

Same Old Tricks, Brand New Show

By
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They're not effects. They're not mini-dramas. There's no Victorian theme to the evening, no plot, and really no through-line. And that's the idea.

From November 30 through January 2, David Ben brought his new show — well, a new show full of old material — to the Artword Theatre in Toronto.

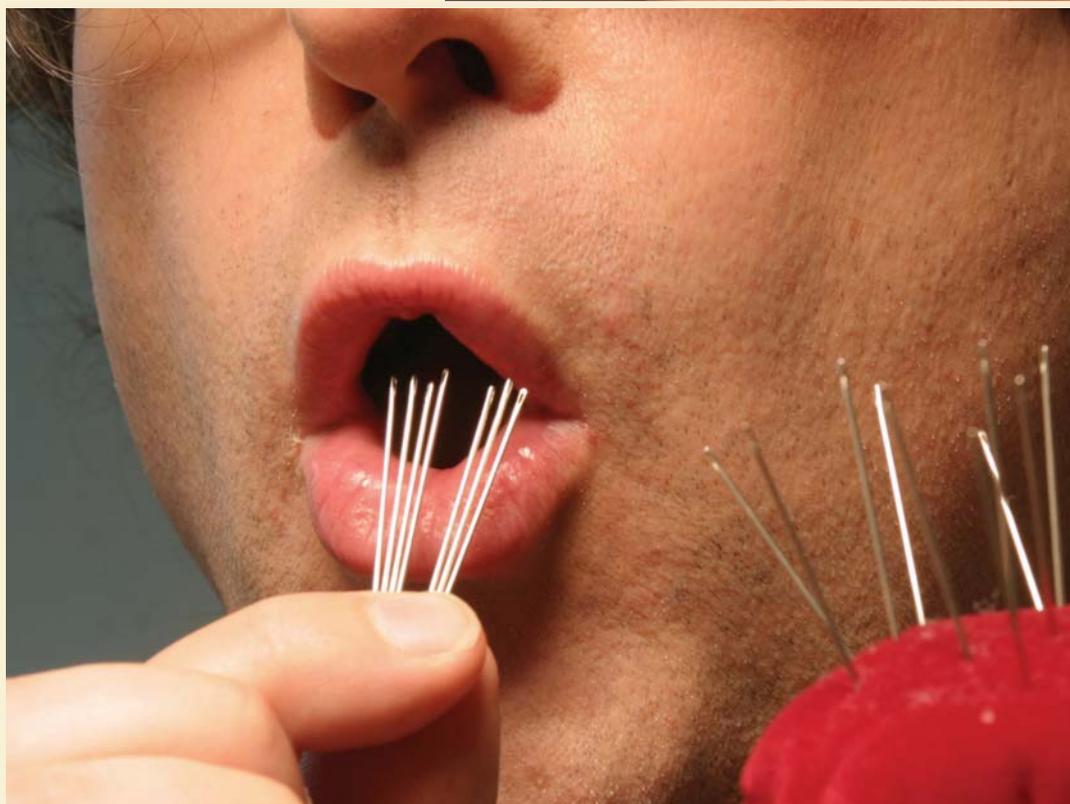
The title of the production? It doesn't get much simpler. It's *Tricks*.

About the new show, David Ben says, "There is no timeline or plot, just great tricks, comical and mysterious, beautiful and visceral, all performed with twists and turns." Gone is the premise of Ben's previous hit shows, *The Conjuror* and *The Conjuror's Suite*, in which the performer re-created an aura of master

magicians from eras gone by. In *The Conjuror* and its incarnations, Ben played the part of a magician, circa 1909, in the grand style of Charles Bertram or David Devant. In *Tricks*, David Ben plays himself. What *hasn't* changed about Ben and the way he presents his magic is the influence of the classics on his repertoire and the source of his inspiration — the past.

Tricks, though chock-full of gasp-getting material, is not made up of revolutionary, never-before-seen magic. Instead, the show is composed of material that has stood the test of time. It is a concert of sleight of hand, a series of hit after hit. And if there's anyone suited to breathing life into magical standards and bringing them back at hits, it's David Ben.

He also brought back the same talented



team he worked with on past theatrical endeavors. Patrick Watson, Canadian broadcasting icon, directed and co-wrote the show. John Lang composed original music for the production. Bonnie Beecher lit the show, and David Rayfield designed the sets. Suleyman Fattah and Julie Eng both worked as assistants in the production, as they had in *The Conjurator*.

The production was staged at the Artword Theatre in downtown Toronto, a smaller venue than others Ben has played in recent years. With its excellent sightlines and seating for 165, the show has an intimate feel. In this way, *Tricks* more closely resembles *The Conjurator's Suite*, a parlor show produced in 1999, than *The Conjurator*, which included illusions and stage-filling sets.

