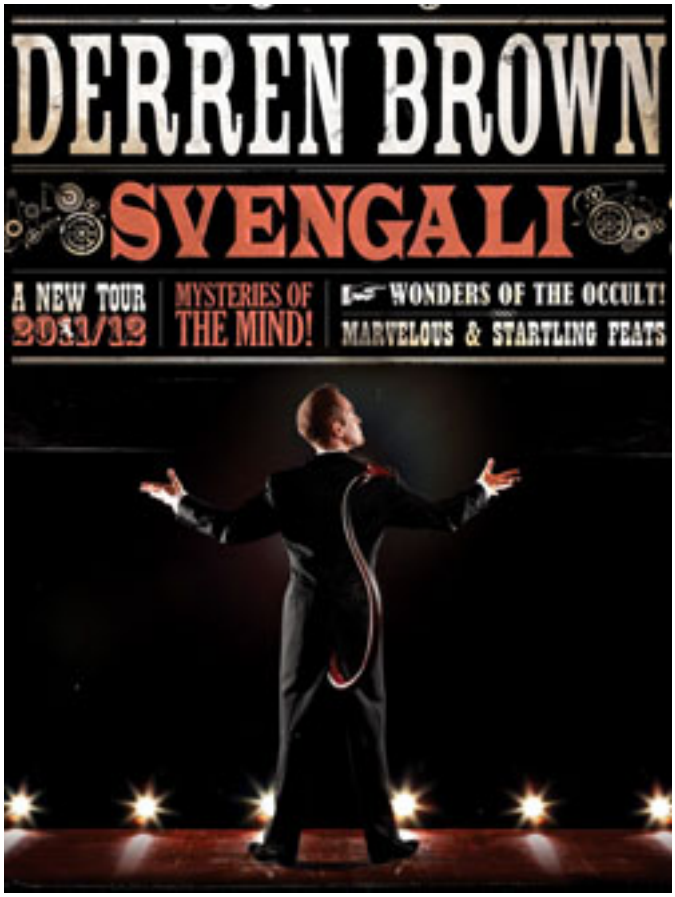

Derren Brown: Svengali at The Lowry

Reviewed by Georgina Kirk March 2012

In an age of scepticism, the immense popularity of psychological illusionist Derren Brown may appear to run counter to the Zeitgeist. Yet it's actually his extraordinary skill at tuning into the beliefs and doubts of a spiritually confused nation that has brought him to his current position as one of Britain's most acclaimed and revered entertainers.

Svengali, Derren's fifth live stage show taken on national tour, is playing to packed houses for a full week (5th-10th March) in the large auditorium at Salford's Lowry Theatre. And it's returning, by popular demand, for two further shows in May. Despite the recent resurgence of interest in more mainstream magic, no conjuror would be able to fill theatres up and down the country night after night, month after month, the way Derren does.

What is it about mentalism that resonates with the public psyche? Although Paul Daniels is a household name and although the new generation of magicians, such as Dynamo, are changing the image of conjuring, making magic 'cool', there persists a widespread misconception that magic is for children. Perhaps mentalism is more readily accepted as adult entertainment.

Or maybe it's more subtle than that. I love a good conjuring show (Hallowe'en 2009 at Simon Drake's House of Magic remains one of the highlights of my life) and, secretly, I prefer it to mentalism. For me, the joy of watching objects and people vanish, change shape, dissolve, appear, levitate in front of my eyes is that it connects me with my inner child, reminds me of a time when I used to believe nothing was impossible. But it could be that I'm out of step with the trend here, which wouldn't be the first time of course. Or it could be that today's audiences consider themselves too sophisticated for child wonder and instead want more cerebral, adult mystery.

When someone flies, or removes the hand of a volunteer so that we can see it running around by itself, as adults we know there is no other explanation other than that the magician has deceived us. We may choose to suspend our disbelief for the duration of the show, but the line between reality and 'magic' is very clear. With mentalism there is always that slight blurring of the edges. I believe in a degree of telepathy between people who have a close bond, I believe in the transformative power of the mind, I believe there are phenomena humans have yet to understand. I do *not* believe a stranger on a stage can divine any secret from my past by looking at me, still less that he can hypnotise me into behaving unnaturally. And yet, and yet, there's always that grey area of doubt; the boundaries are not so clearcut.

Tour Dates