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**Genii**  
THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE



**Derren  
Brown**

# Derren Brown's Secret

By Chloe Olewitz

## This is a story *I made up.*

It is a narrative I concocted, as we all do, after rooting around in the infinite data source that is our human condition to develop a definitive understanding of one man. This man is trapped by the storytelling imperative, a unique affliction of our species, as we all are.

He tells his own stories, and keeps secrets too.

This is a story about Derren Brown.

This story is not made up in that it is untrue, but is rather fabricated in the spirit of Brown's notion that our conceptions of reality are born from the stories we tell ourselves. It's this spirit that guides *Derren Brown: Secret*, his one-man show currently playing at the Cort Theatre on Broadway.





**This story** is about

**a magician,**

**or mentalist,**

**or psychological illusionist,**

**a man whose prescient surrender to a perfect storm of opportunity**

**soldered his unstoppable talent to his fierce intellect,**

**electrifying an unparalleled, international career**

**and catapulting a singular showman into a class all his own.**

**B**rown was born in Croydon in 1971 and raised in Purley in South London. Around the age most young magicians first get bit by magic, Brown found the Bible. He was picked on as a child—precocious, smart, artistic—and learned to use his charms to ingratiate himself with other kids. As a first-year studying law and German at the University of Bristol, Brown saw a performance by hypnotist Martin Taylor and pivoted almost immediately toward the stage. Before long, the track toward law and German had run out of rail.

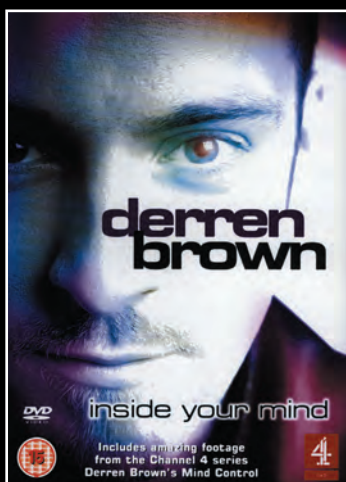
He read his way into his first show as a hypnotist, practicing what techniques he could find in books on friends and performing at and around the university. His dive into the world of stage hypnosis was also a true leap of faith; a Christian student group protested one of his early shows by counter-performing an exorcism. Brown felt his religious identity begin to crumble, furthered by the discovery that his church-bred morality was at odds with his sexuality.

In the way that so many reformed believers do, Brown swung toward atheism with a militant urgency that resembled faith. The rush of acceptance he had tasted while winning over bullies with his wit was supercharged when he stepped onto the stage. In an instant, he was in control.

He felt impressive. Powerful. Larger than life. Stage hypnosis led him to magic and to mentalism—more mass, more power—and he made a modest living working restaurant gigs for a while.

In 1999, Brown was asked to London for a meeting with Objective Productions co-founders Michael Vine and Andrew O'Connor, who had already spent two years searching for a mentalist to star in their new television concept. Andy Nyman was the only other candidate under serious consideration, but he turned down the job to focus on his acting and agreed to consult when they did eventually find someone. At the meeting, Brown performed his effect, "Smoke," in which the cigarette he'd been happily puffing on transformed into the selected card. Vine and O'Connor were fried, and Brown became the one.

*Derren Brown: Mind Control* aired on Channel 4 in 2000, followed by a second season in 2001, a third in 2002, and a two-year network contract after that. In 2003, the controversy over *Derren Brown: Russian Roulette*—in which Brown blindly fired a revolver containing one bullet against his skull five times, burying the single live round into a sandbag instead of his brain, all broadcast live on national television—spanned from media backlash to litigation against the show's creators and against the government for allowing its airing. Brown emerged from *Roulette* unscathed, of course,



The *Inside Your Mind* DVD (2003) combined explanations and special features with selections from Brown's *Mind Control* series to form "a manual of mind reading."





but the scandal had served its purpose. As Jamy Ian Swiss wrote in this magazine in 2005: “In no uncertain terms, Derren Brown had arrived.”

