

MAGIC maker

She's one of the best magicians in the world — and Juliana Chen returns to mesmerize the home-town crowd



Les Szabo — The Province

Juliana Chen uses masks and a lot of sleight of hand in her magic performances, which have made her among the best in the world.

By Glen Schaefer
Staff Reporter

There's nothing magical about the stylish condo in south Vancouver — until the playing cards start piling up.

They gush from Juliana Chen's fingers in an endless stream, bouncing off the walls, skittering across a glass coffee table and layering the cream-coloured carpet. It's just another day at work for the 30-some-

On stage at the PNE

Who: Magician Juliana Chen
Where: PNE Telus Mobility Stage
When: 9:30 p.m. Sunday
Tickets: Free with PNE pass

thing Chen, who has turned her talent for manipulation and illusion into a globe-trot-

ting career. Just back from six months doing shows at a plush Malaysian casino, she makes a rare home-town appearance at the PNE this week.

And strangely, for a woman who has played to crowds in Vegas, Monte Carlo and Beijing, she says she still gets the pre-show jitters.

"I'm excited, a little nervous," says Chen in English still accented by her native

Hunan province. "I think I'll do a good job."

Chen's show includes the deft handwork that won her first prize at a 1997 international competition in Dresden, Germany, considered to be the magicians' Olympics. Also part of the 45-minute show are illusions involving ropes, boxes and saws.

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• Magic most on her mind

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The glittery costumes and near-constant world travel are a long way from Chen's beginnings as a child performer at a Chinese circus school, where she started training at age 10. She trained as a juggler, acrobat and ballet dancer, spending 12 hours a day in movement, stretching and gymnastics classes, until she broke her leg as a teen in 1980. Doctors told her to quit acrobats or she'd be in a wheelchair by the time she was 30.

At first, she didn't listen: "Sometimes you don't believe what doctors tell you."

But then she discovered sleight of hand and applied herself to learning that. Within a few years she was headlining on Chinese TV but began to chafe at the lack of more opportunities. She came to Vancouver as a student in 1988 and decided to stay, eventually starting a business doing typesetting work for Chinese-language publications here.

But magic was always on her mind. "Every time I was talking to a client, I was practising magic under the table. People would say 'What's that sound?'"

She started performing at small parties and in 1989 someone told her about a small magic store on Main Street, something unheard-of where Chen came from. In China magicians guard their secrets and suddenly here she was in a store that had every false bottom, every mirror and puff of smoke.

"I was like a kid, I went round and tried everything there."

The owner of that now-closed shop, impressed with her skill, invited her to a magicians' party, where Chen did a four-minute routine for a crowd of her peers. She eventually met U.S. hypnotist-magician Peter Reveen, who invit-



Lee Russo — The Province

Juliana Chen makes Vancouver home even though she's on the road for most of the year.

ed her to the Magic Castle, a Hollywood nightclub catering to magic fans. After her appearance there the shows started getting bigger — a 1992 gig at the Pacific Coast Magic Convention in San Francisco, televised appearances on international magic showcases in Las Vegas in 1997 and Monte Carlo in 1998, and a travel sched-

ule that covered more than 20 countries in Europe, North and South America and Asia.

And between the shows, there's home in Vancouver, with a shelf full of magicians' competition awards and a little brown dog named Christina.

"When I'm not doing shows, I'm researching new ideas, looking for

new music or new costumes," Chen says. Her mother, who came to Canada two years after she did, sews all her costumes for her.

Chen will take a break after the PNE show until October, when she's due back in China. But this time she'll be watching — she's judging a national acrobatic competition.