

BRETT DANIELS: ANOTHER DAY AT THE OFFICE

A review of Brett Daniels' third show at the Gold Strike

Journey into the Unknown

The rat race. You have a house in the burbs, and the commute to work takes an hour each way, sometimes longer. You get only one day a week off, and you put in late hours. You're committed to years of this grind, and who knows what the future holds after that? A working man's nightmare? Not if you're Brett Daniels. Not if your home is in Memphis, and your office is a designer theater at Mandalay Bay's elegant Gold Strike casino/hotel. Not if you receive those generous Gold Strike checks for doing what most magicians would sell their mothers to do. And not, thanks to inspired management, if you get to reinvent your show each year, to keep it fresh and cutting edge for both yourself and your audiences.

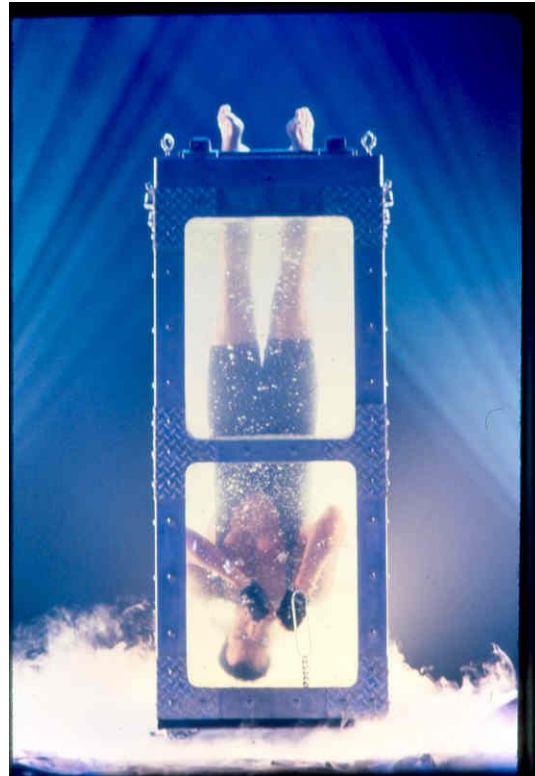
I visited the Gold Strike recently to witness *Journey into the Unknown* (so-called "because we had absolutely no idea what we were going to be doing up here," Brett quips), the third incarnation of Brett Daniels' show just south of Memphis. I wanted to see what was new (most of the show) and what was left (stunning signature pieces) of *Brett Daniels: Magic and Beyond* and *Magique*. As Brett explains, "We'll be exploring flaws in the fabric of the universe, in the fabric of logic, in the fabric of my underwear ..."



Despite the annual overhaul, returning faithful experience a sense of continuity as soon as they enter the theater, where the flanking video portholes look out onto a computer simulated world of dancing robots and retro spaceships, as huge electrostatic globes sizzle like scenic elements in a Frankenstein movie, and as the show begins to the strains of Danny Elfman's *Batman* theme. Even retired illusions contribute to the yearly transition as they assume museum status in the outer lobby. Here the audience can touch the heavy metal instruments of torture and sense the danger and the reality of the stage effects. Newest in the evolving Brett Daniels Story is the "Water Torture Chamber" from which Brett used to escape during the run of *Magique*. Up close one senses its seriously claustrophobic nature.

Brett retains his defining effects in the show, particularly his bird work – who can forget the sight of a bird swooping from the rear of the theater to pluck a selected card in its beak from a

tossed deck? – and his mega-illusion closer, the sudden appearance of a full-scale Navy fighter jet. These are the magic tricks people tell their friends about and bring others to see. (Observant fans will note that Brett's traditional themes are still in play. There is a vehicular subtext, with lightning-quick productions of a motorcycle, a Lamborghini, a Navy jet. There is the flight subtext, with magic involving birds, a jet turbine, a self-levitation, a jet plane.)



Brett visually reinterprets Houdini's famed Water Torture Cell Escape

Helping to bridge the old and the new elements of the show are Brett's talented on stage cast, most notably seven of the cutest young dancers in show business. Exquisitely attired and expertly choreographed, the girls are featured elements of entertainment in the show. In a new science-fiction number called "Quantum Teleportation," the girls appear as scientists in short white lab coats and Clark Kent spectacles. "How is your data?" Brett asks. "How is your coefficient?" To the rock beat of The Guess Who's "American Woman," they shimmy and shake in long blue pants and American flag bras, just before causing a discombobulated male audience member to vanish. (He reappears later in a "Backstage With the Magician" illusion.) The most romantic interlude in the show is Brett's work with a petite dancer whose ballet skills enhance the beauty and charm of Steinmeyer's "Origami." She is folded into a small package and pierced with swords to Mariah Carey's "Hero." Magically the swords begin to remove themselves from the box, and the girl emerges from the unfolded container into Brett's arms. They spin as the music and single spot fade out.

