

THE MANY ROLES OF THE CONJUROR

BY KARL JOHNSON



JEAN-EUGENE ROBERT-HOUDIN'S MAXIM ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE CONJUROR HAS MANAGED OVER THE YEARS—LIKE A SMALL, SELECT GROUP OF CLASSIC EFFECTS—TO KEEP ITS PUNCH DESPITE BEING SO FAMILIAR.

David Ben performing "Germain's Water Jars"



Surely everyone in magic knows how it goes: A conjuror, the great 19th century modernizer declared, is an actor playing the part of a magician. This seemingly simple idea has pulled off a neat trick: an aphorism that manages to avoid cliché. It has not, despite the gazillions of times it has been repeated, become empty. The maxim crops up constantly. It has been cited approvingly down through the ages by the widest range of influences on magic.

Dai Vernon enlisted it, and found it did comfortable duty, in his greatest cause, the quest for naturalism in sleight of hand. "Now I'm quite sure that what Robert-Houdin meant is that you must be an actor in every way when performing," Vernon says in Volume 4 of *The Vernon Chronicles*. "In other words when you are doing a sleight you must be an actor about it, never just do a sleight for the sleight's sake; you must act."

On the very first page of *Learn Magic*, his savvy and worthy text for beginners, Henry Hay (Barrows Mussey) quotes Robert-Houdin as the lead-in to a wise analysis of different performing styles. "You can take this in several ways, because there are several kinds of magician," Hay writes. "But any good performer gets close to that definition somehow."

Even David Blaine, in his new book, *Mysterious Stranger*, tips his knit hat to Robert-Houdin as an influence. And while we have no way of knowing what the great French master would have made of Blaine's acting choice—the messiah in FUBU—there's no denying that Blaine has, indeed, made a theatrical decision to play a certain part. (How it will play in the long run is, of course, the topic for another discussion.) The conjuror as actor as magician. Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin, it would seem, has succeeded in touching all the bases.

But there's a catch, of course; there always is. If three well known yet vastly different figures like Vernon, Hay, and Blaine can all claim Robert-Houdin as a guide, does it get us any closer to deciphering his famous dictum? Maybe his mantra has avoided becoming the empty vessel of cliché by becoming the exact opposite. Maybe it's the too-full vessel, so loaded with something for everyone that it's in danger of sinking under the weight of universal meaning.

David Ben's wonderful new revival of *The Conjuror* provides a particularly winning, and entertaining, opportunity to ponder yet again the nexus of conjuring and theater. Others, of course, work the same intersection of magic and theater with great success. But Ben's show, which completed a month-long holiday run



David Ben levitating his son, Courtney, in a recreation of Robert-Houdin's "Aerial Suspension"

(December 4 to January 5) at Toronto's new Isabel Bader Theater, is especially evocative of Robert-Houdin. In *The Conjuror*, he performs as a tuxedoed stage illusionist putting on a show in 1909 at St. Georges Hall in London. He summons forth various ghosts of that glorious, fertile Golden Age of magic—among them Herrmann, Germain, Okito, Kellar—and does superb versions of some of their classic effects. But perhaps none of these ghosts looms so close as Robert-Houdin himself. (Though the French master had long since passed from the scene by 1909—he died in 1871—his styles of dress and presentation were still powerful influences). And with Robert-Houdin so near, that quote of his must be there, too.

It can be a bit confusing, this theater-as-magic, magic-as-theater theorizing. If a magician is really an actor playing the part of a magician, as Robert-Houdin would have it, what on earth, then, is David Ben in *The Conjuror*? Is he an actor first? Is he a magician first? If he's an actor, well, he's not playing a dying salesman or the Prince of Denmark. He's playing the Conjuror, a slightly pompous, slightly awkward, always likable, always magical character who runs through some of the great effects of the period. If he's a magician, why go to all the trouble of dressing up the show as a period piece and have to worry about convincing people not only of the magic but that it's taking place 100 years ago? So what is he, anyway?

