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Original Citation

Taylor, Nik (2016) “Strange Ceremonies”: Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick. *The Luminary* (7). pp. 54-63. ISSN 2056-9238

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“Strange Ceremonies”: Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick

NIK TAYLOR

The guests are seated in the study ... The Mage explains that one of the most powerful of the Old Gods is Pan, the Guardian of the Woodlands. “If one is fortunate, the Horned One will grant their innermost wishes. However, if one’s presence offends him in any way, only the most hideous and frightful fate will befall them.” (*The Great God Pan* 20)

The above is an excerpt from *The Great God Pan* written by Tony Raven in 1974 and further revised in 1982. It is a performance magic piece designed to shift the imaginations of the guests out of the magician’s study, where the piece is set, and (re)locate the imaginative experience within fictional realms of fantasy and horror. For the duration of the performance, the imaginative space inhabited by the guests is ambiguous in that it is neither real nor unreal but rather a boundary space where real magic may exist. This article discusses how performance magicians experiment with a creative form known as Bizarre Magick, which, by borrowing from themes within popular fiction, allows them to take their audience on an experiential journey through fictional, fantastic and magical landscapes. The article will examine a threefold relocation through the practice of Bizarre Magick; the physical re-embodiment of the performance space, the relocation of the audience’s awareness into places where the distinctions between fact and fiction are blurred, the shift from the performance of a stage magician to the idea that the practitioner is a genuine mage, demonstrating real magic. In order to illustrate these relocations this article will examine four Bizarre Magick effects.¹ The first two examples illustrate the audience’s relocation into this ambiguous space through an involvement with a heightened piece of experiential theatre, and the final two demonstrate the relocation of fantastic fiction into previously mundane spaces that through the power of the magician/Mage apparently become charged with meaning.

First, I want to place Bizarre Magick within the context of performance magic practice. Today an audience may be familiar with the tropes of performance magic found on television, at children’s parties, at weddings, or in live venues. They may be aware of popular television magicians such as Dynamo, Derren Brown, David Copperfield, Kris Angel, Paul Daniels, Doug Henning or even David Nixon. However, this belies the existence of a wider “magic assemblage” where we can identify performance magic as a far more complex performance form with many sub-genres (During 66). Some of which are more visible and popular than others. Close-up, big box illusions, mentalism, and con-games are forms with which the reader may be familiar. Lesser-known forms from within the magic assemblage are those that blur the edges between the real and the unreal experience of magic, and Bizarre Magick is such a form.

Bizarre Magick was, and still is, an underground form of performance magic. Practitioners such as Tony Raven, Tony Andruzzi and Doc Shiels initially pioneered the practice in the 1970s. Shiels believing that Bizarre Magick should “authentically scare people” and practitioners of the form used storytelling, intricate props and often complex hidden methods in order to achieve these scares in their performances (Shiels, *Bizarre* 20). Performers drew heavily from the fictionalised histories of science fiction, horror and the supernatural to create site-specific “strange ceremonies” locating Fantastika in everyday physical locations through the creation of a charged sense of space where illusion was played as real.² Raven and Shiels coined the name “Bizarre Magick” in the inaugural issue of the *Invocation* in July 1974. However, experiments in this form occur much earlier, which I shall refer to as the proto-bizarre. According to Stephen Minch, the genre rose “... wraithlike from the sod of two specialised schools of magic: pseudo spiritism and mentalism” (Minch, “A Vivisection of the Bizarre” 58). The form grew and *Invocation* magazine 1974-78 and *New Invocation* 1979-1996 became the hub for Bizarre Magick practice in printed form and this generated a large volume of material for the Bizarrist to explore.