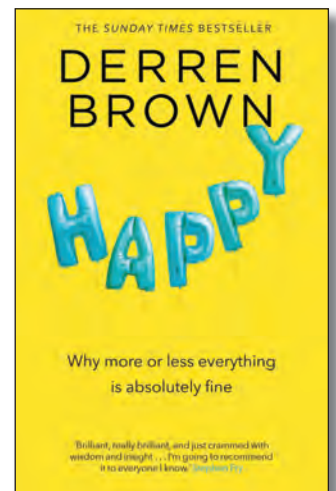
The network deal expanded into a third year, and then a fourth. Brown soon settled into a cadence that would govern much of his career, making television for half the year and touring live shows around the U.K. for the other half. Meanwhile, Objective Productions had grown from a small, private operation to one of the largest independent production companies in the country. Objective Media Group is responsible for almost 20 Derren Brown productions, along with other recognizable projects like *Peep Show* and *The Real Hustle*.

Now Brown runs a separate production company called Vaudeville with Vine and O’Connor. “Before,” Brown says, “I was caught between Channel 4, which might want six shows a year that I don’t want to do, and Objective, who would want to give Channel 4 what they want. I’ve got a bit more control now over what I do, and it’s not their entire livelihood either so they are happy for me to steer my own path.”

The absence of any ladder-climbing ambition or starry-eyed drive allows Brown to guide his life from the fundamental

question of what he will and will not enjoy. In the sense that it allows for self-determination built on decisions entirely within his control, Brown’s joy-seeking seems aligned with stoicism. *Happy*, his most recent book for the general public, provided an investigation into stoicism and a roadmap for recouping happiness from the clutches of self-help. Brown doesn’t necessarily see his behavior as a ploy for control, but he also doesn’t consider himself a stoic.

“Steering my own path is essentially about not doing what I don’t enjoy,” Brown says. “I don’t do very much. I mean I work a lot, but there’s a tour and maybe one or two TV shows a year, because I don’t enjoy them as much as the touring, so that’s what feels right.” There are aspects of making television that Brown does enjoy, but it’s also a part of his schedule that serves a very specific purpose. “Ultimately, without the TV, people aren’t going to come and see the shows. It’s much harder to fill those theaters. The theaters are where I make my money, but they’re also what I enjoy most,” Brown says. “There are talks of a tour in the States, and all those things that would follow on from it. But I’m 48, not 28, so I just keep an eye on whether it’s going to be enjoyable.”



In *Happy*, Brown traces the concept of happiness from the Stoics and Epicureans to today’s \$10 billion self-help industry.

“...if you’re doing a show on Broadway or you’re doing a show at a small provincial theater around London, it’s the same experience on stage,” Brown says. “You’ve got the same spotlight in your eyes, everything else is just black, it’s the same as far as doing the show goes ... I just love the experience of doing the show.”



PHOTO BY MATTHEW MURPHY

**I**t is important to distinguish Derren Brown, the man, from Derren Brown, the brand. Brown himself is not at all driven by the unending upward trajectory we consider modern success. “How much do you need, really?” he asks. During the five-month Broadway run of *Derren Brown: Secret*, he has been living a happy existence in a city he has long wanted to know. But he wasn’t aiming for Broadway, hungry to break out in the U.S., or even looking to tick the box of seeing his name in lights on a Great White Way marquee.

All of that has happened, but Brown isn’t much bothered by it. “To be honest,

if you’re doing a show on Broadway or you’re doing a show at a small provincial theater around London, it’s the same experience on stage,” Brown says. “You’ve got the same spotlight in your eyes, everything else is just black, it’s the same as far as doing the show goes. There are other experiences that are different around it, but from that point of view it doesn’t make much difference to me. I just love the experience of doing the show.”

Some of those other experiences are the thorns in Brown’s side; necessary evils like a rigorous press schedule and the pressure to do tricks on TV. He remembers how, during his 20s, he would have been



perfectly happy “singing for his supper” to satisfy his constant, survival-born desire to impress. “That was the only way I could connect with people,” he says. “Coming out is probably part of it, as well; you burst this sort of bubble that you’ve created needlessly, and you want to engage more honestly with life. I think it’s partly growing up, partly growing out of that childish thing. It’s also getting well known. People want to know what you’re like. I just thought more about how I was with people, which again isn’t conducive to wanting to impress all the time.”

