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*Performing Real Magic(K): The  
Conjurer and Audience in Bizarre  
Magick.*

Nicholas Taylor

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2020

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## *Declaration*

### *Publications arising from this work:*

#### **Single Authored (100% Contribution):**

Taylor, N. (2014) 'Out of Tricks', in Landman, T. (ed.) *The Magiculum*. London, UK: EyeCorner Press, pp. 101–111.

Taylor, N. (2015) 'Impersonating Spirits: The Paranormal Entertainer and the Dramaturgy of the Gothic Séance.', in Piatti-Farnell, L. and Brien, D. L. (eds) *New Directions in 21st-Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass*. Routledge, pp. 163–174

Taylor, N. (2016) "'Strange Ceremonies": Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick', *The Luminary*, (7), pp. 54–63.

Taylor, N. (2018) 'Magic and Broken Knowledge; reflections on the practice of Bizarre Magick', *The Journal of Performance Magic*, 5.  
[<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/34494>]

Taylor, N. (2020) 'Identity and Persona', in Landman, T. (ed.) *The Magiculum II*. Nottingham: Lulu Press Inc., pp. 58–63.

#### **Joint Authored (50% Contribution)<sup>1</sup>:**

Taylor, N. and Hoedt, M. (2012) 'Magic and the M-word', in Drury, S. (ed.) *Liber Mentis*. London: PSYCRETS, pp. 262–276.

Taylor, N. and Nolan, S. (2015) 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magic.', in Spooner, C. and Botting, F. (eds) *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 128–142.

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<sup>1</sup> Where this material is joint-authored, Joint-Authorship Declarations are on file with the Research Office.

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## ***Abstract***

This submission draws together seven publications (four from the academic press and three from performance magic publications) and a covering document to set out an original contribution to knowledge in the field of bizarre magick. Bizarre magick is a sub-genre of performance magic and critical attention has been scarce in this field. The publications gathered here offer the only extended study of bizarre magick and performance that covers its inception as a form and how that form has found a place in modern mystery entertainment. This submission is informed through the author's practice as a bizarre magician.

Following an initial study of the performers of Bizarre Magick, the publications included then focus mostly on detailed studies of specific aspects of the genre and its legacy; examining how bizarre magicians sought to re-enchant performance magic with the mysterious and the spiritual; discussing how practitioners of the bizarre draw heavily on fictionalised histories of science fiction, horror and the supernatural to create site-specific ritual and ceremony; and exploring the spectatorship of bizarre magick against wider issues of disenchantment in conventional magic performance practice. The three industry only works (offered an appendix) underline the author's relationship to the reflective in performance practice.

The covering document sets out the core arguments that underpin the included publications, forming a cohesive approach to bizarre magick practice and its offshoots that allows us to read the genre as an integral and important performance form that has a lasting legacy in the field of performance magic. I argue that Bizarre Magick pulls at the very essence of magic practice and draws so heavily from a range of areas such as horror, the fantastic and the Gothic that it cannot be ignored as a form. In doing so, the combined research generates new possibilities for understanding and developing wider practices in performance magic and the notion of what it might mean to be a magician.

## *Portfolio Overview*

This portfolio documents my research into a genre of performance magic known as bizarre magick. The scope of this project is to explore the practice, history, legacy, and application of that form. The study comprises of a covering document and seven peer-reviewed pieces. Four of the seven pieces; two journal articles and two book chapters, are published in the academic press and are offered as primary material. The remaining three pieces are offered as an appendix and these were published primarily for magicians only.

### *Covering Document*

The covering document will provide a context for the attached articles and is presented first in this portfolio for convenience. It may be useful to explore the articles before reading the context to this work.

My approach to the offering in this document has centred around four main threads of enquiry. These are;

- The identification of key themes in bizarre magick
- The application of elements of ostension onto bizarre magick practice
- An exploration of the nature of the magician in bizarre magick
- A consideration of the magician's prop in bizarre magick.

Following on from a general introduction, I will first discuss my methodological approach to the above, then offer a general overview of the origins of bizarre magick, before returning to these four threads and further examining how they operate within

the form. Finally, I will offer some concluding thoughts within a discussion of my current performance practice.

### *Primary Publications*

- **Taylor, N. and Nolan, S. (2015) 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magic.'**, in Spooner, C. and Botting, F. (eds) *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 128–142.

Considers the practice of bizarre magicians and how, by attempting to (re)discover a meaningful presentation of performance magic through storytelling and theatrical character, they sought to re-enchant the form with the mysterious and the spiritual.

- **Taylor, N. (2015) 'Impersonating Spirits: The Paranormal Entertainer and the Dramaturgy of the Gothic Séance.'**, in Piatti-Farnell, L. and Brien, D. L. (eds) *New Directions in 21st-Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass*. Routledge, pp. 163–174.

Examines the practice of the bizarre magician when framed as a paranormal entertainer. The chapter focuses specifically on the performance of séance and the examination of this against the folklorist notions of ostension and collective delusion.



- **Taylor, N. (2016) “‘Strange Ceremonies’: Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick’, *The Luminary*, (7), pp. 54–63.**

Examines how practitioners of bizarre magick draw heavily on fictionalised histories of science fiction, horror and the supernatural to create site-specific performances embodying notions of ritual and ceremony.

- **Taylor, N. (2018) ‘Magic and Broken Knowledge; reflections on the practice of Bizarre Magick’, *The Journal of Performance Magic*, 5.**

Considers and explores the spectatorship of bizarre magick against wider issues of disenchantment in conventional performance magic practice. This discussion is approached with direct reference to my own performance practice and research into bizarre magick and mystery entertainment.

### *The Appendix*

The three works included here serve to demonstrate my relationship to the practice of bizarre magick. These pieces allowed me to continuously develop and reflect upon my own work as a bizarre magician, paranormal entertainer, and as a co-curator of *Mr Punch’s Cabinet of Curiosity* (a travelling museum of magical artefacts).

- **Taylor, N. and Hoedt, M. (2012) ‘Magic and the M-word’, in Drury, S. (ed.) *Liber Mentis*. London: PSYCRETS, pp. 262–276.**

Examines how practitioners can approach the creation of meaning in their performance practice by employing a three-phase model in the construction of a performance magic effect.

- Taylor, N. (2014) 'Out of Tricks', in Landman, T. (ed.) *The Magiculum*.

London, UK: EyeCorner Press, pp. 101–111.

Presents a personal exploration of practice based on my rehearsal notebooks.

- Taylor, N. (2020) 'Identity and Persona', in Landman, T. (ed.) *The*

*Magiculum II*. Nottingham: Lulu Press Inc., pp. 58–63.

This is the companion work to 'Out of Tricks' and brings together the final threads of a consideration of my own practice as a bizarre magician.

### *Dissemination and Impact of this work*

This research sits within the work of The Magic Research Group, whose aim is to encourage reflection on areas of performance magic not already covered in publication or in areas already heavily researched. As such the intention for this research has been, through an examination of bizarre magick, to generate new possibilities for understanding and developing wider practices in performance magic and the notion of what it might mean to be a magician. This project has contributed to both the practice of performance magic and to wider interdisciplinary fields in a number of ways:

My initial work in establishing a position for the bizarre magician based on an occurrence classification of effects was disseminated as the performance *Many Magics* (Taylor, 2009b) and through a paper delivered to the British Society of Mystery

Entertainers (Taylor, 2011d). Additionally, I have disseminated this work to a number of magician-only publications including; *The Introduction to Scripting & Storytelling for Paranormal Entertainers* (Taylor, 2011c) and *Collective Delusion and the Madness of Crowds* (Taylor, 2011a). This work also led to me being invited to lecture and be a panel member for a roundtable discussion on the future of bizarre magick at the annual gathering of Bizarre Magicians; *Doomsday* (2013b).<sup>2</sup> A distillation of this presentation appeared as *Can We Perform Real Magic? (a provocation)* (Taylor, 2014a), and my approach to bizarre magick was discussed in an interview for *The Séance and Spookshow Podcast Episode 12* (Brynmor, 2015).

The included chapter 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magick' began as a paper 'Performing Fabulous Monsters' (Taylor and Nolan, 2009) and as the performance piece 'Bizarre in the Bar' (Taylor, 2009a) for the *Ninth Biannual Conference of the International Gothic Association*. In addition, the research in the included article "'Strange Ceremonies': Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick' was initially disseminated as two conference papers; 'The Fairy Goblet of Eden Hall to Hunting Mammoths in the Rain – experiencing the paraxial through performance magic and mystery entertainment' (Taylor, 2015d) and "'Strange Ceremonies': The Laboratory, Library, and the Living Room; Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick' (Taylor, 2015c).

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<sup>2</sup> I lectured again in 2016 and returned in 2018 as a judge on their annual talent contest; *The Hex Factor*.

Performances derived from this research include; *How Psychic are You?* (Taylor, 2010, 2011b), *The Gift of Hermes* (Taylor, 2014c), *Christmas Ghost Stories: An Evening Of Stories And Séance Magic* (Taylor, 2015a), *Curzan, Carter and Taylor* (Taylor, Curzan and Carter, 2016, 2017), and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Taylor, 2016a) all of which explored the structure of the ostensive event through a series of séance experiments and bizarre magick effects.

My research findings also resonate deeply throughout my work co-curating *Mr Punch's Cabinet of Curiosities* (2015-present), where myself, and fellow performers Ashton Carter and Reverend Tristan, explore legend texts, the nature of the magical object, and the bizarre magician as facilitator. This practice can also be found in a more focussed form in my work presenting *The Strange Thing* (Taylor, 2017; Taylor and Nolan, 2018). My work on the nature of the object in bizarre magick, how this led to the construction of the cabinet, and how this could be applied to the single-o-grind *The Strange Thing* was disseminated at Doomsday VII (Taylor and Carter, 2016a).<sup>3</sup>

This work has also informed my consultancy practice in that I have provided bizarre magick consultations for The Thackray Medical Museum (2013), Proper Job Theatre Company (2015) and the show *First Aid for Wizards* (2018). I have written a scripted adaptation of the spiritualist performers The Davenport's ill-fated visit to Huddersfield (2018b). This research has also informed my teaching practice, with a series of devised shows exploring the areas I identify in this portfolio: shows include;

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<sup>3</sup> Both *Mr Punch's Cabinet of Curiosities* and *The Strange Thing* are discussed further in the *Covering Document*.

*South Lake Medical – a horror attraction* (2011), *Bizarnival of the Strange* (2012) (discussed in print in Taylor (2013a)), *Dr Svengali's Travelling Winter Show* (2013), *Vampire Survivors* (2014), and *Phantasmagoria* (2019).

Ultimately, the performance practice explored and developed throughout period of research has found fruition in a new show (devised with fellow performer Ashton Carter) entitled *A View from Behind the Veil* (Taylor and Carter, 2019). The work premiered at the *Science and Spiritualism Conference* at Leeds Trinity University in 2019, and the show is scheduled (subject to funding) to be performed at the *Experiencing Popular Occulture in Britain Project* (University of Stirling) and *British Society for the History of Science* (Aberystwyth). The work will also be featured on an upcoming episode of *The Extraordinary Project Podcast*. I have presented on the findings of this research at *Psycon* 2019 and at *Doomsday* 2020 as *Four Stages to Hacking Reality*.

## ***Covering Document***

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## *Introduction*

The interrogation of performance magic has, in the past, been largely neglected by the academy. Works, both in the academic press and those intended primarily for the popular press, have generally confined themselves to a re-telling of the history of popular performance magic, in particular, the so-called 'Golden Age of Magic'. This golden age spans a period which, broadly speaking, begins towards the end of the 18th century and continues until the advent of the First World War. Solomon & Culpepper (2018) argue in their article 'Toward a historiography of stage conjuring: are we entering a golden age?' that the study of this period of magic history is, itself, entering its own 'golden age', having seen substantial growth in both 'the entertainment industry and the university' (Solomon and Culpepper, 2018, p. 118). This continued focus is somewhat understandable, as this was a period when the modern, evening-suited magician was formally codified for audiences through popular works such as Hoffman's<sup>4</sup> *Modern Magic* (1876) and Houdin's *Les Secrets de la prestidigitation et de la magie* (1868), which was translated into English by Hoffman in 1878. It was also a time when stage magic truly flourished in the western hemisphere with many magicians from this era still well-known today, examples include; Houdini (1874-1926) remembered as an escapologist and arch-sceptic; Chung Ling Soo, in reality American magician William Robinson (1861-1918), who is remembered for being fatally wounded when his bullet-catch effect failed; John Nevil Maskelyne (1839-

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<sup>4</sup> The pseudonym of Angelo John Lewis, who as 'Professor Hoffmann' 'wrote and translated dozens of books on recreational pursuits.' The works, *Modern Magic* (1876) *More Magic* (1890), *Later Magic* (1904) *Latest Magic* (1918) form 'the grand cycle of conjuring treatises' (Houstoun, 2018, p. 123).

1917), the first of a dynasty of English magicians that included his son Nevil Maskelyne (1863-1924), and his grandson Jasper Maskelyne (1902-1973), the so-called 'war magician'<sup>5</sup>. Well-known accounts of the golden age can be found in books such as Jim Steinmeyer's *Hiding the Elephant* (2004) and Peter Lamont's *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick* (2004). More recently, the special issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture: The Golden Age of Stage Conjuring, 1880-1930* (Volume 16, 2018) highlighted the continued focus placed on magic history in performance magic scholarship.

However, debates surrounding performance magic have shifted away from purely examining magic history, such works include; Simon During's *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (2002) which explores performance magic (During uses the term 'secular magic') through case studies in history and effect, arguing that secular magic has had an important role to play in the shaping of modern culture. During argues that secular magic forms a 'magic assemblage' whose 'constellation' includes 'sleight of hand and illusion shows form[ing] the core around which other amusements gathered' (During, 2002, p. 67); Michael Mangan's *Performing Dark Arts - A Cultural History of Conjuring* (2007) which examines conjuring and magic through the lens of performance studies and the framing of performance magic at key historic moments; and the collected volume *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Coppa, Hass and Peck, 2008) an interdisciplinary work containing articles that originated from the *Theory and Art of Magic* project at Muhlenburg College in the US, and covering a diverse collection of themes with which

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<sup>5</sup> See: Fisher, D. (2005) *The War Magician: The True Story of Jasper Maskelyne*. New Ed edition. London: Phoenix.



to explore performance magic. Similarly, interdisciplinary scholarship on magic has grown, with focussed explorations on performance magic and its relationship other genres, including, for example, film, in works such as Beckman's *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism* (2003), Solomon's *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (2010), and Williamson's *Hidden in Plain Sight: An Archaeology of Magic and the Cinema* (2015), and works such as Hill's *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits, and Magic in Popular Culture* (2011) which draws on performance magic to discuss the portrayal of the paranormal in contemporary media.

There has also been a proliferation of work discussing magic and science, psychology in particular, including Macknik & Martinez-Conde's *Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals About Our Brains* (2012), and Kuhn's *Experiencing the Impossible: The Science of Magic* (2019). As a performer, I often find these works reductionist in their discussion of performance magic as the experimental methods employed tend to strip the form of its intrinsic mystery. Performance magic in the psychology laboratory is often reduced to simply tricks, with the writers frequently exposing individual magic method in the very process of recounting the experiment. This could be seen as somewhat inevitable as their predominant focus is on what the scientists term as 'attention control'. This is a phrase that provides a useful catch-all for general magic method in that it includes, amongst other things, the more traditional notion of misdirection and a belief that all magic can be broken down into a form of cognitive illusion. I feel that presenting magicians, according to Campbell et al. in *Magic and the Brain*, as 'masterminds of human behaviour'

(Campbell, Martinez-Conde and Macknik, 2011) is problematic, ultimately making the magician a performer of tricks and rather than a privileged other creating mystery for an audience. This covering document will frequently return to the problematic notion of the magician as simply one-who-does-tricks, but it is worth noting that a counter response to this stereotype was one element that led to the formation of the bizarre magick movement in the first place.

### *Writing about Performance Magic*

The notion of what constitutes the role of the trick in magic performance raises a number of questions, two of which have become central to my work and have also required more general consideration when co-ordinating The Magic Research Group. Firstly, is it possible to have a meaningful discussion of performance magic without revealing the method of the trick? and, secondly, is it possible to conduct a meaningful investigation into performance magic without the writer knowing how the tricks are done, that is, without them being a magician? I believe so, and *The Journal of Performance Magic* has functioned well with its policy of non-exposure and has published several articles by non-magicians. There is, however, an underlying suspicion from magicians towards academic works on performance magic that are written by non-magicians. With many magicians arguing against this, for example, in *Genii*, a monthly magazine for magicians, Jamy Ian Swiss, when reviewing the During and Mangan monographs, opened the piece with the attention-grabbing phase: 'The academics are coming! The academics are coming! Shall we prepare to do battle or should we simply run for our lives?' (Swiss, 2007a, p. 97). I have had a number of exchanges with magicians, both amateur and professional, all of whom were arguing

against the impending publication of *The Journal of Performance Magic*. Much of this negativity coming from a suspicion of the layperson and a fear that the non-magician might learn and subsequently reveal the tricks of the trade. Magicians are very protective of their work, carefully guarding the fragility of their art and secrets, and rightly so. As Steinmeyer states; ‘Magicians guard an empty safe [...] when an audience learns how it’s done, they quickly dismiss the art, concluding “Is that all it is?”’ (2003, p. 16). I tend to agree with Steinmeyer’s assertion, as occasionally the most spectacular trick may employ the simplest and often disappointing *modus operandi*. There is simply much more to the performance of magic than the secrets or the method.

### **Insider or Outsider?**

This covering document has been written from the perspective of a long-term insider within the performance magic community. The challenge I have as a researcher is that I am both inside and outside of this work. This portfolio demonstrates moments where my position sits broadly on the *outside* in the peer-reviewed articles, to the *inside* with the material written for magicians and offered here as an Appendix. McCutcheon, asks an important question in anthropological scholarship; ‘... whether, and to what extent, someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, or actions of another’ (McCutcheon, 1999, p. 2). I recognise that I can never truly separate myself from this work or regard magicians as (an)other, and as such this portfolio is written in a form that broadly chimes with McCutcheon’s notion of a ‘reflexive stance’ where ‘observations are inextricably entwined with the self-referential statements of the observer.’ (McCutcheon, 1999, p. 9). We see the

insider/outsider divide between performance magic and the academy discussed in Goto- Jones (2016) who argues that both sides have ‘developed separate bodies of knowledge about magic and separate systems of qualifications to recognise and grant access to them.’ He argues that while the academy ‘recognises the expertise of magicians as performers, their status as “professors of magic” is usually ignored or viewed as a quaint quirk of an eccentric subculture; magicians are at best amateur scholars.’ (Goto-Jones, 2016, p. 35). I share Goto-Jones’ hope that studies such as this help bridge the ‘ostensible divide’ (Goto-Jones, 2016, p. 36). Thus, while I may attempt to move between the worlds of the academy and performance magic in my discussions, I am very much in the ‘middle of the puzzle’, ‘circling words, making metaphors and meaning’ (McCutcheon, 1999, p. 10). It is also worthwhile to note that while I did not begin this work as an ‘initially ignorant researcher’<sup>6</sup> as Graham M. Jones did in his study of performance magic (Jones, 2011, p. 28), I did make the explicit decision to transition into performing bizarre magick, which represents a shift of genre within the form of performance magic . I was already a performance magician and, a decade ago, I became deeply interested in bizarre magick and what this genre held for my own performance practice.

In his 2009 web article *The Real Work: Modern Magic and the Meaning of Life*, Adam Gopnik argues that ‘being a magician is membership in a subculture, where methods and myths can be appreciated only by initiates’ (Gopnik, 2009). It is within

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<sup>6</sup> Some studies by outsiders are less successful, at least in the eyes of the magic community; as Genii Magazine’s damning review of Alex Stone’s book *Fooling Houdini* concluded: ‘Want to learn about magic? Read a book written by a real magician.’ (Swiss, 2012, p. 80)

this sub-culture that training in magic occurs, this is the *real* work identified by Gopnik, and this training comes from others within the sub-culture. Gopnik concludes; ‘The real work is the complete activity, the accumulated practice, the total summing up of tradition and ideas’ (Gopnik, 2009). It is, I feel, next to impossible to write about such a niche performance genre as bizarre magick<sup>7</sup> without being part of a sub-culture/community of bizarre magicians as much learning in this secretive art comes through sharing work, practice, and ideas.

### Secrets

Magicians have secrets to keep and as such there will be no explicit exposure of the methods behind the tricks discussed in this covering document or in the articles that form this portfolio. Rather, performance magic effects will simply be described, and, when it is essential to discuss method, I will be necessarily oblique. As we would expect from a form that prides itself on secrecy, public facing discussions of performance magic practice are necessarily limited. With much of the transmission of the form, ideas, and secrets being shared predominantly in private, magician-only spaces, and thus spoken only in more general terms within the public sphere. Firstly, this might account for the proliferation of historical studies made available in the public sphere, as these are relatively safe celebrations of the form with few secrets to

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<sup>7</sup> Other sub-genres of performance magic such as the bizarre are not so widespread. Magic often being lumped into a whole rather than considered within individual genres. Landman (2013) has opened this consideration by examining the framing of the magician, the mentalist, and the mystic, but there are just three areas and we could examine equally, for example, big-box illusion, close-up, or gospel magic as sub-genres of the nebulous whole of performance magic. As each one crosses over with the other but equally producing its own unique areas of philosophy, practice, and transmission. For example, attend a magic club lecture on Children’s magic and get a very different experience than one on bizarre magick even though there will be crossovers in method.

give, and, secondly, why science and magic publications that expose methods are so problematic to magicians such as myself, and thirdly, and most importantly for any detailed examination while inside the form, why so much work on the theory and practice of magic exists outside the academy and in the private libraries of magicians. These works are not outward facing to the general public having been written *by* magicians *for* magicians. The sheer amount of material produced in this way is enormous, and covers performance, history, magic tricks, audience management, chemical magic, illusion building, etc. While much of this work might be specifically aimed at the sub-genres alluded to in footnote 7 (above), there are certain key respected texts that bridge genres, for example; Juan Tamariz's *Five Points in Magic* (1988), Tommy Wonder's *Books of Wonder* (1996), and Darwin Ortiz's *Strong Magic* (1995). In addition there are a number of deeply respected, genre specific works such as Jean Hugard & Braue's *The Royal Road to Card Magic* (1948), and Tony Corinda's *Thirteen Steps to Mentalism* (1968). While some of these texts have a broader sphere of availability to the general public, the wider and heavily secret repository of knowledge that exists in private collections provides a wealth of material for the performance magician. Much of this work had short print runs, was privately produced, and passed only between magicians. It is this work that provides many of the primary sources for this project.

There does, however, need to be a word of caution when dealing with this material, as Mangan points out, a lot of work by magicians can be thought of as 'performative writing' (Mangan, 2007, p. xix). Although Mangan is primarily talking about magician's own accounts of their careers and performances in books that were

authored to sell to the public where biographical details were necessarily inflated to up-sell the magic credentials of the book's author, we have, within the magic community, a great deal of work produced by magicians for magicians, and indeed created to *sell to* magicians often for a price that proves unworthy of the secrets promised within. Frequently the buyer is disappointed and even falls victim themselves to the "is that all it is?" experience highlighted by Steinmeyer. An experienced magician gradually learns to recognise and filter this material, and this study has knowingly approached some works as performative writing with this quality filter in mind. It is equally important to note that historically performance magic is generally seen as a white, male pursuit. The reasons for this are complex and beyond the scope of this thesis, however, it is clear that further work is needed to examine the questions of ethnicity and gender.<sup>8</sup>

Magician Max Maven gently observes in his introduction to the collected volume of *The New Invocation*, a magazine of theory and magick for bizarrists; 'In this compilation [...] you will find a wide range of material. Most of it is crap' (Maven, 1986, p. iv). Performer and magic essayist Jamy Ian Swiss is more forthright; in his essay *In Search of Street Magic*, he compares street magic to bizarre magick arguing that both are a 'dream chamber for amateurs' (Swiss, 2007b, p. 1). Indeed, many of the methods (there is rarely anything new in terms of method in bizarre magick) are

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<sup>8</sup> For example, a number of early performers of mentalism were women such as Ita and Zenola (see page 45). This may be a direct consequence of the female performer dominating the spiritualist/mediumship market that pre-dates the rise of mentalism. However historically, and for a number of reasons, narratives of female performance magicians are less well-known and require further investigation.

simple, but bizarre magick was not, and is not, about the method. It is, as we shall see, concerned with thinking about performance magic differently from the norm. It is my contention that by looking at the many convergent themes, theories, and ideas by which we understand bizarre magick we can understand a little more about approaches to the performance of magic as a whole. As such this research draws from my experience in performing this form, and from primary sources that might not be well-known outside of the bizarre magick community. Equally, many of the works are rare and difficult to obtain, for example, *The Legendary Scroll of Masklyn ye Mage*, a collection of bizarre material from performer Tony Andruzzi, was handmade and limited to a small number of copies. Bringing much of this material together has been a large part of this research.

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This covering document sets out the core themes and arguments that underpin my publications, and this portfolio forms a cohesive approach to bizarre magick practice and its offshoots. The exploration of this area allows us to read the genre as an integral and important form that has had a lasting legacy in the field of performance magic. This is the first examination of its type, and this is significant as it allows a shift of emphasis away from historical studies of performance magic towards a discourse that promotes an engagement with post-golden age practice and thought. This work also shifts the discussion of performance magic away from an emphasis on the trick<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The term (magic) 'trick', and as we shall see, this is loaded for many magicians, particularly bizzarrists. To avoid these negative connotations and be more in line with standard magic parlance, when referring to a trick in general terms, that is holistically as 'the-thing-the-magician-does', I shall use the term



and towards a holistic approach to performance magic scholarship and practice that seeks to understand the underlying theme, structure and implementation of the effect through practice of the effect rather than by an interrogation of the method. The effects in bizarre magick pull at the very essence of performance magic practice, drawing heavily from a range of themes such; as horror, the fantastic and the Gothic; re-evaluating the nature and persona of the magician; extending the meaning of the magic prop; and experimenting with the structure of the narrative, and as such, it cannot be ignored as a form.

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*effect*. This follows the standard practice in performance magic of writing up a trick in two sections; the first being *The Effect* where the experience of the trick is recounted, usually from the audiences' point of view, and the second being *The Method* where the secret workings of the effect are explained. The effect being, according to Lamont and Wiseman in *Magic in Theory*, 'what the spectator sees, and includes an event that the spectator regards as incompatible with his view on how the world works' and the method being 'the secret behind the effect and allows the effect to take place' (Lamont and Wiseman, 2005, pp. x–xi). Simply put, and echoed in an essay by Jamy Ian Swiss, 'The method isn't the trick' (Swiss, 2005). In bizarre magick publications, and in keeping with the implicit occult themes of the work, the *method* is often renamed the *Arcanum*, and in turn the write-up of the effect is elevated to an extended, story-like, detailed description of the experience. This led Eugene Burger to observe that the write up of a bizarre magick effect had the danger of becoming a 'literary exercise' rather than a wholehearted exploration of the form (Burger, 1991, p. 28) this is explored further in the section *Bizarre Tales* below.

## *Approach*

We can identify four areas of approach when examining bizarre magick, these are not mutually exclusive, but rather serve to enable a structured consideration of the work. These are; key themes, folklore and ostension, the magician, and the magic object.

## *Key themes*

Broadly speaking we can identify a number of key themes that are used by bizarre magicians to re-frame performance magic as bizarre magick. In general, these are fuzzy categories that illustrate broad principles of theming. The term ‘fuzzy’ is used throughout this covering document, and particularly in relation to the ‘fuzzy Gothic’. Here I am referring to a ‘a rich tapestry of material, which can be recognised as broadly Gothic in the popular sense’ (Taylor, 2015b, p. 163), thus I am suggesting that there is a process of borrowing from a broad range of material that has become associated with the Gothic for the purposes of *playing* the Gothic. This might include, for example, borrowing from rich, popular notions of Dracula(s) that go beyond the original novel and include elements drawn from subsequent adaptations such as the Hammer Horror films (Taylor and Nolan, 2015, pp. 131–132). Magicians themselves borrow from a range of fuzzy sources to provide apparent context to their work, often using material that is deliberately ‘muddy and unclear’ to blur the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘pretend’ (Goto-Jones, 2016, p. 33). This is particularly true of bizarre magicians who borrow from many of these elements to blur the context between the real and the unreal.