"This is not a show about pretension and piety," according to Ben. "I wanted to cast all that off and go back to the basics, the root of all magic, trickery just for the fun of it." And on the opening weekend that's exactly what the audience got: fun and lots of laughs, mixed with a heavy dose of head scratching and how-the-hell-did-he-do-thats?

So, what about the tricks themselves? What does David Ben do to inspire such awe and garner such gasps from his audiences?

For starters, he opens with his version of the Magic Square, a routine drawn directly from his recent book, *Tricks*. Inviting a spectator on stage, Ben asks her to think of the age of someone in the audience. A la Picasso (or is it Judah?), Ben then paints an abstract portrait of the thought-of age, in fact creating a magic square that adds up to the thought-of age.

As the rows, columns, corners, and diagonals are revealed to each add to the thought of number, the pace of the trick builds to a crescendo of loud applause.

The next effect yields an audible response from the audience, too. Three pasteboards are selected and shuffled into the pack, which is set in a clear wine glass. With a bit of coaxing from Mr. Ben, each selection rises slowly, steadily, and spookily from the deck. At the conclusion of the trick, a spectator removes the pack from the wineglass, and gets to keep it as a souvenir. Yes, it's a traditional trick. But in Ben's hands, the effect it has is super-sized. Seeing such a well-known piece of magic performed this way is a revelation. Here is a trick, written about by Robert-Houdin (in fact, Ben uses the great French magician's method for the Rising Cards) nearly 150 years ago, badly fooling a sophisticated audience.

Another highlight of the evening is Ben's feature presentation of the venerable, yet seldom-seen Rapping Hand. It's a trick that caused a sensation in the shows of Charles Carter, Otto Hornmann, and Paul Fleming. In David's hands, the effect of the carved wooden hand rapping out answers on a sheet of glass is positively novel, and at times, extremely

funny (though it ran a bit long in the show). At the conclusion of the trick, the hand crawls off the plate of glass into Ben's outstretched palms, providing an excellent applause cue.

Nearly every piece in *Tricks* involves audience participation in some way. Reprisals from *The Conjurator's Suite* includes the Cups and Balls and Malini's Card Stab.

The Cups and Balls routine, based on the work of Charles Bertram, Ross Bertram, and Dai Vernon, uses three young boys in the audience, each one interacting with the magician and instructing him as to where the balls should appear. The Card Stab involves five selected cards. Particularly effective is the stabbing of a selection that had fallen on the floor

was worth the price of admission. Rarely does magic such as this inspire such emotions in a spectator, let alone an audience.

The mainstream Toronto media, more often than not, praised Ben's penultimate piece, the Needle Trick. You know the drill: swallowing 20 shining needles and a length of cotton thread, Ben regurgitates the needles, now strung on the thread, with an almost-sickening series of coughs and spasms. Though such a trick may seem like old hat to the average magician — Hey, Houdini featured the trick, so it's got to be blasé, right? — to the layman, this one is a showstopper.

But stop there the show did not. Ben closes his performance with a rendition of



The old Needles trick is so strong, Ben uses it as his penultimate trick.

"by accident." The final tip-up of the tabletop that leaves most of the deck on the stage with the last selection impaled on the point of the knife. It makes a pretty picture and effective conclusion to the trick.

Sans spectators, Ben performs the Butterfly and Fan, making a graceful transition to the Snowstorm in China. Both tricks were well received, with the Butterfly serving as a wonderful set-up for the long-lingering visual of the Snowstorm.

Truth be told, though, the most powerful trick in the show is another one also performed with paper, the Torn-and-Restored Cigarette Paper. Ben invites a youngster on stage and hands her a small square of paper. The magician takes one and then cues the girl to follow his lead. The pair tears their papers in half and then in quarters. With the requisite wiggle of fingers, Ben restores his paper and lets it flutter to the floor. Next, his young assistant was instructed to do the same. The look of amazement on her face — a combination of sheer delight, wonder, awe, and fascination — as her paper is restored and flutters to the floor, a simulacrum of the magician's,

Dai Vernon's Symphony of the Rings, elegantly presented in Chinese Robe and mask, just as Vernon would have done it some 60 years ago as "Dai Yen."

Called back for an encore, Ben presents another classic piece of conjuring, the Dancing Handkerchief. The lively, animated piece of fabric interacts with the magician, plays hide-and-seek, and charms the spectators, all at the same time.

The remarkable job that David has done with *Tricks* is not just his selection of classic material. And he has always had a track record for presenting his magic with spot-on technique, erudite patter, and well thought-out staging and blocking. What is remarkable is that he developed a show of classic material, sans tigers, sans smoke machines, and devoid of anything remotely close to the definition of the word "glitz."

Tricks is exactly as advertised — a show of magic tricks presented in a modern manner — nothing more. The fact that Ben accomplished that and that alone, putting people in seats for a solid month, is perhaps his greatest trick. ♦