As Brown’s popularity has grown, there have been concurrent shifts in his sense of ethical responsibility. When he first started out, Brown did little to frame what audiences would witness during his shows besides calling himself a “psychological illusionist.” But the bigger he became, the more present he was to the damaging potential of handling tricks of the mind so flippantly. Brown has avoided putting labels on his work ever since, opting for combinations like “magic, psychology, and the power of the well-placed lie” when a description is demanded. “Opening it up to include magic techniques has allowed me to be honest and to ‘own’ the dishonesty,” Brown says.

At the same time, even after he started pointing out the entertainment-oriented nature of his shows, he found that hypnosis was becoming easier. “As the prestige around you builds, it has a hypnotic effect,” says Brown. “I would do less in order to get more reactions from the audience. I would play a film for a minute and people would stand,” he says about a moment in *Secret* during which some members of the audience are mysteriously compelled to get up out of their seats. “Put less in and get more out, that’s the overall effect.”

The phenomena fed into each other so that as he pulled back, his apparent hypnotic power increased, and as his power swelled, he was able to retreat even further. Mere suggestion suddenly caused reactions that mirror the psychosomatic effects of faith healing—disclaimers be damned.



“They knew me back in the U.K., but they were not coming with any expectation because we never advertised that there was going to be faith healing in the show. We didn’t want to attract people that needed it. They were skeptical like me, and there were a million reasons why it wouldn’t work, but it did.”

Since noting the shift, Brown has wondered whether it took place more in the minds of the audience or in his own personality. Was the public becoming more suggestible, or was that power-accumulating ouroboros expanding Brown’s confidence in his abilities and, in turn, increasing his effectiveness? Since arriving in New York, it has been hard to distinguish whether or not audiences are already aware of him. If his reputation did precede him, would that be the deciding factor in who gets taken in?

Brown’s still not sure of the answer, but since *Secret* opened on Broadway this fall, it has become one of the best-reviewed shows of the season. Brown’s self-promoting tweets are so humble they border on the self-conscious. “I have to keep spreading these around, I’m so sorry,” he wrote in September, “won’t be long now.” Or this one: “Sorry—the point will soon come when I’m not obliged to keep trumpeting my own work ...,” followed by links to the stellar reviews he’s gotten in virtually every major New York publication.

**“As the prestige around you builds, it has a hypnotic effect ... put less in and get more out, that’s the overall effect.”**

# Promoting Secret

← **Tweet**

 **Derren Brown**   
@DerrenBrown

Visited in my dressing room by the legendary @Kreskin. I had on my shelf his ESP set, a gift from Scott our sound man, also a big fan. Kreskin was sweet enough to sign it.



12:08 PM · Nov 7, 2019 · Tweetlogix



A game of Guess Who(m) with Jimmy Fallon and Questlove



Promoting Secret in a BUILD Series interview in New York

← **Derren Brown**   
16.8K Tweets Follow

🗨️ 27 🔄 76 ❤️ 649 📌

Derren Brown Retweeted

 **Soda Drinker** @SodaDrinkerPro · Oct 26  
Just saw @DerrenBrown on Broadway it was incredible! I can't say what happened because it's a Secret, but I highly recommend it!



🗨️ 1 🔄 4 ❤️ 64 📌

 **Derren Brown** @DerrenBrown · Oct 26  
If you haven't seen this it's great fun (I think, but I'm in it).

 **Derren Brown** @DerrenBrown · Oct 25  
So @Lin\_Manuel and I did this thing. I do my thing and then he and the @freestylelove gang do their thing (about my thing). Watch through to the end, it's lots of fun.  
derrenbrownsecret.com  
youtu.be/O0F3QK235pU

🗨️ 4 🔄 16 ❤️ 92 📌



Connecting the minds and intuitions of Ryan Seacrest and Kelly Ripa



Presenting selections from Secret at a TED Talk earlier this year



Beyond all his humility and self-possession, tucked in an engine room somewhere at the back of the building, is the Derren Brown brand office. The dance of balancing the man and the brand is a delicate one, in no small part because the performer and the character he plays share the same name and are distinguished by subtle shifts instead of a sweeping brush. His team remains mostly discreet, chugging away behind closed doors, mapping out a path that Brown may or may not follow.

