



## Siegfried and Roy Fischbacher, Siegfried (b.1939), and Horn, Roy (b.1944)

by Linda Rapp

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Illusionists Siegfried and Roy became world-renowned for their spectacular Las Vegas shows, elaborate productions that featured their trademark white tigers, as well as lions and other exotic animals. Although they refrain from discussing their sexual orientation publicly, they are widely perceived as homosexual and are popular with gay and lesbian audiences, functioning in some respects as camp icons.

Both Siegfried Fischbacher and Roy Horn faced difficult circumstances growing up in wartime and post-war Germany.

Fischbacher, who was born in Rosenheim, Bavaria, on June 13, 1939, began learning magic at the age of eight. He discovered that he could use it to get attention from his generally uncommunicative father, who had been in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp and who had turned to drinking after returning home.

Fischbacher studied carpet design for a time but then got a job as a steward on a cruise ship, the *Bremen*, where he also did magic tricks to amuse the passengers.

Horn, who was born on October 3, 1944, in Nordenham, near Bremen, also came from a troubled family. His once-prosperous stepfather became an abusive alcoholic after his fortunes declined. As a boy Horn sought solace in the company of animals, especially his wolf-dog, Hexe. He also visited the local zoo, where he helped with feeding the animals and cleaning cages.

At thirteen Horn became a bellboy on the *Bremen*, where he saw Fischbacher's magic act and suggested that he make a cheetah instead of a rabbit disappear. When Fischbacher agreed to do so, Horn smuggled a cheetah out of the zoo and onto the ship. The captain was concerned about the danger posed by the wild animal, but passengers liked the show, and so Fischbacher and Horn were allowed to continue their performances.

In 1964, with the purloined cheetah still in tow, the partners took their magic act to clubs in Germany and Switzerland, where they had only moderate success. They gained greater public attention when they performed for Princess Grace at a benefit show for the Red Cross in Monte Carlo in 1966. They began playing at more prestigious venues such as the Lido in Paris.

In 1970 Fischbacher and Horn contracted to perform at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas. They began adding more exotic animals to their act and developing their showmanship. They complained that limitations on their creativity were causing them to be depressed, however, and in 1981 they became the main act at the Frontier Hotel, where they broke the record for the longest-running show in Las Vegas.

In 1987 the pair contracted to appear at a lavish new hotel, the Mirage. The deal not only guaranteed them a minimum salary of \$57,500,000 over five years but also included a \$40,000,000 theater for their show and an \$18,000,000 habitat for their growing collection of exotic animals, including rare white tigers.

Fischbacher and Horn received three white tiger cubs from the Cincinnati Zoo in 1982 and have worked with the zoo to help preserve the species. They have since bred more than thirty white tigers, including the only five pure-white tigers in the world. They are also working with the Johannesburg (South Africa) Zoological Society to breed and preserve the rare white lions of Timbavati.

Fischbacher and Horn began performing at the Mirage when it opened in 1990, and in 2001 they signed a lifetime contract, guaranteeing that they will continue appearing at the hotel at least through the end of 2004. Their elaborately produced stage show features music, fancifully-costumed dancers, imaginative and elaborately-engineered props, and numerous exotic animals.

In 1996 the Mirage added Siegfried and Roy's Secret Garden, a spacious exhibit in which visitors can see a variety of animals in lush, tropical settings.

In addition to their stage performances, Fischbacher and Horn have appeared on film and on television. The 2000 IMAX movie *Siegfried and Roy: The Magic Box*, directed by Brett Leonard, turned their already spectacular show into a 3-D film extravaganza in which animals appear to move through the audience.

The movie also tells the story of their early lives and rise to stardom. In his review of the film in *Variety*, Godfrey Cheshire pointedly remarks that the episode about their meeting aboard the cruise ship should appeal to gay audiences.

A 1994 television special, *Siegfried and Roy: The Magic, the Mystery*, also featured portions of their stage show but was centered on their interactions with their exotic animals at home.

Home for Fischbacher and Horn--and dozens of animals--is a lavish mansion known as the Jungle Palace on an eight-acre estate in west Las Vegas. Although the partners have shared the residence for years, they make it clear that each has his own living quarters.

Fischbacher and Horn have not acknowledged that they are homosexual, but it is widely perceived that they are. Of their sexuality, a Las Vegas entertainment reporter said in 1997, "It's a bit like Clinton's policy on gays in the military. We don't ask and they don't tell." Shirley MacLaine, a longtime friend, has stated that the two "used to be lovers a long time ago."

When asked by *Vanity Fair* writer Matt Tyrnauer how they felt about being perceived as gay icons, Fischbacher said that he was "very honored" and Horn called it "a wonderful thing," but neither commented on whether the perception of their sexuality was accurate. Fischbacher described the two of them as "friends."

Charlie Skelton of *The (London) Guardian* described their stage show as one of "the most homoerotically charged performance[s]" that he had seen. He characterized it as "an excuse for two fabulously rich gay Germans to act out their wildest fantasies, night after night after night."

Accounts of the show mention that the cast of dancers included "a dozen behooded men in padded pink muscle-suits" and that Fischbacher and Horn's costumes (especially Horn's) featured lamé capes, skin-tight leggings, and codpieces variously described as "ridiculously enormous," "as big as soup bowls," and "certainly more frightening" than the tigers.

Their show told a fantasy story of battle with and defeat of a dragon and an evil sorceress. Lasers, holograms, high-tech props such as the four-story-tall dragon, and dramatic music contribute to the spectacle, which Tyrnauer calls "a kind of hallucinogenic 'buddy picture.'"

In 1991 Fischbacher and Horn won the German BAMBI award as the best live entertainers of the decade and

the Liberace Legend Award from the Liberace Foundation for the Performing and Creative Arts.

In 1992 the Academy of Magical Arts in Los Angeles bestowed upon them the Magicians of the Decade Award. They were chosen as the Magicians of the Century by the International Magicians Society in 2000.

Fischbacher and Horn's long-running show tragically came to an end on October 3, 2003 when Horn was bitten in the neck by a tiger during a performance. Although gravely injured, immediately after the incident Horn pleaded that the animal's life be spared.

Initially in critical condition because of loss of blood and suffering a stroke, Horn, in what Fischbacher described as a "remarkable demonstration of will, courage, and faith," began to recover and was transferred from the Las Vegas University Medical Center to the UCLA Medical Center for further evaluation and treatment.

A few weeks after the accident Fischbacher accepted the 2003 World Award for entertainment on behalf of the couple and optimistically declared, "The Siegfried who you see before you here will soon return again as Siegfried and Roy."

Horn defied doctors' predictions that he would never speak or walk again. On February 28, 2009, he and Fischbacher appeared at the Bellagio Resort in Las Vegas for a farewell performance in a benefit entitled "Keep the Memory Alive: Power of Love for the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health."

Albeit with halting steps, Horn walked onstage unaided, and the pair delighted the audience with their illusions for one last time. Afterward, more than half of the hundreds of members of the cast and crew from their previous productions gathered backstage to congratulate them on the bittersweet occasion of their swan song.

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