

Review: Derren Brown: Showman

By Su Carroll

Derren Brown: Showman, Theatre Royal Plymouth

How does he do that? No, seriously, how does he do that? The clues are there. Firstly Derren Brown introduces us to 19th century illusionists the Zancigs – Danish magicians who performed mind-reading acts. He weaves a fascinating story about their stage act and how they cleaned up in casinos through their amazing abilities.

Then he reminds us about the man who inspired a musical and the film *The Greatest Showman* – P T Barnum. The American circusmaster was a shrewd businessman who coined the phrase “there’s a sucker born every minute.” But Derren Brown doesn’t regard his audience as suckers. This is no cardsharp peddling his *Hunt the Queen* game on a street corner. We are an intelligent bunch. We could spot the trick, identify a tell, make a prediction. Of course we could.

No spoilers here, but early on he selects four men from the audience at random and gets them up on stage. What, he asks, are their partners most annoying habits? As they scribble down their answers, he gets the four women on stage too – shuffled up, as it were. So who is connected with who? Easy.

But it’s only easy for Derren – swiftly connecting the man who is annoyed at a failure to load a dishwasher properly with his other half while I had plumped for someone completely different.

Derren is the ultimate showman and before long you give up trying to work out how he does it and just thrill that he does. As each scenario plays out you become more and more drawn into the world of Derren Brown. He’s an evangelist, a preacher, a charmer and this show is all about connections.

He issued a plea for Plymouth patrons to bring in a small item very personal to them. He identified the stories behind four chosen at random. They were all (and this isn’t giving the game away) about loss. The things people took to the Lyric theatre were treasured items that helped us hang on to memories, to a comforting time in the past.

In a post-covid world, Derren Brown wasn’t just standing there performing tricks and illusions. He was making us connect – with each other, with absent friends and with him. Carrying his own sense of loss, gradually revealed, created an intense, almost visceral atmosphere.

I still don’t know how he does it, but what I do know is that *The Showman* is electrifying, fascinating and uplifting. Just what we needed.