These days, Brown is managed by Michael Vine, Andy Nyman is a co-writer and co-director, and Andrew O'Connor co-writes, co-directs, and produces. O'Connor, Nyman, and Brown form the tripartite brain trust behind the brand; "We all built this brand up together from the start," Brown says, "so we all know what's best for it. We have a great shorthand between the three of us, so there's nobody else better suited for it. We all happen to be great friends and work together really well, which is not to be taken for granted, and not a given that would happen. But aside from the personal, we just know the thing inside and out."

That professional intimacy is hard-earned. The team birthed the brand together 20 years ago, and then nurtured, developed, and grew it into what it is today, and what it will be tomorrow. Brown's anecdotes about their collaboration reveal a collective integrity and ease in their partnership. But there is also a profound level of trust at play; as much as Brown is disinterested in the machinations of success, there is a team of people behind him dealing with those business-minded matters.

"There's never been a sense of cracking America or anything like that," he says. "However, the people that work with me, I'm sure they have that interest, and they can see the advantage of it financially. It's nice not to have to worry about that. I don't have that ambition. It's nice to be able to leave that to others and just focus on what I enjoy."

Brown spends much of his off-stage time pursuing painting and street photography,



Andrew O'Connor, Derren Brown, and Andy Nyman, the creators of *Secret*

and he loves to write. He is enamored by process in all its artistic manifestations, by the creative, on-the-court action of making a thing, not by some imagined future satisfaction in having made it. He describes himself as a tranquil soul and enjoys being alone with himself. It's no surprise, then, that the arts that speak to him are solitary endeavors, creative acts that require him to be simultaneously alone and connected to his environment: isolated and also developing his sense of self in relation to others.

Brown is perfectly satisfied, contented, even happy, spending his days in New York working quietly on his new nonfiction book, the theme of which he expects to reveal itself to him through the writing of it. "Then there is the joy of going out and being this well-rehearsed, charismatic version of myself in the evening," he says. "That's it, really."

**I**n the 1990s and early 2000s, Brown was still calling himself a magician. He was hooked on the power he felt when he performed, the approval, the mighty sensation of existing as a hero with impossible skill. "Look at me, look what I can do." It was the natural evolution of a hard-earned survival strategy, from the armor he barbed to protect against mean-spirited school bullies to the on-ramp he built for audiences who would respect, admire, and adore him.

"Look how clever I am" couldn't be further from the way Brown operates today, or the way he performs on stage. But still,



he is clever. He has always been clever. His now out-of-print magic books, *Pure Effect* and *Absolute Magic*, were bold and accusatory and rightly advertised as not for the easily offended. He has called magic “childish” and “easy” and has taken magicians to task for laziness. “I feel that most mentalists don’t perform mind reading,” he wrote in *Pure Effect*. “They perform instead the act of writing information down on paper that they apparently couldn’t know.”

Even in hindsight, Brown’s reflections hold. “My feeling when I wrote *Pure Effect* was that what mentalism was, or at least what it seemed to me, just wasn’t very

interesting,” Brown says now. If the joy of conjuring is the moment of revelation, then the joy of mentalism is its process, according to Brown. There is no release in the revelation of something merely thought of; the power of mentalism is the contextual work that gives audiences a sense, or at the very least a question, of how. “This translates into a limp thing about how mentalism is about presentation. It is, but I think people miss what that means. It doesn’t mean overacting or talking endlessly. There’s enough [expletive] instructions in mentalism.”

What Brown has mastered is the way he





PHOTO BY MATTHEW MURPHY

invests himself absolutely in his audience's experience. He takes their lived experience as his prop, as opposed to treating spectators as props to be used. He believes in elevating people's experience as the goal of the spectacle he creates, not an afterthought beyond making himself look good. "If you commit yourself to a person's ongoing experience properly, and you really settle into that, it doesn't lead to those strange empty bits of script that sound like process but don't really engage the person. Sadly, I think there's a lot of that."

