Look into my eyes, deep into my eyes

He's gay, an atheist, a magician – and our favourite entertainer. *Erica Wagner* talks to Derren Brown about losing God and finding himself

PAUL STUART / TWENTY TWENTY FOR THE TIMES

MASTER OF MANIPULATION On stage Brown steers our beliefs and assumptions. Magic, he says, is about control and learning how "to handle people right"

You could work yourself into quite a state in anticipation of an encounter with Derren Brown. The day before we were due to meet, I lost my Oyster card. Now, the thing is, I don't ever really lose stuff; let's not call me neurotic about it, but you get the gist. So, the day of our interview, I bought a Travelcard in the morning. In the afternoon I headed for the Tube . . . no Travelcard. Not anywhere. I bought another and then went to where I'd been told I'd find his flat in a big Victorian mansion block . . . there was no block of flats, there was a coffee shop, and I was sure he didn't live there.

Luckily, a call to his PR adviser and psychotherapist, Greg Day, put me on the right track, but how was it that Brown had kept his true address secret from the all-knowing Google maps? Had he somehow, using only magic mental powers, caused my Oyster and Travelcards to vanish? By the time I arrived, a bit sweaty and flustered, at the place I was meant to be, I was ready to believe anything.

Brown in the flesh is no Lord Voldemort. He's not even Harry Potter. He's just a really nice guy. All right, his huge and rather grand flat is a sort of frozen zoo, a mini-museum of the taxidermist's art; all right, he's wearing a waistcoat and his trademark goatee beard is a wee bit wizardy. Before we settle down he makes a round of tea, not only for me but for the photographer and his crew, too; Day says, as I take out my tape recorder, you've got about an hour; Brown turns to me and says: "You've got as long as you like." I don't know what I was expecting — and, having read his book, *Tricks of the Mind*, I do know that my Oyster card heebie-jeebies are nothing more than a circular belief — but the extent of his courtesy and attentiveness is a pleasant surprise.

He says in his new book, *Confessions of a Conjurer*, that he believes kindness to be the cardinal human virtue. I don't disagree, but how does that opinion square with his latest television spectacle, *Hero at 30,000 Feet*, broadcast recently on Channel 4? The show took Matt, a regular joe stalled in his life, and showed him what he was capable of by convincing him that he could land a passenger airliner — when previously he'd been too scared to fly. No, it wasn't a trick, as such, but it was done with the collusion of friends and family. The airliner wasn't an airliner; it was a simulator. Sure, it was all in aid of fostering his self-belief, but couldn't you argue that it was a bit cruel? "Well, I don't know," Brown says. He's curled up in a big leather chair; I'm on the big leather sofa across from him. The flat manages to escape looking like a leftover set from Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* by virtue of looking lived in — there are books that have clearly been read, the kitchen's quite normal, there are pictures of Brown with his partner, Mark. "Matt had such a wonderful experience with it. We were very careful with it, we were in constant contact with his work, with his family, to make sure that he wasn't freaking out too much . . . And watching his transformation was very moving for all of us. The train tracks" — at one point Matt was made to lie down, tied up, in front of an oncoming train and had to extricate himself; there have been complaints to Ofcom about this part — "he just so got it. It had to be frightening; and if you look carefully the train's not going that fast. When he came out he was elated by it, not 'What the hell have you done to me?'. So it's about handling people right."

If you wanted to define what Brown does, "handling people right" just might do it. He has been called a psychological illusionist, which indicates the direction in which he's headed. He discovered magic, conjuring, while studying law and German at Bristol University; his apprenticeship as a table-hopping, dinner-entertainment sleight-of-hand magician is a thread that runs through *Confessions of a Conjuror*. What the book reveals is what an acute observer of human behaviour he is. Those skills are vital in setting up close-up magic, as the book demonstrates, but this deep interest in the way we think and act has surely driven all his TV work. This skill makes being in his presence, however sweet he seems, a little unnerving, but he assures me that there's a difference, for him, between work and life.

How did he hone those observational, analytical powers? He shrugs and looks a bit abashed. "Probably the prosaic and disappointing answer is that it came with the territory. I started off as a hypnotist; so I became very aware of suggestion, and that immediately gives you a real awareness of things. Doing magic, that's a very local and specific thing. But you learn to work with people's attention, what signs to look for, as you do, in your job. You learn certain signals and learn to change what you do to keep the situation as you want it to move towards a particular end." I'm flattered by the compliment, but I doubt I could keep Brown on a track that he didn't want to go down, if I were so inclined.

"It's not like I grew up as this hyper-observant, odd child — all right, I might have been an odd child, but I wasn't a mini-mind-reader — it all came with learning the skills around the time of university. It's absolutely something I switch on when I'm working and, of course, it's part of the job to make it all look more impressive than it is. That doesn't mean I'm living in that world all the time — I couldn't have a normal conversation! I've made a couple of friends recently and realised that in our first few meetings they thought I was doing that all the time, which threw me, I have to say. None of that enters my real life at all."

On stage, and on television, he manipulates our systems of beliefs and assumptions; in real life he was once a practising Christian. He calls himself an atheist now. In *Confessions of a Conjurer* there is a nice description of a reason to hang on to religious faith — simply, that it makes the believer happy. As for himself: "I don't think it made me happy, but if you believe that it's true, you believe it's true." I know when I came out of it I suddenly felt that a safety net wasn't there; and then there was a delight in realising that only what I brought into my life was going to give anything back to me. There was nothing else, and so it was up to me to live the best life possible."