Key ideas in bizarre magick exhibit a great deal of crossover between forms, and as such the mythologies and narratives from which bizarre effects are drawn often span many themes taken from many genres of fiction. In Taylor (2016b) I identify this as *fantastika*, a term appropriated by John Clute<sup>10</sup> to embrace genres such as science fiction, horror and fantasy. The *fantastika* that is drawn upon in bizarre magick comprises of a fuzzy series of genre signs applied across a wide continuum of practice. It is important, therefore, that we understand bizarre magick as a form that spans a continuum of diverse practices. At one end we see work being loosely categorised as *spook magic* which is often lightweight, high-camp, and draws from influences such as Hammer House of Horror or early Universal horror classics, it is these expressions that are discussed in Taylor & Nolan (2015). Around the centre of this continuum of practice we see work that draws from the fictions of, for example, H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James. In bizarre magick performance, much of this work presents *fantastika* for serious consideration, in the sense that the bizarre magician provides, through magical method, apparent evidence that the events recounted in their tales actually took place. The act of magic being the vehicle to produce evidence with which to empirically demonstrate the apparent truth of the tale as recounted by the magician. Finally, at the other end of the continuum we have a harder approach to bizarre magick, this is often framed in terms of the pagan or the occult. Here the boundary between truth and reality is deliberately blurred in performance. These latter concerns were very much central to the performance of early bizarre, with many

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<sup>10</sup> See also, Clute, J. (2007) 'Fantastika in the World Storm'. *Stuff*. Available at: <<http://www.johnclute.co.uk/word/?p=15>> [Accessed 3 May 2016].

practitioners experimenting with framing of their work, in terms of both persona and effect, as genuine magic(k). However, more generally the performer of bizarre magick will play across this continuum by dipping into its various themes where necessary. Thus, while in his book *Strange Ceremonies*, Eugene Burger identifies fellow magician Harry Meier as distinguishing two styles of bizarre magick; the hard and the soft, with the soft being less about 'blood and fear' (Burger, 1991, p. 31), in reality this was, and still is, a tricky binary for the bizarre magician to align to, and thus we see Jim Magus in his *Arcana of Bizarre Magick* referring to bizarre magick as often being played across a 'spectrum' with the 'theatrical' at one end and the 'credible' at the other (Magus, 2009, p. 20). Ultimately, it is the performer's response to the source material that determines where they might appear on this continuum, and it is important to highlight that this framing is often unique and mutable for each performer. In more general terms, the bizarre magician's position across the continuum of bizarre magick is dependent on the areas or themes that the magician chooses to draw from. Perhaps one of the richest veins for the bizarre magician to tap into was the wealth of material, both fictional and 'real', that surrounded spiritualism, mediumship, ghosts and hauntings.

### *Séance*

The performance of séance provided an early focus for my research and allowed me to develop my initial thoughts as to the structure of the performance magic effect. I introduced this to magicians in the attached Taylor and Hoedt (2012), and applied this more thoroughly to the performance of bizarre magick in the form of the Gothic séance in Taylor (2015b). Séance performance, while largely presented in a serious

mode, can be seen as a more playful form within bizarre magick, with the light or theatrical séance having an element of interactive play within it. Early on in my practice, my séance show *How Psychic Are You?* (Taylor, 2010) drew upon and applied, Holloway's notion of 'Enchanted Spaces' (Holloway, 2006, p. 182). Holloway examines descriptions of séance that were published in the *Spiritual Telegraph*, a journal for spiritualists that ran from 1852-1860. Here Holloway demonstrates the 'playfulness' of the experience of séance together with the 'fear at the sight or touch of the spirits' (Holloway, 2006, p. 185). My approach in this area also expanded upon the ludic possibilities of séance and trance in performance that are discussed in Lehman's analysis of the theatre of trance. Here the trance or mesmeric state allows for a 'freedom from restraint' and opens up 'subversive possibilities' (2009, p. 2). These elements, coupled with the fuzziness the audience experiences when engaging in the referencing of ghosts and hauntings, itself echoes the messy rise of spiritualism, formed as it was, according to Monroe, by 'radically different cosmologies and theologies' (1999, p. 220). This ambiguity was injected into the opening phase of my show's script in order to create a general ludic atmosphere. I identified this opening phase as the 'crisis' in Taylor & Hoedt (2012, p. 273) and as the 'underlying stress' in Taylor (2015b, p. 169). As such I identified four phases to the bizarre magick/Gothic séance act which follows a model of collective delusion that I borrow from folklorists. I discuss this model in the next section below, however, I will briefly expand on the four phases here as they are directly relevant in the consideration of séance practice. The four phases I applied to my work were *underlying stress*, *triggering event*, *collective action*, and *showdown*. The playfulness intended in my piece *How Psychic Are You?* was to allow the audience to discover, through various interactive effects,

who amongst them was apparently the most psychic and more likely to be able to contact the spirits in the later dark portion of the séance show. The emphasis in these shows was on play and to present the mystery of spirit contact, with myself being more of a facilitator than a magician. The final dark element of the séance also had a lighter touch and brought together the *triggering event* and *collective action* phases mentioned above into a final psychic showdown moment.

In applying this research to my later work, particularly that with fellow performer Ashton Carter (2016b, 2017, 2019), I sought to retain some of the playfulness I had explored previously in the *Underlying Stress* phase, but with a focus on extending the exploration of the *triggering event* and *collective action* phases to develop a more sensuous space that could appear to be enchanted in some way. A space that, again returning to Holloway, can be described as, ‘vitalised’ (Holloway, 2006, p. 182). In performance, this vitality comes from facilitating ideomotor action with a traditionally small<sup>11</sup> number of audience volunteers. This is achieved through glass moving<sup>12</sup> in the *triggering event* phase, and then allowing audience possession effects to occur in the *collective action phase*. The audience is guided carefully through these experiences, with the bizarre magician framed as a facilitator, and there is little emphasis on any magic tricks beginning performed. However, as suggested in Taylor (2015b, p. 167), we do still see tricks performed in some séances, but again this plays across a continuum. While trick-heavy theatrical séances such as Earle’s *Making*

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<sup>11</sup> Hardinge, E. (1870) 'Rules to be Observed when Forming Spiritual Circles'. *Joseph Peace Hazard and Spiritualism*, (11) suggests eight to be the perfect number.

<sup>12</sup> See page 60 below.

*Manifestations Séance* (1989), Maue's *Book of Spirits Séance* (2005) and Piazza's *Memories of Emily* séance (2007) use effect and method to give the audience the experience of spirit manifestation, the gimmick-less ideomotor based séance relies more heavily on facilitation rather than explicit moments of traditional effect and method.

### *The Gothic*

Another rich theme that can be seen in bizarre magick is that of the Gothic, and often areas chosen to be explored by the bizarre magician are taken from an assortment of popular Gothic tropes. Thus, when Charles Cameron argued in the first issue of *Invocation* that 'the "average" magician has long since given up dread [and] what he requires is a sound Gothic revival!' (Cameron, 1974, p. 1), he was referring not to an accurate reflection of Gothicism, but rather to the 'fuzzy distillation of historical, the geographical, the environmental, the physiological and the scenographic sign-system of the Gothic' (Taylor, 2015b, p. 163). The contents of this portfolio reference many bizarre magick effects that call for, or at least suggest, Gothic tropes in performance, and these tropes are drawn from an exposure to this fuzzy Gothic through popular fiction. Finegan in *Closing the Circle: presencing gothic space through performance* identifies this as the 'heightened reality of fiction' (Finegan, 2015, p. 61) and in Taylor (2015b) I identify this as chiming with Mighall's (2003) notion of a Gothic 'mode' which can be seen as an *approach* to the past, rather than an accurate reflection of the Gothic itself;

[...] a form that can be recognised as of the "gothic [sic] genre" as having "similar attitudes to setting atmosphere and style" (Bloom 1998, 2). This often theatrically mirrors the popular Gothic seen in films such as those from the Hammer Studios

which, according to Kavka (2002), have a clear “visual code” and are themselves “inheritors of a cultural legacy” (Kavka 2002, 210) (Taylor, 2015b, p. 168)

Bizarre magicians perform these attitudes to atmosphere and style by creating a space that can be defined as Gothic-like, or simply a space where the Gothic-like happens. Bizarre magician Tony ‘Doc’ Shiels believed that the performer should spend time to ‘tread the path of the supernatural’ ultimately developing their work to ‘convey the feeling of gothic horror’ (Shiels, Raven and Fromer, 1974, p. 3). The work should, according to Shiels in his collection of effects *13!!!* (1968a), seem like ‘the real thing ... not trickery, not deception, but genuine, spell-casting, spook-raising sorcery!’ (Shiels, 1968a, p. 2). The ‘real thing’ described by Shiels is this heightened bringing to reality of the fuzzy Gothic. Shiels later argues that given the relative simplicity of the mechanics of many of the actual effects in bizarre magick, its framing must be serious, minute in its detail, and not be treated lightly (Shiels, Raven and Fromer, 1974, p. 17). Fellow bizarre magician, Tony Andruzzi appears to agree when he refers to the secondary nature of the effect in *The Negromicon of Masklyn ye Mage* arguing that ‘the climax of a bizarre bit of weird Magick should seem incredible and a bit sinister ... almost anti-climactic, at times’, and the ‘resultant denouement should be a subtle and startling inexplicable “happening”’ (Andruzzi, 1977, p. 2). Throughout bizarre magick literature we find effects that are compact Gothic story-telling experiences that are designed to be played to small gatherings of participants. Reflecting on this, Stephen Minch suggests in his collection *Lovecraftian Ceremonies* (1979a), that the effects, Minch terms them ‘playlets, ‘are destined to be performed to an intimate grouping of three to eight persons’ (Minch, 1979a, p. i), and Eugene Burger later quotes Andruzzi



as saying; 'the number of people in attendance is in direct ratio to the acceptability of the genuineness' (Burger, 1986c, p. 90).

### *Folklore and Ostension*

As suggested above, a key driver of my research was the application of a four-phase model of ostensive action onto the performance of bizarre magick. I initially applied this model in broad strokes to the general form of the magic trick and this was disseminated to magicians in Taylor & Hoedt (2012), but later I applied this methodology more rigorously in Taylor (2015b) where I discuss how the concept of ostension might be applied to the performance of the Gothic séance. When using the term ostension I am referring to 'the presentation (as opposed to the representation) of a legend text' (Taylor, 2015b, p. 165). In this case the legend text being the acting out of a ghost story, the fuzzy gothic or fantastika, that is, the narrative focus for a bizarre magick effect. In folklorist terms, and chiming with bizarre magick performance where the fictions are generalised representations, it is rare that a legend text is literally fully acted-out, but rather it may be suggested through the process of ostension. In 'Death by Folklore: Ostension, Contemporary Legend and Murder', folklorist Bill Ellis, suggests that there are, in fact, the three ostensive forms which can be seen to 'function synergistically' in the process of acting out a legend text, these are; pseudo-ostension, quasi-ostension, and proto-ostension (Ellis, 1989, p. 209). Here Ellis is extending the work of Dégh & Vázsonyi who in their seminal article 'Does the Word 'Dog' Bite: Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend Telling', argue that there are a number of degrees to ostension, and that these can describe 'ways in

which circulating narratives can influence reality, or at least the way reality is interpreted' (Ellis, 2001, p. 162). In summary, these forms are;

- **Pseudo-ostension:** A hoax in which the participant produces evidence that the legend has been enacted, for example, fabricating evidence of cult sacrifice on a 'legend trip'
- **Quasi-ostension:** The misinterpretation of naturally occurring events in terms of an existing legend, for example, visiting a site alleged to have been involved in 'devil worship' and being seen as a 'devil worshipper' or, according to Koven (2007, p. 184), this happens when someone who believes in ghosts becomes more likely to see one.
- **Proto-ostension:** When, to gain attention, persons take a story alleged to have happened to someone else and claim it as a personal experience of their own, for example, falsely claiming to have seen something during a 'cult panic'.

(Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983; Ellis, 1989; Koven, 2007)

Early on in this research I found that ostension was, in general terms, a useful frame with which to discuss bizarre magick effects. Bizarre magicians, in particular, appear to tap into the synergistic functioning of the ostensive narrative. For example, in performance, as I have stated, the bizarre magician attempts to (re)create stories and experiences for their audience that give reality to legend texts. In this case the legend texts are predominantly the underlying, and often fuzzy, themes that find themselves expressed not only in the mode of story-telling within a bizarre magick effect, that is, the themes and dramatic structure of the act of bizarre magick, but also in the props or the objects the bizarre magician works with in performance.

It is important to note that Dégh & Vázsonyi argue that performance, and here they are speaking in particular about acting, is not, in itself, a form of ostension. They argue that the audience does not confuse the character sign with the actor sign, they use the example of an audience not confusing the actor with the character of Hamlet (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 8). However, we can see how this might function differently in performance magic, as a confusion with the performance magician sign and the real magician sign may sometimes occur and, indeed, this is often courted deliberately in bizarre magick. During my research, and early on in my practice as a bizarre magician, I experienced this audience confusion first hand and this is recounted in the attached *Identity and Persona* (Taylor, 2020).

Throughout this portfolio I point to examples of how the bizarre magician actively plays with the confusion of the actor and character sign, chiming with Dégh & Vázsonyi's notion that 'while the stage actor keeps character sign and actor sign in balance, the hoaxer, in the interest of deceit, strives to conceal as much of the actor sign and simultaneously make the character sign more complete and convincing' (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 19). However when examining bizarre magick the *pseudo-ostension* mode noted above is perhaps the most useful as it is the 'imitation of ostension' (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 9). While this mode of ostension might, at first glance, appear more relevant to the theatrical conjurer or the magician-who-performs-tricks, that is, one who performs the appearance of plausibility through theatrical signs. We can see that the bizarre magician pushes the boundaries of this acting-out as they draw on far more complex legend texts and themes. The bizarre magician is effectively playing with a mode of ostension that chimes with Dégh &

Vázsonyi's contention that through ostensive action 'facts can be turned into narratives but narratives can also be turned into facts' (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 12). I believe that it is these legend narratives, played as facts, that the bizarre magician attempts to express and communicate in performance. Dégh & Vázsonyi are talking not only about the co-authorship of the experience, but also a separation between the actor (hoaxer) and the believer (the audience), and, once again, this transaction is less delineated and more blurred in bizarre magick performance practice where the actor and audience often share or are guided to appear to work together towards an ostensive act in the intimate setting of bizarre magick. We then see some of the work of the bizarre magician often having much more in common with the traditional hoaxer, who through acting-out ostensively, enables an encounter with a legend text to occur (see Tony 'Doc' Shiels *Monstermind* discussed on page 91 below).

It is possible to extend this further; Dégh & Vázsonyi suggest there can only be one of four possibilities experienced in a folklore encounter; that the experience was real; that someone was playing a trick (it was a deception); that it was human error or a mistake; or that it was a lie (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 18). Throughout this research I suggest that the bizarre magician is often acting-out a folklore encounter through the act of magic by creating the experience of a real folklore/legend text encounter for their audience. Of course, as with the mainstream magician, they may achieve this through deception, lying or the manipulation of human error. However, by employing ostensive practice, the bizarre magician, and subsequently their audience, find themselves interacting with belief and non-belief in the performance space. They become co-authors of a folklore encounter drawing on legends, hints,

motifs to experience a legend text, see Taylor (2011a, 2015b). Thus, the performance of bizarre magick might be presented as a transaction similar to the ‘delicate oscillation of “belief” and the persistent uncertainty’ identified by Dégh & Vázsonyi (1983, p. 24) as occurring during an ostensive encounter.

As this work progressed I began to accept that ostension can be a problematic concept to apply directly to the performance of bizarre magick and, certainly as my practice developed, I became less happy to use it as a method of framing my work. At the time of writing and publishing, however, the concept was central in the construction of my early performances, and this is why it is discussed in detail in this portfolio. As my own work moves beyond this thesis, I feel that as a general umbrella concept for practice that does not get bogged down in notions of sequential dramatic structure, reverting to Ellis’ (1989, pp. 201–202) notion of ‘collective delusion’ (discussed below on pages 100-101) better describes the work. I had initially applied these ideas to bizarre magick in Taylor (2011a) and explored them further in Taylor (2015b). This concept would appear to express the processes of bizarre magick performance in more general terms, allowing a certain freeing of the narrative structure, treating ostension in more ludic terms (see pages 73 & 109) suggesting neither a beginning or an end, but rather a process of illusionistic inclusion in the act of magic(k).

### *The Magician*

A key element of enquiry for me when working practically in bizarre magick was my role in the creation of my magician persona and the performative world I constructed around that persona, this is discussed primarily in Taylor (2014b, 2020).

Magician-only literature on bizarre magick, aside from providing the bizarre magician with a large number of effects, presents a great deal of discourse as to what a bizarre magician should be and how that role might be played.

I began my own journey with an examination of the more general notion of the performance magician and how they might classify their practice. This is often attempted through formulating an occurrence classification of effects, that is, an analysis of effects based on the thing that appears to be happening in performance. For example, Daniel Fitzkee in *The Trick Brain* (1944) developed a basic list of nineteen effects, and much later Lamont and Wiseman (2005, pp. 3–7) provided a useful simplification of this effect classification. I found that, while these classification systems were helpful at the level of the effect, that is, what the audience sees, the systems tend to focus on the performance of magic at the functional level of the trick, rather than as an effect based on a particular theme or act of performance. When focussing on the mechanical in this way the performance of magic becomes a non-complex form, with the emphasis on tricks rather than embracing a holistic performance practice. Robert Neale in *The Magic Mirror* (Neale and Parr, 2002) presents a more thorough analysis, and through using Fitzkee's classification as a foundation, Neale develops an occurrence classification that is useful for beginning to unpick not only the classification of effects but also the experience of that effect. Neale refers to this as the effect's 'symbolic' concerns. For Neale, the three basic symbolic concerns are; Being, Doing and Relating. Each of these areas have three sub-concerns which are in turn linked back to Fitzkee's nineteen basic effects (Neale and Parr, 2002, pp. 68–71).

Previously, and as a response to their own practice in bizarre magick, Eugene Burger and Robert Neale developed a model for the magician that considered the notion of 'many magics' (Burger and Neale, 1995). Burger and Neale suggested a movement away from classification by occurrence to a broader more considered overview as to what magic could be. They proposed five categories of magic; primary, secondary, reduced, restored and reflective. In these practical approaches Neale sees primary magic as 'life magic', which is the nearest thing to 'magical thinking' (Burger and Neale, 1995, p. 175), and is the 'invisible magic in our lives' (Burger and Neale, 1995, p. 179). According to Neale, the audience's response to *primary magic* is the *secondary magic* of ritual and stage. *Ritual* being a response based on belief and *stage* simply being the performance of magic. The former response accepts magic as real, the latter response asks 'what if magical thinking worked?' (Burger and Neale, 1995, p. 179). In the next category, *reduced magics*, we see magic without belief, that is, performance magic presented purely to deceive or distract; and *restored magics* which is magic that relates to our humanistic concerns. The final category, *reflexive magic*, is a little more complex as it is 'magic about magic', that is, 'magic that refers to itself', defined by Neale as 'trickster magic'.

In an early draft of this classification, Neale listed examples such as 'Gospel Magic' and 'Bizarre Magick' as being *restored magic* (Burger and Neale, 1995, p. 184). Bizarre magick finding a position such as this, would suggest that the practice had succeeded in some way as a form and that it could be used by magicians to explore and create 'secondary worlds' where 'miracles are common', both of which were called for by

Tony Raven in his 1976 essay for *Magick* magazine 'On the Presentation of Bizarre Magick' (Raven, 1976).

Larry Hass in his article 'Life Magic and Staged Magic: A Hidden Intertwining' (2008) developed the work of Burger and Neale further, by making a separation between what he termed as 'life' magic and 'staged' magic. Although he does not quite refer to stage magic in the same way as Neale, Hass signals the importance of 'mystery' in the debate and warns us not to insist 'on a false binary that divides magic from the things that really matter' (Hass, 2008, p. 28), and that 'people are magicians in their daily lives' (Hass, 2008, p. 16). This re-evaluation of the role of magic and the magician, again coming out of the work the Mystery School, comes full circle in suggesting that there can be a blurring between the real and the performed. The key for me while exploring the performance of bizarre magick, was how this might map to my approach to being a magician and how an audience might then experience this magick.

### *The Magic Object*

Another common theme throughout this research is the notion of the (performance) magic(al) object. Aileen Robinson (2014) in "'All Transparent": Pepper's Ghost, Plate Glass, and Theatrical Transformation' sees the magic object, in her example a dove, as being transformed into a magical thing by (and at) the very moment of transformation or disappearance. This represents a shift of focus for the observer, and Robinson suggests that objects become magical things through a



process transformational enactment, Robinson calls this ‘illusory enactment’ (Robinson, 2014, p. 136). Robinson extends this discussion to the plate glass covering the stage and facilitating the illusion of the appearance of the ghost. It is this object that becomes the magical thing through its employment in Pepper’s illusion<sup>15</sup>. The plate glass becomes the thing producing the ghost. However, I suggest that if we look on a more practical level at the standard prop in performance magic, we see that the object also becomes transformed through interaction with a magician through the effect; for example, two individual solid rings become linked, or an egg is transformed into a silk handkerchief. This is the latent and the hidden that pushes up against the ordinariness of the mundane object and makes it magic(k)al. The vase is a normal vase, until the magician does something to it, and it is transformed into a magical thing through an illusory performance that includes a facilitated moment of enactment. Of course, the props of the magician are themselves extraordinary by the virtue of them being stage properties of a magician, whether the performance of magic then comes from the physical alteration (gimmicking) of that object or that object is made *other* through the skill or actions of the magician.

Pringle, when discussing 19<sup>th</sup> century stage illusions, argues that the mechanisms and designs of magic lead to a ‘subliminal awareness of an elsewhere that was not supernatural’ (Pringle, 2002, p. 342). This awareness can be extended to our understanding of (non-bizarre) magic props. The audience are often aware that the garishly painted box is gimmicked in some way and that the dove does not, and

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<sup>15</sup> For discussion on the history and workings of Pepper’s Ghost see; Speaight (1989) & Brooker (2007)

cannot, simply vanish. Therefore, it must have gone somewhere (in Pringle's terms an 'elsewhere'). In this model the employment of the conventional magic prop once again becomes a trick, or a puzzle to be solved, rather than a moment of real magic. In bizarre magick the prop or magical object is still a magic prop, however the bizarre magician attempts to remove, or at least dislocate, this notion of a mundane 'elsewhere' in favour of alternative elsewhere driven by supernatural causes. In bizarre magick performance the object is often portrayed as a 'genuine' magical object and it is frequently central to the conceit of the effect, drawing as it does from a variety of occult or fictional sources. To further remove the notion of 'elsewhere' and to make the objects appear real, many works on bizarre magick discuss how to age, customise, and give historical providence to existing or custom magic props. In an early editorial for *Invocation*, Anthony Raven discusses how to age props so that they 'look the part and "appear" authentic' (Raven, 1974a) and the *Negromicon of Masklyn ye Mage* was not only a handmade book of effects, but also 'a prop to use in your shows' or 'an unusual book to keep around the house to show your guests' (Magus, 2011, p. 197).

## *The Origins of Bizarre Magick*

Writing in the *Magazine for the American Society of Magicians*, performer Tony Andruzzi describes bizarre magick as ‘the Grand Guignol of conjuring’ (Andruzzi, 1983a, p. 24). Certainly, Andruzzi’s own brand of bizarre magick shared many of the traits seen in the popular horror theatre form, however the actual practice of bizarre magick was far more nuanced as it embraced many more themes aside from simply horror. By the time of Andruzzi’s article, bizarre magick had grown from a smattering of effects found in magician-only publications to a recognised genre of performance magic in its own right. As well many magician-only publications, there were several periodicals devoted to exploring the theory and practice of the form, these included; *Cauldron* (1967-68), *Invocation* (1974-78), *New Invocation* (1979-1996), and *Séance* (1988-1991). There were also a number of private meets and conventions, perhaps the most well-known being the regular international gathering *Invocational* which was held in the US and ran from 1984 to 1990.

An often-quoted origin story for bizarre magick, at least in the UK, is that it was a reaction against British plaque magic. This was a performance magic form described by Eugene Burger as relying on colourful ‘pictures of three-dimensional objects [...] painted on two-dimensional boards or plaques’ (Burger, 1986a). These performances were seen by bizarre magicians as the anathema of what performance magic could be. For them the contemporary performance magic form had become stale, relying on the same lines of script (patter), and using the same popular magic props purchased from the same small number of magic dealers. Thus, at its heart, bizarre magicians saw performance magic as a form that had become tired and disenchanted, and they

sought to re-imagine it by exploring darker themes, such as occult and spiritualist practices.

This response to a lack of innovation in performance magic was mirrored in the US, as Andruzzi observed in *The Negromicon of Masklyn ye Mage*<sup>16</sup>; ‘in Magick, one will see no fountains of silk or flip-over boxes painted garishly with ersatz hieroglyphs’ (Andruzzi, 1977). Throughout the literature on bizarre magick we see continued critical responses to mainstream performance magic and a continued push for, according to bizarre magician and editor of *Invocation* Tony Raven<sup>17</sup>, ‘mystery and enchantment rather than finger flinging’ (Raven, 1978, p. 290). The term ‘finger flinging’ being used in the derogatory sense towards mainstream magicians who were performing tricks that used unsubtle and often complex sleight of hand which drew attention to the mechanics of the method and made the effect a puzzle to be solved by the audience rather than a moment of true magic. Bizarre magicians sought remove, or at least lessen, the audiences’ puzzlement by emphasising other motivations in their presentations, for example; wonder, enchantment and/or fear. Bizarre magicians were also reacting against the performance of magic that they saw as being trivialised through what Eugene Burger identified as the ‘undisciplined use of comedy’ (Burger, 1989, p. 591). In a later interview when discussing this issue, Burger suggests ‘magicians are afraid of magic’, and he cites a time where he watched a magician ‘shatter’ the moment of magic with a ‘stupid joke [that] brought everyone

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<sup>16</sup> Masklyn ye Mage was the stage name Tony Andruzzi adopted for some of his bizarre magick work (usually pagan in form). For the majority of his work in bizarre he used the name Tony Andruzzi. Previous to this he performed comedy magic under the name of Tom Palmer.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Raven was the bizarre magick persona of performer Bob Lynn.

down, back to the tacky world of comedy club reality' (Burger and Neale, 1995, p. 2). In response, bizarre magicians choose to avoid comedy in an attempt to introduce a 'sincerity of intent' and a 'sincerity of purpose' (Burger, 1989, p. 591) into the effects they performed. Thus, practitioners of bizarre magick no longer wanted to be 'perceived as mere tricksters or performers of puzzles', instead they wanted to 'present the wonders [...] theatrically as if they were real' (Caplan, 1988). At its core, bizarre magick was a reaction against established popular tropes of performance magic such as garish props, printed plaques, comedy, and presenting magic as tricks or puzzles. The aim being, as Eugene Burger suggests in his article *A Magazine in Search of a Mage*, to elicit the 'recovery of presentation' (Burger, 1986a).

### *Proto-Bizarre*

While the roots of bizarre magick practice may have found impetus in this counter response to conventional performance magic forms, the origins of bizarre magick are more complex. The movement can be seen as growing, in part, from a number of effects and ideas that were published across a small number of publications in the 1950s and 1960s. I refer to these as proto-bizarre effects, and many of these came in part, from the legacy of séance, mediumship and mentalism. Performer Stephan Minch describes bizarre magick as rising 'wraith-like from the sod of two specialised schools of magick: pseudo-spiritism and mentalism' (Minch, 2009, p. 732). In these terms, we see perhaps the nearest precursor to the bizarre magician being the *miracle entertainer*, or as it later became more formally codified; *the mentalist*. The term mentalist derives from 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses on personal development and the title was often woven into discussions on animal magnetism and theories of 'mentalism'.

For example, in 1902, Segno's *The Law of Mentalism: a practical, scientific explanation of thought or mind force: the law which governs all mental and physical action and phenomena: the cause of life and death* claimed mentalism as a 'law' of nature that provided a foundation for the following 'sciences'; 'Mesmerism, Hypnotism, Personal Magnetism, Magnetic Healing, Mental Science, Christian Science, Spiritualism, Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, Telepathy, Mediumship, etc.' (Segno, 1902, p. 20). A few years following this publication magicians had appropriated the term, and 'mentalism' was being used as a wide-ranging label for mediumistic or mindreading effects, and term the 'mentalist' was being used as a title for the magician who actually performs these effects. A search of documents held at *The Conjuring Arts Research Centre* reveals that the term 'mentalist' in relation to performance magic first appeared in issue 1, volume 5 (1906, p. 5) of the magician's periodical *The Sphinx*, and the term 'mentalism' appeared in the same periodical in issue 1, volume 18 (1919, p. 24), in an advertisement for 'Zenola: the girl who knows'. An earlier mention of mentalism, this time in another periodical *Magical World*, issue 16, volume 1 (1910, p. 244) refers to *Ita*, another female mentalist.

Two of the earliest offerings from magicians that we can identify as precursors to bizarre magick effects are *Voodoo* (Monroe, 1937) and *The Fairy Goblet of Eden Hall*<sup>18</sup> (Smith and Lyons, 1941). Max Maven recognises these effects as 'exceptions' to the 'wilful normalisation of conjuring' (Maven, 1986, p. iv). Both effects were published<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Not to be confused with the effect 'Entity Alone' (Elliott and Lyons, 1941) which was later published in *Practical Mental Effects* (Annemann, 1944, pp. 51–51) and served as a coda to the original Fairy Goblet effect and was a more traditional living or dead test.