Brown's friends are mostly actors, not magicians, and he has subsumed many of those actors' philosophies of the stage.

"If you're an actor, you need a process. Otherwise you're just saying the same lines every night," Brown says. To him, the key is recreation instead of repetition, advice he picked up from magician Peter Clifford. "I'm really in it in my head," Brown says, "and that's the only way it's ever going to feel light and fresh and like I'm making it up for the first time from night to night. If I've contributed anything to mentalism, it's leaning into the process of what you do."

It is evident that most mentalists take "process" to mean procedure, leading to incessant instructions and parades of stationery and not much to experience in the way of emotional or even mental meat. The process of mentalism, Brown says, "has to be real. It has to be every bit as carefully thought out" as the rest of the method and the effect.

Here we scratch the surface of Derren Brown the intellectual. He is a philosopher, mapping the investigation of his own experience against his researched understanding of a subject. He is a critical thinker who does not cave to a quick fix or give in to the easiest answer. When he started out in magic, his intellect combined with his intense focus meant Brown could lock himself in a room for hours to perfect one isolated technique or a single sleight, hinting at countless hours of invisible work.

Brown's competitive edge is neither magical nor secretive; it is rather born of his nature as a man dedicated to craft, intellectually curious, and deeply caring about humanity. Brown wants to do all things to the best of his ability, which happens to be grand and sweeping. And that work is never done. On the final night of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, a stage show Brown toured throughout the U.K. in 2005 and 2006, he found himself in his dressing room after the show doing notes. "We were never going to do the show again, but we were still talking about what we were going to change," Brown says. "We were laughing, but we couldn't stop."

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Something Wicked toured the UK from 2005-2006

**T**he idea to bring the Derren Brown brand to New York predates *Secret*. The team had bandied about the idea since as far back as 2001, when a meeting scheduled for a certain Tuesday in September was derailed. They tested the waters with some smaller-scale projects but made no great foray into the U.S. until 2017, when *Secret* premiered off-Broadway at the Atlantic Theatre Company.

When the opportunity first arose, Brown was on the road touring *Derren Brown: Miracle*. “*Miracle* makes sense as a show in the U.K., where people know me, because it took a sideways approach to faith healing,” he says. His British fanbase was already aware that he makes no claims to the supernatural and presents a mysterious blend of illusion entertainment. “But it didn’t make sense as a show for a first audience, and what we imagined were people who didn’t know me at all.”

So instead of transporting *Miracle*, he set out to create *Derren Brown: Secret* as a greatest hits album. There aren’t many professional mentalists in the world with the audacity to attempt a best-of show, but there also aren’t many who could pull it off. Brown, O’Connor, and Nyman compiled a list of their favorite pieces from over the years and distilled down a selection that might work together in a show with a life of its own. “That was unusual for us, because it meant that all the material was there before the show had its own path worked out,” Brown says. “Usually those things emerge together. It starts to feel like the whole show was always about that, but it wasn’t really. Initially it was born out of putting together the best bits.”

They worked out the kinks at a small, 200-seat theater in London; a tiny fraction of the size Brown is accustomed to, but comparable to the 199 seats of his soon-to-be home off-Broadway. “It was important to get a sense of how it would play to a more intimate space,” Brown says. “And in doing that, it found its heart, this idea that magic works as an analogy for the stories we tell ourselves and how we mistake those for reality.”

“It’s taken me 18 years of touring to realize that about magic,” he says. “I’d always been very suspicious of magicians who say magic transports you back to a childlike state of wonder, or that it’s important for this or that reason, because all of that goes out the window when the magician has bad breath.”

At the Atlantic, the analogy worked, and Brown noticed that New Yorkers were more aware of him than he’d anticipated. “The first time I stepped out on the first night, there was a sustained roar. It was two or three minutes solid, which is ages when you’re in the audience. Or on stage. It was so moving, because we were all presuming it was going to be this skeptical, sassy older audience that I’d have to work really hard to win over.” From April through June 2017, *Derren Brown: Secret* played a sold-out run.

