

IS EVERYTHING UNDER THIS MAN'S CONTROL?



DERREN BROWN KNOWS WHAT YOU'RE THINKING. OR, AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT HE WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE. FHM SITS DOWN WITH BRITAIN'S GREATEST ILLUSIONIST AND MIND READER WITH A SINGLE GOAL: TO GET INSIDE HIS HEAD

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For a glimpse inside Derren Brown's head, you should look inside his house. It says more about Britain's greatest mind reader than a story ever could. For starters, the three-storey London house is full of stuffed animals. There's an 8ft giraffe craning out of the wallpaper, a moose, a goose and a stillborn pickled chimp in a jar (everything, he says, died of natural causes). There are parrots, peacocks, penguins and a six-legged sheep. Some are dead pets, like the moray eel and the dog. The unicorn, we're guessing, is not. You half expect to see the wrinkly corpse of Doctor Dolittle himself hanging stiff on the hat-stand.

"I know it's pretty weird, but I like the freaky stuff," Derren tells us. "Over there, pull that lamp..." He points to a wall-mounted light beside a big bookshelf. We do as we're told and the bookshelf swings open to reveal a secret staircase to an underground lair. "That's my steam room," he says at the bottom of the stairs before turning along a short corridor, "and this is my cinema. Nice, isn't it?" Its red velvet carpet, six large seats and 10ft screen speak for themselves. Then, one of the stuffed parrots – now very much alive – dive-bombs us from nowhere, squawking, "Bye bye, bye bye," and pecking our ear. "Don't worry about Rasputin, he's just jealous," Derren laughs. "If he really didn't like you, he'd shit on your head."

We've popped over to Derren Brown's house for a cup of tea and a tour after our photo shoot at a nearby studio. Nothing here – not the animals, the bookcases, nor the terrifyingly realistic latex 'death mask' of Matt Lucas's severed head by the door – is as it seems. "I just love facsimile and fabrication and things looking real that aren't," explains Derren. "I don't know why, but that's always excited me."

Derren Brown has found a lucrative career in making the unreal look real. After all, here is a guy who has made a grown man double over in pain at an imaginary stomach punch; convinced a group of law-abiding citizens to commit armed robbery; predicted the National Lottery; and hypnotised a man to assassinate Stephen Fry. That's just some of what he's done for TV. Two of his six stage shows have won Laurence Olivier awards, enthralling sell-out audiences with his unique cocktail of hypnotism, manipulation, body-language reading, memory games, misdirection and other subliminal crafts. His seventh stage show, *Miracle*, finished its UK tour this summer and will move to London this »

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month. That show, like all his others, will almost certainly sell out.

And yet, has there ever been a performer so confident on stage and so lacking in self-belief off? "It's a job that can feel really trivial and stupid," he says. "I love it, especially the stage stuff, but a large part of me feels like it's sort of mucking around, like it's all a bit... pointless. It's lovely when people occasionally write to me saying that something I've done has meant something to them. Otherwise it's just showing off, isn't it?"

His honesty is destabilising. Coming into the interview, we had planned to do battle before we broke into the brain of Britain's greatest mind reader. We at least expected him to put up a fight. But he's offering himself on a platter. Isn't he? On closer inspection, it occurs to us that he might be subtly mirroring our body language – a leg cross here, a chin scratch there. His eye contact is intense but non-threatening. His voice is like caramel and his manner oddly soothing. Even though we're asking the questions, we can't shake a niggle: who, really, is interviewing Derren Brown? Are we? Or is *he*?

"My job is about creating the *illusion* of control," he says. "All the things I do, a magic trick or hypnosis, are experiences that the participant is creating in their own head. I just create a narrative to give that person a particular sort of experience but, ultimately, they're doing it themselves."

Has it ever occurred to him to harness his powers for evil? "That'd be exhausting," he says. "I'd rather use it for good. Really, all this was born out of wanting to impress

people. I think any kid who gets into magic does it because they don't feel impressive. Look at a lot of magicians and you can see a lonely child in their background."