The best answer is that David Ben is a magician playing an actor playing the Conjuror. Happily, that makes for a wonderful magic



Suleyman Fattah, David Ben, and Julie Eng

show with some beautiful—and quite subtle—theatrical elements at its core. And those elements enhance the magic. *The Conjuror* can't be judged solely as a series of effects and Ben can't be judged solely as a magician. The magic may dominate, but Ben and his devoted director and co-writer, Canadian media and theatrical pioneer Patrick Watson, have underwritten the magic with some wise artistic deci-



Presenting "Okito's Floating Ball"



Performing "The Thumb Tie"

sions—theatrical decisions—that succeed in subtle, satisfying, and surprising ways.

Their most important theatrical choice is evident the minute after the curtain opens on *The Conjuror*. They've decided not to have a plot—at least, not a plot as we generally think of it, with characters speaking lines and running on and off stage and getting into trouble and bursting into song. There is just the Conjuror and his assistants—some of whom are cast members and some of whom are actual volunteers from the audience. There isn't even much back-story. The Conjuror introduces himself and quickly establishes that it's 1909 and

that's about it. He's rolling along into his character and into his magic. And we, the audience are rolling right along with him.

It's simple, this decision to forego plot, yet it still heightens the theatricality of the magic. Isn't that what Robert-Houdin was driving at? Everyone from Aristotle to David Mamet has advised us to keep our storylines simple. And, honestly, does anyone remember the plot behind Doug Henning's *The Magic Show*? There's no percentage in cluttering up as priceless a list of effects—ageless gems like the "Egg Bag," Germain's "Water Jars" and his "Blooming Rose Bush," Selbit's "Sawing in Half," the "Okito Floating Ball"—with some contrived storyline about a magician trying to get the girl or save the world, or both.

Ben's character the Conjuror really *is* the plot here. Off stage, Ben insists he's merely a student as an actor, but he has definitely created a character for *The Conjuror*. He's no longer the loquacious, polymathic Ross Bertram protégé, the deft-fingered card-handler with the silken second deal. He's the thoroughly magical, tuxedoed character on the St. Georges stage. His character works well, and *The Conjuror* works as theater because that's enough plot for us as an audience. We're suggestible. We want to see where he's going to take us, which miracle he's going to unfurl next. If he's not running around after a love interest or thwarting some evil plot, that's quite all right. He's busy with something else. He's got a magic show to do, and that's what we came to see.

The magic is of the highest order. Ben is by now an acknowledged master at reinventing classic effects, rescuing them from the obscurity of the musty graves of the bookshelf. He re-launches them, often relying on his own, modern handlings, in thoroughly original versions. It's easy to say about the greatest-hits list that he offers, "Yeah, yeah, every-

body knows them.” But when was the last time you saw Robert-Houdin’s “An Aerial Suspension” done with props that faithfully duplicate the original? Or taken in the “Sands of the Desert” refreshingly represented with a child volunteer on stage, heightening the mystery and the wonder? To know about these effects or to read about them is one thing. To see them in all their classic glory, live on a full-size stage, set to original music, is to begin to understand the theatrical potential of fine magic. Robert-Houdin surely would have nodded approvingly as the audience—which included several magical luminaries up for the revival—filed out for intermission on opening night, buzzing in puzzled wonderment over the “Sands of the Desert.”

Ben likes to say about *The Conjuror* that his greatest illusion is that it’s a one-man show. He’s the front man, and he gets the lion’s share of the applause, but he has a fine, deeply experienced team

behind him, many of whom are seasoned theatrical pros who were involved in earlier versions of *The Conjuror*. As director, Watson’s elegant, thoughtful touches are everywhere—from the humorous, informative narrative he and Ben have crafted for the Conjuror (full of historical allusions and self-deprecating asides) right down to Ben’s footwork and the angles at which he works various effects. The set by William Schmuck and the lighting by Bonnie Beecher serve to enhance the plot (and compensate for any lack of back story) by instantly placing the audience in St. Georges. One of the most fundamental changes from earlier productions is the music. Previously, *The Conjuror* featured classical pieces of the time as its theme music. Now it features an original score by John Lang, which must be hailed. Lang’s music is wonderfully evocative, reminiscent of the classic Hollywood soundtracks of the 1930s, and it does much to reinforce the mood and to complement the action.