Brown had invested heavily in the Atlantic run, and because he was making the minimum equity actor rate, he needed to take *Secret* on a tour with some earning potential. Back in the U.K., *Underground* ran as a true best-of version of the show, employing the same material as *Secret* but reimagined as a different production. “They were kind of cousins of each other,” Brown says.

While on the road with *Underground*, Brown and company were eager for a way to bring *Secret* back to Broadway before it faded completely from New York’s memory. There were hiccups; including that they wanted to time his return with the release of *Derren Brown: Sacrifice*, a Netflix project that had only just begun kicking up dust. Brown says the edit of the show took longer than expected, forcing them to pass on the first Broadway offer that came in. Because despite his warm reception off-Broadway, the team was relying on *Sacrifice*’s made-for-America angle as a splashier introduction to a bigger U.S. audience.

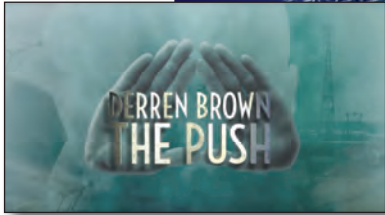
*Sacrifice* was one of three Derren Brown specials available on Netflix between *Secret*’s off-Broadway and Broadway runs. First, there was *Derren Brown: Miracle*, a taping of that live show that took a side-







NETFLIX



The Push was released to U.S. audiences on Netflix in February, 2018

ways swipe at faith healing. There was also *Derren Brown: The Push*—which originally aired in the U.K. as *Derren Brown: Pushed to the Edge*—in which Brown employed increasingly brash social engineering tactics in order to persuade an absolutely ordinary and unsuspecting participant to push an innocent man to his death.

Then there was *Sacrifice*. Presented as the latest in a series of Brown's psychological experiments, the show set out to see if a racist, anti-immigrant American citizen ("kick 'em out, kick 'em all out") could have his mindset so thoroughly altered that he would take a bullet for someone he believed to be an illegal Mexican immigrant.

Sacrifice was created for Netflix, and debuted globally in October, 2018



NETFLIX

Brown worked hard to avoid any overt politics in *Sacrifice*. There was no finger-pointing, no partisan pandering, and no taking sides. And where *The Push* was about the power of compliance and the dangers of abandoning our own morality to groupthink, *Sacrifice* was framed as a humanitarian mission. "Now, in these aggressively divided times, I want to try to create a hero," Brown said in the *Sacrifice* trailer. "Someone who will willingly lay down their life for a complete stranger."

*Sacrifice* was about the triumph of the human spirit over personal bias, about our fundamental connection to others, and about our duty to treat each other with a certain amount of dignity. When framed with the broader philosophy of the Derren Brown brand, what emerges from *Sacrifice* is a positioning of personal bias as yet another story we convince ourselves is true.

Phil, the unwitting star of *Sacrifice*, doesn't believe he is a racist. Through Brown's radical compassion, through his unjudging, unprejudiced handling of another man's most vulnerable beliefs laid bare, the show frees Phil from the baggage of labels like "racist" and "patriot" and even "American." It distills down the idea of bias to nothing more than a series of stories we have heard, repeated, and internalized over the course of our development as individuals—sparks unconsciously selected from the infinite data source in which we swim.

*Sacrifice* is of its time and place. It was a risky way to breed awareness about the Brown brand; it's almost as if the team took a page out of their own Russian Roulette book, aiming for controversy and hoping for a boost in the fallout. But America wasn't all that scandalized. Also of this moment is the reality that any backlash against *Sacrifice* was limited to specific information silos. Fox News didn't like *Sacrifice*, or *The Push* for that matter. Much of the criticism about the specials ran in *The Guardian*, *Metro*, and other British publications that may have soured on sharing their star with the circus across the pond.

**D**erren Brown: *Secret*, like *Sacrifice*, uses psychological illusion to investigate the idea that our identities are given by the stories we tell ourselves and the way we mistake those stories for reality. Maybe our understanding of reality is bound—that is to say, limited—by those stories. And if everything is constructed, then everything is subject to change.

