



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: Shhh! Illusionist Derren Brown Has A "Secret"

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DERREN BROWN: SECRET *** 1/2 out of ****

ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

Hmm, well this is awkward. Performer/TV personality/illusionist/man of mystery Derren Brown asks the audience during his clever-clever new show *Secret* to keep all the details...a secret. Fair enough; I'm not one for spoiling an evening's entertainment; sometimes I even hesitate before deciding yes, yes, it's quite alright to say everyone dies at the end of *Hamlet*. Except so much of the fun, the smartness, the meta nature of *Secret* is involved in the secrets that are revealed at the end.

So I'm reduced to shilling for the show, telling you that a friend saw this show a week before I did and urged me to review it. Afterwards, the guest I took wanted to debate the merits of hypnosis and the possibility of psychic phenomena over drinks. And another friend (ok, acquaintance) saw the show that same night (What a coincidence! I had no idea he would be there! It's almost eerie!) and said he was pretty blown away and "felt thoroughly chumpy" for being taken in. But in a good way!

Brown is a big name in the UK as a magician and hypnotist and purveyor of our delightful desire to be conned. He's hosted a string of TV specials (including one where he "froze" some viewers at home to their couches!), appeared on stage in Oliver-winning shows and even written some bestsellers. And here's the secret to his success: you like him. Brown's stage persona is thoroughly winning and frankly one can imagine him developing a show without a spot of magic and creating a charming piece anyway. But magic there is here, from reading minds to hypnotizing audience members to dazzling us with his ability to spot "tells" and know what you are thinking without your saying a word.

In a way, Brown's seemingly old fashioned show is the flip side to Derek DelGaudio's high-art aiming piece *In And Of Itself*. Fair or not, having two of the most acclaimed illusionists in the world performing their new works in New York City mere blocks away from one another makes it impossible to resist comparison.

DelGaudio is less interested in wowing you with "magic" than creating a mood or emotion that can't exist in any other context — he's not interested in "reading your mind" as much as using that evergreen stunt, for example, to identify audience members by a quality or characteristic they define themselves by. It's magic with a purpose. Brown never lets you see him sweat. It's not Vegas glitzy but his new show plays as pure entertainment, wearing its sophistication lightly. Kudos to Brown's professional partners, which includes his co-writers Andy Nyman and Andrew O'Connor, who also co-direct as a team to create an evening that is sneakily well constructed.

The overlaps between DelGaudio and Brown are many. Both acts tell (or claim to tell) very personal stories during the show. DelGaudio's involves his mother; Brown's stories involve his own sexual orientation (happily, he's gay) and a beloved grandfather with a secret of his own. Both involve impressive feats of memorization (or so it seems) and a keen understanding of human psychology. Both like to emphasize (briefly) that they're going to be fooling you. (Brown even spends act one doing his own tribute to *The Invisible Gorilla*, which should make one more cynical when it comes to an event in act two. And yet people being who they are — bless them — it doesn't. I include myself in this.)

The difference is that DelGaudio's show is self-consciously arty while Brown's is pleasingly familiar, until it's not. More significantly, DelGaudio is still working out a consistent stage persona while Brown has that in spades. He is great company right up to the end of the show, where many audience members are then thoroughly gobsmacked. But in a good way. Plus, the hypnosis, which is either impressive or impressively staged and does it matter?

Mind you, it's not a competition. Both artists are raising the bar for a what a magic show can be and how a well constructed piece of theater can make these age-old works of tomfoolery take on new emotional import (DelGaudio) or simply save the best magic for last by revealing the show is greater than the sum of its parts

(Brown). I will gladly see whatever works they create next. But in terms of star power, in terms of that bit of magic that makes audience members fans for life, Brown is way ahead. Half the crowd seemed to be composed of people from the UK who were thrilled to be seeing his act in such a small setting as the Atlantic. After DelGaudio's show, you slipped away into the night to ponder some of his better pieces. After *Secret*, the tiny lobby of the theater was jammed with people hoping for a chat.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O'Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll's House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.