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SUBHEADLINE: Unless you vanished from the world two decades ago and have just returned, chances are you've heard the name David Copperfield \_ it's magic and it is on its way to Thailand

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BYLINE: Picture courtesy BEC-TERO

Evaporated, disappeared, vanished into thin air.... The girl in the canary yellow windbreaker was here in the flesh just a few seconds ago! But she disappeared in the twinkling of an eye as a light veil touched down upon the open shaft on which she and David Copperfield were standing.

Now she is seen on a big screen, soaking her feet in an idyllic place \_ Hawaii, they say \_ caressing the golden sand in her hands.

But no use knocking yourself out, or racking your brain to exhaustion. No matter how many times you might attend the show you won't uncover the hows, whys and wherefores, nor even detect a shadow of a clue of how it is all done.

That's the trick of the trade brought to an unrivalled level of perfection by internationally acclaimed illusionist David Copperfield, recipient of numerous Emmy awards, ranked the seventh highest paid entertainer in the world, and famous for tricks such as making an aeroplane, a 70-tonne Orient Express railcar and the Statue of Liberty disappear, and walking through the Great Wall of China.

Mystery and secrecy prevail in this business where staff members of the Magic of David Copperfield (MODC) team are requested to sign secrecy agreements and are never fully in the know.

`` Sometimes people know portions of it but not the whole. And if they reveal these tricks, we kill them!" kidded David Copperfield, obviously a born joker, during a private interview with the Thai press in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was performing.

`` I use physics, psychology, mathematics ... There are scientists, engineers, chemists, mathematicians and psychologists working for me," the 45-year old magician explained. `` I have four or five different methods for each of my illusions. So if parts are disclosed I can use another way," he revealed, ruling that trying to find out the devices behind the stunts was of no particular advantage.

`` No, you don't want to know ..." Copperfield presumed.

Perhaps he's right, because not knowing is the whole charm of magic shows. It's probably best just to revel in total ignorance of the stratagems employed and let yourself be engulfed in the ocean of illusions the `` King of the Conjurers" has created.

From start to finish \_ the show is a good two hours, from his first appearance on a Harley-Davidson in a big white box proved thoroughly empty a split second before, to his Hawaiian beach feat \_ you will be taken in. From small sleight-of-hand tricks to huge tours and stunts, you will be left forever wondering.

`` How did he do that? How on earth did he split himself in two or squeeze himself into a 10-centimetre gnome with just a head, a non-existent body and feet?

You are condemned to ponder, although the highly interactive performance gives you the illusion that you might be able to discover some tricks by being one of those spectators who seem to vanish into thin air.

`` They [those who participate] don't understand it either," Copperfield concludes, putting an end to our last source of hope.

In this realm of entertainment, magic is unlimited and almighty, even when the master himself admits that `` it actually happens a lot that tricks don't work. I always have ways \_a plan B or a plan C for example\_ to move on to something else. I guess the audience doesn't notice it. When you dare to take risks, you are logically more exposed to things going wrong."

But there is more to it than condemning audiences to eternally wander in mystery. To Copperfield, performing magic is about dealing with people's most secret and unrealised dreams: being able to fly, being able to be wherever one wants whenever one wants, scoffing at symbols of power such as the Statue of Liberty, the Great Wall of China, the Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon....

`` My most successful tricks are not about cutting people in half or making people disappear. They are those which come from dreams. Some people are living through the dreams I try to materialise. They support me in this way and want me to channel these aspirations," Copperfield explained, emphasising his insatiable will to preserve the art of magic for future generations.

`` I think it is important to preserve wonders, to sustain dreams. Whereas today's high technology make people jaded and cold, it is great to be able to astonish them, to make them go `Wow!' I think we all need that," said Copperfield, whose International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts founded in 1991 near Las Vegas is the world's premier collection of historical documentation \_ some dating back to the 16th century \_ and artefacts applying to magic, illusion and the allied arts.

`` Magic shows have to be close to people's dreams, to touch them in different ways. Like movies, a magic show needs to include components of fun, danger, excitement, and even pretty girls," Copperfield explained, acknowledging his two pretty and leggy professional dancers Valerie and Gina.