But I can't tell you much about it. Brown has been asking audiences to keep the secrets of his shows for 20 years. The request protects against spoilers, first of



all, so that audiences can experience the show's surprises for themselves. Second, it stops people from discussing the details of the show on social media and exposing their own cockamamie theories about method—a sin of which both laypeople and magicians are guilty.

Somehow, after all this time, people still keep Brown's secrets safe. "The overall effect is theatrical as well," Brown admits of the odd request, "but it was born out of those two things. Now it feels like you're part of something special. From a marketing perspective it's not ideal, we can't be open about this or that, but in another way it's sort of great."

With *Secret*, the theatricality of the ask emerges in the way it envelops entire crowds, night after night, into a conspiratorial pact that connects each audience member to the other as much as it connects them all to Brown. It's only one of the myriad ways in which Brown weaves a web within which his unique take on mentalism can thrive, building a contextual world and digging into process to hint tantalizingly at some mysterious layer of a potential method by which he may possibly pull off the show's elaborate feats.

Brown opens *Secret* with a monologue about the show's theme, these stories we tell ourselves, including the stories he's told himself. He reveals the big secret of his youth, his homosexuality, not because it's a particularly impactful secret—to him or to anyone else—but to demonstrate just how unimportant the stories we cling to can be once we release them. In contrast with so many shows (magic and otherwise) that take and use, *Secret* fosters a very clear experience of exchange.

Brown gives before he takes, and shares of himself—in the form of both private truths and scripted mistakes, only some of which are pointed out—forging for himself the role of a vulnerable sage. Though he can come off as cheeky, even a little Luciferian (Brown takes character inspiration from Sherlock Holmes, Hannibal Lecter, and Willy Wonka), it is also clear to audiences that they are held gingerly

within the cradle of his spell. Take, for example, the active community of Brown's survivors, the subjects who have come out the other side of Brown's psychological experiment shows like *The Push* and *Sacrifice*; he warped their worlds, but he also left them better than he found them.

Before *Secret*'s intermission, Brown warns audiences not to return for the second half of the show if they have secrets that they would rather not be revealed publicly. This invitation makes that pact all the more palpable; infidelity, indecency, and indiscretion are unjudged, even excused. The warning is premised on Brown's explanation that he can't always control what secrets come to him once he begins the Q&A act, and apparently, some theater seats have wound up suspiciously empty since Brown added in that warning. The absences make the Oracle act that opens the second half of the show that much more frenetic, when Brown, blindfolded, calls frantically for people who have left the room. If he's not in control, who is?

But the gift of *Secret* is not prescribed. What Brown hopes audiences will take away from the show is much less rigid than the tectonic shifts Brown plots for the subjects of his television specials. "I think it has to be open ended," Brown says, paraphrasing English theater director, Peter Brook: "The piece should give you a kernel that sits like a seed, and you take that away and it forms its own thing. If it's laid out to you, if it's too on the nose, it's a different thing. It becomes a political tract."

Or a sermon. Abandoning any predetermined intellectual point means Brown never has to crowbar a magic trick into a demonstration of that idea. He can present magic as an analogy for life, open-ended and undefined, offering freedom to himself, to play comfortably with a dishonest art, and to audiences who can then craft their own stories to make sense of what they witness. "You don't want to hit people over the head with it," Brown says. "You have to let them find it for themselves."

*Secret* is packed with micro-moments that facilitate the inception of that kernel. Each

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night during intermission, one animal is selected by popular vote. By the time they leave the theater, some people will realize that their choices were not their own and will begin to question yet another aspect of a reality they trust. Others will leave still under the impression that any of the six animals are all equally eligible to win each evening. Delicate scripting and subtle production details allow for this ambiguity, but so does Brown's theory of restraint.

Most humans, faced with a lack of control, get bigger. They lean in and compensate. Brown dares to do the opposite; he does not attempt to control the audience's experience of *Secret*, instead refusing to insist on a set message or lesson, eschewing the practice of pointing out and tallying up every single hit. Some people will miss the show's subtler points; Brown is okay with that. And his willingness to surrender the results, to withhold and pare back, is one of the rare traits that sets Brown apart from the pack.

"At that base level as a mentalist," Brown says, "if you want people to believe in your skills, you don't spell out what it is. You have to let them join the dots themselves." But there are other, more tangible ways that Brown makes the most of potential withheld.