In 1985 the magazine announced that “a magician's credibility is in direct inverse ratio to the number of sequins on his suit” (Andruzzi 342). Hence, Bizarre Magick established itself as a performance practice finding impetus in a rebellion against established or traditional practices of conjuring by relocating performance magic into a darker occult, and apparently more realistic, magic(k)al tradition. This new work was reframed as serious occult study and typical props such as playing cards, jewelled boxes, and stencilled images of rabbits in hats were discarded. While the genre of Bizarre Magick is just as prop heavy as the practice it rebels against, the ritual paraphernalia it uses originates from pagan, voodoo and other magick practices, rather than in the glitz and glamour of traditional stage magic. This ensures that the work retains an inherent dark theatricality. It offers new stories and new narratives that characteristically evoke darker times, hidden histories and Gothic landscapes, and draws heavily from popular fiction and cinematic tropes. Eugene Burger argues that, at its height, the concerns and interests of the Bizarrists were the creation of weird and bizarre magical effects; stories and other forms of presentational motivation; the provocation of audience responses other than laughter and applause; exotic props; the creation of atmosphere and mood; a willingness to appear to “lose control” of powerful magic energies; the exploration and generation of a sense of mystery; and an interest in exploring performance styles that raise the question, “Is this real?” in the minds of the audience (Burger 96; Burger and Neale 9). Furthering a move away from traditional performance magic, it was common practice within the bizarre movement that the magician was rarely called a *magician* at all, and the audience was rarely called an *audience*. Terms such as *guests* or *participants* were more usual; with a *Mystery-Entertainer*, *Paranormal-Entertainer* or *Mage* guiding them through their experience.

At its heart, there is a blurred relationship between the real and unreal embodied in this performance practice. In its purest form, many practitioners of the bizarre appear to perform their magic pieces as real, often choosing to remove any suggestion of trickery within their practice. In so doing, they borrow freely from Gothic, goetic, pagan, spiritualism, psychic sources and popular fiction (Taylor and Nolan 131). Practitioners often favour

grisly effects based on, for example, the stories of writers such as M R James and H.P. Lovecraft. The work becomes interplay between the serious and playful. This is a performance form that aligns closely with Mangan's notion of magic triggering the "grown-up" sensation of the uncanny (Mangan 94). Ultimately, *Bizarrists* reimagined their performance practice and sought to discover a new darker mode (Taylor, "Impersonating Spirits" 164).

In the darker mode of Bizarre Magick, the magician performs a balancing act between the real and the imaginary by aligning the role of magician more closely to an occult practitioner. Practitioners of Bizarre Magick locate their work in a region between the real and the imaginary, the received truth and the actual truth. The performer becomes a magician whose power is derived from "secret, and conventionally rejected knowledge" (Burger 35). However, commentators on this mode of performance, such as Tony Raven, warn those who draw inspiration from works of popular fiction against playing corny characters from bad horror movies. Raven advises practitioners to take things seriously, and, at the very least, play the role of the dabbler or of an interested party demonstrating what they may, or may not, know (Raven, "An Analysis of the Presentation of Bizarre Magick" 290). This leads to a performance mode that Tony Andruzzi later calls "the Van Helsing Approach" (Magus 17). According to Burger, Van Helsing is portrayed as "one who may, or may not, know what he is doing! Van Helsing here leads us into areas that perhaps he can't handle, that he perhaps cannot control. We are led to the *edge* of credibility" (Burger 35, emphasis in original). Practitioners of the Bizarre attempt to fully exploit the relationship between the real and unreal by pushing the towards to the edge of credibility as far as possible. This is emphasised by Tony Shiels, who argues for a carefully mediated performance practice based on both established fictions and real magic(k). He argues that a bizarre magician can steal plots from films and books, but should also be familiar with "dusty grimoires and books of shadows, with the learned tomes of occult philosophy" becoming "a force to be reckoned with" (Shiels, *Bizarre* 41). Thus, practitioners work towards making the fictions evoked in the performance feel real in the minds of the audience.

To illustrate the experiential nature of this movement, I will next examine two effects that bracket the genre of Bizarre Magick. The first effect *The Fairy Goblet* (Smith and Lyons) is an important pre-cursor to the Bizarre Magick movement and a truly experiential piece. Similarly, although published much later, *Hunting Mammoths in the Rain* (Strange 3–13) takes the participants on an experiential journey back to primal shamanism and apparently into "real" magic.