<sup>19</sup> *Voodoo* was reprinted in *Practical Mental Effects* (Annemann, 1944, p. 111)

in *The Jinx* which was a periodical edited by mentalist Theodore Annemann and ran from 1934 to 1941. Although the periodical ultimately focussed on mentalism, *The Jinx's* wider purpose was to supply 'magicians and mystery entertainers at large with practical effects and useful knowledge' (Annemann, 1934). Monroe's effect *Voodoo* stands out here as it draws on many themes that will later become the key building blocks of bizarre magick effects. In Monroe's *Voodoo*, a Chinese coin is marked and tied to a cord, this and a blank business card are secured in a small box and a member of the audience is asked to hide the box 'in the most remote corner of the house, in an old trunk, under the mattress upstairs, or in the attic' (Monroe, 1937, p. 208). When the volunteer returns, the lights are extinguished and an eyrie green glow appears at the table and in the half-light the magician is seen to be holding the original box. The box is opened, the coin and thread removed and the coin then mysteriously drops off the cord. A playing card is then selected by a member of the audience and the name of the card written on a blank business card. The cord and the business card are returned to the box. The green light fades and the lights are turned back on. The box has vanished, the coin remains on the table and an audience member verifies that coin to be the one that was marked previously. Another audience member retrieves the box from its hiding place and they find 'only the knotted string and card upon which is written in bright green ink; 'The card you selected was the Ace of Hearts' (Monroe, 1937, p. 208). Monroe's effect expands the traditional magic/mentalism effect of divining a chosen playing card by making the prediction no longer come from the performer, but from some ghostly other. Monroe layers onto this a ring on rope style presentation borrowed from a more traditional magic effect, but again this is given a

supernatural twist, and Monroe further layers in special effects with the eyrie green glow emerging from the darkness.

The other effect, *The Fairy Goblet of Eden Hall* is discussed more fully in “‘Strange Ceremonies’: Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick’ (Taylor, 2016b).

However, it does represent an early attempt at bringing in themes of participation in ritual and the magician as a facilitator of the ritual process. In the effect the audience are referred to as ‘guests’ and the magician as the ‘host’;

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. (Taylor, 2016b, p. 57)

The seriousness of the performance is emphasised in both in the author’s description of the effect and is further stressed in the editor’s accompanying note which warns magicians not to be tempted to add their own ‘magical’ or ‘tricky’ effects to this ‘profound beginning’ (Annemann, 1941, p. 763). The *Fairy Goblet* later would provide inspiration for bizarre magician Brother Shadow<sup>20</sup>, who would publish adaptations of these effects as *The Ritual of the Rock* (Shadow, 1991) and *Have Séance Will Travel* (Shadow, 1995).

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<sup>20</sup> Magician Carl Herron.



### *The 'Psychic Series'*

A little later and alongside these proto-bizarre effects, stage hypnotist and magician Ormond McGill produced a series of six volumes between 1950 and 1951. Entitled *Psychic Magic*, the work published by Supreme Magic promised to provide 'magicians with some most unusual material with which they can entertain' (McGill, 1950, p. 5). In keeping with how bizarre magicians would later dismiss many contemporary forms of performance magic as wanting, the first volume of McGill's *Psychic Magic* opens with a similar dismissal of mentalism;

When the late Theodore Annemann made the statement the mental and psychic effects were the most grown-up form of Magic, he spoke the truth. But while it is true that intellectually such is the most mature Magic, emotionally it is the most naïve. And as proof, one could hardly conceive of the most innocent spectator giving credence beyond entertaining trickery to any other form of conjuring, while many have been the sophisticated who have expressed belief in Psychic Magic. (McGill, 1950, p. 5)

McGill goes on to describe how the magician might appear to lend a 'sympathetic ear' to the possibility of genuine psychic phenomena and then offer examples of that phenomena in action. The six volumes that make up *Psychic Magic* cover effects based on mindreading, crystal seership, psychometry, x-ray vision, animal magnetism, manifesting spirits, an 'East Indian' mystery act, pendulums, and occult 'amazements'. McGill refers to this work as 'miracle presentations', which are, 'considerably different from that normally employed by the magician' (McGill, 1951, p. 18). In the final volume McGill suggests that a miracle presentation has two requirements; firstly, 'it must, by its very nature, imply the workings of some supernormal force or source for its accomplishment' and secondly, 'it must be sold to the observers in a very special way through the application of thirteen rules' (McGill, 1951, p. 19). McGill's thirteen

rules can be seen to be a precursor to many of the tenets of the bizarre magick movement and cover themes such as, the incitement of awe over pleasure; the seriousness of the intellectual demonstration; the presentation of effect not as a demonstration of a magician's skill [that is, not a 'trick'], and a presentation that is not discussed or repeated after it is shown. For McGill, the performer's relationship to the effect is 'purely that of the instrument through which the effect is made manifest' (McGill, 1951, p. 19). Later, as a response to a renewed interest in the performance of psychic and occult magic including the emergence of bizarre magick, McGill's six volume series was revised and republished in book form in 1976 as *How to Produce Miracles*. The reworked introduction further echoes the disillusionment bizarrists felt with mainstream magic; with McGill dismissing the magician who performs 'obvious tricks designed to entertainingly mystify, and promoting the 'miracle entertainer' whose work presents, 'exclusive commodities that hark of deep mystery, the unknown, the weird and unfathomable' (McGill, 1976, p. 9).

The interest in the psychic and occult performance magic continued to grow around the fringes throughout the 1950s and 1960s occasionally making it into the mainstream, for example, we see the performance of occult themes discussed in Henning Nelms' popular *Magic and Showmanship: A Handbook for Magicians* (1969). Of interest here is the discussion of the portrayal of apparently real magic by magicians, mostly through performers adopting themes of the occult and parapsychology, and it is Nelms' contention that performers of this material should also develop a deep understanding of these themes. As Nelms argues, 'Esoteric knowledge always impresses people. If you can talk with authority [...] you can lull

almost any audience member into a suspension of disbelief in your power' (Nelms, 1969, p. 77).

The magician-only periodical *Magick* also published a number of early effects that could be seen as proto-bizarre. Although the publication was entitled 'Magick', the use of the 'k' was not suggesting that this was a bizarre magick publication, rather the periodical which was published between 1970 and 1994, catered for a range of performance magic genres. The effects that I identify as being pre-cursors to bizarre magick include; *Madam Fifi's Haunted House* where a prediction appears in haunted doll's house, with a 'ghostly atmosphere' being of prime concern as the 'impact lies almost completely in the presentation' (Conley, 1970, p. 37); *The Book of the Damned*, which is an astrology prediction using props that are 'ancient and ornately tooled' and 'worn and faded from long use' (Bascom, 1971, p. 141); *Dagger of the Dead* where the magician sits in semi-darkness amongst flickering candles and 'talks about the extensive use of the dagger in black magic' (Blake, 1971, p. 189); and the Charles Cameron's<sup>21</sup> *Shrieking Skull of Kabbalah* where props include 'a black cardboard square on which is drawn a six-pointed cabalistic star, a lighted candle at each point and in the centre a miniature white skull' (Cameron, 1972, p. 241).

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<sup>21</sup> By the late sixties Charles Cameron made the first attempt at publishing a periodical on bizarre magick with the short-lived *Cauldron* (1967-68). He went on to become a key figure in bizarre magick and a regular contributor to bizarre magick publications.

### *Bizarre Magick*

Through these proto-bizarre examples, it is possible to see that the origins of bizarre magick are more complex than simply a counter reaction to mainstream performance magic. An interest in proto-bizarre themes such as those mentioned above provided a foundation for the growth of bizarre magick itself, and although it was still a form that was largely underground and not widely practiced, magicians began to see a possibility that they could be different from the mainstream by embracing what performer Tony 'Doc' Shiels called the 'occult explosion' (Shiels, Raven and Fromer, 1974, p. 3) of the early 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Bizarre magicians began to experiment and share ideas as to how they could appear to perform an apparently real and more vital form of performance magic. This explosion of creativity opened up a practice that, at points, chimes with what During terms the 'neglected and problematic extension of the magic assemblage' (During, 2002, p. 71). This being where performance magic form and method are used to portray magic as real for fraudulent means. For During, this centres on the performance of spiritualism, however, as should be clear in this portfolio, for the bizarre magician it could encompass a host of fraudulent claims not normally associated with mainstream performance magic.

However, if we were to set a date for the founding of the bizarre magick as a genre in its own right, it is likely to be around the time of the establishment of the bizarre

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<sup>22</sup> See also, David Berglas' experience of the Uri Geller phenomena in the 1970's in the attached Taylor (2018a, pp. 9–10), see also page 74 below.

magick focussed periodical *Invocation*. Brother Shadow later recounts the beginning of the movement in an interview with *Oracle Magazine* in 2006. In the interview he recounts that, 'In Germany the great magician Punx was doing stage magic like no other', Charles Cameron was publishing several small books containing 'weird and spooky routines' and magician Tony Shiels was publishing 'weird and scary magic books'. He concludes; 'in 1974, Tony Raven published the first issue of *Invocation*, which brought us all together through the printed word'. He adds that Tony Andruzzi joined them shortly afterwards and 'modern-day bizarre magic was born' (Goodsell and White, 2006). Indeed, a search of the *Conjuring Arts Research Centre* archives reveals that in 1974 the *Magic Circular*, the magazine of the Magic Circle (often seen as the legitimate face of the magic community certainly in the UK), first mentions bizarre magick in volume 68, issue 156 (1974, p. 221), as does the US-based *Linking Ring*, the magazine of The International Brotherhood of Magicians, in the same year in volume 52, issue 10 (1974, p. 88), both in reference to *Invocation* magazine.

It is from around this time, and as discussed in Taylor and Nolan (2015), that the movement outwardly describes mainstream magic as trivial, and to differentiate this new form of performance magic from the norm and to make its link to occulture clearer, we see it renamed with a 'k' signalling 'a connection with a spelling convention initiated by Aleister Crowley' (Taylor and Nolan, 2015, pp. 128–129). Bizarre magicians sought to find ways to re-enchant performance magic with the appearance of being mysterious and spiritual and to give magic meaning through storytelling and a heightened sense of theatrical framing. Bizarre magicians distanced themselves from the traditional magician, avoiding the notion of tricks, and choosing instead to

emphasise apparently real magic in their performances, for example Charles Cameron in the very first issue of *Invocation* categorically states; 'either you are a magician with magical powers or you are not. It is as basic as that!!' (Cameron, 1974). Across many publications, bizarre magicians chose to explore themes such as the supernatural and the occult, allegory and symbolism, and making magical performance 'non-trivial' (Burger, 1989, p. 590). As Tony Raven states in issue sixteen of *Invocation*, the focus was to 'fill man's primal need for the supernatural' with performances that 'carefully open the gates to the world of fantasy' (Raven, 1978, p. 290), and as Eugene Burger recounts in his video *Eugene Goes Bizarre*, 'strange and uncanny power[s were] sometimes invoked with a liberal sprinkling of stage blood' (Caplan, 1988). For performer Stephen Minch bizarre magick represented a 'harken[ing] back to the grassroots of all magic, back to the supernatural and the possibility of its control by man - or his tragic submission to it' (Minch, 1979a, p. 1).

Later, as bizarre magick developed as a performance practice, it began to move away from its early emphasis on darker subjects. Brother Shadow asserts that he found his later modern audiences 'too sophisticated' to 'get scared' during a performance (Goodsell and White, 2006, p. 3). Eugene Burger began to argue for the development of bizarre magick away from the lineage of western occultism, wanting to draw instead from a 'larger or expanded cultural sense' (Burger, 1991, p. 97). Magician Jeff McBride, disillusioned by what he saw as a lack of 'sensitivity and depth' in bizarre magick, describes in his book *Mystery School* (Burger and McBride, 2003) how he began explore to the possibility of a 'post-bizarre' magic movement. This 'mythopoetic magic' was formalised with the establishment of the *Mystery School* in

1991, which was a collective of magicians who ‘wanted to show that meaningful magic, doesn't have to go dark and creepy. It can be bright and warm’ (Burger and McBride, 2003, p. 22). While more traditional bizarre magick continued to be performed throughout this time, many magicians were reflecting on how they could take what they had learnt from the movement and apply it more widely. For many performers bizarre magick had faltered as it momentarily became trapped in what Eugene Burger would later describe as the ‘H.P. Lovecraft paradigm’ (Burger and McBride, 2003, p. 31). However, in hindsight many acknowledge the debt to the early practitioners of bizarre magick. This included magician and theorist Robert Neale who in *Magic and Meaning* accepted that, at its heart, bizarre magick had found ‘something rather old’ that allowed practitioners to return ‘to the roots of magic’ giving them scope to explore ‘other traditions’ or even ‘[make] up stories and “traditions” of their own!’ (Burger and Neale, 1995, pp. 7–8).

Therefore, broadly speaking, we see a gradual movement away from a hard form of bizarre magick, with its accompanying themes of horror, demons, and hauntings, towards a softer, more experiential approach. Darker themes and references were lessened in favour of a meaningful theatrical experience where the magician takes a more playful, and occasionally, less serious approach to their material. Here bizarre magick had evolved into a performance form that played within a state of flux between illusionment and disillusionment<sup>23</sup>. A key tenet of bizarre magick still remained however; that the magick should be played to ‘other human emotions than

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<sup>23</sup> I discuss this in the attached Taylor (2014b, p. 105, 2015b, pp. 165–166, 2016b, p. 60, 2018a, p. 2), by drawing on Neale’s concept of Monkey Movement (Neale, 2008, p. 217).

laughter and applause' (Burger and McBride, 2003, p. 31). Experiments in this form still drew from the bizarre, but explored ways not to scare or provoke fear. The interest being to find a 'medium to transform people's lives by giving the gift of a story' (Goodsell and White, 2008, p. 1). These stories, according to Brother Shadow would leave the audience with a 'sense of wonder' (Goodsell and White, 2006, p. 1).

Bizarre magick in all its incarnations continues to be performed, sometimes explicitly as bizarre magick, but we can also see its legacy weaved into contemporary mystery performance and mainstream mentalism and magic. Today, bizarre magick continues to 'reference[d] a larger magical world beyond the boundaries of the performance' (Burger, 1991, p. 38) and it is this discourse that generated a rich legacy that can inform the framing of a contemporary magic performance practice. For example, Derren Brown recounts how the work of Eugene Burger made him 'realise that my magic was missing the experience of wonder' (Brown, 2000, p. 13) and allowing him to give 'serious thought to presentation' and how to 'turn a good effect into something artistic and stunning' (Brown, 2000, p. 14).



## *Bizarre Themes*

On the appointed night the audience find themselves seated around a table. The windows of the room are curtained, the door is locked and low, rather strange music can be heard in the room. Perfumed smoke rises from several sticks of smouldering incense and the room is illuminated by candle light. There is an air of nervous expectancy, even those who really don't believe in the supernatural find themselves being strangely affected. (Cameron, 1967a)

The above is from the opening description of Charles Cameron's effect *Voices from the Dead*. The effect was first published in *The Cauldron* in 1967 and was later revised and appeared in Cameron's book of bizarre magick effects *Devil's Diary* as *Voice from the Tomb* (Cameron, 1976, pp. 33–37). Both versions of the effect see the performer using 'the strange and forbidden lore of the Black Arts' to appear to contact the spirits of the dead. As part of this process a ritual consisting of an offering and an incantation are performed, after which a spectator chooses a tarot card, another draws a simple geometric shape, another secretly writes down the name of a dead person, another chooses one of three objects, and finally another writes down a question that they want answered. The previously hidden choices are then revealed by an unseen spirit's disembodied voice speaking in 'deep, ghostly tones' (Cameron, 1967a, p. 35). What, in terms of procedure, would have been a traditional multi-phase effect for stage mentalism has been re-framed by Cameron into an intimate piece of atmospheric bizarre magick. In another of Cameron's publications, *Handbook of Horror* (1971b) the author explains that 'weird magic' (note the term bizarre magick has not yet been coined) must be performed 'under the proper conditions' and 'once a suitable atmosphere has been created then critical faculties tend to become suspended and age old beliefs take over' (Cameron, 1971b, p. 7). For performers such as Cameron, the creation of the right atmosphere through replicating the trappings of popular

occult settings is key to the transformation of what would have been traditional performance magic effects into pieces of bizarre magick. Central to this is the revised figure of the magician who is now portrayed as the 'Master of the Unknown' demonstrating unusual powers (Cameron, 1971b, p. 24). In his 1968 publication *Something Strange* Tony 'Doc' Shiels, a performer contemporary with Cameron, argues that this 'special kind of presentation' allows the performer to 'tickle the imagination of the audience in order that they will be properly impressed by what you show them'. A simple magic effect then becomes framed within a setting that elevates it away from being a trick, as Shiels states, 'if you do the job properly, the simplest trick becomes enormously exaggerated in its effect' (Shiels, 1968b, p. 19).

### *Bizarre Spirits*

Historically, the apparent ability to contact spirits has provided a wealth of opportunities for deception by performers. Magicians have had a constant and ambiguous relationship with the performance of spiritualism and the complex links within this relationship formed a 'dysfunctional family' with magicians and spiritualists competing in developing better methods of deception (Taylor and Cooper, 2019).

While, following the first rappings of the Fox sisters in 1848, the rise of spiritualism may have provided the audience with, 'a brief diversion from Enlightenment' (Cook, 2001, p. 172), it also opened up a series of practices that made spiritualist performance fair game for magicians to replicate. They would often perform spiritualist effects under the guise of scepticism or exposure, and, as they were already able to, for example, divine information through hidden method, they were able to exploit the contemporary drive, by believers and sceptics alike, for empirical

evidence of spirit contact. Monroe in his article on the seriousness of the séance cites Kardec's *Book on Mediums* (1874) as central to making séance a 'serious' pursuit. A pursuit that was often defined by the quest for empirical evidence and an attempt to remove the more 'dangerous' elements through regulation. However, even with the loss of 'ecstatic trances, uncontrolled, eroticised female behaviour, and the possibility of madness' (Monroe, 1999, p. 246), the private séance still managed to provide 'spectacular entertainment directed to all the senses' and many so-called genuine seances continued to feature trance in some form. These were usually accompanied by demonstrations of physical phenomena including, 'table tilting, floating furniture, musical instruments playing themselves, [and] the wafting of mysterious incense in the air' (Walkowitz, 1988, p. 8). With these, often complex but serious performances all occurring in the domestic space, the performance of séance became a private, middle-class pursuit (Bloom, 2010, p. 147) and magicians were quick to see their commercial value on the public stage.

### **The Modern Magician**

Around the same time, the figure of the modern performance magician was becoming formalised by authors such as Professor Hoffman, whose work *Modern Magic* (1876) effectively created the model of the modern parlour magician as a 'perfectly socialised nineteenth century gentleman' (Mangan, 2007, p. 104). The gentleman magician would often debunk spiritualist beliefs by demonstrating, and thus exposing, the magical method behind the parlour séance, and, while on the same bill, perform their own miracles often claiming scientific method, rather than magical technique or fraudulent means. One such magician was the American performer

Keller<sup>24</sup>. Keller, according to Anspach (2009), claimed to be performing ‘true magic’ as opposed to the ‘lowbrow hokum which had come to be known as magic’. Anspach argues that Kellar, and other magicians of that time, performed a separation of the ‘lowbrow magic of mediums’ against a ‘legitimate magic’ of things. These *things*, which Anspach identifies as ‘trunks, handcuffs, levitating bodies, saws, playing cards, rabbits, top hats’ (Anspach, 2009) became clear signifiers of the performance magician. However, at the same time, spiritualist performance, as it moved to satisfy the empirical drive for evidence, began to develop its own spiritualist *things*. These things, while using what can be broadly termed as magical method, claimed a validity for themselves outside of ‘legitimate magic’ and thus an ‘arms race’ (Taylor and Cooper, 2019) of invention and debunking ensued, with magicians eventually appropriating the things of the séance as their own. Many of these new things became constants in performance magic and were later used on stage by the mentalist and then re-imagined by the bizarre magician. For example, in so-called genuine spiritualist performance, we have Henry Slade first using slates in London in 1876; Charles Foster using billets, small pieces of paper used by the sitters for writing down their questions to the spirits in 1862; and in London in 1864 the Davenports were using rope ties and a spirit cabinets (Lamont, 2006, pp. 22–25). These new props and methods were known to fraudulent spirit mediums many years before magicians fully exploited their methods, and when they did find their way into the hands of the magicians, many of the props saw continued development in terms of method and

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<sup>24</sup> Active 1869-1908

mechanics. This resulted in magicians claiming the effects and often publishing their own working methods, for example, William E. Robertson (Chung Ling Soo) wrote the definitive work on slates in his book *Spirit Slate Writing and Kindred Phenomena for Magicians* (1898) and much later Dr. Q, a pseudonym for Claude Alexander Conlin who performed as *Alexander: The Man Who Knows*, published *The Life And Mysteries Of The Celebrated Dr. Q* (1921) which contained a number of exposures including an explanation of spiritualist performer Anna Eva Fay's act.

While Abbott notes in his exposé *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums* 'There is much difference in the effect when one knows such a thing is a trick and does not think some supernatural agency is at work' (Abbott, 1912, p. 62), in practice it was not so clear cut. As, while a sceptic gentleman magician might expose a medium's abilities as tricks, they would also appear to better them by performing more spectacular (and theatrical) wonders. It was not until the rise of the mentalist, proto-bizarre and the bizarre magick movement proper that we see a movement away from exposure and a return to the ambiguous playing of the supernatural as apparently real. Much of performance magic practice that was seen as external to the emerging genre of bizarre magick had become trapped in its own paradigm of things and associations, and, with reference to Keller's legitimate magic paradigm, became centred on tricks and illusions.

As stated above bizarre magicians sought escape this paradigm of legitimacy and to re-enchant the trick by framing it as supernatural and by playing séance performance not as a debunked performance magic form pursuing illusion, but instead by developing illusory happenings played as apparently real. In bizarre magick, effects

that drew from the legacy of spiritualist performance were embedded with rich layers of new meaning. Burger refers to this inner movement as ‘Spirit Theatre’ which embraces a mixture of bizarre magick and traditional séance. Here ‘the production and presentation of apparent spirit phenomena [is] accomplished through the use of theatrical devices, techniques, and strategies’ (Burger, 1986c, p. 20). Burger’s *Spirit Theatre* sits within the ‘light’ mode<sup>25</sup> of séance practice where, as Burger states in his video *Spirit Magic*, ‘The spirits [...] are a presentation idea, a kind of reason for what is happening in the magic show’ (Stevens, 1987).

While spirit theatre might present a series of bizarre magick effects framed as séance, much of the work published in bizarre magick speaks more directly towards individual effects rather than full shows. Speaking, as McGill’s *Psychic Magic* did, to individual demonstrations of phenomena which incorporate individual demonstrations of spirit contact. Notable examples include; Brother Shadow’s *Séance* where the bizarre magician reveals that a ‘sensitive person’ is able to ‘part the veil’, and this is proven by the manifestation of a torn photograph, and the words “DO NOT TAMPER WITH THINGS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND” [author’s capitalisation] appearing, written in ash, on a previously blank piece of parchment (Shadow, 1982); and Eugene Burger’s *Séance Revisited* where the performer covers a pencil and a blank piece of card with a handkerchief, and appears to invoke the spirits. Suddenly, the pencil is

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<sup>25</sup> Light and dark séances are discussed in the attached *Impersonating Spirits: The Paranormal Entertainer and the Dramaturgy of the Gothic Séance* (Taylor, 2015b, pp. 167–168) and can be aligned with hard and soft approaches to bizarre magick more generally.

seen to be moving under the handkerchief and when it is lifted the spectator sees that pencil has written their chosen word (Burger, 1986b).

### *Bizarre Tales*

In bizarre magick we see many references to popular and weird fiction, which often includes themes drawn from the aforementioned fuzzy Gothic. Frequently, a key feature of bizarre magick material is the attention that is paid to writing of the effect, that is, the telling of the tale. For instance, Andruzzi's second major work, *The Legendary Scroll of Masklyn ye Mage* (1983b), presents a collection of effects created by Andruzzi and other bizarrists such as Stephan Minch, Eugene Burger and Anthony Raven, and it is written in a heightened literary style that has become synonymous with bizarre magick. For example, the first effect in the collection is *The Blood of Dhste Kravahn* by Masklyn ye Mage, the description of the effect begins with the following sentence; 'The elaborately ritualized Dessert [sic] for which the lugubrious dinner at the High Table of Miskatonic was quite famous rounded to a close and the Beak made his withdrawal.' The effect continues in this mode describing how seven of the diners climbed the winding stairs to the 'tower room' where they observe a container carrying an 'obsequitious[sic] obscenity'. This being earth taken from the Queen's Chamber in 'Cheops' pyramid'. In the effect, the earth is shown to become burning hot, before leaving the 'bloody red smear' of the blood of 'Dhste Kravahn' (Andruzzi, 1983b, p. 2).

For many effects in bizarre magick the act of writing itself is a heightened reflection of genre it is attempting to draw from, and the *effect* descriptions are often presented as heavy, occasionally over-blown pseudo gothic/historical pieces of fiction,

with the very act of writing underlining the highly theatrical nature of the work. The stories that frame the effects might draw material from Gothic fiction, mythology, the Cthulhu mythos, or from a more general pool of occult signifiers, such as tarot, crystal balls and pentagrams. We also see frequently repeated settings, often in spaces described as, for example, a magician's study in the effect *The Great God Pan*<sup>26</sup> (Raven, 1974c); a ritual circle in *The Sacrifice* (Masklyn ye Mage, 1980); or a heavily curtained parlour in *Beyond the Grave* (Cameron, 1971a).

Stephen Minch much later, and somewhat dismissively, in his article *A Vivisection of the Bizarre*, refers to bizarre magick as a 'literary phenomenon' (Minch, 2009, p. 61) rather than a coherent performance practice. Even so, Minch's most well-known work; *Lovecraftian Ceremonies* (1979a) (noted above) follows the very literary design of which he is later dismissive. This work, a collection of seven 'ceremonies' is according to Minch, 'a bastard blending of the subterfuges of the magician [...] with the horror fiction of the eminent genre-stylist, Howard Phillips Lovecraft' (Minch, 1979a, p. i). As interest in the bizarre expanded, some of the descriptions of effects that were produced for magicians relied heavily on storytelling and literary pastiche,<sup>27</sup> often with little consideration of the effectiveness of the actual method for working the moment of magic. Certainly bizarre magicians were keen to develop the

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<sup>26</sup> Based on Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), for further examples of keys effects inspired by Gothic fiction, see the attached Taylor & Nolan (2015, p. 136)

<sup>27</sup> This continues in modern bizarre magick, for example, Eugene Poinc's *The Practitioner: Journey Into Grey* (Poinc, 2000) tell the story of 'The Practitioner' a modern mage who becomes involved in the life of Andrea, a Beverly Hills heiress, black sheep of the family and 'self-flagellated with alcohol and private demons.' (Poinc, 2000, p. 12). The story of this ultimately tragic relationship is told through a series of three stories and twelve bizarre magick routines.



nods to existing fictions within their work and Minch in *Evolution of the Bizarre* (1991) quotes performer Tony Raven as saying it's 'the type of magic you'd expect to find in a Lovecraftian tale' (Minch, 1991, p. 733). As suggested above the Lovecraftian, or certainly some pastiche of the Cthulhu mythos, provided many reoccurring themes within the genre, not only *Lovecraftian Ceremonies*, but other effects such as the aforementioned *The Blood of Dhste Kravahn* or the *Lord of Blood! – Lord of Lust!* (Charles and Janice, 1977) which describes a complex routine involving a possession by Yog-Sothoth which playfully addresses the legacy of H.P. Lovecraft.