Ben is not the only one called on to do some acting in the service of the magic. His various on-stage assistants—his cohorts, not the legitimate audience volunteers—succeed wonderfully at enhancing the theatricality of the show. Most prominent is Suleyman Fattah, returning in his role as the Conjuror’s Assistant (identified in the program as “a mysterious figure even to the Conjuror”). He shows adroitly why a polished helper is so vital to a stage magician. Fattah also shows why he’s an actor. While smoothly, and more importantly invisibly, assisting in much of the magic, he never forgets to play his role, and he does so to increasingly subtle humorous effect as the 90-minute show progresses. Julie Eng, herself a magician and the real-life wife of Fattah, acts beautifully in her role as a wrecked volunteer—is she hypnotized? drugged?—who vanishes while floating up to the rafters in Servais Leroy’s “Asrah.” And Ben’s son Courtney makes his debut in this revival, playing an assistant of sorts to the Assistant, and he fulfills his magical duty as the one being suspended in the impressive version of Robert-Houdin’s “Aerial Suspension.”

Kenneth Delaney, another *Conjuror* veteran, does a great comedic turn as a hapless backstage technician who gets dragged on stage to



The mysterious “Sands of the Desert”

stand in for some reluctant audience members in the Selbit “Sawing in Two” routine. The presentation here is definitely theater. Delaney’s turn shows most of all, after Ben’s, how good acting—good theater—not only enhances the magic, but, in the context of *The Conjuror*, allows for a new interpretation of a classic.

When the volunteers are initially summoned for the Sawing, they exhibit the usual, quite understandable trepidation at being up on stage. They aren’t made any more comfortable when they see the effect for which they’ve been picked, since it appears that one of them is intended as the victim headed for the box. When they balk, the accommodating Conjuror reacts with barely more than a shrug. He doesn’t miss a beat as the quick-thinking Fattah drags Delaney, still wearing his technician’s mike, onstage bodily. Delaney’s character is a mod-

ern figure who crashes through the pretense of the 1909 setting. No matter. He’ll have to do. He’s strapped in and the illusion continues. The volunteers relax, and they play along by helping to pull the ropes that apparently enable a clean cutting. The audience loosens up, too, and the “Sawing in Two” becomes practically a rollicking, postmodern affair. Baz Luhrman couldn’t have pulled it off any better.

In one key area, Ben’s not really acting at all, and it’s worth highlighting because it’s such a crucial element not only to the presentation of many of the effects, but to both his own personality and the character of the Conjuror as well. The Conjuror has a noticeably easy rapport with children on stage—kids are, in fact, fundamental to several of the routines—and to see a guy with a healthy Erdnase-Vernon obsession interacting so comfortably with children on stage is astonishing. One local reviewer posited that Ben’s success in this area stems from his ability to treat adults like children and children like adults. That’s a great line, but the thought just misses the mark. It’s more that he treats anyone who comes up on stage with the respect due a ready co-conspirator. He joins them for the illusion and so, in turn, does the audience.

So what, in the end, is *The Conjuror*? Relaxing with a glass of wine after the opening with the gathered magicians, Ben resolutely called it a work in progress. He wasn’t just being humble. He and Watson are forever tinkering and editing and even this month-long run saw some big changes. The ambition now is to get *The Conjuror* to London and it’s likely that that version will be considerably different from this latest version. So is it magic? Is it theater? Ben and Watson have structured and staged *The Conjuror* as magic and theater come together. The best of magic always relies on acting—“watch the hand holding the coin”—and the best of theater is always sparked by magic. That’s what Robert-Houdin was urging, and that’s what Ben and Watson have pulled off yet again. And that’s a pretty neat trick, too. ♦

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