The Fairy Goblet by Lew Smith and L.V. Lyons (1941) relies on the careful construction of a ritually charged atmosphere to create a seemingly real experience within the minds of the audience. Based partly on the real Luck of Eden Hall (now in the V&A), a Fairy Goblet is seen glittering and glowing during a candlelit ritual in a "weird and uncanny manner" (Smith and Lyons 761). The performer invites the guests to form a circle and take part in an unusual experiment that is neither "... auto suggestion, telepathy, nor spiritualism, but something which, as we proceed, you will realize as being far beyond your imagination" (Smith and Lyons 761). The goblet is then solemnly introduced:

It is said that the wishes of the fairy queen are: that the past shall not be forgotten, and therefore at the proper time by the wave of a magic wand Queen Titania will bring back to the memory of whomsoever is looking into the goblet, some memory of a past and forgotten event which never again will be forgotten (Smith and Lyons 762).

A traditional verse is recited and the ritual begins; each guest is invited to step forward and, by interacting with the goblet, experience a deeply personal vision of a past memory or emotion. After the ritual has been drawn to a close, the performer offers a chance for a guest to share their recovered memory with the rest of the group. The performer becomes a facilitator sharing a magical gift with the guests, allowing them to take part in a piece of powerful experiential magic designed to evoke strong personal emotions. As way of a warning, the editor of the *Jinx* (where the routine first appeared), Theodore Annemann, adds his own footnote to the work, urging the reader not to be tempted to devalue the experience by adding recognisable performance magic tropes, stating “if you can't finish with something of a truly mysterious and oddly accomplished miraculous nature please forget the whole thing and throw these pages away” (Annemann 762–763).

Sixty years later, mystery performer Caleb Strange published *Hunting Mammoths in the Rain* (2005) where a group of participants, after a day exploring an ancient ceremonial landscape “rich in stones and stories and strangeness”, suddenly find themselves involved in a dark primal ritual (Strange 3). The participants are led to a space surrounded by ancient stones bearing megalithic cup and ring marks. They suddenly find themselves accompanied by drumming and dancers, and surrounded by a circle of fire. This ritual theatrical happening continues through the twilight and into the night where the participants witness the ancient lines carved on the rocks that surround them “twist”, “curl” and “swirl” (Strange 6). This hypnogogic experience signals the beginning of an intense trance-like journey for one of the participants. The performer, again acting as a facilitator, uses the “ragbag” of a “modern Siberian shaman” to induce visions in the participant in an attempt to reveal; “pre-historic memories – tribal experiences lost in the ancient centre of the brain” (Strange 5). During their vision, the participant acts as a conduit with their consciousness apparently falling back in time and able to share with the group a tangible feeling of “the rich, stinking earth”, “the shaking ground”, and the primal hunt itself. The final section captures the intensity of the experience: “then quietly you ask, ‘What did you remember? What was your memory?’ [the participant] looks at you, with eyes moist but bright, and whispers, ‘I was hunting mammoths in the rain’” (Strange 8).

These two examples bracket the genre of Bizarre Magick from proto-bizarre to the modern bizarre, and, as I suggest above, there is a rich and deep continuum of this type of work from its early incarnation in the 1940s to the present day. The key to the experiential nature of these effects is the relocation of the imaginative space from the mundane to a place where apparently real magic can happen. Within the genre as a whole, there is a playfulness in the Bizzarist’s use of relocation, taking non-traditional theatrical spaces, using themes from popular fantastic fiction, and making them, at least for the duration of the performance, a tangible experience. By relocating the audience into a space that is both real and unreal, Bizarre Magick moves performance magic away

from its physical home in conventional performance spaces and removes the labels and the obvious signifiers of the traditional magician. While it relocates the practice into the seemingly mundane reality of the living room or the library, the very act of magic causes these spaces to apparently become charged with meaning based on popular fictional narratives. As a consequence, performance magic relocates itself through the act of storytelling and (re)emphasises the need for a character other than the traditional magician with which to tell the story. The following two examples play with both the idea of the magician and the creation of the fictive world they and the audience inhabit for the duration of the performance.

