service. As soon as he was released, Nicolas went directly to a McDonald's before returning to his cat, his apartment, and his girlfriend.

“That was my first victory,” he said.

### The Start of Nicolas’ Magic Career

The following years took him through a rollercoaster of more almost victories, come-to-Jesus moments, surprising opportunities, and extremely dark situations.

Nicolas moved between Strasbourg, Paris, and Nantes several times over, during which he worked more odd jobs here and there; survived on rotten leftover food from village markets; went on a charity mission to Burkina-Faso; lived and worked in a monastery; recovered from an operation for an infection twice over; worked in an ambulance car; won a grant of ten thousand francs to take medical supplies to the same village in Burkina-Faso where he was allegedly mistaken as a doctor and given the tribe leader’s adolescent daughter’s hand in marriage (he said he left before his rejection of the marriage proposal could turn into a problem); and became a security guard at an art gallery in Strasbourg named Galerie Asperger where he squatted overnight with a different cat and girlfriend.

Through all of this, “le chapeau, oui, mais pas la manche,” he told me seriously, which translates to “in the hat, yes, but not in the sleeve,” meaning he would eventually accept money dropped into his hat after performances, but never from begging.

It was during his time at the art gallery that Nicolas learned about a certificate program called the Diplôme des Hautes Études des Pratiques Sociales (DHEPS) at the University of Human Sciences at Strasbourg for people who had dropped out of high school.

Nicolas decided to participate in order to study the subject of illusions within society, which could bring him closer to a nascent interest in becoming a magician.

This was when he started posing as a young journalist at festivals and conferences. He interviewed magicians, illusionists, occultists, and even witches.



“I was always in a bad mood when I saw magic tricks, because I couldn’t understand them. I had to discover whether magic existed or not.”

As you might imagine, Nicolas didn’t come upon an easy answer. The illusionists were pretentious and snobbish, and the occultists were (in his words) “desanglés,” literally translating to “unstrapped,” probably meaning “unhinged.” It was around this time that he began to nurture his spiritual side, which led him to meet a healer named Pierre Conrad that eventually became a close friend.

It was this same Pierre that initiated Nicolas into the spiritual domain. Nicolas replaced the partying and drugs with intense meditation and what he believes to have been astral projection: traveling to parallel dimensions, and sometimes

even meeting other people there. He dropped out of the certificate program.

At this point he was around 30 years old. With his newfound peace, he started his own magic show business called “Les Magillusions de Nico,” *Nico’s Magillusions*. The company took off quickly, and in 1997 the company Festival Voix et Route Romane invited him to go on a charity tour in Madagascar whose fundraising would help construction work on a kindergarten.



What allegedly followed is a series of events that Nicolas was very nervous about revealing. In fact, at the beginning of our second session, he said he was about to tell me a story that he didn’t want included in its entirety in the article.

I politely informed him that it would be a conflict of interest for me to do so. His follow-up proposal to this was that he could tell the story but replace the sensitive details, and wink at me at the right moment to signal the false content. I explained that this, too, was problematic. So at last, he resorted to telling me what he still believes to be the full and true story.

Three days before his trip to Madagascar, Nicolas realized that his passport had expired. Refusing to cancel his itinerary, he showed up to the airport anyway. After being turned away a first time, he went to the boarding area for his flight (this was before 9/11 when security

checks were much less stringent) where he showed the pilot of his flight a magic trick, and promised to reveal the trick to the shocked man if he was allowed to board. The pilot allegedly agreed and made him sign a waiver before letting him onboard.

Once landed in Madagascar, Stutzmann was so relieved that he dropped to his knees and kissed the tarmac. At the same time, a Malagasy minister walked by, surrounded by his bodyguards, and stopped to inquire about the man that loved his land so much. Nicolas seized the opportunity to befriend the man and walk into the customs area with him, where the border guards could see him accompanying a minister. After he and the minister split ways, Nicolas apparently bamboozled one of the border guards by pulling out hundreds of franks from the man’s hat, pockets, and sleeves, until the man was sufficiently impressed (and bribed) by the magic trick to let him into the country with one advice: don’t get caught.

Once inside the country, Nicolas’ tour took him all over Madagascar and was not an easy endeavor. Though Nicolas had assistants to help with his presentation, transportation, and translation, the locals were very superstitious, and he was immediately taken to be an evil white wizard.

At the end of his trip, a Malagasy educator gifted Nicolas a wand carved out of ebony wood, a rare type of wood that Stutzmann believed was illegal to travel with. And so he returned to the airport worse off than he’d arrived: still with no passport or money, and now with a potentially contraband object.