More frequently, however, the subject matter drew on tales and themes of the general occult, with occasional, rather specific, discussion of 'real' ritual implements (Andruzzi, 1977, pp. 1–3; King, 1977). The title and cover of *Invocation* itself suggests the trappings of high magick and the occult, and as Burger states in his *Foreword* to the collected volume; '*Invocation*, then, stands as a reminder to magicians that there is an older magic, a deeper and perhaps even darker tradition that has quietly spread underground for centuries' (Burger, 1986a). In fact, Charles Cameron in his first effect for *Invocation* uses the following opening description; 'Slowly the sorcerer moves forward and blows out the three candles then the five smaller candles grouped around the pentagram' (Cameron, 1974, p. 4). As with themes of the Gothic, many effects draw upon a notion of popular understandings of the occult and many practitioners developed these notions to speak to their own performance agendas. For example, Tony Andruzzi in the early 1970s fully embraced the spirit of kayfabe<sup>28</sup> and became

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<sup>28</sup> See Taylor (2018a, p. 9).

affiliated with a group called the *Pagan Way* where he quickly learned that he could ‘out-bullshit the bullshitters’, and he eventually set himself up as a ‘Priest of the Maganegro Coven’ (Magus, 2011, pp. 170–171). To fellow magicians he was explicit about this sham, ‘I maintained the persona of being the great oracle, the wisdom of my traditional witchcraft upbringing which I invented the day before; and the beauty was that I could deceive these people without ever taking out the ball vase<sup>29</sup>’ (Magus, 2011, p. 312). Tony ‘Doc’ Shiels also embraced this notion by drawing from local Cornish folklore, he describes his work *13!!!* as a ‘little book of spells [...] intended as an up-to-date ‘grimoire’ for the modern magician who wishes to cause strange things to happen without all that old-fashioned toil and trouble!’ (Shiels, 1968a, p. 1). This work is deeply rooted in seeming traditional Cornish folklore, with references to magical characters such as William PigWiggin, Granny Magor, and Lijah Milkie. Later, he also employed these themes along with popular notions of witchcraft to develop a series of occult interventions that included a number of successful hoaxes (see page 91).

## Methods

Ultimately, within the effects, with their complex themes and extended storytelling, the actual method for the moment of the trick is often quite simple and frequently repurposed from mainstream performance magic method. Additionally, the method was occasionally unreliable, complex or even unconvincing. However,

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<sup>29</sup> The Ball Vase is a classic magic trick often seen in children’s magic sets. The Vase allows a ball to vanish and reappear in a variety of different ways.

Burger does point out that, ‘*some* bizarre magick has been, and is being, performed’ [author’s emphasis] (Burger, 1991, p. 28). In the early years of bizarre magick particularly, the effects, though simple, were certainly performable. For example, the ‘strange and unearthly magic’ contained in Charles Cameron’s book *Witches’ Brew* (1967b) are all staples of drawn from mentalism and magic. They are workable effects that have been reframed as occult fictions. For example, the effect *Ritual of El Shaintan* is, at its heart, a series of practical methods borrowed from classic spiritualist tricks and chemical magic. In isolation these would have little impact, however, when these are knitted together with a bizarre magick themed narrative, they build a solid bizarre magick routine. In this instance we see the participants taking part in a ritual where the magician unexpectedly loses control of the invisible forces surrounding him. This results in ‘glowing eyes’ suddenly appearing in every part of the room’ and only disappearing when a ‘thunderous knocking’ is heard. The magician’s table shakes, there are screams and ‘something icy cold, touches the faces of some of the people in the circle’. Finally, the magician collapses and the lights are quickly switched back on and the ritual is ended (Cameron, 1967b, pp. 14–17). Similarly Shiels’ curated collection *Daemons, Darklings and Doppelgangers* (1981) [originally published in 1966] represents another early example of the movement where the author and contributors borrow freely from fictions of vampires, voodoo, séance, witches and the occult to frame workable, and simple effects based on already established methods. For example, *Scarab* (T. Shiels, 1981, pp. 34–36) a tale of ancient Egyptian amulets, and *Noctambulation* (T. Shiels, 1981, p. 53) a demonstration of the projection of the ‘etheric self’, are at their heart classic card tricks, but framed with all the trappings of the bizarre.

## *Bizarre Magick and Ostension*

In the section *Folklore and Ostension* (above) I discussed how I applied models of ostension to the dramaturgy of the Gothic séance, however, in bizarre magick performance more generally, we see ostension communicated in more general terms through performative interactions with oral narrative, memorate, and legend-text. Broadly speaking we can employ a *proto-ostension* mode to bizarre magick, where the storyteller might transform a more distant story or legend; ‘a fabulate’, into a verifiable first-hand account; ‘a memorate’ (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 21). This section will begin by discussing how I have attempted to apply notions of ostension to my own practice as a bizarre magician, I will then move on examine a modern, published, bizarre effect that uses (proto) ostension more explicitly in the form of legend tripping, before discussing how ostension might be applied to our understanding of bizarre magick as a whole.

### *Legend texts and Legend Tripping*

My performance piece *The Gift of Hermes* (Taylor, 2014c) was devised as a way of applying notions of ostension to an extended bizarre magick effect. This was approached through experimenting with the notion of gifting a memorate and offering the participant the ability to experience this as a fabulate. These powers are gifted in a similar way to the bizarre magick rituals found in Brother Shadow’s *Ritual of the Rock*

and *Have séance Will Travel* (Shadow, 1991, 1995).<sup>30</sup> *The Gift of Hermes* is presented as follows;

This is Hermes, god of transitions and boundaries - quick and cunning he moves freely between the worlds of the mortal and the divine - he is the messenger of the Gods - patron of travellers and thieves - you never quite know where you are with him, he's a bit of a trickster you see.

Plato talks about 'The Gift of Hermes': a slip of the tongue. Sometimes these slips can be portentous and this is where Hermes comes in - now you may have heard of the 'third eye'. Well, Hermes was said to give his followers acute hearing - he was known as the 'God of the Third Ear' - the one that can hear an essence buried in an accident.

From this developed a form of divination called Cledonomancy - derived from Cledon - an accidental but portentous remark.

Pausanias describes the practice as follows:

'It is called Hermes of the Market, and by it is established an oracle. In front of the image is placed a hearth, which also is of stone, and to the hearth bronze lamps are fastened with lead. Coming at eventide, the inquirer of the god, having burnt incense upon the hearth, filled the lamps with oil and lighted them, puts on the altar on the right of the image a local coin, called a "copper," and asks in the ear of the god the particular question he wishes to put to him. After that he stops his ears and leaves the marketplace. On coming outside he takes his hands from his ears, and whatever utterance he hears he considers oracular.'

.. all the better if the words are uttered by a child or a fool ...

So the lamp is lit and the incense is burning. Focus on a question ...

[at this point I have the question written down on a little square of flash paper and asked for an offering on a coin of local currency]

Let us send it to Hermes - I ignite the paper.

Your question is now with Hermes. At some point today Hermes will come to you. You might see his image in the bark of a tree, in the clouds or simply in your mind's eye. But at that point you will know that your message is ready. At that point you should think once more about your question, put your fingers in your ears and walk to where it feels right. Take your fingers out of your ears and listen for the answer.

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<sup>30</sup> The latter is discussed in Taylor (2016b).

Remember though - Hermes is a Trickster God ... his answer might be a riddle for you to solve .. (Taylor, 2014c)

The purpose of this piece was to explore many of the ideas I later discuss in Taylor (2015b), where I quote Ellis who describes legend texts as ‘normative definitions of reality, maps by which one can determine what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen’ (Ellis, 1989, p. 202). As such, *The Gift of Hermes* is intended as a bizarre magick effect that plays with normative beliefs held in some of the legend texts that surround themes of magic thinking or magic behaviour. It enables an audience, through an imaginative engagement with the effect, to develop imaginary maps by which to navigate the fictions (or supposed non-fictions) performed by the magician. Here the bizarre magician stands outside of reality playing the part of, what is in many ways, an ostensive dungeon master. By placing the magician at the centre of an ostensive magic happening we go beyond the dramaturgy of collective delusion I discussed in Taylor (2015b), and venture into a much more ludic form of legend-tripping. Ellis’ (1981) discussion of the ‘mock ordeal’ (a form of folk drama experienced at US summer camps) is helpful here, Ellis argues that mock ordeals provoke an ‘ambiguous’ response to the real and the non-real that chimes with Goffman’s notion of ‘being engrossed’ (Ellis, 1981, p. 488). The response generated in the experience of a mock ordeal ‘is not an individual’s sense of what is real, but rather what it is he can get caught up in, engrossed in, carried away by; and this can be something he can claim is really going on and yet claim is not real’ (Ellis, 1981, p. 495). The event, then, is based on a suspension of belief, meaning that it chimes with Koven’s view that such events ‘encourage[...] neither belief or disbelief [...] but a meta textual debate about whether or not such events are possible’ (Koven, 2007, p. 187).

Koven later argues that the '*possibility* that the phenomenon was real, even if entertained momentarily, makes this incident legendary. And that this phenomenon is *presented* for us, makes the event ostensive' (Koven, 2007, p. 194) [Author's emphasis]. Although Koven is talking primarily about televised ghost hunting programmes such as the series *Most Haunted*, his work does appear to chime deeply with the ostensive practice of the bizarre magician and legend tripping. We see this employed most pointedly in bizarre effects that are site specific, that is, where participants visit locations associated with local legends to experience the supernatural. Such a site-specific, legend tripping effect would be Caleb Strange's *Hunting Mammoths in the Rain*, which is discussed in Taylor (2016b), where the playing out of the effect brings the audience collectively to a Neolithic site to experience the feelings and senses of an ancient shaman.

An example of a bizarre magick effect that very specifically uses the fabulate/memorate model of proto-ostension is *Jesusita's Haunted Railroad Crossing* by Rolando Santos published in 2009 in *Oracle*. This is a two-phase effect that mixes legend-retelling and fiction to allow the magician to demonstrate that mundane objects taken on a legend trip have become haunted. In this case the legend-text referred to is an urban myth of railway crossing which has become haunted following a fatal railway accident. The legend text is described by the magician as follows;

It was well after midnight on a crisp late-October night as Jesusita stood on the verge of tears about 50 yards from the railroad crossing on Shane Road in south San Antonio, Texas. This is the most famous and haunted place in the Alamo City, if not the state of Texas.

60 years earlier to-the-day, a school bus full of children heading home from the county school nearby stalled on the railroad tracks. The 5 p.m. freight train came

barrelling down the track and was unable to stop in time. Ten of the children on board and the bus driver were killed.

By midnight of the same day, the dead began to make their presence known. Any car stopped near the railroad tracks was pushed by unseen hands across the tracks to safety. Locals have no doubt that it is the spirits of the children who push the cars across the tracks to prevent a tragedy and fate like their own.

To this day, when a driver stops his car on the flat spot about 20 yards from the tracks, puts the car in neutral and turns off the engine, the car begins to roll. It rolls slowly at first, and then gains momentum up the slight incline and over the tracks. Those with dusty cars will see tiny handprints appear on the trunk of the car - the prints of the ghost children pushing the car. (Santos, 2009, p. 69)

This represents re-telling of many existing legend texts that surround a real gravity hill in San Antonio. In reality, a gravity hill presents an optical illusion that occurs when the horizon is obscured, thus making a downhill slope appear to be going uphill, gravity hills are discussed briefly in Taylor (2015b, p. 169), and Gibbs observes, 'Objects may appear to roll uphill. Sometimes rivers even seem to flow against gravity' and areas with gravity hills become powerful tourist attractions often linked to paranormal phenomena (Gibbs, 1998). Legend trips to this area are well documented folklorist by Carl Lindahl (2005) who notes;

I have yet to meet a San Antonio Hispanic who has not heard the legend of the train tracks. More than a hundred Hispanics from the San Antonio area have shared with me accounts of a school bus crushed by a train and of the lingering presence of the spirits of the children slain in the crash. All but three of these tellers have visited the crossing to test for themselves the validity of the claims that the dead children will reveal themselves to those who seek them. (Lindahl, 2005, pp. 165–166)

The effect *Jesusita's Haunted Railroad Crossing* is a retelling of that legend and is framed around an encounter with a 'mage' (the bizarre magician), named Don Mitos and the seventy-five year old Jesusita. Jesusita, according to this re-telling, foresaw the accident when she was fifteen but did nothing to prevent it happening. Full of guilt for the rest of her life, her role in the story is to re-tell the legend through the



haunted objects given to her by legend trippers who visit the gravity hill. The legend trippers, by taking the objects across the gravity hill, have caused them to become possessed by the spirits of the children that supposedly lost their lives in the accident. In the effect the objects are presented as demonstrations of the supernatural representing sad proof of the event, rather than framed as magic tricks. The effect is a story of an encounter layered into a legend trip and, in performance, the bizarre magician is demonstrating the powers that were shown to him by Jesusita. Thus, as with *The Gift of Hermes*, the magician removes themselves explicitly from the moment of magic, and shifts into the bizarre magick framing of the magician as interested observer rather than maker of magic(k).<sup>31</sup> The bizarre magician in this effect is a demonstrator turning a fabulate into a memorate by taking part in a form of ostensive play with the audience. The effect draws directly from the ostensive behaviour of legend trippers where players 'recreate storied events and simultaneously expand the tale by adding their experiences to the core narrative' (Lindahl, 2005, p. 165). Lindahl further observes that the experience of legend tripping is often religious or spiritual, and that trippers often attempt to perform 'ostensive healing' on the ghosts of the dead children (Lindahl, 2005, p. 174). This is further mirrored in the telling of the effect, as we hear that, to heal the ghosts of the children who find themselves trapped in the objects, Jesusita frequently returns to the railway crossing to save their spirits.

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<sup>31</sup> This is discussed further in the section *Bizarre Magicians* (below).

### *Ostensive Play*

More generally, however, the legend texts that are performed by bizarre magicians can be defined as stories and accompanying demonstrations that make a claim to truth. This is the seed at the heart of the 'is it real?' approach (Taylor, 2015d, p. 3) that was adopted by many bizarre magicians. The bizarre magician will attempt to perform an apparent truth, but uses the ambiguity of ostensive play to give the audience the opportunity to suspend belief. This is often promoted through the demonstration/performance of legend texts, and, while these texts may or may not be true, they are often portrayed as imprecise memorates for the purposes of creating an ostensive experience. For this ostensive experience to occur the bizarre magician, through the use of props, setting and atmosphere, employs at different times, a number of approaches to ostensive play that taken as a whole function in a similar way to Koven's idea of 'mass-mediated' ostension (Koven, 2008, p. 139) where themes from popular culture find themselves recycled into legend texts. Thus, although Koven's focus, once again, is the depiction of folklore in film and television shows where the performer is acting at enacting the contents of a legend-text, the process does mirror the bizarre magician who is often acting out an effect ostensively, rather than simply telling a story. For Koven 'any legend text dramatized through popular culture [...] is a kind of ostension, particularly when we are *shown* the narrative through actions rather than having the story retold to us in narration' (Koven, 2008, p. 139). The bizarre magician's acting out of a legend text sees the blending of story-telling and physical demonstration (involving magic method) to produce apparent proof of that legend, either through the direct demonstration of the legend, for example; the effect *The Coming of Bast* (Raven, 1974b) where the audience witnesses

the invocation of the cat-god Bast from a strange powder said to originate from ‘the mummy’; or through the portrayal of a fantastic happening, such as the materialisation of an ‘Astral Visage’ in the effect *Spectre* (T. Shiels, 1981, pp. 51–52).

The bizarre magician is often portrayed as someone who can physically demonstrate an apparent truth, that is, someone who presents a legend text as real. They combine re-telling with showing and thus blend forms of ostensive action that plays on the fuzzy boundary of showing and telling reality. This operates in a similar mode to how sociologist Fine (1991) sees redemption rumours (positive legend texts) as functioning. According to Fine the process ‘pays heed to the ability of people to model behaviour on texts that have been presented to them’ and as long as they fit with cultural and personal themes then, Fine argues, ostension will occur (1991, p. 181). In the case of bizarre magick the texts fit within a cultural memorate of plausible fictions, although fuzzy, where themes of the ghostly, the Gothic and the weird are considered possible. This allows the audience in bizarre magick the scope to not only suspend belief, but also, in some cases, believe they are somehow linked intrinsically to the outcome of the magical event<sup>32</sup> and we see an element of playfulness in the storytelling and the interaction with the bizarre magician.<sup>33</sup>

By extension, and useful when examining the playfulness and the rich atmosphere that bizarre magick seeks to create, is Huizinga’s notion of the magic circle. Here I approach this as a metaphor for a ‘sacred’ space where the playfulness of magic

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example *Hunting Mammoths in the Rain*, and *Gift of Hermes* (discussed above), and *The Stigmata of Cthulhu* (Minch, 1974) discussed in (Taylor, 2016b, p. 59).

<sup>33</sup> This was identified in Taylor and Nolan (2015, p. 140) as a tension between narratology and ludology.

happens. In *Homo Ludens*, Huzinga talks about the space as acting as a real circle or a defined play space such as a tennis court (Huizinga, 1949, p. 10). The magic circle is a space for play, it is apart from normal daily life and different rules apply. If we relate the magic circle to the practice of bizarre magick we see it can also be an imaginary ritualised space, temporary, and sometimes without physical walls or boundaries. In fact, bizarre magick works with both spaces simultaneously, that is, the physical and the metaphorical. This is perhaps seen most clearly in Neale's illusion/disillusion model, and, as previously noted, this model is discussed in (Taylor, 2014b, 2015b, 2016b, 2018a). This model has been central to much of my philosophy of practice, expressing in the space not simply regular moments of illusion and disillusion of the type articulated by the conventional trickster magician, but a more fluid and ostensive engagement with the process that is inherently more ambiguous. This results in what Steinkuehler, when discussing game design, refers to as the 'mangle of play' (2006). For Steinkuehler, the 'mangle' is the fluid relationship between designer and player through either intent or shared practices. I use this term here to refer to magician's intent and audiences' experience and agency. For bizarre magick performance we see this mangle in the interaction between the bizarre magician, audience and the apparent agency given to them in the performance space. This illusion of control, is particularly apparent in the guided séance work of the bizarre magician, but agency can also be seen in effects that use divination or ritual where participants feel somehow part of the negotiated outcome of the effect. For example, in Brother Shadow's effect *The Wheel of Fate* (1986) the bizarre magician and an audience member, referred to as 'the sitter', share a divinatory experience through a series of tarot reveals and a ludic interaction with a special zodiac board. The

audience/participants, therefore, become co-authors of their experience of the performance magic event. They become involved in ostensive play through the bizarre magician's control of the magic circle. We can, once again, argue that this is an ostensive process in much the same way as the magical thinking exhibited by real-life legend trippers. Holly and Cordy (2007) discuss this with reference to legend trippers attempting to summon the ghost of a suspected vampire Mercy Brown by peering at her grave through an opening in a nearby gravestone and chanting ' Mercy Brown are you a vampire?' three times (Holly and Cordy, 2007, p. 345). This playful ritual behaviour can be seen mirrored in bizarre magick effects such as *Cat's Game* (Armando, 1987) where a ghost of a black cat plays a card game with the spectators, or *Sole Survivor* (Burger and Neale, 1995, pp. 133–136) where the magician and a spectator play a card game that identifies victims of the bubonic plague and finally summons Death himself to the table.

### *Ostensive Objects*

While bizarre magick props are discussed more fully in the next section, we can see how certain key props in bizarre magick may act as ostensive objects. This is achieved by having legend narratives associated with them and results in their presence in the effect appearing to act-out the heightened reality of that legend text. The Ouija board is an example of this, with the use of gimmicked and un-gimmicked boards being a powerful symbol of other worldly contact. Although these boards were not widely used during the early phase of bizarre, many magicians built their own variations. Brother Shadow, for example, used a board with a clock face that also contained signs of the zodiac (Magus, 1990, p. 18), and Charles Cameron used a heavily adapted

version on a Ouija board in his effect *The Talons of Taz* (Cameron, 1967b, pp. 9–10). However, it was not until the release of the film *The Exorcist* in 1973 that the Ouija board came more widely known. According to McRobbie's discussion of the history on the board, *The Exorcist* 'changed the fabric of pop culture [...] almost overnight, Ouija became a tool of the devil' (McRobbie, 2013). Thus the previously mundane Parker Brothers version became associated with a powerful legend text that represented the board as a vehicle for contacting demons and evil spirits. After the release of *The Exorcist* there is little direct reference to the Parker Brothers board or other Ouija boards in bizarre magick literature. These powerful associations appear to have been recognised by bizarre magicians as potentially problematic for their practice and even ten years later bizarre magician Jim Magus in his article *The Ouija Séance* advised that 'you may need to overcome objections' and suggestions that the Ouija is a "vehicle for demons or the dead"' (Magus, 1989). Instead we see the practice shifting towards glass-moving, the method being essentially the same as the Ouija board but avoiding the powerful meanings attached. In this version an inverted glass is placed in the centre of a circle of alphabet cards and moving is facilitated by the magician.<sup>34</sup> This movement away from a recognisable Ouija board tends to continue today, and I discovered in my own practice that it was useful to draw from Paul Voodini whose work *Paranormal Entertainer* (2008) echoes Magus in that Voodini states that he 'tend(s) to shy away from the Ouija purely because of the "baggage" attached to it [...] kinds of crazy urban myths about what has happened to people' (Voodini, 2008, p. 24).

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<sup>34</sup> Interestingly as early as the late 1960's Corinda in *Mediumistic Stunts* (step nine of his *13 Steps to Mentalism*) was referring to glass moving in a piece entitled *The Ouija Board* (Corinder, 1968, p. 299).

Voodini, therefore, chooses to focus on glass moving as the way to apparently contact spirits. Consequently, in my own work with glass moving I distance myself from the Ouija board as much as I can, making it clear that the glass moving table is not associated with the boards in any way. In my most recent work, particularly that in *A View from Behind the Veil* (Taylor and Carter, 2019), I have, with fellow bizarre magician Ashton Carter, experimented with removing the alphabet cards completely from the board. This has been to not only remove any negative association with the Ouija board itself, but also intended to remove the potential for any misinterpretation of the spirit messages. In this set-up the glass moving now functions simply as a powerful indicator that the spirits are present in the performance space.

### *Belief*

I referred earlier to elements of bizarre magick and ostensive practice being linked to an audience's propensity for magical thinking and how bizarre magicians often tap into many of the themes of the occult through popular, and often indefinite, new age symbolism and logic. David Hufford, when discussing how folk belief is often rationally gained through an person's experience, terms this broadly as *spiritual belief* (Hufford, 1995, p. 15). It is important to note the difference between this definition and, say, a belief in spirits. Spiritual belief is a much more fuzzier concept as it might encompass physical experience (Hufford uses the experience of sleep paralysis as an example), religious belief, and/or folk belief. For Hufford, modern knowledge is not a barrier to spiritual belief despite the wide growth of secularisation, and beliefs that are formed during these interactions are termed by Hufford as 'unofficial belief[s]' (Hufford, 1995, p. 24). Bizarre magicians often playfully address or appear to create these

experiences through the manipulation of these unofficial beliefs, or at least attempt to make these events interpreted as such<sup>35</sup>. They create and manipulate these experiences, and the bizarre magician will often re-enforce an unofficial belief by demonstrating empirical evidence that it is real. Echoing again the point I touched on earlier in this document, that the empirical proving (in our case via performance magic method) has developed through the necessity to reinforce and appear to prove a belief in the supernatural. The spiritualist séance historically developed its dramaturgy through the need to verify the presence of spirits. As Pimple (1995) argues in his discussion of the origins of modern spiritualism, the need for empirical evidence was central to the shaping of spiritualist performance; ‘*any* spirit could be summoned from *any* sitting room’ and in order to appear to prove that these spirits are known to the sitters various methods were developed to verify test-questions (Pimple, 1995, p. 80). The process of verification in some form is also something that is, of course, central in performance magic more generally. The verification of a chosen playing card being the clearest example of this, although opening a door to a cabinet to show that the contents have disappeared is another. The element of proving is heightened in bizarre magick performance as the bizarre magician needs to go beyond proving that they have tricked the spectator and appear to demonstrate that the effect really has occurred. In séance performance the creation of the real experience of verification appears external to the magician, that is, the spirits did it; it

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<sup>35</sup> Some studies appear to affirm that a belief in the paranormal (unofficial belief) directly affects the response to pseudo psychic performances. People with that belief are less likely to see a demonstration as a trick, see for example; Hergovich, A. (2004) ‘The effect of pseudo-psychic demonstrations as dependent on belief in paranormal phenomena and suggestibility’, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 36(2), pp. 365–380.



was spirits that moved the glass across the table or turned an audience member into a human pendulum<sup>36</sup>. In other bizarre effects, such as those purporting to contain ritual, the proof comes from other means including, for example, Andruzzi's effect *Demon Dirt*, where the 'Daemon Pazuzu' proves its existence by causing a 'many tentacled monstrosity to emerge from a wooden tray filled with earth' (Andruzzi, 1983b).

Nardi (1984) observes in his work on defining a social psychology of entertainment magic, that 'the more the performance involves spiritualism or mentalism routines the more the audience seems to define it and the performer as real' (Nardi, 1984, p. 28) (see also footnote 35 above). To this end, the beliefs held and exhibited by an audience of bizarre magick have been a double-edged sword that has over-shadowed much of my performance practice and, while my work is offered explicitly as entertainment, the boundaries between bizarre magick and psychic fraud are ethically difficult to negotiate. Lamont (2006) sees this as different levels of fabrication across the form, he argues 'the magician fabricates the effect but not the performance as a whole, while the pseudo-psychic fabricates not only the effect, but also the overall performance' (Lamont, 2006, p. 24). As we have seen, the bizarre magician applies this fabrication strategically to pursue their intended affect. This fabrication becomes ostensive practice as the boundaries between truth and belief in performance become blurred. As stated in the attached documents (Taylor, 2018a, 2020), this has been a concern throughout my practice, choosing as I did to focus initially on the harder form

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<sup>36</sup> An effect used in séance where a spirit appears to push and pull an audience member, thus 'proving' the existence of a spirit present within the room.

of bizarre by specialising in séance and divination. The process of this study has allowed me, as a performer, and through the sharing to the bizarre magick community, to understand the level of ostensive play that the bizarre magician can tap into. By presenting work as ambiguous in this way, it has been possible to find, echoing Neale, the 'hidden reality of mystery' and the 'mystery of enchantment' (Neale, 2014, pp. 220–221) which drew me to the practice of bizarre magick in the first place.

### *Bizarre Magicians*

When Jean Robert-Houdin famously proclaimed ‘A conjuror is not a juggler; he is an actor playing the part of a magician’ (Robert-Houdin, 1878, p. 43) he was, in part responding to a drive appear to perform apparently real magic rather than obvious sleights and tricks. Houdin’s work represents not only a key element in the codification of the modern magician discussed earlier, but it was also an early attempt at reconciling the notion that magic has the potential to be much more than simply a demonstration of skill. Mangan argues that Houdin was “probably talking about what Kirby calls ‘simple acting’; which involves simulation and impersonation, rather than the investment of the whole being of the performer in the created reality of the character” (Mangan, 2007, p. 98). Mangan further suggests that Houdin would not have been aware of the notion of complex acting, and this is likely, however, the relationship between magicians and the idea of complex acting itself is difficult. In reality, the quotation from Houdin is too often taken in isolation by magicians and has sparked almost endless circular debates amongst them. On the face of it, the legacy of Houdin can be seen as the codified simple acting of the performance magician, that is, the very type of practice bizarre magicians railed against. Bizarre magicians often argued for a depth to the performance of magick coupled with the complexity of appearing to live the part of the magician in the persona they create, and thus chiming with Kirby’s argument that acting ‘becomes complex when more and more elements are incorporated into the pretence.’ (Kirby, 1972, p. 9).

Importantly, however, we should remember that Houdin was interested in a ‘fictitious magic’, as Mangan notes, ‘by implication [...] it leaves open the possibility

that there exists another, non-fictitious kind of magic' (Mangan, 2007, p. 216). These non-fictitious possibilities align well the 'secondary worlds' that were initially called for by Tony Raven in his article 'On the Presentation of Bizarre Magick' (Raven, 1976), and echoed throughout bizarre magick practice. In addition, Houdin's concept of 'fictitious magic' aligns much more with a fluid transmission to the nineteenth-century magician where focus, according to Cook in *The Arts of Deception*, is not on 'explaining the waning status and efficacy of the village wizard, but the emergence of the theatrical magician as a powerful symbol of progress' (Cook, 2001, p. 169). Echoing this in nineteenth-century performance, and further chiming with bizarre magick, was the fluid relationship between performance magic and the performance of science, which often meant that 'the distinction between illusion and delusion was seldom made explicit to the public' (Lachapelle, 2009, p. 298). Indeed this fluidity sees the emergence of the 'professor' magician and a scientific theatre that, again according to Lachapelle when discussing the occultist revival of the second half of the nineteenth century, led to magicians leaping upon the claims of the occultists and later spiritualists to 'exploit and reproduce for the pleasure of their audience' (Lachapelle, 2009, p. 300). Venues such as the Polytechnic Institute in London were blending the real and the fictitious to the point where they became known as being the 'repository for inventions, a pioneering venue for the popularisation of science, but at the same time a place of popular entertainment, famous for its screen-based extravaganzas and stage-based illusions' (Brooker, 2007, p. 189). Thus, Houdin's 'fictitious magic' points towards a model of complexity in performance magic that is not immediately obvious. Both spiritualism and the occult in performance engaged with complex action and belief, and this was, to some extent, mirrored in a presentation that was much more

aligned with magician David Devant's notion that magic 'is the feeling that we have seen some natural law disturbed' weaving a kind of spell over others' (Devant, 1910, p. 10). The fictitious magic suggested by Houdin, allows for the magician, at least for the duration of the performance, to apparently present real miracles and wonder, but within the safety of the theatre or the lecture hall.