Brown has given us permission to mention that the finale of *Secret* is an interpretation of David Berglas's "ESPacology." Multiple selections made by six volunteers standing on stage are shown to be perfectly predicted on numbered lollipop stands that have waited in full view all along. "It lends itself to multiple climaxes," says Brown. "Berglas is the king of that, and one of the joys of his work for me is teasing them all out. Maybe you're seeing the same thing five times, but it doesn't feel like it because each one is a surprise." But once Brown started reworking the routine, lining up one climax after another, he faced an unexpected challenge.

There were too many hits. Brown and his team noticed that in his interpretation of Berglas's classic, audiences were climbing a mountain of incredulity, one incredible match after another, until at a certain point,



they had summited the climb and all the hits after that grated and cloyed. “Then you’re over it. It’s just tiredness. It turns into ‘Yes, well done, can we just go home,’” Brown says. In the end, they cut out some of the routine’s easy climaxes, experimenting with different omissions live on stage during the preview period. “It’s not entirely intuitive to the magical way of thinking,” he says. “You’re actually pulling back on how clever you might show yourself to be to save the audience’s experience.”

Brown has also become known for taking risks in his shows, attempting off-beat methods that are unprecedented when they play but aren’t guaranteed to work. When he plays that one-minute film during *Secret*, asking those who are so moved to stand, the sometimes very long moments that pass in pin-drop silence between the conclusion of the film and the first bell that rings out to indicate someone in the theater has stood are absolutely electric. *Did it work? Is anything happening? Something is happening. What is happening?* It was spine-chilling, and nothing had even happened yet.

*Secret* plays best in these moments of tension and release, elevating a best-of-show that could easily have fallen into the trap of nostalgia into a roller coaster of emotion. *New York Times* theater critic, Ben Brantley, wrote in his review: “God help me, I found myself in happy tears at a magic show.” The surprising twists and turns in *Secret*’s finale are not intentionally emotional; there’s no heartstrings message or story about Brown’s grandfather (that one came out in the first act). But Brown so expertly teases the knife-edge of anticipation that when he finally releases the tension that he has built up over two reality-altering hours, the experience in the room isn’t just amusement, it’s euphoria.

In the end, what makes *Secret* so special—and indeed what makes Brown so remarkable—is his ability to take a performance that is very clearly a demonstration of immense skill, deep experience, and brash confidence honed over the course of 30 years, and make it absolutely, utterly

not about him. He has come to accept this about himself since the first time Michael Vine pointed it out. But it was largely an unintentional development; it arose organically, as it would have had to.

Brown says the starting point for all his shows is a simple inquiry that centers everything that follows around the audience’s experience. “Here are 2,000 people locked in a room with me for two hours. I have carte blanche permission to do anything. What would be interesting?” It’s about them; it always has been. And nestled within this “for them” mentality, one of us instead of separate from us, Brown is more powerful than he could ever be doing the razzle dazzle out on his own.

“I remember Teller talking about that if you’re a magician who can click your fingers and make anything happen, you’re a god-like figure,” Brown says. “Dramatically, there’s no interest in that. It’s empty because you can do anything. What’s interesting dramatically is the hero figure, because the hero has to struggle.” Brown is *Secret*’s hero, but he is a fallible hero. We all harbor stories that structure our reality long after we have forgotten we crafted them in the first place. We are all made vulnerable by the secrets we keep. Even Derren Brown.

“I think life does pull us ultimately to the hard stuff,” Brown says. “It’s centripetal, it pulls to the middle, and the middle is going to be tough. Those moments feel very frightening and isolating. But life pulls to that point for all of us, so if we lean into them differently, that’s where we can connect most. And therefore, love the most. It’s actually sublime.”

Maybe what we learn from *Secret* is this beautiful nature of the folly of the human psyche, this idea that we tell ourselves stories to survive, and then convince ourselves those stories are the truth. That humans are meaning-making machines seeking desperately and despite ourselves to understand who we are, what we do, and how and why we do it, all along an imagined continuity that we cling to like the linear belay ropes of our lives. •

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