The Great God Pan by Tony Raven is based on Machen's *Great God Pan* (1864) and *The White People* (1909/22). The piece begins with the "guests" sitting around a table in the Mage's study. The table is laden with ancient tomes of the black arts and curios of the occult. On the table is a brass plaque bearing an inscribed pentagram and at each point of the symbol there is a small candle in a brass holder. The Mage opens the piece with a warning that if, after summoning the Great God Pan, anyone's presence offends him in any way, only the most "hideous and frightful fate will befall them" (91). However, the Mage promises to try to mitigate the possibility of this happening by introducing an effigy of the "summoner" into the ritual. The Mage explains that if Pan is offended in any way he will wreak his wrath upon the effigy (a wax figurine of a nude woman) and not upon any soul in the circle. The effigy is set within the pentagram, the candles are lit, and the remaining light in the room extinguished. The flickering flames cast weird shadows around the circle and play upon the Mage's face as he stands at the head of the table and speaks:

Please be cautioned that the ritual we are about to begin offers no danger to you, the beholders, so long as you remain silent and do not move from where you are sitting. Remember, no matter what happens, do not utter a sound or move from your place for fear of your mortal soul! (21)

From an ancient *Book of Shadows* a chant is intoned. The chant itself is the infamous *Eko Eko Azarak* chant that appears in Gardener's occult novel *High Magic's Aid* (1949) and, according to the Raven's script, the chant is repeated five times, with the Mage extinguishing a candle at the end of each repetition, until the room is in total darkness. Thirty seconds of silence follows and then, as if from a great distance, the faint sounds of the Pipes of Pan can be heard. The sounds become gradually louder as if the god is approaching and then the music suddenly stops. Within the space there is total silence broken only by the breathing of the guests in the circle. The guests suddenly become aware of the scent of a forest that fills the room and seemingly out of nowhere there comes a loud crash, the table shakes and there is an ear-piercing scream followed by a deadly silence. The Mage calls for the lights to be put back on and there at a table, in the centre of the pentagram, is the wax figure broken into pieces. To all it appears as if something of great power had struck it down. It becomes apparent that Pan was "offended" in some way and unleashed his wrath on the offender, in this case the wax effigy. The performance piece ends with the Mage making it clear how lucky the sitters were not to be subjected to the wrath of The Great God Pan.

The second example *The Stigmata of Cthulhu* by Stephen Minch places the magic in the fictional universe of weird fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft. The performer takes the role of a “Sorcerer” who ushers his “initiates” (the audience) into a dim library “where amongst the ancient tomes of sundry and eldritch lore, queer and bestial countenances and unwholesome forms brood from niches and crannies with the shifting shadows of the place” (13). The initiates are seated round a table in the middle of the room and the only light comes from a single candle in the centre. The sorcerer takes his place at the head of the table, the incense is set smouldering and the ritual and purpose of the gathering is explained:

We are gathered here this evening to call up to our plane one of the Old Ones Dread ruler of the seas and oceans CTHULHU from his slumber in the sunken ruins of R’lyeh. I will ask you all to remain quiet and still as I summon mighty Cthulhu and prepare the way. Any disturbance made during the ritual will close the gates and doom our purpose (13).

The sorcerer begins the ritual, a ceremonial dagger is taken up and a Tetragrammaton traced in the air above the table. The sorcerer then lays down the dagger in the centre of the Tetragrammaton and takes a piece of parchment and a pen. He draws upon it The “Mark of Cthulhu”, which consists of two concentric circles with three spikes or horns on the outermost circumference. The sorcerer then holds the marks before him and chants “some heathen spell” in which can be discerned the words “Cthulhu” and “R’lyeh”: “*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*”. As with *The Great God Pan* this chant is taken directly from extant fiction, in this case from Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” (Lovecraft 140).