It's a tight cast. If you had noticed that the ushers leading you to your seats were uncommonly poised and beautiful, with ponytails that were a cascade of curls, it's because these girls would assume the roles of dancers once the show began. Similarly, Dana Nelson continues as Brett's Showroom Manager who "fills in at the last minute" as a comedic juggler. On stage, Dana is to Brett what Michael Goudeau is to Lance, and it's a crazy turn involving torches, a balance beam, a unicycle, cigar boxes, and a toilet plunger. Later, to the music of Bobby Darin's "Splish Splash," Dana reappears to laughs in the "Shower Illusion." Although a brief look at a dancer wearing only a towel and the sexy shadows on the shower curtain lead the audience to think they are about to see a wet nude dancer, it's only Dana that they find when Brett whips the curtain open, with his toilet plunger in hand. "I'm here to fix a clogged drain," he explains. (In his Showroom Manager role, Dana was kind enough to escort me into the room where the Jack Binion World Championship Poker Tournament was under way, where one of the pots hit a half million dollars!)



Also continuing in his Mandalay Bay staff consultant/co-producer role is the indispensable Paul Harris. Paul turns up each year to collaborate on the changes, and his presence is especially noted in this year's close-up segment, in which Brett performs "Twilight" along with various "Winged Silver" and "Han Ping Chien" passages. Paul's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* mirror-and-coin effect is a thing of beauty in Brett's hands and a perfect routine for televised enlargement. The only drawback to focusing on this magic of the hands is that you miss the joy on Brett's face, which I chanced to study on this visit. In this as well as in the larger illusions and the bird and card work, it's clear that Brett Daniels is a guy who loves his job.



Brett segues from this hand mirror effect to "Walking Through a Mirror," a gorgeous and baffling illusion and one of several that evoke fond memories of Doug Henning. Brett displays the mirror in the lobby prior to the show and has it brought down the aisle for one last look before using it in the illusion. A child is invited up on stage to witness the penetration first hand. Along with the Henning-inspired "Origami" and "Walking Through a Mirror," Brett later performs a high tech version of "Things That Go Bump in the Night." The raised chamber in which Brett stands is barely wide enough to contain him, and its walls are quite thin. I've no idea whatsoever where the girls come from or how Brett is switched out. Perhaps, as Doug would have wanted it, it's magic.

The highlight of the new show, the one that will send magicians away talking, is a levitation that Brett introduces as a specific homage to Doug, and to Doug's wish to fly. The effect begins as the "Pole Levitation," in which Brett sits in Lotus position (a la Doug), his hands barely touching two tall vertical poles aside him. Slowly and traditionally, he floats upward, in full light. There is no backdrop. The dancers select a lady from the audience who is instructed to remove one pole, then the other. Brett descends to her level, and on instruction the lady passes her hand both over his head and under his seat. She holds Brett's hand, and he rises a bit and then descends a bit as she does so. Eventually she returns to her seat, and Brett floats upward and out of sight, waving. It's a beautiful illusion and one that you can't help feeling that Doug would have greatly enjoyed.



Fly the friendly skies!

For the record, Brett's *Journey* also introduces the production of Brett in a vertical crystal cabinet, the production of a girl from a smaller crystal cabinet, a couple of illusions involving spikes, and an Okito-style floating ball. In all his effects, Brett extends the mystery beyond your expectations. The productions (of a girl astride a motorcycle, of Brett *and* a motorcycle, of the car, the jet) are breathtakingly fast. Shadows (Brett being impaled by flaming spikes, a girl showering, Brett teleporting from one side of the stage to the other) mess with your sense of what is where. Stunning young women in racy attire (sparkly silver short shorts and bras, lace-up-the-side leathers, tight velour body suits) divert your gaze. Combine this with Steinmeyer-class methodology, pricey backdrops, serious light and sound effects, and a skilled performer who looks great and loves magic, and you have a show worth seeing in any year.