He was, too, involved with that segment of Christianity that believes it's possible to "heal" believers of a homosexual orientation. I'm surprised when he repeats, more than once, that his experience of this was "all very gentle and well-meaning". "I didn't get deeply involved," he says. "But I did go to one of their conferences, and I did read the books, and it strung out this feeling of, well, if I don't get cured, at least if I work with this kind of plan, with this kind of thinking, it will probably go away. And then I got to my thirties, and I started to see lonely old men sitting in the corners of restaurants wearing jewellery and fedoras and I thought, I don't want to end up like that. So I thought I should probably deal with it and have a relationship."

Of the process of coming out — which he did publicly a few years ago — he says: "You live in this day and age which is far from perfect but fairly enlightened, but you've lived with this really awkward area . . . When you let that go you expect a big reaction from people — but, of course, you don't get one because they've either already guessed, or they don't really care; it isn't a big deal to them. It was kind of elating, the discovery that you don't have to worry."

He has the air of a man who knows that he's lucky; he says that when it came to considering a career, his main concerns were being able to get up in the morning whenever he wanted to, and not having people boss him about. He loves performing live — a new stage show, *Svengali*, starts touring next spring; tickets are on sale although, "terrifyingly", he has no idea yet what the show will consist of. After that, he may well head for Broadway.

All in all, he seems very comfortable in himself; the only awkwardness comes when I say, pretty sheepishly, that I am hoping, er, to be, you know, amazed at some point in our conversation. I am sheepish because it strikes me that you couldn't meet a fellow less likely to show off for the sake of it; one way of describing magic, he says, is as "the quickest route to impressing people". "If you chase that desire, it probably comes from somewhere where you need that; as it did for me when I started out. It's about impressing people, it's about control . . . But you choose your career in your twenties and by the time you reach your thirties you begin to wonder if you couldn't be doing something a bit more meaningful. So the TV work has moved away from me doing tricks. The last thing I did like that was the *Events* I did last autumn. It's the thing I've liked least, you know."

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That series included his predicting the winning numbers in the lottery and "explaining" how he'd done it; of that he says: "It's the only thing I've done that I'm really desperately unhappy with." The explanation is convoluted, but clearly he was taken aback by the huge publicity that attended the show. In his telling, that huge scrutiny put pressure on him, and Channel 4, to handle the way the "explanation", which ran two nights after the draw, was handled. A crucial segment of that show (apparently showing that he had "fixed" the lottery) was cut out of the final edit. "The effect of the show was that you felt you were supposed to believe the explanation I did give" — the wisdom of crowds, the ability for a group of people to divine a number by concentrating all together — "but there was no alternative really offered. So, understandably people watched it and thought it was just a lie. And that left me very, very uncomfortable."

Brown does, in the end, give me a trick. He asks me to draw a picture, something concrete, not a stick man or a house; he gives me A4 paper and a pen. He turns away, covers his eyes and hums while I draw . . . I look behind me for a mirror, but I can't see one. When I'm done, he asks me to fold it up in a tiny square and put it away; I hide it in the bottom of my bag. I draw a sort of awkward eagle; I'd started, just a little, to draw an airplane, but thought better of it, too obvious after *Hero at 30,000 Feet*.

When I have done, we keep chatting; he says we should until what I've drawn "comes to him". After about five minutes he seems distracted, as if his mind is elsewhere — OK, he's ready, he says. And so he takes another sheet of A4, and the pen he'd given me, and instructs me to lay my drawing hand lightly on his as he moves the pen over the paper. Not too much pressure, not too little. Sure enough, within a few minutes, an eerily accurate version of my drawing begins to appear, and I laugh in spite of myself. I know it's not mind-reading, but I'm a little spooked when he says: "You were thinking of drawing an airplane and then you thought that was too close to the show." I know it's a "turn", but I don't really care. It feels like magic, a word that means, according to Brown, "a shorthand for a type of experience rather than any one particular thing. It's something you perceive, it's something that happens in your mind. You interpret something in such a way that it isn't just bewilderment, it isn't just confusion, it's delightful in some way."

That, I promise, it surely is.

***Confessions of a Conjurer* by Derren Brown is published by Transworld, £18.99. Tour dates: derrenbrown.co.uk**

To see Erica and Derren's drawings, go to thetimes.co.uk/books

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It's just an illusion

Harry Houdini
Born in 1874, "The Handcuff King" became the highest-paid performer in American vaudeville. In the Chinese Water Torture Cell act he escaped from a locked glass and steel cabinet overflowing with water. He revealed some of his secrets: regurgitating keys and dislocating his shoulders to get out of a straitjacket. He was a keen debunker of self-proclaimed psychics and mediums. One of his most famous non-escape stage illusions was to make an elephant disappear.

Penn and Teller
A double act who specialise in gory tricks and often politically charged stunts. Penn does the telling, while Teller keeps quiet. Performances include dangling upside down over spikes in a straitjacket or being run over by an 18-wheel tractor-trailer. One of their most recent tricks involved Penn playing Russian roulette with a nail gun.

David Blaine
Blaine's baffling endurance feats include being encased in ice for 63 hours, balancing on a 30m pole for 35 hours and being submerged in water for a week. The British proved a tougher crowd to please during his 44-day stay in a Plexiglass box over the Thames: they hurled eggs, lemons, sausages and bacon. He didn't eat anything for the duration of the stunt.

Megan Walsh