As the sorcerer chants, each repetition becomes more powerful and the guests hear the slow sound of water and bubbles rising. The sounds become louder and louder and suddenly a female member of the audience collapses to the table, and the parchment with the mark of Cthulhu written upon it catches fire and vanishes. Instantly the water sounds fade away and the sorcerer makes it clear to all assembled that the ritual has been disturbed and the gates have closed between the sorcerer and the great Cthulhu. However, Cthulhu was with them for just a few moments before the gate shut. Minch notes “for each and every member of the group has the MARK OF CTHULHU upon him! The marks are found on hands, arms, shoulders, necks, foreheads, feet, and (?) These are the STIGMATA OF CTHULHU!” (15). The structure of the piece with the Mage apparently losing control of the ritual aligns closely to the *Van Helsing Effect* described earlier. In addition the ending is intensely theatrical, with the panic at its conclusion chiming with the sideshow tradition of the “blow off” where a final scare moves the audience out of the space still accompanied by the lasting memory of experiencing an alternate reality (Nickell 76).

These two examples represent the glory days of the Bizarre, a period characterised by experimentation and complex production values which allows for an increasingly complex interaction with the spaces in which the work is performed. It is this complexity that has since led to a concern amongst practitioners that the sheer amount of material being published moves Bizarre Magick towards becoming a “literary exercise” rather than a

“practicable theatrical movement” (Minch, “A Vivisection of the Bizarre” 60). Creators of Bizarre Magick attempted to draw from more fictional landscapes and in turn gave less thought to the theatrical possibilities of the Mage character and the practical workability of the effects in performance. Many published pieces were seen as un-performable, resembling fan fiction rather than attempts to further experiential work. Practitioner Max Maven, in his introduction to the collected *New Invocation (Volume 2)* in 1986, states “in this compilation of the first thirty-six issues you will find a wide range of material – Most of it is crap” (i). I believe Maven intends fond humour here, even if a large amount of Bizarre Magick writing moved towards the literary rather than the performable there are many examples of Bizarre Magic effects that successfully “gave back to magicians their identity”. They also significantly allowed performers experiment with magic set in the realm of Fantastika and thus to (re)imagine performance magic as “real” magic (Minch, “A Vivisection of the Bizarre” 61). In order to move the audience successfully into this imaginative space it is the reframed character of the magician as Mage who must attempt to move themselves and the audience seamlessly between the worlds of the real and the unreal. This is, of course, is likely to occur to different degrees, the extent of which is usually signified by the degree and frequency of movement between these worlds. To illustrate this, I will now explore further the role of the traditional magician alongside that of the Bizarrist.

For the traditional magician, the movement between the real and the unreal is a regular pattern and often embedded into the form itself. Magician and theorist Robert Neale calls this pacing “monkey movement” (217). To illustrate this Neale draws on the traditional Japanese image of a monkey swinging from a branch that hangs over a lake. The monkey is looking down at a reflection of the moon in the water and so sees the illusion of the real moon shimmering just below the surface (the unreal). Then, when the monkey reaches for the reflected “moon” he disturbs the surface of the water. The illusion is dispelled (the real) at least until the water is still and once again the monkey looks down at the moon’s reflection and enjoys the illusion. For Neale, the experience of performance magic is this playful movement between illusion and disillusion. The work of a traditional magician, who may play the trickster, often adopts this role by presenting magic (real) but ultimately framing the performed magic as tricks (unreal). This is an accepted trope of the performance magician, and something against which that the early Bizarrists fought. This is not to deride the traditional magician, but theatrically in the context of the Bizarre it is not very challenging. It is trickster magic, something Hass refers to as “reversal and disruption” (Hass, “Life Magic and Staged Magic” 22).