When he was asked to present his passport at the security check, Nicolas improvised and grabbed a hammer from his suitcase instead. Before the guards could stop him, he pretended to hit them in the head, then slammed the hammer down on his own forehead and collapsed on the floor.



Then he stood up again. The hammer was fake: a stage prop.

“I was in show-mode to detach myself from the stress,” Stutzmann explained. When the trick was revealed, the guards apparently started laughing so much that they forgot to ask for his passport a second time.

“*Merci marteau magique.*” *Thank you, magical hammer.* Stutzmann still keeps a piece of the fake hammer as a good luck charm (pictured here).



During his layover on Reunion Island, a French territory, everything went smoothly. They didn't check his passport, and when his suitcase rang in the metal detector, Nicolas told them that it was because of his hammer. In Paris, he was also able to get through border control when another passenger tried to cut past the line and distracted the guards from checking his passport once more.

At last, he was back in Paris; but it was 10 PM, he had no money, no food, it was raining, and public transportation wasn't running until the next morning. He spent the night at a bus shelter waiting for the first RER train with which he could return to Strasbourg to find that his situation was about to get much worse.

In Strasbourg, his showroom had been completely destroyed by a flood, his accountant had spread rumors about him and copied his show business model, and Nicolas' own fiscal

mismanagement had left him with at least 360 thousand francs in debt.

Nicolas panicked, and then disappeared.

### The Power of Hopelessness

This was where our second interview session ended. A week later, Nicolas arrived at the same cafe dressed as usual, with his multi-colored jacket and bright orange scarf. But the session started differently this time.

Though he was as warm and friendly as ever, he was evidently troubled. His hands shook as he picked up his story again, and he immediately reached for the tobacco rolling paper. He finally asked me to pause the recording, and chain-smoked three cigarettes in a row. When he nodded for me to start recording again, I had a distinct feeling that he was reliving his story as he told it.

After discovering that he'd lost everything in Strasbourg, he fled to Paris, where he lived as a homeless man. He went back to eating rotten food scraps from markets, and sleeping where he could.

During one truly desperate night, Nicolas turned his attention toward the heavens and asked for help. The next morning, he found a single franc coin on the ground before him.

“*Merci,*” he thanked fate sarcastically.

What could a single franc buy him? It wasn't enough for a coffee—but maybe he could get a sugar cube, or a candy. Instead, he got an idea. He found a magic supplies store and tried to clean himself up as well as he could while he waited for it to open. Inside, he asked to buy a single balloon.

What follows is a familiar pick-yourself-up-from-your-bootstraps narrative. Nicolas took the balloon to Notre Dame and blew it up with, in his words, “the power of hopelessness.” He certainly couldn't afford an air pump.

He shaped the balloon into a sword, offered it to a boy, and received ten francs from the boy's grandmother. With ten francs Nicolas bought ten more balloons, made ten more swords, and so on and so forth. After an hour he'd earned one hundred francs and was able to afford an entire bag of balloons.

By the end of the afternoon, he'd earned enough money for a hotel room, a hearty dinner, and a new set of clothes. That night he went to bed wondering, "Mais qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?" *What happened?*

"Balloons saved my life," Nicolas admits now.

Cue a heartwarming montage. He started standing at street corners and blowing balloons into the shapes requested by starry-eyed children. He began to work at birthday parties, eventually rented a room, and life slowly got better. He participated in festivals, where he watched street artists put on shows and collect money in their hats at the end of the entertainment.

It was while watching their shows that Nicolas decided that he, too, wanted to be a performer and not just a balloon twister.

But he didn't just have to learn how to put on a show. He had to learn the rules of the street: how to stay safe, how to make your own space among other street performers, and ultimately, how to protect it.

And so he began to learn from his colleagues, and through trial and error created his own show, which eventually incorporated poetry, rhyme, anthropomorphic balloons, creative storytelling, and the language of birds. A show I imagine wasn't much different than the one I'd seen at Bibliothèque Les Moulins - Alain Lefevre in Nice.

Nicolas admitted that he had found something of a childhood for himself.

"It's not a big mystery that I was healing the injured child within myself," he self-analyzed.

Lucasz, a fellow street performer with whom Nicolas sometimes shared street corners for his shows, told me that he "appreciated Nicolas'



quirky side: a kind of dandy from another time, cultured and unfailingly elegant and full of poetry."

