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Editorial

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On September 15, 2016, the UK broadcaster Channel 5 aired a three hour special entitled “When Magic Goes Horribly Wrong”. Described by the channel as an “entertaining documentary looking at when magic tricks fail” (Channel 5 Broadcasting Ltd, 2016) the Radio Times review of the programme was less favourable:

Channel 5’s night of magic-themed programmes concludes with a clip show for ghouls. “Horribly” is the key word in the title. [...] Comics and fellow illusionists offer comment on each grisly clip but mostly it’s like You’ve Been Framed with added ambulances. (Butcher, 2016)

The show itself consisted of a compilation of clips of a variety of dangerous tricks and stunts, interspersed with commentaries from those involved in the action, as well as other magicians and comedians. The nature of the footage is often grim: most videos shown involve quite grievous injuries, hospitalizations, near-death situations, or even moments where those involved did not survive. Yet the programme is clearly intended to be light-hearted, with each of the asides aiming to get a laugh. The commentary often makes fun of the magician and their efforts, despite the serious nature of the event, and in doing so, reframes these moments of life and death. Instead of a physical, mortal body, which can be harmed beyond saving, the public is confronted with a magic body, a body which is in some ways unreal. Like the illusions and amazing feats they try to accomplish, the magician’s body cannot be harmed, or if it can, it is not something that should be taken seriously; after all, it is all just a trick. In other ways, the programme draws our attention back to magic as a largely physical activity, engaging the entirety of the body and possibly putting it at risk. Often perceived as a feat of the mind and the imagination, a flight of fancy perhaps, Channel 5 inadvertently reminds us that magic is reliant on physicality and on the relationship between the performer and their body, and the fact that these can be placed in a position of danger. The old adage of “mind over matter” does not hold up as one is slowly drowning or accidentally set on fire.

Aside from comments on how funny or tasteful (or, indeed, tasteless) the programme is, it raises some interesting questions about the body as it is perceived in performance, and perhaps more specifically, in magic performance, focusing on a strange duality between the unreal / immortal and the material / vulnerable. Indeed, it is these kinds

of inquiries that inspired the initial call for papers for this issue. As it does in so many explorations of performance in magic, the famous quotation from Robert Houdin functions as the starting point here:

A conjuror is not a juggler; he is an actor playing the part of a magician; an artist whose fingers have more need to move with deftness than with speed. I may even add that where sleight-of-hand is involved, the quieter the movement of the performer, the more readily will the spectators be deceived. (2006, p. 29)

Rather than following the common interpretation in which the magician is said to play a role, a character, in an attempt to convince the audience, the idea behind this issue is to draw attention to the context of the quotation, which focuses on the art and physicality of magic performance. Indeed, the presence of the body is central to the creation of any kind of (live) performance: in *Theatre and the Body*, Collette Conroy puts forward that “[i]n theatre, bodies have to both exist and not exist. They need to be used and manipulated and foregrounded to make any kind of theatre at all” (2010, p. 74). She is not alone in this assertion, and the importance of the physical body is a notion which is long established within the field of performance theory. By contrast, research and writing about magic has not followed the same path. Although many texts discuss and even emphasize the existence and the development of a stage persona, little attention has been paid to the physical presence of the magician. As in any form of performance, from the moment they step onto the stage, the magician, mentalist and mystery entertainer present themselves to the audience in both body and mind. Although this is not always acknowledged, the persona and the physicality are of equal importance, and their development, representation and reception may change based on the type of performance, as well as the image the performer wishes to portray. In its purest form, magic performance presents the spectator with a magical body, an extraordinary body, a body which is different and more capable, a body in possession of nearly superhuman capabilities. Even if the performer appears to be hurt or victimized in some way, they will ultimately remain unharmed, a feat which is impossible for an audience member to pull off. What is presented is often an intelligent body, a knowing one, in possession of knowledge that goes beyond the capabilities of “mere mortals”. These illusions may persist even beyond the duration of the performance in a legacy that is created by the magician themselves, or by their fans, imbuing the physical form of the performer with additional meaning.

Despite these questions and perceptions, as Collette Conroy reminds us, “There is an important distinction to be made between the body as an idea or an ideal and bodies as real physical objects that vary hugely from each other” (2010, p. 6). One would perhaps expect that the materiality of the body onstage should bring some clarity rather than raise further questions, yet as Conroy’s words show, there is an inherent duality to the presentation of the body in performance. The current issue contains

three entries, all of which approach the body in different ways, but each of which focuses on an aspect of this duality between certain perceptions of the body and the way in which they are framed. As Conroy argues, “the body is necessarily abstract, but it is an abstraction based on the idea of a fleshy, palpable class of objects in the world” (2010, p. 9), drawing attention to the clash between the ideal and the physical.

Each of the contributions to the issue capture this duality and try to answer some of the questions which arise from it. In “(Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism” by Edward Dean, the author discusses the role of the body in the performance of mentalism, or rather, the perceived lack thereof. As Dean argues, the performance of mentalism, in particular, is seen as an activity of the mind, first and foremost, foregoing any notion or interpretation of the physical. In his essay, Dean is opening a discussion as to how the body of the mentalist needs to be reassessed in order to create a different, and perhaps more effective, type of performance. Elizabeth Turner, in her piece “I Am Alive in Here”: Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine’s Body”, focuses on another incarnation of the dual body: the physical and the mediatized. In her essay, she discusses how recordings of two of David Blaine’s durational performances reframed the live events, thus creating a situation where the action is reinterpreted and Blaine’s body is encountered and explained anew to the audience. The final contribution to this issue is an interview with Todd Robbins, famous for his work on the sideshow and associations with Coney Island. In the discussion that ensues, another duality becomes apparent, which is the connection between the performer and the audience in both magic and sideshow performance, and how the physicality of the performer can perhaps influence this relationship.

The essays presented here are by no means exhaustive, nor can they be, but the editor hopes that they will start a new interest in the presence of the body onstage and what this may mean within the context of performance magic. Each of the authors represented in this issue offers a distinct viewpoint and a way into a wider discussion of the magical body. As Todd Robbins argues in the interview, the sideshow performer and, by extension, the mystery entertainer is ultimately “an extraordinary other”, able to present a particular reality to the audience. There may not be a mind over matter, and maybe the matter of the physical body is ultimately what matters.

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