

Q & A

with David Copperfield

Interviewed by Caroline Fontein

There is no name that has become more synonymous with magic than David Copperfield. Since his start as a magician when he was 8 years old, he has been working to redefine magic. Copperfield, born David Seth Kotkin, started performing professionally when he was just 12 years old as "Davino the boy magician." That same year he also became the youngest person ever to be admitted to the Society of American Magicians. From there, Copperfield went on to teach a course on magic at New York University when he was 16.

During his first year in college, Copperfield starred in the Chicago musical, "The Magic Man," and as a result of the show's success, he was selected to host ABC's "The Magic of ABC." From there he was offered his own series of specials with CBS titled "The Magic of David Copperfield." The series has been aired in over 40 countries.

Apart from his revue in Vegas, Copperfield continues to tour, performing sold out shows around the world. He is a Guinness Book of World Record holder for having 21 Emmys, and he has a star on the Hollywood "Walk of Fame."

His enduring presence as a magician and his integration into pop culture and even postage stamps proves that Copperfield's magic has no boundaries.

What made you decide to become a magician and what did you do to acquire those skills?

For some reason magic came very natural to me. When I started doing magic I started as a ventriloquist, and I was a very bad ventriloquist, my lips were flapping in the wind... I liked the unique quality of [ventriloquism] and the illusion quality of it. I went to the local library... and they had ventriloquism books right next to the magic books. I would take out [magic] books and I would challenge myself. I would read the effects and what the audience was supposed to see, and I would not look at the method or the secret behind it. I forced myself to come up with my own method on how to do that piece of magic... without reading the explanation. In doing so, I ended up inventing things that were different from what was already in the book. This was when I was eight years old, and it was really kind of fun.

So, I invented a lot of magic and that magic got published in a lot of encyclopedias. There is an encyclopedia called "Tarbell Course of Magic," which is from the '20s and '30s. At the magic store in New York they were writing a new volume, "Tarbell 7," and when I was twelve years old my inventions were published in that very prestigious encyclopedia... Magic kind of came natural to me. I was horrible at everything else. Magic for some reason not only caught my imagination, but it allowed me to feel special, and I was motivated to create something new and fresh.

Where do you get the ideas for your illusions?

I loved theater so much, but I was good at magic so I tried to combine the two and find a way of making magic very theatrical and really making magic moving as well as amazing. Everyone always created wonder, if you did magic well, but to have the audience really laugh or really cry or to tell stories with magic was something that I brought to our craft. I really focused in on that idea...

In the beginning my ideas came from MGM musicals, or movies or things that really moved me. Then it went to a period where I was doing these big vanishes and escapes... with large objects or ideas, things that people were familiar with... Then my magic became very sensual and my ideas came from emotions of romance and stories.

Recently it's been about peoples' dreams. I did a Broadway show and my collaborator was Francis Ford Coppola... and Francis came up with an idea for a show called "Dreams and Nightmares." He motivated me to make all of my magic based on my personal dreams or my personal nightmares. So everything in the show was based on things that happened in my life. Then that inspired me to create magic about other people's dreams.

Once you have an idea, what process do you go through to be able to perform that illusion in front of an audience?

You have an idea and then you have to come up with technology to create it, much like you would in a movie except you have to do it live and it has to work from every angle every night. So, you make models and mock-ups. I have a whole warehouse and designers that I collaborate with, and we come up with these things and it takes about two years to create each illusion and three years of trial and error before they are perfect.

What would you say has been the most difficult illusion to perform?

Each illusion has its own difficulty. If you're doing sleight of hand, the difficulty is obvious, development of personal skill. When you're doing big stage illusions, it's physical skill or invention difficulty...because you are creating theater from scratch. I am not a singer ...that can take other's peoples' music and perform it. I have to start from the very beginning, and I have to write it, direct it, light it and make sure that every aspect is right, including building it and testing it in front of the audience. It's a long process.

Is there anything that you had to do different with your show to suit audiences in Las Vegas?

I have done about ten world tours and when I play those cities I really customize the show for those cities. I say my jokes in French when I'm in France. When I'm in Canada I'll do local humor... Then what happens is that all of those people come to Las Vegas expecting me to say those same jokes... so the audience becomes a giant tower of Babel... The magic will always make sense and to them wonder is wonder. I know what to expect as far as that goes, but ... in Vegas everyone comes in



Photo courtesy of Guy Aroch

When not on stage performing, Copperfield spends his time creating new illusions, using his island paradise as a source of inspiration.

the world. It's quite challenging and a lot of fun.

You have a lot of interaction with the audience in your show. Have you ever had any funny or unusual things happen with audience members when they have participated in an illusion?

All the time... People ask how can you do 500 shows a year... and if I was just doing a show that was pre-recorded with the same thing every show, there's no way I could do it. I do it because you never know who is going to stand up. We throw Frisbees in the audience and big bouncing balls and people are chosen totally at random. When you have somebody stand up, and they give you a little bit of trouble, it's fun. The audience really feels it...it's way better than doing the same thing show after show.

You have a busy performance schedule with shows at least twice a night in Las Vegas. What do you do to stay creative and inspired as a performer?

I have the islands in the Bahamas, which might be the best place in the world... It's become a passion for me putting all of my team together creating magical adventures that take place there. It helps my show and the show helps the islands. It's really remarkable... It's eleven islands in the Exumas in the Bahamas which were also found in a very magical way.

I looked for the most perfect place in the world and just by luck I picked four of the most magical architectural wonders... I drew a line on the globe from Stonehenge in England to the statues on Easter Island, Chile. Then I drew a line from the pyramids in Mexico to the pyramids of Giza in Egypt...and on the globe made an X connecting those four magical places. That X converges in the Exumas in the Bahamas... I went to visit those islands, and I acquired eleven of them. They've become the islands of Copperfield Bay.

Tell me about some of your collections in The International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts.

It's just an amazing place, also in Vegas... It's 80,000 pieces that belong to not only Houdini but Keller, Thurston, Blackstone and all the greats of magic. It's all of their books, all their props, magic sets, their scrapbooks, letters and props that are actually working. We make them work. It's only for scholars, students of magic and special guests that come by invitation only to see this amazing collection of things that is also very inspiring.

What prompted you to start this collection?

It was kind of an accident. I never looked back, I never really paid attention to the history of magic. I knew enough about the history of magic to invent new things, but all through half of my career I never really cared about the people who preceded me. My idols were Walt Disney, Orson Wells, Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra. It wasn't Houdini, Thurston and Keller. It was people who were where I wanted to be, who were moving people emotionally.

Then one day a collection was up for sale that was going to be split into many different places called the Mulholland Library of Conjuring Arts... A friend came to me and said that you should buy this and keep this together, and I did. That was one major part of it...then I started acquiring all kinds of other collections from other people... Now I have a renewed great respect for all of those people that I really was not paying attention to before because they lived the same lifestyle that I am living now.

You have walked through the Great Wall of China and made the Statue of Liberty disappear. Do you have ideas for any upcoming illusions involving another iconic landmark?

I do, and I don't really want to discuss them. I want to be able to do them first, but when I am in Vegas I have been spending all of my time transforming the interior of my warehouse into an island... All of my new show material is based on things that are taking place on the island... It's great because that's what I do. My job is to make people forget about their problems and dream and be transported, and what better place to be transported and to dream than in paradise? If I can make the paradise that I have an even more magical paradise and at the same time make my show a more dream-like experience by taking people to paradise, whether they are in Las Vegas or in Chicago, then I think I've done my job.