As life began to look up again, Nicolas contacted his old friend Pierre to re-embark on his spiritual journey. He began volunteering at hospitals by performing for gravely ill children, where he felt incredibly privileged to witness them finding moments of happiness in his fantastical stories.

"It was a story strictly for the children, the balloons, and myself," Nicolas explained.

Graziella, who was a nurse at the now closed Hôpital Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, told me that she met Nicolas at the hospital where he made balloon sculptures at the bedside of sick children on both a voluntary and paid basis for a



long period of time. She found his work remarkable and despite being a bit solitary, believed him to be a unique, talented, and sympathetic person.

“I just know that he is a deeply sensitive and emotional human,” she added.

During the summer, Nicolas fixed a big wooden trunk to the back of a scooter and traveled from one festival to the next. For about a decade, Stutzmann was finally convinced that he had achieved the pinnacle of life.

But eventually, years of living on the streets caught up to his health. He developed pneumonia, which is more problematic than average for a balloon twister without an air pump. He began earning less than when he'd first started street performing, for which he blames the advancement of cell phones and the ability to record and share videos for free.

Some colleagues suggested he officially register as an intermittent du spectacle, a sort of nationally recognized work status given to freelance artists (among other occupations) that allows them to receive support and protection from the French state.

Given his precarious health situation, Nicolas agreed, but he still had one problem: his debts from the previous decade. He built up the courage to call the organizations he was indebted to, which informed him that his debts had been canceled. In fact, a 2008 law shortened the French debt collection time limit for certain debts from 30 years to five, meaning that if after five years the debt still hasn't been collected, the creditor can no longer take legal action against the debtor.

Nicolas was free.

## Nicolas Rejoins Society

So in 2012, Nicolas registered as an intermittent and officially rejoined society. But the transition wasn't as easy as one might imagine. It took him two years to consistently remember that he had a shower in his apartment. Once again, he depended on his spiritual mentor. He leaned into regular meditation.



“I was in a very strong system of belief,” Nicolas told me.

So strong, in fact, that Nicolas claims he was once able to become invisible.

It was when an anthropology professor at the University of Human Sciences in Strasbourg named François Torrelli invited Nicolas to perform his mind tricks for his students, who were studying occultism. Nicolas told me that he was able to enter the lecture hall by passing through the crowd of students outside of the only entrance, without being seen. They were all shocked to find him inside.

“It's not about making myself physically invisible, like in movies. Just invisible to others,” Nicolas explained when I pressed him on the topic of invisibility. “I said to myself that if I stop thinking and create an inner emptiness, if I immerse myself as much as possible into the surrounding students, I can pass completely unnoticed. And it worked.”



When I asked him whether this was magic, he told me that he wasn't sure, that it depends on what magic means to the individual.

Nicolas himself, however, admitted that at one point everything had gotten a bit too much.

"Often, madness wasn't too far, but I felt very talented," he explained. Sometimes, the places he visited during his "astral voyages" felt truer than real life. He claimed that what he lived was real and that he lived it intensely, but even during our interview session he had a hard time answering my question, *Does magic exist?* directly.

Nicolas told me that he also began to struggle with his role as a magician, which he increasingly believed to be an abuse of people's flawed perceptions to make them believe in the impossible. He admitted that when you trick people, you're really tricking yourself.

He feels this anxiety to this day. During one of our last sittings, I asked Nicolas to perform some of his magic tricks for me. During the first trick, he handed me a small fairy doll, which made a match stick trapped under a glass cup

move as I brought it closer or farther. The second was a card trick, and for the third, he stopped the small hand of a wristwatch on a number I had randomly picked.

The tricks were impressive and entertaining, but I was surprised by the number of times Nicolas reassured me that they were simply illusions; that there was, in fact, a trick to them.

Earlier, Nicolas had told me that magic tricks used to put him in a bad mood because he couldn't understand them. He watched what was happening, but he couldn't really see what was happening: he couldn't understand the entirety of this language of birds, if you will. I guess that's why he eventually made his own.

Fellow street performer Lucasz also told me that he "saw this tormented part of Nicolas."

But everything changed over the course of Nicolas' 49th birthday dinner, which he shared with his mentor Pierre and one of Pierre's friends. During the meal, Nicolas told them about his adventure in Madagascar, and how he'd been able to get past border control several times thanks to his magic tricks.



Pierre immediately accused Nicolas of lying. Nicolas held his ground, and the argument became ugly.

“Two days later I left, and I knew I’d stop seeing him.”