Copperfield has been practising the art of conjury from an early age and he began performing professionally when he was 12 years old.

Illusion is more real and tangible to him than it is to most people.

`` We are all living in illusions in a different way, trying to change one's life to make it more perfect, in the same way girls put on lipstick to change their external appearance," Copperfield said.

His philosophy echoes the doctrine of maya (illusion) in both Hinduism and Buddhism.

Born David Seth Kotkin in Metuchen, New Jersey, on September 16, 1956, Copperfield was a quiet child who came out of his shell when he picked up ventriloquism at the age of 10.

This led him to magic and by 12, he was the youngest person ever admitted to the Society of American Magicians.

By 16, he was teaching a magic course at New York University and soon was offered a job hosting The Magic of ABC, so popular it turned into a regular gig.

In the early '80s, he jumped over to CBS channel to star in another long-running series of popular specials, beginning with The Magic of David Copperfield. With each new special, Copperfield created and performed ever more mind-boggling feats before live audiences, without the aid of camera tricks or visual effects.

Another illusory step in his career was taking the name of the Charles Dickens novel when he was 18.

“I don't know if it was a good idea or not but I am stuck with it now,” he said.

A handful of fans believe he has supernatural powers or even an extra-terrestrial birth, confusing his brand of magic with some kind of witchcraft, to which Copperfield answers: “I do the seemingly impossible through sleight-of-hand and misdirection. It has nothing to do with the supernatural, spirit or other-world.”

Heralded as the world's greatest modern-day magician, the magic of David Copperfield has become a mammoth which moves along in several huge trucks, or crammed into a 747 jumbo aeroplane.

“Some 38 people travel with David Copperfield in the US but the number expands to around 65 when performing abroad. There are only a few places in the world where we haven't been yet,” said Chris Kenner, MODC's executive producer and magic consultant, who has been working with David Copperfield for the past 10 years.

Copperfield's illusions are the outcome of years of relentless work; the average time it takes him to create a new illusion, from conception to performance, is two and a half years. But it can take up to seven years to develop illusions such as defying gravity and flying.

“I am actually experimenting with things between each show \_ although I usually perform three times a day. At this very moment, if I wasn't talking to you I would be with my team, trying new things,” the dark, handsome and thin workaholic revealed. “The audience is a real source of inspiration. Seeing how enthusiastic they are, you feel it is a responsibility to come back next year with something different. It is a trap!”

No doubt Copperfield's intimate bond with the audience was also a factor in setting up what he regards as his greatest work to date: “Project Magic”. Established in March 1982, Project Magic is a rehabilitation programme intended at strengthening dexterity and motor skills in disabled people by using sleight-of-hand magic as a method of therapy.

Accredited by the American Occupational Therapy Association, it is currently implemented in some 1,100 hospitals and 30 countries worldwide.

“Magic can help people feel better and improve their self-esteem. Someone very shy, for example, will find it a good way to better communicate with others,” Copperfield explained.

“Magic helped me too actually.”

“[As therapy] it is used as a way of exercising the muscles and so on and as a tool and motivator to practise those exercises,” he noted, disclosing his wish to try and extend Project Magic to Thailand with the help of physical and occupational therapists.

And David Copperfield has great plans for his show in Thailand, where he will be performing for the first time from June 21 to 24.

``After five years of negotiation, we finally managed to have David Copperfield perform in Thailand. He was supposed to come in 1996, but the economic crash plunged the whole region into depression," said Neil Thompson, general manager of BEC-Tero Entertainment, which has thrown in some 45 million baht into organising the event \_ as much as for the concert of Michael Jackson several years ago \_ and hopes to have some 70,000 people attending the shows.

``I really love Thailand. It's an amazing country. I used to go there every year but the problem is being able to invest that much time ... from the US it is a really, really long way," Copperfield said.

Asked which kind of magical power he would choose if he was granted any, Copperfield answered: ``I would make people become nice to each other and healthy. I would leave forever and I would love singing ... I can't sing, really. When I sing, the audience disappear totally. That really is magic!"

\* David Copperfield will perform at the Impact Arena, Muang Thong Thani, June 21 to 24. For tickets or more information, call (02) 262-3837.