In comparison to the above, both *The Great God Pan* and *The Stigmata of Cthulhu* raise the theatrical stakes as, at the moment of performance, the participants are offered a gateway into the unreal and this experience is not reversed. Here magic's performative intention is deliberately blurred, inducing something Hass terms “visceral cognitive disturbance” and it is this that allows the performer to enable the audience to awaken “another realm of experience; the magical dimension that lies behind and beyond all experience” (Hass, “Magic & Theatre, Part 1” 21; Burger and Neale 24).

The figure of the Mage is intrinsically important to this end, protecting the guests from unearthly wrath, bringing dark forces under control and making all present safe. Many effects in Bizarre Magick explore the notion of the magician as a protector located within a circle cast and secured by a pentagram or some other magical object. The act of magic becomes a process that has been born out of learned study and not the endless practice of sleight of hand or trickery. Thus, the Bizarrist moves further away from the established view of the magician. Early Bizarrists and indeed proto-Bizarrists recognised this distinction, for example, Steven Fabian's image of the magician/Mage was highlighted by *Invocation Magazine*, here the magician is seen as a skilled practitioner of ritual, able to command elemental forces and summon demons, and many of the key Bizarre Magick effects of the time appeared to achieve this very thing. This image was so popular that Fabian's illustration graced the cover from Issue 5 (July 1975) for over four years until the publication became the *New Invocation* in October 1979.

Bizarre Magick as a performance form continues today, occasionally in the pure form discussed in this article, or in areas across the wider field of performance magic where its techniques are applied. This experiential relocation is used outside of performance magic and across other forms of fringe entertainments such as mediumship, spiritualism, storytelling, fortune-telling, the new age movement, hoax and LARP. The techniques of the Bizarre Magician can be employed within a performance space wherever the intention is that unreal themes, particularly those exhibited, in popular fiction become relocated in reality. As a practitioner of Bizarre Magick, I have found it useful when devising work of this kind to refer to Mangan (2007) who, in turn, is drawing on Rosemary Jackson's definition of the Fantastic (1981) by borrowing from the science of optics to identify the "paraxial region" as a useful metaphor for the "imaginative space in which the [...] performance of magic takes place" (Mangan 56). For Jackson this "imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image) but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two" (Jackson 19). Mangan extends this notion in his discussion of early modern magic in the 17th Century by describing it as "multifocal" and "able to contain paradoxes and contradictions" (57). My own rehearsal notes remind me "clouds [can] both make rain and be dragons" ("Out of Tricks" 98). I feel that Bizarre Magick as a performance practice can be just as "creative and playful" as Mangan suggests the experience of performance magic was in the 17th century (56–57).

Through a performance practice that plays with the boundary between the real and imaginative space, Bizarre Magick plays this as paraxial, that is both real and unreal, allowing practitioners to re-enchant performance magic and to re-discover an experiential theatricality based on material derived from unreal and fictive landscapes and locations. Within this space, the candle, the idol, the dagger and the smouldering incense are all charged with meaning that when combined with a strange ceremony can re-locate performance magic out of theatrical (or non-theatrical) spaces and transform them into charged magic(k)al spaces where fictions appear to become reality. In Bizarre Magick the magician/mystery-entertainer/facilitator/Mage places themselves in a performative grey area that blurs the distinction between the magician as actor, and magician as Mage. This means, according to Doc Shiels, that the performer does not simply appear as an actor playing the part of a magician, but rather "an awesomely and demonstrably *real* cantrip-casting magician!" (*Cantrip Codex* 19,

emphasis in original). The ultimate aim for Bizarrists is to challenge “the spectator's sense of reality”, testing “the spectator's perceptions against the cognitive structures which allow those perceptions to make sense” (Mangan xv). Hence, Bizarrists work with story-telling, hauntings, the Gothic, Fantastika, and popular perceptions of the supernatural strive to facilitate an atmosphere where all traditional magical tropes are absent and through a guided process, re-locate participants into a space where fictions become real and strange ceremonies may occur.

Notes

- 1 “Effect” is a term used by magicians to describe a trick, or performance piece.
- 2 I borrow the term “Strange Ceremonies” from the title of Eugene Burger’s examination of early bizarre *Strange Ceremonies* (1991).

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