

LEE SIEGEL: *Net of magic: wonders and deception in India*. viii, 455 pp., 6 plates. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991. \$55 (paper \$19.95).

Readers of Lee Siegel's *Laughing matters: comic tradition in India* (1987) will be almost prepared (and thus forewarned) for *Net of magic*. The technique of the two books is similar: a researcher's approach sits in uneasy tandem with a practitioner's, and produces an end result which informs, entertains, bemuses and infuriates by turns. Siegel, Sanskritist and member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, reveals the world of traditional Indian street magic and compares it with the 'mystic kitsch and melancholy glitz' of contemporary Indian stage magicians, whose acts in outrageous maharajah outfits ape the exotica of the Western music-hall. The author himself is wholly enmeshed in the *Indrajāl* to which the title alludes, and part of the entrance price to Siegel's show is the acceptance of a highly self-indulgent style of presentation. If this onerous condition does not deter, the book offers an engaging view of a largely unexplored part of Indian society and performance tradition.

The first section of the book is a relatively straightforward account of street magicians

practising in Northern India. The skill of the magicians themselves, their reception by a beguiled public on the one hand and a brutally philistine police force on the other, and the ethnographic details relating to their origins and families, is all revealed here most effectively. The author has a real empathy with the magicians, their art and their plight; and since they accept him as one of their number, he manages to compose a very convincing portrait of one of India's least-known worlds. For this material alone, the book deserves serious attention (despite the frequent misspellings of transliterated Indian words). After introducing the street magicians, Siegel moves on to consider some historical views of Indian magic, looking in particular at the West's fascination for illusions such as the Indian rope trick. He draws upon Sanskrit material in establishing a context for assessing the illusion of magic, and for interpreting its associated dismemberment with the symbolism of ritual; but a popular tone prevails throughout, and there is no extensive foray into the Indological aspects of magic.

The second section of the book is concerned primarily with stage magic, as performed by a variety of larger-than-life characters. The tone becomes increasingly anecdotal, and descends to ribaldry in an overlong fictionalized account of a visit by the magician 'Professor M. T. Banerji' to Las Vegas, his self-confessed *param dhāmam*. The slapstick tone of *Laughing matters* is here wearisomely recalled, and the considerable value of Siegel's account of India's contemporary stage magicians is severely reduced by the intrusively whacky tone.

A later section of the book brings a welcome return to the world of street magic, and to Siegel's informative account of their social and professional life. The data here are from fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, and include a revelation, deduced from video replays, of the performance technique used by Sai Baba in his materializations of *vibhūti*. The book concludes with a ragbag of 'field notes on magic', the first of which is more or less par for the course in the banality stakes: '5/29/87 (Bombay). Anything can happen. That's the pleasure of magic and the terror of it'; the leaden aphorism is hardly improved in a reappearance seven pages (and seven months) later with 'India' substituted for 'magic' and 'Delhi' for 'Bombay'. The blurb's sanguine appraisal of Siegel's technique as 'masterfully using a panoply of narrative sleights', rings increasingly hollow as one loses patience with the childish exuberant attention-seeking of the author-as-performer. The sleights are not as convincing as the performer would wish: Siegel's Indians have an embarrassing tendency to speak American English, for example, seriously eroding the credibility of his dialogues. The novelty of his free-wheeling academic approach is given the lie by his pat and patronising assumption of (unproven) superiority over his Indian counterparts, this attitude betraying a distinctly old-fashioned style of orientalism. And yet the interest of Siegel's material is undeniable, as is the skill with which he presents so much of it; if only it could have been subjected to the scrutiny of a judicious editor.

RUPERT SNELL