Bizarre magicians saw the possibility of re-visiting this notion of fictitious magic as a way of re-framing popular occulture. As stated above we see this emerging in the period I referred to as the proto-bizarre. However, even before bizarre magick had established itself in its own right, many of these ideas were being discussed in the more mainstream magic press. For example, Nelms in *Magic and Showmanship: A Handbook for Conjurers* (1969) argued that the effect can be separated into two categories; *trick* and *illusion* (it should be noted that Nelms is not referring to the big-box stage performance in this category). Nelms suggests that when magic is presented as a trick, the magician attests to no claim to having any power, whereas, when presenting illusion, the magician can claim to have powers. This depends on the conjurer's 'attitude' (Nelms, 1969, p. 5), that is, the performance persona they adopt. Nelms later argues that the role of the conjurer 'is not limited to impersonating a magician' (Nelms, 1969, p. 50), and although Nelms is not talking specifically about the bizarre magician, we see the indication of character roles being put forward as realistic alternatives to the magician persona. Helms gives examples such as the 'highbrow lecturer' or 'psychologist', the latter claiming no powers of extra sensory perception, but reading minds by observing the subtleties of the subconscious (Nelms, 1969, pp. 51–52). At the time of writing, Nelms' ideas were almost speculative with the

performance magician still very much performing in a mainstream mode, we see this mode reflected in Olf's 1974 article for Drama review 'The Actor and the Magician'. Olf's view of the magician is simple and he discusses the role in very traditional terms, stating; 'the art of the magician, in its purest form, is the art of performing a simple action that conceals a complex one' (Olf, 1974, p. 54). Olf's magician is the traditional mode with an emphasis on the practice of sleight of hand and thus on the trick itself. Here the mainstream conjurer is the gentleman magician making magic that is 'not elicited by voodooistic or incantatory hocus pocus' (Olf, 1974, p. 58). This is the mainstream type of persona bizarre magicians repeatedly challenged and across bizarre magick literature the persona of the bizarre magician is referred away from this and towards personas of, for example, the mage, the wizard, the miracle worker, the student, the acolyte, or the occultist. The list is almost endless. The character of the bizarre magician is often subject to the nature of the fiction that is being performed on stage, and, in the creation of this character, we see qualities such as explicit skills with sleight of hand being less important than, for example, the outward expression of years of learned study in the occult arts. According to Raven; 'You MUST believe that you really are performing magick, and you must transfer this belief to your spectators.' (Raven, 1976, p.726). As noted above, Steven Fabian's image of the mage drawn for the cover of *Invocation* personified at least part of this new portrayal of the magician as 'a skilled practitioner of ritual, able to command elemental forces and summon demons' (Taylor, 2016b, p. 61).

## *Control*

In broad terms the varied expression of the bizarre magician persona plays with the notion of control. The traditional magician has control through explicit expressions of skill in sleight of hand; the sceptic magician has control over the irrational with their own effects being drawn from the rational basis for that control; and the bizarre magician plays with the very notion of control in performance. They will often recount a tale or occult happening that they may or may not understand, or have control over. Even when the persona demands the appearance of learned skill, the bizarre magician is often portrayed as losing control of the energies, spirits or demons raised in the performance. As such, a particular recurring persona for the bizarre magician chimes with what Andruzzi termed as ‘the Van Helsing Approach’ (Magus, 2009, p.17). This is where the persona appears as someone ‘who may, or may not, know what he is doing! Van Helsing here leads us into areas that perhaps he can’t handle.’ (Burger, 1991, p.35) quoted in (Taylor and Nolan, 2015, pp. 130–131). The role of the magician is then expanded from the mainstream conjurer to a persona faced with the looming threat of chthonic and dark unseen forces, and often framed as a scholar, mage, demonologist, witness/reporter of events or interested party, etc. For example, we see the *scholar* persona called for in the effect *Signs of the Elders* (Devlyn, 1983) where ‘Professor Arathorn of the University of the Miskatonic’ discovers a possessed diary; the *mage* persona highlighted in *Summa Bonum* (Hughett, 1985) where a ritual of purification ends with an ominous message; and the *demonologist* persona in *Fire Demon* where the performer attempts to exert control over demonic forces (Cameron, 1984). In these examples and others, the persona of the bizarre magician still appears to be empowered through an engagement with

apparently real magic(k), but this empowerment often appears to come from their ability, or their inability, to control external forces, or the ability to facilitate an experiment/demonstration to show their control over these forces. Once again this is quite unlike the traditional magician whose control over any kind of force behind the magic is rarely made explicit. The objective in bizarre magick is to cement the notion in the minds of the audience that the bizarre magician has real powers that can be tapped and explored. In performance this is balanced against the level of control the magician is perceived to have over the dark forces he/she apparently commands. The level of control performed varies with persona, where the performer situates themselves across the continuum of bizarre magick, and how much the fuzziness of the source material mirrors established notions of the occult or new age ideology. The latter often exploiting what O'Neil, in his article *The New Age Movement and its Societal Implications*, identifies as the very lack of 'orthodoxy, canon or ritual' (O'Neil, 2001, p. 456). This does, of course, have the potential to be ethically troubling as the performance might draw from popular conceptions of personal transformation, magic behaviour, counselling, and divination. Such interactions in performance magic are not new, for example, the rise and subsequent movement behind, for example, Uri Geller. In fact, Geller's rise to fame was contemporary to a great deal of bizarre magick practice and a number of effects responded to this, for example, the effect *Gellerism Plus* was published in *Invocation* in 1976 and described how to appear to bend coins rather than spoons (Nelson, 1973). However, it was the performance persona of Geller that caught the imagination of many bizarre magicians, particularly those who advocated the 24/7 style of hard bizarre magick. Tony 'Doc' Shiels, contributed perhaps the largest collection of work on how a Geller-like performance



persona could function for the bizarre magician. Shiels initially discussed this in his article 'You Can be a Super-Psychic' (1975), and these ideas were expanded upon in his book *The Shiels Effect: A Manual for the Psychic Superstar* (1976). Here Shiels argues that a post-Uri persona/character would be a 'super-psi' performer, and the book describes methods as to how the bizarre magician might achieve this. Shiels later re-examined this work to produce an 'authentic and official sequel' to *The Shiels Effect*, the new book, entitled *Cantrip Codex* (1988b), included a *Shamanifesto* where Shiels argues for 'real magic' and for a 'pox on ethical prudes' (Shiels, 1988b, pp. 11–21). Three months earlier, in another book, *Bizarre*, Shiels had argued that there was 'little point in psychic entertainment, mentalism, or whatever you want to call it, unless the performer implies (at least) that his or her powers could be genuine'. In particular Shiels announces that the 'time is ripe for an exciting new paranormalist', who could would become a 'modern super-psychic as a performance artist' (Shiels, 1988a, pp. 3–4).

The presentation by bizarre magicians of work that purported to be real magic led to Eugene Burger suggesting that bizarre magick might only have a peripheral relationship to entertainment magic and be more aligned with the work of the fraudulent spirit medium (Burger, 1986c, p. 45). Indeed, practitioners of the hard approach to performing bizarre magick often dismiss the need for the disclaimer or 'scripted piece[s] of dialogue designed to distance the performer from any claim that what is about to be performed is real' (Taylor, 2018a, p. 4). However, in his early work Charles Cameron suggests that to protect the audience from fraud is 'rubbish and triple balderdash!' and he concludes, 'the usual argument is that the spectator should

“believe” in the magicians’ powers during his act (akin to empathy whilst watching a film) but regain reality at the conclusion of the performance. Stuff and faddling nonsense!!’ (Cameron, 1974, p. 1). Andruzzi in an audiotape message to Brother Shadow (c.1974) suggested that ‘when you do magic so unexpectedly, and so frighteningly, it is immediately accepted as real (Magus, 2011, p. 167). Even Burger appears to have an ambiguous relationship to the disclaimer, claiming in his 1988 midnight talk at the Invocational convention that disclaimers ‘ruin the fun of it’ (Burger, 1989, p. 591). However, by this time the hard bizarrists were being more playful and ambiguous (see Cameron’s and Andruzzi’s disclaimers in Taylor (2018a, pp. 5–6)). Thus, while the early hard bizarre magicians would appear to press for a return to real magic, there was a later softening that was more aligned to the story-telling or ‘yarn-spinning’ seen in the earlier work of Tony Shiels (Shiels, 1968b, p. 18) where the role of the magician was more playfully ambiguous.

### **Presenting Bizarre**

Whichever persona the bizarre magician chose to adopt, the challenge was to be seen as not to be doing tricks, but present mysteries, and to ‘stop dealing in puzzles’ (Shadow, 1997, p. 1). The performer of bizarre magick according to Andruzzi in an article for The American Society of Magicians, goes a ‘step beyond that which a mindreader or psychic may go.’ Andruzzi gives the example of the magician moving an object in performance; a mindreader might explain that this was the result of telekinesis, but the bizarre magician is more likely to describe the movement as a result of ‘a cosmic force’ or ‘eldritch spirit’ coupled with a sense that ‘danger threatens’ (Andruzzi, 1983a, p. 24). Andruzzi playfully believed that ‘you must come in

as a man of mystery and must leave as a man of mystery. You do not break the persona that you are trying to create. It is a great sport' (Magus, 2011, p. 201). As stated on page 65 above, Andruzzi played with affiliations to pagan groups and presented himself as a high priest of his own fictitious religion. In *The Negromicon of Masklyn ye Mage*, Andruzzi sets out his approach to the performance of bizarre magick, which was to perform as 'sincere and sober', and this work should emphasise the feeling of 'mystique and arcane foreboding' (Andruzzi, 1977). The *Negromicon of Masklyn ye Mage* itself is a handmade spell book that is deeply immersed in his exploration of the magic of the middle ages, covering discussions on ritual implements and the casting of magick circles. In the descriptions of effects included in the *Necronomicon* we see the audience members referred to a 'my liege' and 'my lady'. However, as Andruzzi's character developed he became more interested in performing, what he referred to in a letter to fellow performer Jim Magus in 1983 as, 'Goetic Magick'. This shift appears to occur around the same time as he sees bizarre performance becoming 'increasingly common' (Magus, 2011, p. 299) and from July 1982 Andruzzi uses the term more frequently in the *New Invocation*. In his other handmade work for magicians *The Legendary Scroll of Masklyn ye Mage* (1983b) Andruzzi opens with the following declaration; 'I Masklyn ye Mage of Maginegore, defy that demons of the Abyss and Eaters of Souls, and do set down these fragmentary illuminations of the Magical Craft for the edification of future generations of Bizarrists!' (Andruzzi, 1983b, p. 1). There is, of course, performative writing here, and by 1988 Andruzzi appears more realistic as to what might be achieved in the performance of bizarre magick. We see in the videotape *Bizarre*, Andruzzi continuing to describe how to 'make magic magic' by making 'memorable theatre', but Andruzzi

also appears to relax the notion of persona, this time arguing not for the heightened character but rather that you should be yourself 'not someone you are not, but perhaps just something you are not. Don't be too theatrical, let the mood of the effect be primary' (Flora, 1988).

Meanwhile in the UK, artist, and bizarre magician Tony 'Doc' Shiels continued to explore the complexities of performing bizarre magick. In his work *Bizarre*, Shiels declared himself a 'surrealchemist' (Shiels, 1988a, p. 15), and thirteen weeks later in his follow up work *Cantrip Codex* (1988b) he had refined this persona to be a 'cantrip-casting shamanic surrealchemist' (Shiels, 1988b, p. 12). To this end, Shiels saw bizarre magick as 'nonconformist, outlandish, strange and fanciful' and his own persona was heavily influenced by a number of assorted characters, real and imaginary' (Shiels, 1988a, p. 31). This persona is characterised by Shiels' experiments in performing metal bending, creating hoaxes, and general mythmaking. Here his work appears less concerned with bizarre effects and more like experiments into the wealth of possibilities available to the bizarre performer. Shiels' work included many hoaxes such as the one performed on the 17th November 1976 where 'Doc Shiels' claimed to have seen Morgawr (a Cornish sea monster) and from this claim came the 1977 project *Monstermind*. *Monstermind* was an extended piece of bizarre magick performance that claimed to have used an international group of real (i.e. not bizarre) magicians and psychics to raise ancient creatures from lakes across the world. The project produced one of the most enduring photographs of the Loch Ness Monster

that is still used today.<sup>37</sup> The ‘experts’ that were named to be working on the project included fellow bizarre magicians; Tony Andruzzi (as Masklyn ye Mage) who was referred to as a real ‘wizard’ (Shiels and Wilson, 2011, p. 82), Max Maven who was referred to as an ‘American Psychic’ and David Hoy referred to as ‘America’s top psychic’ (Shiels and Wilson, 2011, p. 62). The project was later written-up and published for a lay audience in *Monstrum! A Wizard's Tale* (first published in 1987 later revised in 2011). It is a fascinating piece of work as it represents a bizarre magick happening being written-up as non-fiction. In later reflections, Tony Shiels argues that bizarre magick ‘is more like a continuation of the ancient art of authentic shamanism’ with the ‘showman/shaman’ as an ‘archetypal figure, trickster wizard, story-teller and seer, entertainer and enchanter’ (Shiels, 1991, p. 739). To these ends, Shiels also developed a modern witch character known as ‘Psyche’ who at the time drew some media attention (Shiels, 1976, pp. 36–46). In reality ‘Psyche’ was Shiels’ daughter Kate who also worked under the name ‘Cait Sidhe’ (Shiels, 1988b, p. 46). Billed as a ‘witch-lady and psychic’, Kate also had an effect *Witch Craft* (1981) published in the periodical *Magick*.

### **The Practitioner**

As briefly mentioned in footnote 27 above, perhaps the most complex portrayal of the modern bizarre magician can be found in Eugene Poinc’s *The Practitioner: Journeys into the Grey* (2000). It is a book that this part novel and part book of effects, Poinc

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<sup>37</sup> The photograph, now widely revealed to be a fake, still appears regularly in articles on the monster see (Naish, 2013).

describes the Bizarre Magician as a 'Practitioner' who 'travels through the singularities of life and leaves them changed.' For Poinc, the figure of The Practitioner is a serious, but frightening entity, with no trappings of the performance magician about them. As an example, he argues that the symbols of traditional bizarre magick; 'plastic skulls or devil's heads' are 'absurd' and should be replaced with 'a real skull, human or animal, or a decaying fragment of a coffin lid' (Poinc, 2000, p.9). Here the persona expected of the performer is that of a real magician, performing real life changing magic.

However, as contemporary bizarre magician Christian Chelman warns in his book of effects *Capricornian Tales* (1993), the choice to shift persona from magician to soothsayer 'requires a certain ethical stance' and 'inconsistency in the psychology of your communication could lead to dramatic consequences' (Chelman, 1993, p.6). This once again chiming with the ethical questions which have been a concern in my own practice, see the attached Taylor (2018a, 2020).

Ultimately, the persona of the 24/7 bizarre magician who performs apparently real magic(k) requires a level of detail that is tricky to maintain, as Ortiz argues in *Strong Magic*;

most published bizarre magic [sic] effects have presentations that require a type of persona that few amateur magicians can sustain. Your friends know that you're not a warlock who has sold his soul to Satan or studied occult doctrine for decades in some remote monastery in the Carpathians (Ortiz, 1995, p. 120)

T.A. Waters echoes this stating; 'with the exception of Stephen [Minch] himself, Max Maven and several people named Tony one would be hard pressed to find performers who could put [bizarre magick] over in anything approaching a convincing fashion'. Waters suggests that rather than 'play the sorcerer', the magician should take the approach of interested student rather than omnipotent master' (Waters,

1993, pp. 242–244). This focus, echoed by many bizarre magicians, was the playing of short demonstrations of experiments through personas that demonstrated a dalliance with the themes of the bizarre rather than complete immersion. In many ways this returns to McGill’s notion of the miracle presentation, and indeed, Shiels himself began his practice in this way, arguing in 1968 that;

Magic of the spookier kind is, in my opinion, most effective when presented in the guise of impromptu-seeming experiments at a party or a gathering of friends. You should avoid anything which smacks too strongly of a rehearsed theatrical performance, but you **can** make use of certain subtle atmospheric tricks (Shiels, 1968b, p. 19) [author’s emphasis]

Thus, the practice of the bizarre magician ranges from the demanding kayfabe presentation of the magician as warlock, to smaller presentations of individual effects with the magician as a demonstrator of bizarre happenings. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and whichever approach is adopted by the bizarre magician they spend a great deal of energy in creating the experience for their audience. In the literature we repeatedly see calls to perform intimate effects for, as Andruzzi puts it a ‘select few’ or ‘small groups’ (Andruzzi, 1977). Creating the setting, the story and the props were considered central to this concept of creating ‘mood and atmosphere’ (Raven, 1976, p. 726) and while ‘atmosphere’<sup>38</sup> is a term that is discussed heavily in bizarre magick literature, it remained a loose concept often shaped by the magician’s persona, the props of the magician and the fuzzy tropes drawn from popular narratives of the past (both fact and fiction).

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<sup>38</sup> This can be seen to draw many of its qualities from the notion of ostension discussed above.

## *Bizarre Objects*

‘Objects have histories. Some have souls’ (Chelman, 1993, p. 65)<sup>39</sup>

As previously discussed, bizarre magicians deliberately played against what they saw as the established, generic, and often garishly painted, magic prop. These were the easily recognisable objects of performance magic that clearly signalled the mainstream performance magician. Decks of cards, the top hat, lacquered production boxes, floating silver balls and linking rings, etc., were largely dismissed by the bizarre community. Even so this dismissal was often playful, for example a typical signal of the mainstream magician is the deck of cards, usually the Bicycle brand, and at the third Invocational gathering of bizarre magicians in 1986, the Friday night show featured the surprise appearance of card magician Richard Kaufmann. Kaufmann began his act as follows; ‘I think all of you have seen enough of this Geotic crap so it’s time you saw some real magic. So, I’m going to do my favourite Four Ace Production.’ Jim Magus recounts what happened next; ‘The startling sound of gunfire rang out and Kaufman crumpled to the floor, apparently shot. Blackout, The audience broke into loud applause...’ (Magus, 2011, p. 356). These days at *Doomsday*, the annual UK meeting of bizarre magicians, card tricks are still ‘banned’ or at the very least humorously frowned upon. However, while bizarre magicians may have (often playfully) dismissed the trappings of mainstream performance magic, they certainly did not dismiss the magic prop entirely, rather they fetishized the magical object further by creating new constants on their practice, for example; the aged wooden

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<sup>39</sup> Christian Chelman created the semi-fictional *Surnateum* to house what he identifies as Hauntiques which are ‘authentic haunted antiques’ (Chelman, 2006).



box, or the ancient parchment bearing magical symbols. Bizarre magicians also appropriated existing objects from established occulture, for example tarot cards replaced playing cards, and crystals were used as a focus for mind-reading or scrying. The magic props of the bizarre magician no longer signalled mainstream performance magic, but instead signalled the fuzzy themes, fictions, and ostensive legend-texts from a plethora of external sources.

Of course, in many ways, performance magic is about the props, the apparatus, the objects, and the things on stage. Magicians have always used objects, and these are often gimmicked or modified in some way to facilitate magical method, and very early examples of the gimmicked prop can be seen in works such as Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584, pp. 290–294). More recently, the magic prop became codified by Hoffman and his contemporaries as ornate objects. These not only signalled the new gentlemen magician, but also could be reproduced commercially by magic dealers and marketed to other gentleman magicians. More than ever performance magic had become about the things on stage.

In general, magic objects themselves, that is before the physical illusory moment of the effect, function, according to Burger and Neale, as 'symbols and metaphors: pointing beyond themselves to a larger reality and a greater mystery' (1995, p. 9). The magical object is a thing that affords to be something else. For example, in the effect *Sole Survivor* (Burger and Neale, 1995, pp. 133–136) (discussed on page 76 above) the playing cards do not afford the ordinary deck of cards of the magician, but rather they are identifiers of the plague victims in a village from the middle ages. We can, therefore, expand my discussion of the magical object in séance (Taylor, 2015b, p.

170) and see the potential for the object to transform from a prop in a magic show into what Paavolainen (2010), in his discussion of stage properties, calls a powerful “static force of characterisation” (Paavolainen 2010, 117), and this immerses the audience in ostensive action. In bizarre magick, compared to conventional magic, the difference is that the affordance of the objects is not mundane, and in most cases these affordances are not regular, but are performed as part of the effect. The object has been taken from the mundane. Props in bizarre magick function, as Sofer suggests in a different context, as ‘object(s) that go[...] on a journey’, that ‘trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives as they track through a given performance’ (Sofer, 2003, p. 2). Extending this argument, I believe that it is the bizarre magician who produces this alteration, or in Sofer’s terms ‘triggers’ the object to alter in some way. The literature on bizarre magick contains many discussions as to how this triggering might occur, and a number of these also chime with the processes of empirical verification discussed on page 79.

In *Thing Theory*, Bill Brown quotes Nabokov in stating that ‘the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object’ (Brown, 2001, p. 4). Brown, citing Stein, describes the encounter with an object as being through experience of that object. In mundane terms the experience, Brown uses the example of cutting a finger on a piece of paper, gives the thing, the paper, its presence and power. Of interest to me here is the idea that objects hold something that is ‘excessive’ and that imagination allows us to see ‘their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems’ (Brown, 2001, p. 5). The transformation and heightened

presence of the ordinary object and can be seen in my practice and throughout my séance shows (Taylor, 2010; Taylor and Carter, 2016b, 2017, 2019) where the wine glass I use for glass moving is given a history based on a re-telling of the time I was caught running a séance in the school stationary cupboard. I tell the audience that I still use that very glass, that I have kept it for all these years and that it never fails in contacting the spirits. While the story is true in that I did try to run a séance in the school stationary cupboard and was caught, the wine glass is in fact new (Ikea), but the movement to a magical thing is initiated by the story. This is further reinforced when the glass does indeed move and appears to provide evidence of the spirit world, and thus further triggers its presence and power.

Throughout the practice of the bizarre magick we see a continued layering of meaning onto the magic prop and this can trigger simple or complex affordances. Most magic props can be said to move through the temporal in the expression of affordance. That is, when an object is recognised as a conjuring prop it falls victim to the association with the magic trick, however, the focus of bizarre magick is to switch this temporality to an alternative imagined history and thus attempt to avoid the notion of the magic trick entirely. The bizarre magick prop is, of course, still a magic prop, but the associations with conjuring are deflected through careful manipulation of the temporal positioning of the object, the variety of cues given by the bizarre magician to show it is authentic, and the more fuzzy approach that uses the already temporal position of the object to produce new meaning for the spectator<sup>40</sup>. Much of

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, my discussion of the Ouija board on pages 76-78.

this meaning production is fostered through ostensive storytelling, for example, an object like a key, might become haunted by the ghosts of the house it unlocked in the effect *The Haunted Key* (Burger, 1986c, p. 138); bent by an unknown force in an old English Inn in the effect *The Key in the Door* (Neale, 1991, pp. 191–198) or becomes the only key that will open a vampire’s tomb in *The Keys to Dracula’s Coffin* (Bridewell, 1976).

### *Magic Technologies*

I find it useful to think of performance magic props as a technology. In theatre we often talk about theatre technologies, almost always this refers to the standard, taken-for-granted elements that work together to create the theatrical experience. These technologies are often external to the actor/performer, being designed and run by technicians and specialists. Such technologies light the space, create sound, and run scenography effects; as such they create atmosphere. In comparison to such overt technologies, the technologies of performance magic are hidden from view and are central to the magician’s performance. The technologies that powered *The Phantasmagoria*, *Psycho*, and *Pepper’s Ghost* would create illusionary happenings on stage that go beyond the actor-sign and blur the distinction between illusion and reality. These technologies all played in what we would broadly define as a traditional theatrical space. However, smaller props such as the pendulum are ideomotor technologies that also have a rich history in the non-traditional space, and, in particular, the séance room. Such technologies serve to deepen an audience or participant’s engagement with the séance performance.

The pendulum is a séance technology that is part of a broad continuum of technologies designed to provide evidence of spirit communication (other examples are discussed on page 59 above). The majority of these require the intervention of the host/medium as performer, these include, rope ties, spirit cabinets, rapping hands, and the production of ectoplasm. Ouija boards, glass moving and the pendulum are hands-off in the sense that the performer is relying on the ideomotor response of the participant to give results. These technologies in the hands of the participants, however, provide a tangible affordance of contact with the spirit realm inside the performance space of the séance. The pendulum can also be seen as a utility prop for the séance in that falls into the category of physical phenomena. The device has a rich history outside of the séance room; a very complex example of pendulum/ideomotor action is described by Abbott (1912) in *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums*<sup>41</sup>; they are featured in fiction such as the the bottle pendulums of HP Lovecraft's *Terrible Old Man* (Lovecraft, 1926), or even marketed as a 'sex detector' see *The Pendulum Knows* (Spooner, 2008). In contemporary séance practice the pendulum plays a role in establishing not only the other, but also of creating a group unity and a sense of community amongst ghost hunters.<sup>42</sup> This again promotes the ostensive state referred to by folklorists as *collective delusion* where an often undefined fear or panic,

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<sup>41</sup> "The trick which the first medium originated I will now describe. He called it 'The Mystic Oracle of the Swinging Pendulums, or Mind over Matter.'" Briefly, it consisted in the medium apparently causing any pendulum, which might be selected from a number hanging on a frame or in a number of bottles, to vibrate or swing in response to his will. There was absolutely no mechanical or electrical connection to any of the pendulums whatever. Most of these pendulums consisted of a bullet suspended by a piece of hair wire. On a few of them glass marbles of various sizes were used instead of bullets." (Abbott, 1912, p. 29)

<sup>42</sup> Discussed in Taylor (2015b) See also; Taylor, N. (2011) 'Collective Delusion and the Madness of Crowds.'. In: F. Valentine ed. *Occult Magic 2: Into The Darkness*. Valentine Entertainments, pp.43–47.

usually from a group of people or even a community, manifests the ostensive in group action, often magic behaviour, to reassure themselves they are acting to protect or overcome a perceived threat and thus 'controlling their fates' (Ellis, 2001, pp. 201–202). Collective delusion is also a narrative process through which ostensive action is played out, the affordance of the pendulum simultaneously demonstrates group action, in that everyone can help the individual make the pendulum move; while at the same time attributing power or focus to the participant who is apparently channeling spirits. The bizarre magician appears to take the role of a facilitator to guide and ultimately elicit ideomotor response in the participant. This is then interpreted for the audience by the bizarre magician as spirit contact, or in the case of my séance practice, evidence of the most open-minded and attuned members of the audience.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In a piece I devised with third year undergraduates the pendulums were used ludically to determine the final outcome of the performance (Taylor, 2014d).

### *Current Practice*

As we have seen bizarre magick draws from a wide range of sources, and in this document I have examined many of its key themes, in particular spiritualism and the fuzzy Gothic. I have explored the notion of ostension through showing how bizarre magicians play with the boundaries of presentation and representation. I have discussed how the bizarre magician (re)frames the persona of the traditional magician into something that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. Finally, I have examined how the bizarre magician approaches the objects of magic, not as magic props in the traditional sense, but as things full of rich meaning and history.

Bizarre magicians play with notions of truth and reality in performance, and apply this with a fuzziness that not only echoes the source's external transmission through popular mediatised forms of fantastika and occulture, but also chimes with the skilled act of misdirection by the magician themselves. Here appropriation and lie serve (as noted above) to 'out bullshit the bullshitters' (Magus, 2011, p. 170). Bizarre magicians attempt to knit together an approach that, depending on where they might situate themselves across a continuum of practice, might aim to give the appearance of performing real magic, to tell a tale illustrated with performance magic, or appear to contact spirits, but almost always never to be seen to be performing a conjuring trick. Bizarre magick represents an attempt to explore how magic performance could occur in the boundary between fictive and real-life experience, it creates worlds for an audience that continues to somehow bleed outside of the magic circle and into real life. This may be presented explicitly in, for example, Minch's *Stigmata of Cthulhu* (Minch, 1974, 1979b) where upon leaving the performance space each member of the

audience discovers the mark of Cthulhu upon them (Taylor, 2016b, p. 59), or simply implied, such as in Leslie May's *From Deep Down* (May, 1981) where the spectator is left with the suggestion of the existence of crypto-zoological beasts and the possibility they might encounter one next time they venture by a lake.

As my performance practice developed alongside this research, I explored the blurring of the boundary between the magic world and the real world in the previously mentioned piece *The Gift of Hermes* (Taylor, 2014c). Here the audience take the gift of self-divination facilitated by the magician into the wider environment outside of the performance space. Equally, we can see this experience shared in the work of other contemporary performers such as paranormal entertainer Paul Voodini, where, in the effect *Kiss of the Clairvoyant*, an audience volunteer is given the gift to see into the spirit realm (Taylor, 2015b, p. 171), and in the work of Academic Magician Todd Landman, who blends performance magic with philosophy, and often explores external notions of magical thinking within his shows. Landman sees this blended approach to truth and reality as 'crucial in the observation, enjoyment and pseudo-explanation of a magical effect' (Landman, 2010, p. 14). These and other performers require the magic they perform to be taken seriously, and while no longer framing themselves explicitly as bizarre magicians, they draw much from the legacy of the movement.