Was Derren a lonely child? "I was solitary, but not unhappy. Mum thought I had a drug problem because I spent so much time in my room. But I was just drawing mostly and, for a period, building a Lego wanking machine."

Derren Brown was, by his own admission, a weird kid. Born in Purley, south London, to a swimming teacher and an ex-model, he was an only child until the age of nine, when his brother Dominic arrived. He went to Whitgift School in Croydon where he "fell in with a very uncool crowd". "I wasn't bullied, but I found the sporty kids intimidating," he says. It was around this time that adolescent confusion over his sexuality began to set in. "I sort of knew [I was gay] but wasn't sure," he says. "Then I thought it would pass." So he threw himself into Christian evangelism, which, for a while, acted as a "veil to hide behind and never address it".

But by the end of his first year at Bristol University, he had swapped God for philosophy and the veil of Christianity for an actual magician's cloak. "I was the guy reading Nietzsche in a cape, so of course all the other students thought I was an absolute prick, which I was," he says, laughing. Now a "born-again atheist", it would still take another decade for him to come out publicly. But, just as he created a character out of his Christianity, he did so out of his magic. "I saw a hypnotist called Martin

and it all just clicked. It turned out the sporty types I was intimidated by were most responsive to hypnosis, so I suddenly became quite cool among them; I became able to control them too, which is the opposite of being intimidated by them." He got a tortoise he would walk on a lead and a parrot he could hypnotise by blinking. The weird kid was still a bit weird, but now he had schtick. "I was the hypnotist guy," he laughs. "People would let me stick them to chairs or whatever and I got bolder and bolder with it."

After a few years doing sleight-of-hand card tricks in bars and hypnosis in small theatres around Bristol, a TV producer asked him to try out for a new show. *Derren Brown: Mind Control* aired on Channel 4 in 2000. Over the next 15 years, he would enthral his public with increasingly outlandish stunts on screen and stage, from playing Russian roulette on live TV to tricking a woman into believing she was dead. Has it ever gone wrong? He grimaces. "I had a full-blown vagina on stage this tour. A girl came on stage in Birmingham in a very short skirt," he says. "She was meant to fall back into a guy's arms but as he caught her, he accidentally pulled her skirt up and she wasn't wearing any knickers. She got back up absolutely nonplussed, straightened herself out and went back to her seat. That was a memorable moment... and unusual to have two cunts on stage."

Derren's funny – and he loves a dirty joke, usually at his own expense. »



"ALL THE THINGS I DO ARE EXPERIENCES THE PARTICIPANT IS CREATING IN THEIR OWN HEAD"



DERREN BROWN TAKES PHOTOS TOO... AND THIS IS WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE

"These two ladies are in a posh part of Athens. Sometimes you feel conspicuous, even a bit pervy, taking pictures; here there were lots of bathers around and there was no way of hiding that I was photographing them. The more you try to hide it, the creepier you become. In the end I just crouched down behind them and took it."



"This was in Rome. I like strong lines and shapes, so when I saw a couple walking into such a compelling background, I ran after them and snapped a few shots without them seeing."



"I took this in the market streets of Athens. She was sat in a big open window and, of course, made a very striking image for a black and white photograph. I took it as I walked past, before she noticed."





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But he stops laughing when he moves from a wardrobe malfunction to malfunctions of the mind. More than once, he says, people have found themselves stuck to their seats after a show or plunged into a full-blown trance. "It sounds like I'm making this up but it does happen, even if I haven't done anything overtly hypnotic," he adds. "They panic and their family is upset but all they have to do is understand that they are fine. But the story in their head is saying, 'I'm hypnotised and I can't get out of it – Derren Brown has done something to me.' I can always get them out of it but that's the weird thing about doing what I do: if you go and see a band and then crash your car on the way home, you'd never think of blaming the band, whereas you come and see my show and... well."