That was the last time Nicolas saw his spiritual mentor, and he began to question everything he’d learned and practiced during their time together. This time, Nicolas embarked on a philosophical quest. He realized that perhaps he’d subconsciously decided to tell Pierre that story because he knew it would end their relationship, and Nicolas would finally be free of the mentor that had led him so far astray.

He also concluded that God was an illusion (perhaps the greatest illusion?).

“When you believe in something you’re submissive, or pretentious, or sometimes both,” he explained to me. “I’ve returned to the principle of reality. I no longer have the need for a system of belief.”

But Nicolas’ rejection of belief didn’t spare him from earthly troubles. Several serious breakups over the years caused him heartbreak and depression.

Childhood family traumas followed him into adulthood. A man with his same name stabbed someone to death in a tram in Strasbourg—a grotesque coincidence that would cost him several contracts. A serious healthcare scare might have motivated Nicolas to accept my interview request.

### An Epic and Uncommon Journey

To this day, when asked whether or not magic exists, Nicolas is still unable to give a definite yes or no. When children ask him, he tells them

that magic is the language of birds: it means different things to different people.

While our magician has a hard time believing in traditional magic anymore, you might have a hard time believing his stories. And while it was impossible to independently verify some major elements of his narrative, I was able to track down a couple of things.

On August 4th, 1997, Randriamirado Narcisse wrote a French article in the Madagascar Tribune titled “Niko, le magillusionniste” about



a show tour in Madagascar planned for Nicolas that cites him having already “déjà montré deux ONG au Burkina Faso,” which translates to “already shown two NGOs in Burkina Faso.” In all likelihood, “montré” meaning “shown” is a typo for “monté” meaning “set up.” This would support his claim to have been in Burkina Faso twice in a charitable capacity involving medical supplies. It was Nicolas who sent me a photocopy of the print article.



The same article confirms that a Madagascar kindergarten called “Pomme d’Api” called upon the organization Festival Voix et Route Romane, directed by a Jean-Paul Linder and chaired by a Gilles Follea to organize the charitable tour in order to raise funds for the remodeling of the building and bathrooms in honor of the school’s 10th anniversary.

Pierre Conrad as a healer who uses magnetism (a form of energy healing similar to Reiki) to treat people in all sorts of distress. The description also invites (paying) guests to ask Conrad questions about the meaning of life, the role of alternative medicine, and the necessity for humanity to engage with the development of its conscience.



Benoît Haller, current director at Festival Voix et Route Romane, told me in an email that there is no company record of a tour in Madagascar, but he did confirm that Jean-Paul Linder was the founder and a former director, and Gilles Follea a former president.

Nicolas’ fellow street artist Lukasz confirmed that Nicolas had been homeless for a time, and that he had a knack for meditation. In regards to Nicolas’ supernatural beliefs, Lukasz said, “I cannot say if everything is true but it is an integral part of his personality, the artist and the man!”

There aren’t many traces of Nicolas’ ex-spiritual mentor Pierre Conrad online, and Nicolas asked me not to contact him for fear of attracting his attention. I did, however, find two past Facebook events with descriptions that present

There are, evidently, many elements to Nicolas’ story that will never be confirmed (or, for that matter, denied). To be fair, when I explained to him my responsibility to verify his accounts, Nicolas was the first to admit that it would be impossible.

Though I am still unsure of what he has been searching for all this time—and he must be searching for something, because what else could propel a man to such physical and mental limits?—perhaps the one thing that remains clear is that in his search, he tried it all.

He performed in front of an audience as often as he hid in the margins of society. He emerged out of a mute childhood to become a professional storyteller. He traveled far and wide, physically and psychologically. He outgrew all the traditional ways humans search for things

in the world: spirituality, religion, philosophy, magic.

Disappointed by conventional soul-searching methods, his language of birds might have outgrown his performances. Nicolas ardently believes that all his experiences were real, however he is also the kind of person who might once have said that reality, like magic, means different things to different people.

I do believe he must have felt unseen as a homeless man in Paris. I can also imagine that

he must have had to use his creativity and quick thinking to get out of high-pressure situations while traveling. So while it is difficult for me to believe that he became invisible or that he tricked his way over the Madagascar border, perhaps Nicolas is communicating a greater emotional truth that even he is still coming to terms with.

Ultimately, I agree with Lukasz' final statement about his colleague: "I'm sure his journey is epic and uncommon."

*Photos: © Margherita Bassi, unless otherwise noted*

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