Throughout this research I saw myself continually reframing my performance persona. I began my work by framing myself as a bizarre magician, and in *Bizarre in the Bar* (Taylor, 2009a) I adapted effects directly from the rich material offered by the original bizarre magicians, using objects such as aged playing cards, voodoo dolls, and



wooden prediction boxes. As my practice progressed I applied notions of ostension to both my persona (taking a stage name) and in my séance performances by constructing the piece around the four-phase model of collective delusion. It was at this point I felt more comfortable framing myself as a mystery entertainer or paranormal entertainer, and providing mystery entertainment or paranormal entertainment, rather than framing myself as a bizarre magician doing bizarre magick. The use of the term 'entertainer' or 'entertainment' was intended to suggest to an audience that the work I presented was, in fact, fiction. In practice, however, the ambiguity between the real and the non-real in my work remained and this is something I found challenging, particularly as I explored ostensive experience in my work. As such I have been presented with a number of ethical issues, I attempted to capture these in Taylor (2018a, 2020) where I align them to the process of finding my performance persona. In these cases, I have had to consider at which point does the audience/participant feel that I am acting or not-acting, whether I am an actor playing the part of a performance magician, or even a real magician, and whether I am playing with the fictitious or non-fictitious. This role does not fit neatly into the persona of the mentalist either as the traditional mentalist will often deflect any notion of ostensive behaviour by giving pseudo-explanations for their powers.

Landman (2013) argues in his typology of performance magic, that mystery entertainment can encompass the genres of 'theatrical mentalism' and 'bizarre magick'. Landman provides an account of running a focus group that experiences three different magic performances each based on a different framing of the magician; the traditional magician, the mentalist, and the mystic. The latter two frames are

most pertinent for my own work as they exhibit a more indeterminate relationship with notions of the real and the imaginary, and, in particular, 'trust and belief' (Landman, 2013, p. 14). For the focus group, the notion of being tricked was more prevalent in the response to the traditional magician, and less so with the mentalist and the mystic, where more complex explanations were offered. These categories were considered less trivial framings for performance magic by the focus group.

Landman's work demonstrates how the experience of magic is often a consequence of an audience's expectation of the magician/mentalist/mystic persona. Landman's model has the mystery entertainer, blurring the sub-categories of 'theatrical mentalism' and 'bizarre magick.' Landman's typology showing key indicators of the theatrical mentalist and the bizarre magician is reproduced on the next page.

Mystery Entertainment			
	Theatrical mentalism	Bizarre Magick	
Typical Effects	Telepathy ESP Precognition Prediction Mind reading Clairvoyance Clairaudience Hypnosis Mesmerism Psychokinesis Telekinesis Psychic readings	Levitation Penetration Transposition Production Vanish Reappearance Transformation Destruction Restitution Storytelling Psychic readings	Telepathy ESP Precognition Prediction Mind reading Clairvoyance Clairaudience Hypnosis Mesmerism Psychokinesis Telekinesis Spiritualism Demonism
Typical Materials	Antiques Books Lamps Desks Artefacts Photographs Carpets Clocks Bookcases Leather satchels Vases Bottles	Skulls Crosses Boxes Crystal balls Spirit lamps Spirit cabinets Tarot cards Pendulums Swords Axes Candles Bowls	Scales Knives Syringes Blood Fire/flames Wands Staves Robes Cloths Symbols Chalice
Frame	Psychic Collective unconscious Plurality of explanations	Occult magick Spirit contact Demon/angel contact	
Contract	Real power Expand understanding	Real occult power	
The engagement with the audience	Interactive participation	Passive viewing Interactive participation	
Discourse	'Mysterious' 'Demonstration' 'Experiment' 'Participant' 'Akashic records' 'Collective unconscious' 'Empathy'	'Occult' 'Ritual' 'Angelic/demonic summoning' 'Communication with the dead' 'Mystery schools tradition' 'Hermeticism' 'Spiritualism'	
Popular exemplars	Christian Chelmon Paul Voodini Todd Landman Christian Cagigal Professor BC	Charles Cameron Tony Andruzzi Roni Shachnaey Professor Rigomorto Todd Robbins Neil Tobin	

Landman typology for 'mystery entertainment' (Landman, 2013, pp. 8–9)

However, I would argue that the two sub-categories suggested by Landman, while having some differences, are not mutually exclusive in this sense, as bizarre magick continues to draw from both as freely as it does from other cultural sources. Thus, while mystery entertainment became a useful frame for me in the mid to latter stages of performing bizarre magick, I found myself taking more ownership of the form in

reverting back to a framing as a bizarre magician, or even simply a magician. The intention for me now is to retain the ludic ambiguity of the performance form by moving away from a fear response, towards something more playful that can also maintain the essential experience of the bizarre magick.

### *Further Work*

In 1996 a pilot was made for a new television show *The Mind of Doctor Frost*, it was billed as a psychological mentalist show and pitched as ‘Hannibal Lecter does card tricks’ (Britland, 2012). The setting for the show was a secure unit in a hospital with magician T.A. Waters playing Doctor Frost. Britland describes Water’s portrayal as the ‘Crichton effect’ (named after author Michael Crichton) where ‘the audience never know where fact leaves off and the fiction begins’, and, as such, the audience were not made aware that it was a magic show at all. As Britland discusses in a presentation for the *Essential Magic Conference* in 2012, ‘the BBC believed the character was real, and they lost track that this was a mentalism show’ (Britland, 2012), as such it was not picked up to be made into a series. Later we see this ambiguity again when Derren Brown quickly rose to fame as a psychological mentalist using many of the techniques of the bizarre magician including ostensive practice and kayfabe. Surprisingly, his work drew the particular attention of science author Simon Singh who declared in the *Daily Telegraph*; ‘I’ll bet £1,000 that Derren can’t read my mind’ (Singh, 2003b). Singh appears to have missed the ludic quality of the mystery entertainment/mentalism act completely, arguing; ‘I don’t like to think of myself as a spoilsport. I wouldn’t dare question the veracity of Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy or even the Easter Bunny. But I draw the line at Derren Brown’ (Singh, 2003b). Singh later qualified this

comment citing that his main objection was that Channel Four, apparently playing along with the conceit, listed the show in the science section on their website (Singh, 2003a).<sup>44</sup>

While these two examples are large scale mediatised projects, we can, in general terms, see elements of a legacy of bizarre magick practice within them. Bizarre magick did not occur in isolation, and the many experiments across its continuum of practice cannot help but feed into performance magic practice more widely. While this research is the first to suggest coherent approaches to bizarre magick practice we can, and would expect, to see existing interactions in performance magic, particularly in the already established notion of the ambiguity of the real and the faked.

Wider work is now required to examine not only how and where this current examination might inform today's bizarre magick practice, but also how it might be useful both within mainstream performance magic and other performance practice. At present, my work in this area is finding potential moments of impact outside of performance magic, in particular I explored use of ostension/collective delusion as a dramaturgy for magic and (apparently) non-magic performances at the recent PSYCON conference where I presented on *Four Stages of Hacking Reality* (Taylor, 2019). Here I gave examples as to how ostension could be applied to practices such as immersive storytelling. I illustrated this by referencing my ongoing work with *Mr Punch's Cabinet*

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<sup>44</sup> Given the popularity of Derren Brown's and the rise of internet and social media holding the pretence on such a large scale is difficult to achieve. Whereas he smaller, intimate performances during the heyday of bizarre magick perhaps allowed for safety in (less) numbers.

*of Curiosity*<sup>45</sup>, where myself and fellow performers Ashton Carter and Reverend Tristan, have experimented with theming, ostensive play, the nature of the magician/facilitator, and the affordance of the object, to devise a performance based on the presentation of a series of oddities and magical objects. The piece has been designed as a walk-through experience, facilitated by the bizarre magician. The exhibits each have a different story to tell and function as an extension of the bizarre magick prop, each one being transformed into a magical thing through an interaction with an accompanying story and with a curator/facilitator (the bizarre magician). The whole piece is an ostensive bizarre magick experience where patrons can view and interact with the exhibits and curators in their own time. For example, the ‘Odontomancy’ exhibit is a playful look at the practice of divining the future through the structure and alignment of a person’s teeth, and, for our purposes, it is performed as an interactive ‘personality test’. In addition, the final exhibit, known simply as, *The Oracle*, is hidden from audience view and may only be interacted with through special request and requires the intervention of one of the Curators. During this intervention a personal moment of bizarre magick can be experienced. The effect here is loosely based on *The Gift of Hermes* described on page 67 above, and here it serves not only to bleed the magical outside of the performance space, but also serve as the ‘blow-off’ (Nickell, 2008, p. 76) to encourage the audience to leave and make room for new patrons.

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<sup>45</sup> See: <https://www.ashtoncartermagic.com/mrpunch>

Ostensive play with magical objects has also been applied in the presentation of *The Strange Thing* (Taylor, 2017; Taylor and Nolan, 2018). In this work the magical object is held obscured from view in a small tent, and the audience are invited into the tent to experience a moment of magic(k). The show is played as a 'single-o' attraction, and the potential audience must pay an entry fee to interact with the object that always remains hidden from view of the non-paying public. The moment of magick with the object is a private experience for the audience member who has paid to enter the show tent, but their embodiment of the experience of magick is open to a non-paying audience's public scrutiny as the tent's door remains open throughout. This process draws part of its inspiration from, for example, the ritual performances of Brother Shadow where the participants witness each other's 'cleansing' (Shadow, 1995, p. 11), and from my own séance work where watching the response of the participants to the glass moving is just as an important moment to the rest of the audience as the physical movement of the glass itself. In *The Strange Thing* the tent is the ritual space or the magic circle. The difference being in bizarre magick ritual or séance the magician is also the focus in facilitating the participants, but the ritual space is closed, while in the performance of *The Strange Thing*, there are, in fact, two bizarre magick shows going on; the dialogue between the magician and those who have entry to the tent, and the experience of those outside who watch this interaction with equal fascination. They are looking through the window at a different kind of magic show; the reaction to the magic. We can see this experience used in

contemporary street magic where a great deal of lingering focus is left on the spectators, quite frequently with the street magician deliberately absent.<sup>46</sup>

In 1991 Eugene Burger asked the question whether bizarre magick could be understood as a branch of conjuring at all and his conclusion, based primarily on the commercial viability of the work, was that it could be (Burger, 1991, p. 14). However, the reach and scope of bizarre magick goes much further than commercial viability. The legacy of the form with its wealth of ideas, effects and methods presents much that the contemporary performer, myself included, can draw from. The combined research in this portfolio generates new possibilities for understanding and developing wider practices in performance magic and the notion of what it might mean to be a magician. As such the implication for my practice, and potentially for others, has been profound, particularly the application of the four-stage model of collective delusion in séance performance and the ludic ostensive shaping of my work more generally.

The next stage for my personal practice is to move away from the obvious trappings of the bizarre and find a persona that is authentic to me, but also draws from all I have learnt in the process. The final piece in this portfolio, *Identity and Persona* (2020) begins that journey and closes off this current chapter in my research practice.

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<sup>46</sup> Bizarre magician and storyteller Ashton Carter has a similar approach with his *Baffling Blocks* single-o grind performance piece. In this experience the story is shared, but only a chosen few can (those who pay) can experience the true moment of bizarre magick.



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# Chapters and Articles

Taylor, N. and Nolan, S. (2015) 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magic.', in Spooner, C. and Botting, F. (eds) *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 128–142.

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## *Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-Inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magick*

Taylor, N. and Nolan, S. (2015) 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magic.', in Spooner, C. and Botting, F. (eds) *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 128–142.

### *Bizarre magick*

Performance magic research has primarily focused on historical studies of the nineteenth century's 'golden age', an interest perpetuated by books such as *Hiding the Elephant* (Steinmeyer, 2003) and films such as *The Prestige* (2006) and *The Illusionist* (2006). Subsequent performance magic has been largely neglected by the academy. This is due to the misconception that performance magic ended as a cultural entertainment with the birth of cinema. In reality, performance magic found ways to inhabit and energise both film and TV, just as it is now inhabiting and innovating new media. The contemporary 'magic assemblage' (During, 2002) now rivals that of the golden age in terms of popularity and overshadows it both in invention and in its astonishing scope.

Performance magic takes many forms and this chapter examines the particular genre of bizarre magick, which favours theatrical character, story-telling, overt allegory, symbolism, and themes of the supernatural, fantastic and weird. Having roots in Victorian spirit performance, such as that of the Davenport Brothers (1854–77), and

the early twentieth-century performances of Theodore Annemann (1907–42) and Stewart James (1908–96), it was realised as a movement in the 1970s through a counter-cultural reaction against the big boxes and card flourishes of a *disenchanted* contemporary mainstream stage magic. Bizarre magicians sought to *re-enchant* performance magic with the mysterious and the spiritual (re)discovering its deeper meaning.

Evidence of this attempt at re-enchantment can be seen in the term ‘bizarre magick’ with practitioners often adding the ‘k’ to signal a connection with a spelling convention initiated by Aleister Crowley, itself an attempt to differentiate performance magic from occult practice. This spelling was popularised in the 1970s by contributors to the influential magazine *Invocation* (Andruzzi and Raven, 2007). However, it was primarily the British bizarrists Charles Cameron and Tony ‘Doc’ Shiels who were directly influenced by Western occultism, Celtic mythology and ceremonial magic. Throughout this chapter we have used the convention of the ‘k’ spelling not to suggest that bizarre magick always has strong links to these traditions but simply to distinguish it from other forms of performance magic.

### *Fabulous monsters*

Max Maven is one of the pre-eminent performers of magic (with and without the ‘k’) working today and this chapter draws its name from a 2006 documentary about Maven, directed by Donna Zuckerbrot, in which he recalls a story from the book *Harpo Speaks* (Marx, 1985). This biography of Harpo Marx also tells the story of Alexander Woollcott, who, on the verge of adolescence, attended a birthday party and was



required to participate in a 'curious activity', a game where each child was asked to write down what they wanted to be when they grew up.

As we can assume, very few of them grew up to be what they had inscribed on their slips of paper. However, this was not true for young Alexander Woollcott, who would eventually become exactly what he had written down. On his paper, he had inscribed these words: 'I would rather be a fabulous monster' (Max Maven in Zuckerbrot, 2006).

This chapter explores the relationship of bizarre magic to the gothic through notions of the *fabulous* and the *monstrous*. Maven, influenced by Woollcott's words, chose to become a fabulous monster himself. He made a decision to create this new character/persona early on in his career. He was born Philip Goldstein and adopted the name Max 'as it was a crisp dynamic name that had fallen out of fashion', the 'x' being 'sharp and distinctive' coupled with *Maven*, a 'Yiddish word for a wise expert or a know-it-all; the name contains many clues to Max's identity and background' (Steinmeyer, 2007: 57). Maven then transformed himself,

with extreme, theatrical grooming: a deep widow's peak, burnished black hair, sharp eyebrows and dark eye shadow, a Mephistophelean goatee, and a pierced ear. He looked like Ming the Merciless from the old Flash Gordon Comics. (Steinmeyer, 2007: 57).

Claiming to have been born on 'the day with most darkness', Maven's look references Ming the Merciless and Kabuki theatre while his personality mixes intellectual supremacy, dry wit and arch comedy (Zuckerbrot, 2006). He contrasts a visually cartoonish image with unashamedly intellectual and eclectic scripts. He is a stylish monster who speaks fluent Japanese and quotes theoretical physicist Wolfgang

Pauli. Maven's trademark opening line plays with the idea of a self-aware monster. He strides onstage, leans in to the microphone, smiles and quietly says, 'Boo!' This immediately plays with the audience's expectations; by taking himself lightly, he is in fact taking himself seriously. The monstrous is fabulous and his persona becomes 'the first effect in [the] show' (Steinmeyer, 2007: 57).

Maven's attention to persona is mirrored in the bizarre magick literature. Just what manner of persona should the bizzarrist adopt? While the idea of the magician developing a dramatic persona is not new, the bizzarrist draws on elements largely rejected by the magic establishment. Bizarre magick rejects the notion of the traditional 'bourgeois magician' (Saville, 2004) while favouring story-telling, the uncanny and the gothic.

A frequently quoted precept of modern magic is Eugene Robert-Houdin's 'A magician is an actor playing the part of a magician' (Robert-Houdin and Hoffmann, 1878: 43). T. A. Waters interprets this to mean 'a stage magician is an actor playing the part of a *real* magician' advising the would-be bizzarrist to 'act as yourself, perhaps sceptical but curious; there are these rituals you know about, they're probably just superstition, but why not give them a try and see if anything happens?' Thus the performer takes the approach of an 'interested student rather than omnipotent master' (Waters, 1993: 243–4).

Tony Raven advises that the magician should not appear like a character out of a grade B horror movie but rather play the part of a man demonstrating what he knows about the occult sciences. He argues that it is far too easy for a character to be seen as

a ‘corny simulation of a man of mystery’, and that a ‘much easier and more credible’ approach to developing a character is to play the ‘role of savant, one who has interest in the occult and is willing to experiment with his discoveries as entertainment for his audience’. Tony Andruzzi has called this ‘the Van Helsing Approach’, referring both to the novel *and* to the various screen portrayals, particularly in the British *Dracula* films of the 1960s and 1970s featuring actors Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing (Magus, 2009: 17). In this performance, 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, 1991: 35).

In adopting a persona the bizarre magician balances the real and the imaginary, the received truth and the actual truth. The magician is often portrayed as an ordinary man whose power comes from a study of the occult and supernatural. His power is derived from ‘secret, and conventionally rejected knowledge’ (1991: 35) and although being associated with the dark arts he is often on the side of good. Within the diversity of these characters we can see a ‘spectrum’ of persona and performance technique based upon the practitioner’s intention to produce *hard* or *soft*, *monstrous* or *fabulous* bizarre (Magus, 2009: 20). The examples which follow illustrate this spectrum and demonstrate a series of conscious decisions by the performer based on dramatic intent; this may involve directly using names and characters from the gothic, borrowing recognisable elements of the genre for their characterisation and performance, and even, in the case of ‘hard’ bizarre, performing magic as *real*.

### *From Dracula to Van Helsing*

A number of bizarre magicians develop characters that make direct reference to the gothic within their work. Here we can ask questions as to just which elements of the gothic genre is the performer adopting. It would be difficult to perform a Dracula character as a magician and stay wholly true to Bram Stoker's vision, and pragmatic concessions are made. These personas are often a jigsaw of the canonical gothic elements that make up the entire Dracula oeuvre, often having more in common with parodies such as *Dracula, Dead and Loving It* (1995) or *The Munsters* (1964–66) than with the original novel or the classic Expressionist film *Nosferatu* (1922).

### *Charles Cameron*

Charles Cameron, a key originator of the genre, was a psychic investigator and performer well known for his *Friday Frighteners* and *Beyond the Unknown* radio shows. Cameron was curator of the Edinburgh Wax Museum from its inception in 1976 until it closed in 1989. Here he created the *Nights of Fear* and, in the final years of its existence, *Castle Dracula*, a theatre devoted to bizarre magick and inspired by Maskeylene's famous Egyptian Hall in London. Cameron produced and took the lead part of Count Dracula; other performers played Daemon, 'a creature from the depths of Hell', and the Vampiress.

In *Castle Dracula Mentalism* (1997) Cameron describes a number of the routines he performed. They read quite differently from other bizarre magick effects that draw influence from gothic tales. They are very straightforward and have little serious dark symbolism attached to them, reflecting the stage show itself, which played out the gothic in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner, comparable to popular gothic horror themed television shows. For example, in *The Book of Demons* (Cameron, 1997: 19), a

page from a book of horror tales is chosen by an audience volunteer. The page is torn from the book and marked with the outline of a human figure. While the page is held outstretched by the volunteer, the performer 'holds a needle aloft and suddenly plunges it down on to the page'. The volunteer holds the page up to the light and sees that there is a hole through the 'O' in the word 'forbidden'. The volunteer then tears the page into quarters and the performer burns it. When they re-examine the book the volunteer discovers that the torn-out page has returned. The edges of the page are slightly singed and charred. The outline of a figure is drawn on the page and there is a pinhole through the letter 'O' in the word 'forbidden'. The volunteer takes the book home as a souvenir.

### *Eugene Burger*

Named as 'One of the 100 most influential magicians of the 20th century' by *Magic Magazine*, Burger is also a philosopher and historian of religion with advanced degrees in divinity (Yale University) and philosophy, and has taught comparative religion and philosophy. This background is apparent in his writing and performance. He argues that in the past magic, death, life and art were mixed, but that today's magic has been reduced to tricks and tamed into the superfluous. Today's magic should be about 'fabricating reality to produce surprising results' (Caplan, 1988). Burger's work emphasises the importance of the structuring of deception, this frequently consists of considered story-telling, focusing on mystery and bizarre as opposed to 'tricks'.

Eugene Burger in his introduction to *The Compleat Invocation* (Andruzzi and Raven, 2007) states that the publication should stand 'as a reminder to magicians that there is an older magic, a deeper and perhaps even darker tradition that has quietly spread

underground for centuries', an older magic that 'stretches back in time and history far beyond the point where written records begin' (Burger in Andruzzi and Raven, 2007). In contrast to the treatment of bizarre magick as a playful form of light-hearted gothic entertainment, the concept of the magician here is more closely related to that of that magus, with professional, ceremonial, ritualistic and spiritual duties (Butler, 1948). However, this serious concern with the deeper meanings of magic does not mean that Burger's performing style is always serious. On the contrary, his routines are often mischievously humorous and his style influenced by the cinematic gothic. He states that if he had a style, 'I think I got it watching Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff movies when I was young' (Burger, 2007: online).

In 1992 Eugene Burger and fellow magician Jeff McBride founded The Mystery School as a way of exploring new contexts for magic. McBride describes the school as, 'not only an experiential retreat, but also a piece of living art, an adventure in theatre' (Burger and McBride, 2003: 17). The intention was to create 'interactive magical experiences for magicians' (Burger and McBride, 2003: 17). Again, there was serious intent but also humour, as Burger says, 'yes, we're serious about this but, well, we're not serious, we're sincere' (Burger and McBride, 2003: 31). Mystery School alumni, such as David Parr, see magic as fundamental to a human culture where, 'the world of magic is not so separate from everyday reality', stating that 'the sciences grew from magic ... alchemy gave rise to chemistry, astrology to astronomy. Magic is present in our religious and spiritual beliefs, it's in our myths and folklore, it's in our entertainment. And it's in our daily behavior' (Parr, 2002: online).

Magical thinking may be a part of our everyday lives, but to explore the potential of the magical through *The Mystery School* requires a more sustained mode of thought; 'not to believe or disbelieve in magic, but just to make believe magic was real, not in the childish sense, but in the very aware adult sense' (Burger and McBride, 2003: 34). Some bizarrists have taken the mixing of performance and *real* magic further, choosing to pursue the bizarre without interruption and developing a reputation for being the trickster playing with the real and the imaginary. Here we see an imperative based upon ambiguity within the performance and, while still drawing on the gothic, Doc Shiels and Tony Andruzzi blur the edge between magic as performance and magic as lived reality.

### *Tony 'Doc' Shiels*

Like many other bizarrists, Shiels has drawn from gothic media to construct a performance persona. Shiels was heavily influenced by a number of characters: W. C. Fields 'the quintessential snake-oil pitchman'; Werner Krauss's doctor-cum-showman in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920); sinister carnival leader Mr Dark from Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962); along with 'a dash of this and a sprinkle of that until the figure evolved' (Shiels, 1988a: 31). Shiels refers to being a magician around the clock and adopting a media-savvy persona to exploit the role of magician and come across as real. Having decided that 'magic could benefit from a strong injection of the stuff which curdles blood and causes nightmares' (Caplan, 1988) he began introducing himself as a 'cantrip-casting shamanic surrealchemist' (Shiels, 1988b: 12). To Shiels, the artfully constructed hoax, such as his photographs of monsters – including Morgawr (a Cornish sea monster) and his now famous

photograph of the Loch Ness monster taken during his 1977 'monster hunt' – are a valid a form of performance. Shiels extends Waters's concept of the *real* magician by arguing that the magician must not simply appear as an actor playing the part of a magician but must 'BE an awesomely and demonstrably *real* cantrip casting magician', with the magician's experiments making the audience feel like they could be in some form of danger (Shiels, 1988b: 19).

### *Tony Andruzzi*

Tony Andruzzi presents a darker view of the bizarre persona, appearing as sophisticated Mephistopheles, occultist and edgy trickster. From 1981 until his death in 1991 he was editor of the seminal bizarre magick magazine *New Invocation* (Andruzzi and Raven, 2007). A pre-eminent founder, contributor and a revered name in the community of bizarre magicians, his primary bizarre magick persona was Masklyn ye Mage, a 'psycho-dynamic experimentalist' (Shiels, 1988b: 12). Eugene Burger identifies three central ideas to Andruzzi's work:

The first is the idea that one must be a magician 24 hours a day; the second is that the impact of a bizarre magick performance decreases as the size of the audience increases; and the third is that Tony did not seek laughter or applause from his audience, his objective was to shake up our sense of reality. (Burger and Parr, 2000: online)

Andruzzi's work has not been without criticism and even today his ethical stance provokes debate (Swiss *et al.*, 2009). He often encouraged magicians to do psychic readings and to 'present themselves to the gullible, who are suffering, as one who has real powers that can help them with the problems in their personal lives' (Burger and Parr, 2000: online).



Although they would have ethical issues with Andruzzi's use of the word 'gullible' there are many magicians today who see helping people as a part of their art. This may simply be a belief that magic is, as Max Maven has said, 'about reminding us, first and foremost, that there is mystery' (Cherniak, 1994) but there are also practising therapists who have written about how they introduce magic into therapy (Inglee in Burger and McBride, 2003: 257; Cushman, 2008). This complex debate aside, Andruzzi's magick was deliberately disturbing and uncomfortable, leaving the 'impression that there really are deep mysteries in the world' (Burger and Parr, 2000: online). In bizarre magick these mysteries are often explored through the telling of stories.

### *Bizarre story-telling*

Alongside the development of character/persona, attention to the importance of story is another key feature that distinguishes bizarre magick from other styles of performance magic. Burger suggests that the ancient tradition of using stories in conjuring performances has been trivialised by the childish stories used by contemporary magicians:

These early stories were serious vehicles, whose telling evoked important truths for our ancient ancestors. It took magicians' stories thousands of years to get to Billy Bunter, the Hippity-hop Rabbits, and Joanne the Duck. (Burger in Neale, 1991: vii)

Neale goes on to state that in most magic, 'the presentation of a plot – that is, the physical event in a card trick, such as a transposition or vanish – usually amounts to communicating the events of the plot clearly'. He argues that this is 'highly abstract and seemingly removed from all human concerns'. He compares such presentations to

mathematics and while such presentations can be enjoyable, there are many other approaches. Neale concludes; 'A presentation can point to matters beyond the plot' (Neale, 2000: x).

Story-telling magic uses the magic effects to point to other things and is fundamentally a symbolic form that is often allegorical in practice. In this sense it is closely related to gospel magic, which uses magic effects as a way of telling religious parable. Bizarre magic can also concern itself with matters of a spiritual nature and has been called 'Gospel magic turned inside out' (Burger, 1991: 14–15). As the game of magic plays with the participant's concepts of truth, belief, illusion and the impossible it lends itself to the service of stories with similar themes to that of gospel magic. Neale refers to this as 'reflexive magic' (Burger and Neale, 1995: 187), magic that is about magic and which can refer to 'deception in all areas of life' (Burger and Neale, 1995: 187). The magic assemblage presents a complex series of reflections, mirrors, and meta-narratives that interpret and reinterpret the various rhetorics of magic. Within this, bizarre magick offers numerous examples of transformations/translations of classic and contemporary gothic rhetorics of the magical.

Shiels describes the bizarrist approach to adapting stories from other media in terms of its taste for the gothic, noting that while 'bizarre magick steals plots from films and books' it is also familiar with 'dusty grimoires and books of shadows, with the learned tomes of occult philosophy [...] it is a force to be reckoned with' (Shiels, 1988a: 41). To understand quite how great the bizarrist's taste for adapting gothic stories was we need only consider that the 35-page booklet *And Then There Were Three* (Shiels, Fromer and Andruzzi, 1974) contained the following examples of bizarre

effects all directly inspired by gothic fiction: Tony Raven's *The Great God Pan*, based on Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894) and *The White People* (1904); Roy Fromer's *The Black Seal*, based on Machen's *The Novel of the Black Seal* (1895); Tony Raven's *The Mysterious Card*, based on Cleveland Moffet's tale of the same name (1896); and Roy Fromer's *The Yellow Sign*, based on Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow* (1895). Shiels has also created a number of effects inspired by ghost story author M. R. James including *Fleshcreeper* (Shiels, 1968: 21) and *Who is this Who is Coming?* (Shiels, 1981: 49), both inspired by 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad'. His *Casting the Runes* (Shiels, 1988a: 46) is named after the James story and inspired by the Jacques Tourneur film adaptation *Night of the Demon* (1957).

