

Magician deftly conjures charming show

David Ben spares the glitz and spoils the audience with
simple, old-fashioned magic

By Steven Mazey

For anyone who has ever sat through the loud, overproduced Las Vegas spectacles staged by David Copperfield, the words “magic show” can produce an involuntary shudder.

Copperfield, the permanently tanned Ken Doll who is probably the world’s best-known magician these days, pumps up the rock music and spends a lot of time strutting and posing through a show that has one motto: bigger is better. At his most recent Ottawa show, Copperfield did everything short of having a 747 land on stage. But there was precious little charm, wit or magic to his magic.

David Ben’s *The Conjuror*, which opened at Centrepointe Theatre last night and continues tonight and tomorrow, is effective precisely because it avoids the heavy-handed, over-the-top vulgarity that is Copperfield’s trademark.

Ben’s charming show, a hit for two summers at the Shaw Festival, goes back in time with a simple, old-fashioned magic show of the kind audiences loved in the early years of the century.

Ben’s show is intimate, warm and human, with a low-key, low-tech approach. And the mop-haired Toronto magician presents it with refreshing subtlety, flair and respect for an audience’s intelligence.

Ben created the show with broadcaster and magic aficionado Patrick Watson, and you can feel the affection the two men have for the traditions of the trade. Unlike Copperfield, Ben and Watson seem to know that a simple, uncluttered illusion can be far more charming and effective than some hugely expensive bit featuring smoke, sound effects and pounding music.

Dressed in formal evening wear, Ben opens the show with simple illusions and gradually escalates to more elaborate bits, accompanied by classical music and chatting in a winning, relaxed style with the crowd.

He holds up an empty glass bowl. A wave of a cloth, and voila, the bowl is full of oranges, which he proceeds to toss into the crowd.

He coaxes a young volunteer from the audience and teaches her how to hypnotize an egg. From other volunteers, Ben pulls coins out of nowhere.

Taking an audience member’s torn \$20 bill, he suddenly manages to find it inside the cigarette of another volunteer.

He pulls out a set of those traditional “Chinese linking rings,” doing the familiar non-they’re linked-now-they’re not routine, and making it seem fresh again.

From six empty bowls, he suddenly produces enough water to fill a huge pitcher.

One of the highlights is another traditional illusion, in which he seems to make a young woman from the audience float in mid-air. As he brings it to a dramatic finish, Ben’s variation on the routine is typical of the kind of attention to details that make *The Conjuror* so simply effective, so richly appealing.