Hypnotists don't hypnotise people, people do. That's Derren's line, and he's sticking to it. "Hypnosis is nothing more than suggestibility," he says. "It's a sort of emotional openness, and you see it in certain people. Every time the lights come up, I'm looking to see who's slack-jawed and wide-eyed. They're good signals that someone's open to suggestion. Then I give them a context in which to think they're being hypnotised, and allow people's natural suggestibility to take over. It's amazing how ignorant we are about the world of suggestion. A lot of people will just say, 'Oh, I don't believe in hypnosis, it must be done with stooges.' But

suggestion is the same unconscious psychological response that makes us believe what a doctor tells us. Suggestion is so part of everyday life yet it's left to entertainers like me, or charlatans, or new-age therapists, to cash in on it because people don't really understand it. Strange, isn't it?" One gimmick to try to convince sceptics he's not using stooges in the crowd sees Derren throw a frisbee from the stage. The person catching it is invited to participate in the next trick. When we saw him in Aylesbury, we caught the frisbee and ended up on stage. Needless to say, he blew our minds into a thousand pieces of what-the-fuck? which we're still picking up today.

Derren's on his feet. "RASPUTIN!" he yelps, taking off into another room. The bird's made a break for it. "Shit, he's going to escape... BOYS!" he calls the two lads cleaning his tropical fish tank upstairs. "Shut the window, Rasputin's on the move." After a muffled kerfuffle, he returns with a mug of tea emblazoned with the words 'Derren Brown: Mind Control'. "Sorry about the mug," he says. "Terribly narcissistic, isn't it?"

At home, Derren likes the quiet life. He loves classical music and reading and painting. His hyper-realist and hauntingly beautiful portraits are exhibited in galleries in London and New York; recent subjects include Michael Sheen, Dame Judi Dench and his parents. He has also recently taken up street photography and just returned from Istanbul, where he spent a week roaming the city with his camera. "I'm interested in feelings

of connectivity with people, because I'm on the introverted side," he says. "Photography is a way for me to engage with the world in a way I haven't before. It's very honest."

He's also writing a book about happiness. In light of his past, he's thought about it a lot. Is he happy now? "Yes, I think I am," he replies. What's his secret? "Don't try to control things that are out of your control," he says definitively. "Learn to enjoy things as they are rather than perpetually climbing that invisible ladder to the future. That's a very Christian idea – suffer now and your reward awaits you on the horizon – that's now fed into the modern capitalist idea that you work now to be rewarded in future. It doesn't add up to me. The key is realising that none of us have a birth right to happiness and positive thinking alone won't make you happy. You can only control your thoughts and your actions."

But you can control other people's thoughts and actions, apparently without them knowing, we say. We saw it on stage. "That's happening now," he purrs, that caramel voice suddenly gooier than usual. Is it? The room does seem warmer. We feel fuzzy. And what's that breeze?

"Are you saying this whole time, you've used us to interview yourself?" we say, blinking like a moron.

"Yes, I have," he replies. "Those notes on your pad are just childish scribbles. And look down... you're not wearing any trousers." **FHM**

Derren Brown: *Miracle is at The Palace Theatre, London from 11 November to 16 January*

"LOOK AT A LOT OF MAGICIANS AND YOU'LL SEE A LONELY CHILD IN THE BACKGROUND"



"This was in Istanbul. I went there with an old school friend who takes street photographs too. You can pretty much be anywhere where there are people and get lost in your own little world."



"This is from Athens. He's dealing with a spot in the mirror of the motorcycle. He was so absorbed, I was able to take lots of pictures and get in quite close. The other two driving past made it for me."



"Istanbul again. Sometimes you just have to be brazen. The three stools grabbed me first. He looks like a miniature man. It's all amusing and satisfying in a way that's difficult to put your finger on."



"I walked past this kid, unsure if it was right to take a picture. I was in Istanbul, and I speak no Turkish. I walked past for a photo, then decided to go back. He seemed oblivious. I still find it touching."