Shiels's effect *Black Christmas* from the book *Bizarre* (1988a: 41) was inspired by the following passage from the James essay, 'Stories I Have Tried to Write' (1929):

There may be possibilities, too, in the Christmas cracker, if the right people pull it, and if the motto which they find inside has the right message on it. They will probably leave the party early, pleading indisposition; but very likely a 'Previous engagement of long standing,' would be the more truthful excuse. (James, 1987: 360)

*Black Christmas* is written for performance at a Christmas party hosted by the magician. A number of different coloured counters are shown and placed into a velvet bag. The guests each secretly choose a counter and the magician is blindfolded and spun around while a rhyme is chanted. The blindfolded magician points his finger and the guest is selected (for this example we shall call him John and add that he is with his wife Alison) and proceeds to loan the magician a five-pound note. The serial number of the note is written down and the magician tears off a corner for John to keep. The rest of the note is folded into a handkerchief and, with the guests in a circle, the magician chants,

‘Yuletide ... Midwinter ... is a dark, strange and magical time. The Winter Solstice, Saturnalia, governed by the King of Chaos, the Lord of Misrule, to whom an offering must be made. Our good friend, John, has freely volunteered to sacrifice something he loves dearly ... Alison ...’ Short pause for effect. ‘Alison will, as I am sure she has many times before, help John wave farewell to his money.’ (Shiels, 1988a: 43)

John waves goodbye to his money, which is then shown to have vanished from the handkerchief. However, we find that John has chosen a black counter and is directed to pick a cracker of the same colour from underneath the tree and to pull it with Alison. Inside they find his five-pound note, which matches the piece he has kept, and a piece of parchment on which is written,

Here’s luck to John and Alison,  
On this special night of Yule,  
It’s rare to get your money back,  
From the dark Lord of Misrule. (Shiels, 1988a: 44)

*Black Christmas*, like many other bizarre magick pieces, follows Andruzzi’s advice that the impact of a performance decreases as the size of the audience increases, and is written for an intimate gathering of friends and pays particular attention to the personal relationships of the guests (in this case a couple). The piece also borrows from other James sources including ‘The Mezzotint’ and ‘Oh Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’ as well as changing the pay-off from something sinister in James’s original to a form of friendly Christmas gift.

Andruzzi has described a bizzarrist as someone who takes the special effects from horror movies and presents them in the living room (Shiels, 1988a). In this vein, bizzarrists have adapted H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, in part because it allows them to have fun creating special effects from seafood: Kate Shiels’s *Vermicularis* (Shiels, 1988a: 70), which is in turn based on Brother Shadow’s *Robin’s Quest* (Andruzzi, 2007: 379), requires the construction of a hybrid creature from a squid and

an octopus tentacle, while Tony Andruzzi's *Temple of Cthulhu* (Andruzzi, 1977) utilises a shelled oyster stained with blue-green food colouring. However, the peak of Lovecraftian bizarre magick is Stephen Minch's *Lovecraftian Ceremonies* (1979), a book of seven bizarre magick routines based on Lovecraft's tales, a key example being *The Stigmata of Cthulhu*, where the 'Mark of Cthulhu' is drawn onto parchment while the magician chants a spell accompanied by the sound of bubbling water gradually increasing in volume. Finally, one spectator collapses, the parchment vanishes in a burst of flame and spectators find the Mark has appeared in various places on their bodies (Minch, 1979).

Shiels then suggests that: 'The magician has a powerful advantage over the story-teller in that he can, through trickery, make that "something" apparently happen to his audience' (Shiels, 1981: 58). Shiels quotes M. R. James as saying: 'The reader of a ghost story must be put into the position of thinking to himself, "If I'm not careful, something of this sort may happen to me."' We see this philosophy in *Jack-in-the-Box* (Shiels, 1988a: 78), where the performer introduces a brightly decorated box, about six inches square and securely padlocked, explaining that it is a rare type of Jack-in-the-Box created in the eighteenth century by the 'eccentric mechanical genius', Jacobus Lathrop-Pinchbeck. The box appears to be moving slightly. The performer carefully unlocks the box and steps back as if expecting the lid to fly open but it remains closed. He leans forward and lifts the lid but still nothing happens. He peeps inside the box – 'Come on, Jack, there's a good fellow...' – and reaches inside. Suddenly the room is plunged into complete darkness. There is a clattering and a shrill squealing sound, a cry of pain and the smell of sulphur. The lights come back on. 'The

box is on its side, empty, except for a few strands of damp straw, and a tiny round brass bell of the type worn on a jester's cap.' The back of the performer's hand is marked with the impression of teeth, and miniature, hook-nosed, mask of 'an evil puppet Punch' is found in the fireplace.

Shiels acknowledges that the inspiration for this routine came from Fritz Lieber's *The Power of the Puppets* (1942) and the episode in the movie *Cat's Eye* (1985) where the murderous little hobgoblin – in a jester's cap – is thwarted by a protective feline. Bizarrists may not be able to compete with the special effects of the horror film but *Jack-in-the-Box* is a fine example of how suggestion and intimacy can be used to generate unease and even terror in an audience.

### *Bizarre influence*

While bizarre magick was initially an underground reaction to mainstream magic it continues to influence the mainstream with performers such as Penn and Teller, Criss Angel and Derren Brown all borrowing elements of the genre. The most successful contemporary performers are working with a wide range of styles but the influence of bizarre magick can be seen in their work in the use of story, the development of character, and an appreciation of the fundamentally bizarre nature of all magic performance. As Burger says, 'Could anything be more bizarre than finding a rabbit in someone's hat, or cutting an assistant to pieces with a lumber saw to the rhythm of cha-cha music?' (Burger and Neale, 1995: 7).

An example of a contemporary, mainstream performance of bizarre magick can be seen in Derren Brown's TV series *Trick or Treat* (2007). The ventriloquist's dummy has

been the subject of a number of cinematic gothic tales including *The Great Gabbo* (1929), *The Devil-Doll* (1964) and *Magic* (1978). One of the tales from the portmanteau horror film *Dead of Night* (1942) also concerns a ventriloquist's dummy and was loosely based on Gerald Kersh's *The Extraordinarily Horrible Dummy* (1939). In the final scene between the ventriloquist, Maxwell Frere, and his rival, Sylvester Kee, Frere speaks in the voice of his dummy Hugo, 'Why, hello, Sylvester, I've been waiting for you.' The personalities of the ventriloquist and his dummy are inverted. The voice and the movement of Frere's lips do not match and we experience an intense moment of the 'vocalic uncanny' (Connor, 2000: 412).

Derren Brown and co-writer Andy Nyman created *Ventriloquist Doll* in homage to this scene from *Dead of Night*. A moment of the vocalic uncanny is created when the psyche of Mr Miggs, a ventriloquist's dummy, seems to inhabit Andy, an audience volunteer. Mr Miggs is a mind-reading dummy and Andy is asked to think of something bad he has done in the past. Andy stares into the eyes of Mr Miggs and they both start moving their lips. The voice of Mr Miggs describes the bad thing that Andy is thinking of but it is Andy who is doing the talking. This is an original twist on the concept of mind-reading. If Andy is simply answering his own question then why is this mind-reading? If Mr Miggs is speaking through Andy's mouth then is he inside Andy's head? Mr Miggs is placed inside the suitcase from which he was originally taken but he continues to speak through Andy, 'No! Lemme out. Can't see anything.' The routine ends and the credits roll with Andy still speaking, disoriented, sightless and alone on the stage.

## *Conclusion*

As contemporary performance magic has been largely untouched by academic theory, we may ask: what kinds of theory can help us to understand such an art? This question is a large one and it is not within the scope of this chapter to suggest an answer. However, we will make some observations about the use of the gothic in bizarre magic as a small step to beginning the debate.

There is a tension between narratology and ludology in any attempt to theorise performance magic. A magic performance, especially one of bizarre magick, is clearly a text and can be considered as such, but it is also a performance in which a game is played between the performer and the audience. As a form of play, performance magic may be analysed in terms of physical stimulus and social interaction. Indeed in many magic performances the notion of an audience, with its connotation of passive spectation, is called into question. Audience members can become helper, volunteer, guest, performer, querent, stooge or sucker – all active roles for players in the game of magic. If magic can be seen as a kind of game then the bizarre magician takes the role of the dungeon master, guiding both the play and the narrative.

The narratology/ludology tension is particularly evident in the writings of Robert Neale, a retired professor of the psychology of religion and philosophy who has created many examples of story-telling magic and written extensively on the meaning of magic and the role of story:

Story magic usually consists of tricks accompanied by story. More rarely, it is story accompanied by tricks. In either case it tends to be limited to children's magic, gospel magic, and bizarre magick. Ideally, story magic is unaccompanied story. Just



as mental magic is simply talk at its best, so general magic is simply story at its best.  
(Neale, 1991: xv)

Here, Neale seems to take the side of narratology but his real intention may be to collapse the distinction between the magic effect and story. For Neale, all magic is about story but he suggests that in the best performances the story and the tricks appear as one.

There are two strong and seemingly opposing approaches that are taken by the bizarre magician to the gothic. The first is an arch, camp, affectionate but essentially light-hearted approach to performing spooky stories with magic. The second takes the performance of magic very seriously and believes that there is an important tradition of performance magic that is inherently philosophical and which naturally deals with the dark side of human nature.

These two approaches may seem antagonistic and many bizzarrists have an uneasy relationship with comedy; however, some of the most powerful moments in bizarre magick performance occur when the performer takes the serious nature of the performance lightly. Schiller has defined play as 'taking reality lightly' (Schiller, 2007), and we suggest that magicians, who perform the impossible, often benefit when they express this notion theatrically. When a theatrical 'reality' is taken lightly by considering it as a site for the magical to occur then sometimes the monstrous can be fabulous.

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## *Impersonating Spirits: The Paranormal Entertainer and the Dramaturgy of the Gothic Séance*

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My own influences when it comes to séance and paranormal events are very much the Spiritualists and the Victorian sense of the Gothic and the macabre. A personal hero from the Spiritualists is D.D. Home [...] I am constantly influenced by the works of the Gothic Victorian writers such as Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley, alongside the stories of Sherlock Holmes [and] the legends built upon around Jack the Ripper. (Voodini 2014)

Paul Voodini, quoted above, is a leading exponent of a genre of performance magic known as “paranormal entertainment”. Voodini’s work plays with an audience’s notion of place and haunting, delivering a seemingly real experience of the paranormal and the contacting of spirits. His séance performances invoke a rich tapestry of material, which can be recognised as broadly Gothic in the popular sense, representing a fuzzy distillation of the historical, geographical, environmental, physiological, and scenographic sign-system of the Gothic. Voodini has discussed his practice in a number of key publications including *Paranormal Entertainer* (2008a), *Reader of Minds* (2008b), *The Jack the Ripper Séance* (2010a), and *How to Host the Perfect Séance* (2011a). My understanding of his practice has also been informed through attending his séance workshop (2010b) and, subsequently, through my own performance practice as a paranormal entertainer. Voodini draws heavily from popular Gothic imagery, particularly the trappings of the spiritualist movement and the Victorian parlour show. Voodini describes this as “old school Victorianesque” with “plenty of candles, crystal balls, old style tarot cards, and floaty table cloths”. Somewhat

ironically, he later states: “Hopefully on the evening of your performance rain will be lashing down, thunder will be rolling across the hills, and lightning will be illuminating the heavens” (Voodini 2008a, 8). Throughout all of Voodini’s work, we see conjurations of the Gothic, spirit contact, automatic writing, a “Victorian handheld mirror” for scrying, all underlined with stories of how mediums were recruited from workhouses, and the recreation of early experiments in mesmerism. For Voodini, the semblance of authenticity and atmosphere are key to creating the mood of the Gothic séance. While Voodini’s performed pursuit of the supernatural itself may not be considered a singular Gothic form, its application can be seen as such, conjuring what Mighall (2003) calls a Gothic “mode” defining an “attitude to the past and its unwelcome legacies” (Mighall 2003, xix). In his performance séance, the ghosts themselves do not define the Gothic space. Rather, it is the placing of these ghosts within a recognisable and rich semantic arena that creates, according to Voodini, a “realm of Gothic Victoriana” (Voodini 2014).

This chapter will focus on the dramatic structure of the Gothic séance and how this structure follows a pattern that chimes closely with a narrative mode borrowed from the folklorist notion of *ostension*, and how this works together with the sign-system of the Gothic to create a form that allows an audience the visceral experience of the Gothic supernatural through a process known as *collective delusion*. In order to place this practice within the continuum of performance magic, there will be a brief discussion of bizarre magick and paranormal entertainment and its relationship to the performed Gothic. The chapter will then consider the dramatic form of the ostensive narrative before presenting an overview of contemporary performance séance

practice and concluding with a case study based on a Voodini Gothic séance performance.

In 1985, *New Invocation* magazine humorously announced that “a magician’s credibility is in direct inverse ratio to the number of sequins on his suit” (Andruzzi 1985, 342). This is an aphorism that also appeared as part of a series of humorous statements known as *Masklyn’s Laws of Magick* in the delegate’s programme for the *Third Bizarre Magick Invocational: 1986* (Magus 2011, 348). The statements therein epitomise the philosophy behind a genre of performance magic known as *bizarre magick*. Bizarre magick practice, particularly in its incarnation in the mid-1980s, attempted to throw out the established trappings of popular contemporary conjuring and reframe the performance of magic in the ritual and paraphernalia of an apparently darker tradition. As opposition to the glitz and glamour of the big box illusions, the concerns and interests of the bizzarrists were: weird and bizarre magical effects; stories and other forms of presentational motivation; provoking 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 1991, 96; Burger and Neale 1995, 9). Garishly painted boxes, playing cards, and pom-pom sticks were abandoned in favour of often grisly effects based on the stories of M. R. James and H. P. Lovecraft. Many practitioners of the bizarre would perform their magic tricks as real, often choosing to remove any notion of trickery within their practice and, in doing so, they borrowed freely from Gothic, goetic, pagan, spiritualist, and psychic cultural

sources. It is important to note that performance magic of this type shifted magic away from triviality into a form that aligns closely with Mangan's notion of magic triggering the "grown-up" sensation of the uncanny (Mangan 2007, 94). Ultimately, *bizarrists* reimagined their performance practice and sought to discover a new darker mode.

Many bizarre magick performances became deliberately ambiguous: presenting the supernatural as terrifying and irrational with the magician purporting to be an expert in the occult and often losing control of the energies raised, a practice coined as "the Van Helsing Approach" (Magus 2009, 17). The importance of character and the representation of the Gothic in bizarre magick are fully discussed in Taylor and Nolan (2015), and while bizarre magick as a performance form has continued to develop up to the present day, the key modern Gothic legacy of the bizarre movement became the paranormal entertainer. In many ways, the natural successor to the Gothic-themed *bizarrists* of the 1980s, the paranormal entertainer continues to tread a fine line of ambiguity within their performance practice and, while not a folkloric practice itself, much of the dramatic intention of this work can be seen to chime closely with the folkloric notion of *ostension*.

In folklore, the term *ostension* refers to the presentation (as opposed to the representation) of a legend text. Such texts can be stories and/or events that contain "normative definitions of reality, maps by which one can determine what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen" (Ellis 1989, 202). Thus, legend texts are narratives that can vary in their range and scope. Examples include stories of poisoned candy allegedly found during Halloween trick or treating (Dégh and Vázsonyi



1983), pilgrimages to haunted sites to experience a ghostly presence first hand (Lindahl 2005), visiting a crop circle to feel the power of the ancient spirits (Meder 2007), and leaving offerings at the graves of alleged vampires (Holly and Cordy 2007). For ostension to occur, legendary narratives such as these are not simply retold in the sense of being represented through storytelling, but rather experienced as real (Koven 2007, 184). Thus, ostension proper has its basis in a fictional narrative that is perceived to represent reality and ostension is, therefore, very closely related to the legends we live, the superstitions we have, and, consequently, the magic behaviour that we practice. Magic behaviour or as Hutson (2012) terms it “magic thinking,” is the propensity to find occult meaning in the world around us and act accordingly, and it is the goal of the paranormal entertainer to represent this magic behaviour as having an occult reality.

It should be noted that folklorists are keen to distance ostension from the theatrical act. Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983) point out that ostensive action is not acting; “actors intend to create illusion, not delusion” (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983, 8), observing that actors use two signs: the actor sign and the character sign and these are not usually confused in a theatrical event. This is maintained in mainstream performance magic. For instance, magician and theorist Robert Neale (2008) discusses the notion of *monkey movement* in the practice of performing magic. For Neale, the experience of performance magic is a playful movement between illusion and disillusion. In this model, magic is an overt theatrical act, the magician is the manager of the process of playing a trickster who presents magic (the illusion) but frames it as tricks (the disillusion). This is in direct opposition to the work of the paranormal entertainer who

has little room for delusion in their act, choosing to blur this interplay through not framing themselves as a traditional magician at all. Thus, when illusion appears absent in the performance, we have a different and deliberately ambiguous form of performance magic quite unlike the usually accepted notion of the magician and their magic tricks. Here there are no tricks and the presentation can be seen as being neither real nor unreal in the minds of the audience. Mangan (2007), drawing on Jackson (1981), borrows from the science of optics and describes this state as being “paraxial”. This is useful for the performance as it takes place, in “an imaginative space which is neither entirely real (object) or unreal (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two” (Mangan 2007, 56–57). The imaginative space performed by Voodini is a carefully constructed immersion into the world of Victorian spiritualism and of the desirability of contacting the dead; however, the movement is away from the terror of the bizarre. It is, rather, a journey into a representation of the Gothic and the reality of a haunting. This creates for the audience a “state of uncertainty” where they become characters in their own Gothic fiction and are allowed to “oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural” (Hogle 2002, 2). Once again, at the heart of the experience in the Gothic séance is the reduction or removal of clear moments of disillusionment; that is, creating an apparently (un)real experience for the audience. Séance performance is not a magic show in the traditional sense at all.

Séance performance has a rich history within performance magic and the bizarre. The foundation for modern séance practice can be seen in “The Fairy Goblet” by Lew Smith and L. V. Lyons (1941). This largely ostensive piece relies on the careful creation

of a haunted atmosphere to create an apparently real experience within the minds of the audience. During each performance, the *Fairy Goblet of Eden Hall* is seen glittering and glowing in a “weird and uncanny manner” and, in candlelight, the guests (audience) are invited to form a circle and take part in an unusual experiment that is “neither of a religious or sacrilegious nature” (Smith and Lyons 1941, 761). The goblet is then introduced as Titania’s Fairy Goblet capable of “bring[ing] 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 1941, 792). The ritual begins as each guest is then invited to step forward to experience a vision of a past memory. This is then shared with the group and the ritual comes to a close. The key to this séance is the lack of trickery and the explicit moments of performance magic. The performer is seen as facilitator sharing a haunted artefact (the enchanted goblet) that allows the guest to take part in a form of ostensive magical behaviour that confirms the uncanny resonance of the legend for themselves. The editor of *The Jinx*, where a description of the routine was first published, 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, “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 1941, 762–63).

Experiments in this form of experiential séance performance continued on the fringes of performance magic and we see a number of examples submitted to journals such as *The Jinx* (1934–1942), *Cauldron* (1967–1968), *Invocation/New Invocation* (1974–1996), *Séance* (1988–1989), and Ormond McGill’s own collected *Psychic Series*

(1951). These works culminated in perhaps the most well-known monograph (at least amongst practitioners) of an ostensive performance séance: Brother Shadow's *Have Séance Will Travel* (1995). This scripted séance avoids all reference to performance magic and is entirely based on carefully guiding the imagination of the participant into an ostensive experience. To achieve this, the work draws heavily on the experiential practices of the *Human Potential Movement* and borrows a key exercise from *Mind Games: The Guide to Inner Space* (Masters and Houston 1998). The séance itself is a ritual happening with a sombre, serious atmosphere that is relaxed and not fearful in any way. After the guests arrive, the performer points out that this séance is “no Hollywood séance. Don’t expect ghostly manifestations, table rapping, strange sounds, or any of the other things films and cheap sensational fiction has led us to believe occurs” (Shadow 1995, 2). A cleansing ritual is performed and the ritual proper begins during which the guests are given leave to spend time with the spirits; revisiting places and experiences enjoyed together. As with *The Fairy Goblet*, the guests are encouraged to share their stories at the end of the ritual. Once again, a footnote provides a warning to the would-be performer; “The Kiss of Death here would be to do some effect to show them that you have some special powers. If you have followed the above instructions they already know” (Shadow 1995, 8). As Brother Shadow is keen to point out, the séance should not be seen to be a theatrical experience, but it should be seen as real, in our terms: *ostensive*.

Not all séance performance practice can be seen to exhibit this level of ostensive action. The “theatrical” séance can, however, be seen as having more in common with magic scare shows containing heightened effects and trickery that may provoke a

sense of ostensive action, but ultimately, and not necessarily explicitly, retain a high level of disillusionment within the performance. Much of this work draws upon elements of the popular Gothic, although in a heightened, more theatrical, and non-ostensive mode. For example, Lee Earle in *Making Manifestations* (1989) describes a séance for a group of twelve guests, where a *Light Séance* and a *Dark Séance* are performed. In the *Light Séance* magic effects are performed for the guests to “adjust to the mood”. In contrast, the *Dark Séance* is the “classic hands-clasped-in-a-circle, total-darkness encounter” where “Tambourines and Bells fly” and “various visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile sensations are simulated”. The finale is “a Hollywood-style climax with invading demons wrestling the medium for control of the circle” (Earle 1989, 9–11). Rick Maue’s *The Book of Spirits Séance* (2005), on the other hand, is advertised as a séance for those who “have an interest in the bizarre world of spirit contact, but yet they do not want the typical ‘magic show in the dark’ type of séance” (Deceptions Unlimited 2013). The theatrical nature of the performance is reiterated in the scripting where it states *The Book of Spirits Séance* to be “simply a theatrical production that was designed to be different, versatile [...] and entertaining” (Maue 2005, 6). In this séance, the guests take part in a series of “tests” overseen by a (fictional) *International Association of Spirit Mediums* Administrator and aided by a spirit medium. The séance in this production, although serious in tone, is framed quite clearly as an illusory happening, the author states; “I am not talking about attempting to do a ‘real’ séance, or even creating a performance that can be assumed to be ‘real’ by those who attend” (Maue 2005, 43). Finally, in *Memories of Emily* (Piazza 2007) performance magic effects are used to indicate spirit contact allowing guests to investigate and ultimately solve a fictitious cold case. During the performance, the

guests are gathered to “solve the mystery of the tragic loss of five-year old Emily Lipenski” (Piazza 2007, 6) and a series of manifestations and incidents led by the performer finally allow the audience to contact Emily and discover the identity of her killer. With such clear dramatic narratives, the theatrical séance would appear to have more in common with the model of traditional performance magic where the effects are performed with a level of theatrical illusion. Here the magician is seen as an actor (in Dégh’s and Vázsonyi’s sense) playing a role in a narrative that *may* have some resemblance to pseudo-ostensive action where themes of the uncanny and ambiguous are explored, but there is no true sense in the audience that the séance is real. This is reserved for the ostensive séance of the paranormal entertainer.

In the 19th century, spiritualism was a “variegated movement,” and “difficult for outsiders to understand” (During 2002, 150). This background is useful for modern Gothic séance performers such as Voodini and as suggested in the introduction, it allows for a blurring of historical reality by tapping into the rich sign-system of the Gothic. Hauntings, hidden histories, locked rooms, mysterious paraphernalia, pseudoscience, heavily draped rooms, candle-lit halls, and so forth, are all brought to life in the imaginations of the audience. During the performance, participants are offered a chance to witness a shadow world beyond reality and lift the veil between this world and the next. The séance continually plays with the disparate and diverse nature of the experience of the supernatural, in a form that can be recognised as of the “gothic [sic] genre” as having “similar attitudes to setting atmosphere and style” (Bloom 1998, 2). This often theatrically mirrors the popular Gothic seen in films such as those from the Hammer Studios which, according to Kavka (2002), have a clear

“visual code” and are themselves “inheritors of a cultural legacy” (Kavka 2002, 210).

The sense of Gothic space within a Voodini séance draws upon this visual code and from what Holloway (2006) describes as “affect, emotion and corporeal practice in the realisation of [...] spaces” (Holloway 2006, 182). The performer will often play upon the suggestion that some spaces, through reputation and/or cultural and historical memory, become “enchanted” and so are charged with spirits or ghostly activity. This plays upon a phenomenon observed outside of paranormal entertainment where spontaneous ostensive action and magic behaviour occur in other perceived uncanny spaces. An example can be found in Lindahl’s (2005) discussion of pilgrimages to gravity hills where visitors experience ghosts apparently pushing them up the hill. A gravity hill is in fact a stretch of road where the horizon is obscured. This produces an optical illusion making a downhill slope appear to be going uphill. “Objects may appear to roll uphill. Sometimes rivers even seem to flow against gravity” (Gibbs 1998).

Lindahl notes that the audience for these events “express an extraordinary range of ostensive action, from thrill-seeking play to humbled reverence” (Lindahl 2005, 165). They are taking part in a form of “ostensive-play” where “visiting the site of a haunting, or the scene of a crime, [...] both recreate the storied events and simultaneously expand the tale by adding their experiences to the core narrative” (Lindahl 2005, 165). This is similar to the “ostensive ordeal” discussed by Ellis (2001) where “an ambiguous response, neither scepticism nor terror” is played out by the participants, leading to “engrossment” (Ellis 2001, 172–73) and that, when “properly performed,” reinforces a “sense of participation in the creation and maintenance of fantasy” (Ellis 2001, 167). The paranormal entertainer allows the audience to take part

in a playful form of improvised drama centred on a cultural memory based within the Gothic mode. For example, if the séance is performed in an old building, a believable dark and suspenseful history for the structure will be created to provide a crucial backstory underlying the fantasy experience. This is further reinforced by the séance following a distinct narrative pattern that creates the experience of *collective delusion* in the minds of the audience.

*Collective delusion* is an ostensive state where an often-undefined fear or panic, usually from a group of people or even a community, manifests in group action, often magic behaviour. Ellis (2001) suggests this in reassurance that participants involved in such activities are acting to protect or overcome the perceived threat and thus “controlling their fates” (Ellis 2001, 201–02). It is possible to borrow from this notion when examining the Gothic séance particularly where collective delusion is the narrative process through which ostensive action is played out. Ellis (2001, 202), who is citing Campion-Vincent (1989), suggests a four-stage pattern to the narrative process beginning with the identification of an *Underlying Stress*, usually characterised by “social situations of unrest or of crisis”; followed by a *Triggering Event*, which serves to dramatise this unrest in an “exceptional and traumatic” way; leading to a period of *Collective Action* that embodies the community’s reaction to the threat; and ending with a *Showdown* or climatic moment in which the legend is fulfilled. This sequence of actions provides a clear dramaturgy where “*all* the activities of the participants constitute the collective performance of the legend” (Ellis 2001, 202). This aligns closely with Koven (2007) who sets out the notion of “cinematic ostension” where a legend text is represented through popular culture forms. For purposes of this



chapter, the séance becomes the representation of Gothic hauntings in a form that draws upon the audience's collective experience and understanding of what a Gothic haunting might be through the visual codes described earlier.

Voodini's work, then, attempts to create a collective performance that "has its feet very firmly planted in the realm of Gothic Victoriana," informing the audience that the "experiments" about to be attempted "are exactly the same as those that were undertaken by the Victorian Spiritualists" (Voodini 2014) thus exploiting the notion of the Gothic by playing on a rich seam of underlying belief and tradition in the audience/participant. By framing the work in this way, the performance séance becomes a meta-language for the experience of *the Other* in two key areas. First, the work provides a visual and visceral form that, via the performance and the paraphernalia involved, creates an imagined space where hallucinations of the past can be glimpsed. For example, in Voodini's *The Jack the Ripper Séance*, a volunteer is regressed to 1888 and to the streets of Old London to witness for themselves (and to describe to the other participants) the "dark, dangerous stranger, horrific murders in darkened alleyways, the perception of foggy nights and flickering gas-lamps, the almost instinctive belief in the public that the murders had something of the supernatural about them, and, of course, elements of class struggle and secret societies" (Voodini 2010a, 25; Voodini 2014). Second, the paraphernalia of the séance serves to periodise the Gothic form, for example, the finely polished séance table laid out with candles, linotype letter cards, and an exquisite wine glass provides an expectation of action; in this case, the glass moving and spelling out messages from the dead. This transforms such an object from being a prop in a magic show into what

Paavolainen (2010) in his discussion of stage properties calls a powerful “static force of characterisation” (Paavolainen 2010, 117) and assists in immersing the audience in ostensive action.

The structure of Voodini’s séance follows the narrative of collective delusion closely moving through *Underlying Stress* to *Triggering Event* to *Collective Action* culminating in a *Showdown*. The Underlying Stress is structured to reinforce many popular Gothic tropes in the minds of the participants. It plays on generally accepted notions of spirits and clairvoyance, often describing a partly real, partly pseudo-history of the paranormal. The routines in this section are designed to create a tension amongst the participants and allow them to experience the paranormal in action. Tales of spirit mediums rescued from the workhouse are told by the paranormal entertainer who then leads the audience to take part in spiritualist experiments, where they take on the roles of clairvoyant, mesmerist, and psychic. For example, the participants might be asked to imagine living in the workhouse and being visited by a world famous mesmerist. The mesmerist (played by the paranormal entertainer) takes them through a series of exercises to see if they have “the gift”. We find that many in the room do, and those identified as such are taken on an imaginary journey to a Gothic parlour in a dark house where they take part in psychic parlour games, for example, “card guessing”. This was a pastime that, according to the paranormal entertainer, “caused great excitement, and for a time ‘the cult of card guessing’ as it became known, threatened to surpass séances as the past-time of choice in drawing rooms up and down the country” (Voodini 2008a, 15). After this, the séance moves on and further experiments are conducted which often culminate in a past life regression (Voodini

2010a, 25–29) where the participant is guided back in time to experience the sights, sounds, and people of an imagined Victorianesque past. Often the characters reported during the regression later return in spirit form as the séance moves on. In terms of the narrative, these experiments are key to providing the underlying stress that sets up and continues to run through the ostensive experience. Here the spirit(s) of the past have been imagined and made real, as has the psychic potency of the participants. The atmosphere conjured by the paranormal entertainer is not one of terror or fear, but rather a growing sense of uncertainty. It is now clear to the participants that they are not witnessing a mere magic show. In the subsequent phases, spirits are contacted, not as material entities, but rather through haunting and possession.

The next element of the séance chimes with the next stage of ostensive action; *The Triggering Event* here is represented by an apparently real contact with spirits from the Victorian Gothic past. The paranormal entertainer invites the spirits into the space, but in order for the séance to continue to move through an ostensive narrative, this must not be performed, but experienced by the audience first hand. For example, in Voodini's sequence *Kiss of the Clairvoyant* a participant is gifted the ability to "see that which the normal senses cannot perceive," "to see beyond this world into the next, [...] to part the veil and look inside the spirit realm" (Voodini 2011b, 91). The participant recounts their experience as it occurs, they describe seeing and interacting with the ghosts that inhabit the space and, moving ever closer to "the light," are pulled back to the material world just in time. This is an incredibly powerful routine leaving the rest of the audience filled with an overwhelming sense of the unreal, and it is

deliberately left unclear whether the experience was a hallucination or actual spirit contact. Subsequently, the participants join to experience a single, powerful piece of dramatic action in the form of *Glass Moving*.

After a little more scene setting, the paranormal entertainer opens an old wooden box, reveals a dusty wine glass and some aged alphabet cards, arranges them into a circle with the glass at the centre, darkens the room, and lights a single candle. Small groups of participants take turns to place one finger on the upturned glass and slowly it begins to move spelling out messages from the spirits. Led by the paranormal entertainer, the participants, who are by now deeply embedded in the ostensive narrative, take turns to experience the pull of spirits on the glass and watch as messages are spelt out in candlelight. The messages are often fleeting but allude to lost Victorian children or fallen women. In experiencing this themselves, the participants are now part of a visceral séance where ostension is manifesting as group action. The notion that the experience is real, rather than imagined, has been further reinforced in the minds of the participants. Hoedt (2011), in her discussion of the fantastic in relation to performance magic, argues that magicians have a choice to leave the audience with a sense of being “part of something larger than themselves” (Hoedt 2011, 2). In the Gothic séance, however, there must be no sense of magic being performed and thus no closure in the traditional sense. The choice here is to maintain that there are, to quote directly from Todorov, “certain texts which sustain their ambiguity to the very end, i.e., even beyond the narrative itself. The book closed, the ambiguity persists” (Todorov 1984, 43).

In order to begin to bring the ostensive action to a close and thus satisfy the collective narrative, the performance once again follows the triggering event with a significant and experiential period of *group action*. Here the entire group is empowered to take part in a séance where they will experience the presence of spirits first hand. Encouraged by the paranormal entertainer to form a circle, the group is asked to welcome the spirits into the room and the candle is extinguished. In the pitch dark, the ostensive action comes into its own; participants report being pushed by invisible hands, feeling the spirits of Victorian children brushing past their legs or stroking their hair, and the experience of sudden drops in temperature (Voodini 2008a, 33; Voodini 2010a, 41–42; Voodini 2011a, 55–56). The paranormal entertainer manages these experiences and at an appropriate time, the candle is relit, the group relaxes, and participants recount their experiences. It is now up to the paranormal entertainer to close the narrative and this chimes with the *show-down* experience discussed above. In séance performance, this is a decisive touch that acts to simultaneously mark the fulfilment of the narrative, and to shut it down. Closure is simple: “We thank you spirits for coming to us and communicating with us. Thank you for taking time to be with us this night. We now leave you in peace, and wish you well” (Voodini 2008a, 31).

Through borrowing from the folklorist notions of ostension and collective delusion, it is possible to see how an event can be shaped to follow a culturally accepted pattern that allows for ostensive panic to occur, equally performance magic theory allows us to place a frame around genres outside of mainstream performance magic and so understand how they function within the charged performance space. The key to the

success of the Gothic séance is the movement away from any clear trappings of performance magic; it is the conjuration of a feeling of ambiguity between what is real and what is not within a theatrical space that expresses a sensibility of the Gothic. This dramaturgy allows the paranormal entertainer to “symbolically awaken us to another realm of experience [...] that lies behind and beyond” (Burger and Neale, 1995, 24). The Gothic séance performance is, thus, a recreation of a living history, a journey through the codified Gothic, where the performance of the séance became a middle-class parlour pursuit (Bloom 2010, 147), describing a time when according to Walkowitz (1988) spiritualism provided “spectacular entertainment directed to all the senses coupled with the wafting of mysterious incense in the air” (Walkowitz 1988, 8). The paranormal entertainer, in presenting these notions, makes real a (popular) Gothic past, with all the trimmings and the added spirits of Victorian children. These spirits are presented and experienced in the séance room as viable entities—even though they may only be figments of a complex Gothic imagination.

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## *“Strange Ceremonies”: Creating Imaginative Spaces in Bizarre Magick*

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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<sup>47</sup>. 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

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<sup>47</sup> "Effect" is a term used by magicians to describe a trick, or performance piece.

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.<sup>48</sup> 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

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<sup>48</sup> I borrow the term “Strange Ceremonies” from the title of Eugene Burger’s examination of early bizarre *Strange Ceremonies* (1991).

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, 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.

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## *Magic and Broken Knowledge; reflections on the practice of Bizarre Magick*

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According to magician and theorist Robert Neale, the experience of magic is very much a journey between the two worlds of illusion and disillusion. It is a journey that is both enjoyable and expected (Neale, 2014). Neale had previously illustrated this with the image of a monkey reaching for the moon (Neale, 2008, p.217). Neale explains that the monkey's movement between the real moon and its illusory form (reflected in the water below) helps represent the fluid interplay between enchantment and disenchantment, and that this journey is key to our experience of performance magic. In my own work on bizarre magick, I have often used the frame of *monkey movement* to discuss an approach to mystery entertainment that can be directly linked to the creation of the visceral tension of the uncanny in the audience (Taylor, 2016). This may occur, for example, through the performance of elaborate rituals and ceremonies, or through séance work which requires a more complex narrative based on the established narrative form of the 'folk-panic' (Taylor, 2015a). Of key importance in these experiences is this movement from illusion to disillusion, that leads ultimately to the resolution of the narrative threads of the experience and takes the audience safely out of the otherworldly experience and back into reality. The means to do this may include such techniques as simply completing the story told, giving a post séance reassurance that the spirits have now left the room, or a more

dramatic ‘blow off’ in the style of the sideshow tradition, where the participants are ushered hurriedly out of the room apparently for their own safety. In this article I want to suggest that the bizarre magician/mystery entertainer could *reconsider* the explicit closing of the narrative threads of performance, thus removing the above disenchantments that are, so far, inherent in the performances mentioned above. Is such a thing possible? It should be noted that this is not a consideration of fraudulent magic aimed at the fleecing of an audience in whatever form, this article is very much a thought exercise in considering what might happen if the magician were less concerned with the notion of explicitly or implicitly being ‘the magician’ and rather focus on facilitating a magic experience that resists disenchantment and might even be seen as real.

I will approach this discussion with direct reference to my own performance practice and research into bizarre magick and mystery entertainment. The discussion will also examine some wider issues in conventional magic performance practice, but ultimately it will explore some thoughts on the spectatorship of bizarre magick which offers an alternative model of practice where the audience’s shift to disenchantment is much less clear cut than in traditional conjuring. The consideration as to how bizarre sought to blur the distinction between real and performed magic will be considered in a discussion of the notion of the magician or mystery entertainer as a facilitator allowing the audience to have the experience of self-enchantment within the performance itself. The latter being the goal of my current practice.

I found myself considering some of these notions after two experiences early on in my performance practice. Both have stayed with me and have shaped future work.

The first was when I initially chose to perform under a different name making a deliberate choice not to debunk the work in performance and perform effects as apparently real. The second example was when I performed under my own name but chose to emphasise the trickery in the work in a deliberate attempt to highlight the movement between illusion and disillusion in magic performance.

### *Example One*

Early in my performance practice (2010), I chose to work under an assumed name. The idea being that while working as a character everything performed would be a reasonable distance from my own self. On reflection, I see much of this practice was shaped by my own performance background where being an actor and taking on a role was all part of the performance process and this felt safe to me. It also provided me with an ethical distance from the work, as if performing as a character would somehow put me a safe distance from the apparently real events on stage. My thinking was that I would play my character as a manic psychic investigator and even with the outrageous name 'Dr Orlando Watt' (a nod to Carry On Screaming) I felt it would be obvious that this was a performance. The show itself was called *How Psychic Are you?* (Taylor, 2010) and was designed to take the audience through a series of psychic tests based on the first phase of the *Voodini Séance* (Voodini, 2008).<sup>49</sup> In summary, the performance involved a series of 'tests' that gradually whittled the audience down to four or five volunteers who would come onstage and take part in a final psychic showdown. The outcome of which would be decided by the audience

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<sup>49</sup> Discussed in Taylor (2015a).

who would choose the winner through a simple vote. The show itself was constructed so as not to make conjuring aspect explicit and nothing offered as tricks, but rather as real psychic demonstrations.

Following the performance, I was struck that a number of audience members believed that the psychic phenomena demonstrated on stage was real, some wanted private readings (I offered no readings during the show), others wanted to book me for talks on my research into psychic phenomena or even for further psychic tests. This audience response, rather naively in hindsight, surprised me. In my time working as a traditional magician not once had anyone believed the sponge balls had really vanished or that their chosen card continually appeared at the top of the deck by any means other than sleight of hand, misdirection, and trickery. Traditional conjuring, in my experience, did not elicit this response. Somewhere in the performance of *How Psychic Are you?* was a sense of belief within the audience that what was presented on stage was quite possibly real.

### *Example Two*

A few year later, in 2014 when demonstrating my work on experiencing the paraxial through performance magic and mystery entertainment<sup>50</sup> and despite the discussion focussing on the performance bizarre magick being explicitly presented as conjuring, i.e. not real, and by presenting myself as an academic interested in performance magic and not explicitly a magician. A similar audience response

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<sup>50</sup> Later presented as a formal paper in Taylor (2015b).

occurred with several members of the audience asking for private readings, advice or quietly taking me aside and saying, 'well it's all real really, isn't it?'

I realised that what has been experienced here is complex, in the first example some members of the audience appeared not to see the character I was playing and view the events on stage as demonstration rather than performance. It appeared that for the audience there was no dissociation between the real or the performative signs to suggest that I was playing a character on stage, this ambiguity in understanding led to a tendency a want to believe in the action on stage. The latter example is more problematic as I felt it was clear that I was not presenting performed ritual (in the context of bizarre magick) as real magic, but as a series of conjuring effects. Perhaps there was already a belief in the likelihood of psychic phenomena in the minds of the audience and this coloured their subsequent understanding of the work.

Such tricky audience responses are not new in performance magic and particularly in mentalism the ethics of belief and non-belief within an audience often leads performers to use disclaimers. These are often presented as a scripted piece of dialogue designed to distance the performer from any claim that what is about to be performed is real. Of course, being performance magic the nature and form of the disclaimer is not as clear cut as simply saying that traditional conjuring is taking place. Rather disclaimers are often playful and ambiguous in their construction and can be seen as a way of simultaneously distancing the performer from any claim of the real while still allowing for the possibility of the real. Landman (2013) provides a useful discussion of the disclaimer and the 'palpable divisions between the 'mainstream' mentalists on the one hand and the bizzarrists and readers on the other.' Landman



states that this division is apparent between ‘mainstream mentalists [who] typically claim that they have no psychic ability whatsoever and bizarrists and readers [who] openly claim they do have such powers or remain vague about what abilities are on display.’ (Landman, 2013, p.2)

It is not surprising then that in the practice of bizarre magick, which is the closest foundational performance form to my own practice, we see the notion of the disclaimer widely discussed. In particular, at the height of the form’s popularity Invocation/New Invocation Magazine published several articles on disclaimers. For example, performer Ned Rutledge (1928-1999) who worked under the title of The Perceptionist, used a disclaimer that was simple and often imitated. He claimed his feats were achieved ‘[...] using my five normal senses to create the illusion of a sixth’ (Rutledge, 1975, p.30). In performance, Rutledge claimed to use “psychological feedback” where he could hear the ‘voice’ of a subject through their actions. Similarly, bizarrist Charles Cameron (1927-2001) playfully claimed to have no ‘psychic’ powers. Writing as Daemon in 1983 he describes his disclaimer and being;

I claim no psychic powers, but what you are about to see and experience is the same type of phenomena produced by professional psychics. How I accomplish them is another matter. Psychology... sleight of hand ... trickery ... or, what... I leave that to you to be the sole judge. (Daemon, 1983, p.201)

The playful ambiguity in the above suggests a modicum of trickery involved in the act of performing, but it also shows the playful awareness of presenting work that on

stage would appear ambiguous to the audience.<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that the attempts have not been made to deliberately play against binary separation of magic and non-magic, for example, performer Masklyn ye Mage claims;

For years parapsychologists have been trying to prove or disprove the existence of extra-sensory perception, clairvoyance, and such phenomena. What I would like to attempt is not so clinical or mundane as their efforts. Rather I go back to the genesis of Psi occurrences ... back to the schools of Mysticism that existed eons before our sophisticated epistemologists closed their minds to magick, due to an ignorance spawned by fear, or a fear spawned by ignorance. Back to the goetic rituals and arcane rites, which are neither religious nor sacrilegious, but merely a reflection of the beliefs and philosophies of the sages of antiquity.

There may be some of you who will say, "Witchcraft!!" or "Black Magick!" ... No, my friends, it will simply be a psychodynamic experiment to determine that validity of those ancient writings in the old grimoire. Remember, what man knows, he calls science; what he is yet to learn, he calls magick! Both are real.

Just as the parapsychologists of today permit a subject to assume an altered state of consciousness to prepare for an experiment, allow me to 'cast' the ceremonial circle and utter the old invocations, to recreate the conditions and environment which of those of yore experienced. I ask only that you suppress your disbelief and lend me your full cooperation, for the elements with which we will be dealing are, at best, fragile and unpredictable ... and any unexpected interruptions could be, if not dangerous, at least, disastrous to the proceeding. Perhaps we can span that region so alien, yet so parallel to ours.

[...] experience, if but for a moment, your cosmic heritage.

(Masklyn ye Mage, 1982, p.95)

The disclaimer presented here is rather grand and the full version runs to almost three hundred words but is a useful example of the alternative philosophy of performance magic that often characterised the bizarre movement. It is also, I believe, not that far, in terms of intention, from my own approach to the disclaimer. In my

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<sup>51</sup> This is rather close to Derren Brown's original disclaimer for his Channel Four Series Trick of the Mind 'This program fuses magic, suggestion, psychology, misdirection and showmanship. I achieve all the results you'll see here through a varied mixture of those techniques.'

current practice performance practice (2017) I play with the following piece of scripted dialogue;

Our ability to know exceeds our capacity to understand that ability. This means that our cognitive selves are to some degree mysterious to us. It is not uncommon that we find ourselves in the position of knowing things, about which, if pressed, we cannot quite develop a clear account of how we know them. The messages that we receive from the world around us add up, sometimes in uncanny ways, to more than the sum of their parts.

This disclaimer is, in fact, derived from the introduction to Struck's *Divination and Human Nature* (2016). Importantly this process of editing has resulted in the quotation being tweaked for mystery. While the above suggests a certain reality to magical practices, the original (see below) actually dismisses the possibility of real psychic phenomena. The sentence in bold is the one that was removed for the purposes of performance.

Our ability to know exceeds our capacity to understand that ability. This means that our cognitive selves are to some degree mysterious to us. **After bracketing entirely the claims of the psychics or enthusiasts of ESP,** it is not uncommon that we find ourselves in the position of knowing things, about which, if pressed, we cannot quite develop a clear account of how we know them. The messages that we receive from the world around us add up, sometimes in uncanny ways, to more than the sum of their parts. [my emphasis] (Struck, 2016, p.15)

Thus, in scripting, I have taken the dismissal of anything otherworldly and removed it allowing for a reasonably clear suggestion of the uncanny reality of the performance. This works well for my performance practice as it demonstrates a personal intention to step away from the explicit reference of the disenchantment that had been echoed in my previous performances. This was a deliberate decision by me to play against magic and non-magic binary I felt was manifesting within my practice and begin to reshape the kind of magician/mystery performer I was interested in pursuing. Previously this question had manifested in ethical and professional dilemmas in

performance and a reluctance to just *be* the magician. This journey was illustrated in my earlier discussion of practice in The Magiculum, where in *Out of Tricks* (Taylor, 2014) the discussion of my practice centred around where I stood in terms of the meaningless and the meaningful in performance magic. I saw myself as being between the geomantic figures of Via and Populous and, as I moved on from this, it became apparent through rehearsal that this binary may not be useful or productive to further the practice and that working explicitly without this binary separation in mind might evolve my practice towards *facilitating* a magical experience rather than *being* a magician. This facilitation would begin to offer no closure or disclaimer. The question I had was how far can this movement be made and whether wider notions of enchantment/disenchantment would serve to promote or frustrate this work.

Traditionally and historically there is an accepted narrative that the world has become increasingly *disenchanted*. Weber famously speaks about this disenchantment, of the world moving towards a favouring of reason and science rather than religion. This, according to Nightingale has ‘destroy[ed] traditional modes of wonder and enchantment’ (2009, p.15). Nightingale moves on to argue that this disenchantment is part of a lineage of favouring reason that began with Francis Bacon’s negative consideration of wonder as ‘broken Knowledge’ claiming that ‘scientists must repair this by the achievement of scientific knowledge (Nightingale, 2009, p.15).

This notion that the West is disenchanted is somewhat challenged by Saler who questions whether magical expectations have been lost in the ‘modern process of rationalisation, secularization, bureaucratization’ (Saler, 2006, p.695). Saler argues

that 'modernity is as enchanted as it is disenchanted' allowing for 'alternative visas to the historical imagination, and at the very least offers the possibility of pulling new rabbits out of old hats.' (Saler, 2006, p.692). Saler's historiographic approach reveals that;

Modern enchantment often depends upon its antinomial other, modern disenchantment, and a specifically modern enchantment might be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: one that delights but does not delude. (Saler, 2006, p.720)

Saler drawing on Daston and Park (2001), Winter (2000) and During (2002) argues that attitudes to disenchantment and enchantment were 'undulatory and sometime cyclic' (Saler, 2006, p.703). Interestingly, Saler's discussion soon becomes haunted by the spectre of performance magic, where we see, for example, discussion of the mid-century illusionists encouraging audiences to reason through the logic of the trick whereas there is also a sense that whilst rational processes are at work there are moments where enchantment and science appear compatible with each other, for example, Victorians discussing science in terms of 'magical influences and vital correspondences' (Saler, 2006, pp.706–714).

The suggestion here is that the separation of enchantment and disenchantment is not so clear cut, and Bennett (2001) is useful here as she argues for an opening out the notion of enchantment, seeing it as a 'mood' that 'involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage' where;

the overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged—a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life. (Bennett, 2001, p.5)

In popular entertainment, we see this almost simultaneous relationship between enchantment and disenchantment illustrated in the work of showman PT Barnum. Cook (2001) quotes Barnum as saying, 'the public appears to be disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived' (Cook, 2001, p.16). It is an awareness that this notion might be a useful way of initially positioning my performance practice in a space where the experience of magic stays centred between enchantment and disenchantment. I wanted to explore what could happen when magic is facilitated, and framed within this paraxial area where, according to Mangan (2007), it 'exploits an ambiguous space between the disturbing/exciting possibility that what an audience is seeing might actually flout the laws of nature, and the reassuring/disappointing awareness that it probably does not' (Mangan, 2007, p.17).

During the Magiculum Symposium in May 2017 (where this paper was first presented), the notion of 'kayfabe' was discussed, particularly how useful this could be when describing the ambiguous work of the magician/mentalists. Kayfabe is recognised, mostly in the US, as a term used to describe sports entertainments such as professional wrestling where staged events are presented as real. Key to this is that the audience for a kayfabe event may not be aware that the event is staged or if they are aware they come prepared to suspend disbelief in the event and often not question this suspension. For the mystery entertainer, Bateman (2011) is useful here as he asks the question whether we could take the term Kayfabe as a synonym for 'fictional' and if so could we then consider practices such as Astrology to be included under the term as 'kayfabe blurs the lines between fact and fiction – at least for those who choose to believe' (Bateman, 2011, p.236).

If magical thinking such as astrology could be considered real in terms of kayfabe, that is, real for those who want to believe, we have an interesting set of connections to explore for mystery entertainment. Perhaps the complexity of these connections is illustrated in magician David Berglas' experience of the Uri Geller phenomena in the 1970's. In 1973 Uri Geller was invited onto BBC's *Talk In* hosted by David Dimbleby. Geller was introduced as someone 'who has various powers which are described as psychic since he was three' (Beveridge, 1973). Geller's understated and extraordinary demonstrations were presented as real to the apparently unquestioning panel and audience. The show helped to secure the UK's often unquestioning belief in Geller's feats. Britland, however, describes the following post-show incident;

After the show was over Dimbleby came backstage to see David [Berglas]. He asked him what he thought. "It was very impressive," said David. "Can you do that?" asked Dimbleby. David was given a teaspoon. He rubbed it, and it slowly bent. It wasn't what Dimbleby was expecting. He shrugged off the demonstration, saying, "Ah yea, but you're a magician." (Britland & James, 2002, p.301)

Both the studio and the home audience's suspension of belief response was unprecedented and at the end of the show Dimbleby announced; 'We've had fourteen telephone messages who also received by telepathy that drawing and six people have rung into complain that their watch has stopped.' (Beveridge, 1973). This was, of course, an entertainment programme and it is difficult to judge who, if anyone else, was in on it, however, the presentation put psychic phenomena alongside science and served to create an (apparently) strong and possibly kayfabe moment.

Britland concludes from the incident;

If you are described as a magician then the demonstration is perceived as a trick. If you are described as a psychic, people are apt to believe that it is paranormal.

When the BBC [...] introduced Uri Geller as a psychic the audience had to believe it. (Britland & James, 2002, p.301)

We can see this response continually reflected in discussions of the practice of bizarre magick. For example, Burger asks Willmarth and Andruzzi to define bizarre magick and they respectively respond; “Magic done as Magic” and “Do it real” (Burger, 1991, p.45). By performing magic done as magic, an audience would appear to want to believe. Of course, this audience response is not new to performance magic and presenting magic as real can also be seen in the work of nineteenth-century magician Robert Houdin. Landy (2009) argues that in the ‘scientific’ demonstrations presented by Houdin, ‘only those spectators who, with a mental agility equal to [Houdin’s] manual dexterity, were ready to don and doff their lucidity repeatedly throughout the show could respond appropriately to the ethereal suspension (Landy, 2009, p.110).

Houdin called this ‘the clever man’, who;

[...] when he visits a conjuring performance, only goes to enjoy the illusions, and, far from offering the performer the slightest obstacle, he is the first to aid him. The more he is deceived the more he is pleased, for that is what he paid for. He knows, too, that these amusing deceptions cannot injure his reputation as an intelligent man, and hence he yields to the professor’s arguments, follows them through all their developments, and allows himself to be easily put off the right scent. (Robert-Houdin & Hoffmann, 1878)

However, performance magic is, of course, not professional wrestling and so performing as real or within the frame of kayfabe does require ethical consideration. Discourse within bizarre circles on the question of ethics often boils down to the using of the phrase ‘for entertainment purposes only’ with which to frame the work. Cassidy (1976) argues that it is not unethical to claim powers as long as you do not defraud people outside of the performance, while Minch (1976) is more dismissive arguing that if you cannot live with ‘magician’s guilt’ you should ‘get out of mentalism’. Raven



(1978) argues that to be effective [the magician] must “appear[“] to be genuine ... the audience must be put into the position of questioning if he is real or not ... but never knowing for sure. While Corinder (1968) simply argues that you must be a world-class liar.

Returning to Houdin’s ‘clever man’ in our audiences, here I believe we have the suggestion, the possibility, or at least the wish for a pre-Weber/pre-science notion of ‘enchantment’ in performance magic. If we look at the example of the Middle Ages, enchantment signified both a “delight” in wonders and the possibility of being “deluded” by them. This chimes with my own early practice in the bizarre discussed above. By attempting to set my practice between via and populous I was playing ‘betwixt Jest and Earnest’; a notion coined by Thomas Browne (1672) in *Pseudodoxia or Vulgar Errors* and a phrase that I have found very useful. Mangan (2007) draws on this notion when he talks of how 17th Century performance magic may have taken place within an imaginative space that was playful and creative, a space neither entirely real nor entirely unreal but ‘located somewhere indeterminately between the two’ (Mangan, 2007, pp.56–57). This notion of positioning performance magic between two poles brings this discussion almost full circle and in my current practice, I found it useful to examine the work of Victor Walter’s *High Magic: The Art of Re-Enchantment* (1998). Walter sees the term "magic" as referring to three different kinds of experience;

[...] **conjuring**, the art of producing illusions by sleight of hand or special apparatus  
 [...] **acquisitive magic**, controlling things or people by methods beyond nature to satisfy desires [...] [and] **subjective**, a unique quality of experience, a mysterious sense of enchantment. (Walter, 1998, p.10)

My own journey through performance magic practice has followed these experiences; I began with simple *conjuring*; the 'low' magic, avoided the urge to drift into *acquisitive* magic, and made a conscious move into the *subjective*, this, for me, being a performance practice embracing the unique quality of enchantment. According to Walter this unique experience exists not in the realm of 'common sense', or the 'intellect', but rather finds its place in the 'kingdom of the imagination' (Walter, 1998, p.11). The practice of bizarre magick often sits itself firmly within this realm. My practice here is characterised by my shift to working towards a form of facilitated mystery entertainment where the performer presents themselves not as a trickster or a mage but as someone with a story to tell. The effects presented are often not overtly magical (in the sense of the technical workings of the effects) but are there to aid the sense of the paraxial in the audience. Here the practitioner<sup>52</sup> takes the participant on a journey and then leaves them in an ambiguous space between jest and earnest, there is no 'ta da' or applause moment.

Myself and fellow performers The Reverend Tristan and Ashton Carter are founders of the joint performance project *Mr Punch's Cabinet of Curiosity*. This travelling cabinet of haunted objects has its lineage in traditional cabinets of curiosity and the curators are facilitators who, as the guests move through the exhibits, share stories about the objects experienced. The stories are largely improvised drawing upon legend, folktale and falsehoods. The objects are affordances with each having a clear story behind it, thus we play with the idea that the objects can speak for

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<sup>52</sup> I'll use this term rather than magician or mystery entertainer.

themselves. For us and the audience it is all about enchantment and situating the work in the kingdom of the imagination where (with a playful nod to Barnum) we describe all the objects as ‘genuine objects’ and the words used to describe their stories as ‘genuine words.’

Significantly, this practice has moved us further into the *Kingdom of the Imagination* into a practice where each ‘guest’ is offered to spend time with the exhibit to experience more about the object and through magic learn something about themselves. It is possible to trace this lineage back to some of the more audience-centric bizarre effects such as *The Fairy Goblet* (1941) and *Have Séance Will Travel* (1995). In our cabinet of curiosity, *The Oracle* (Cledonamancy) the *Dental Display* (Ordonamancy) have a moment of magic that is sparked by the magician with the payoff occurring later and away from the performance space in deliberately playful ways. For example, by interacting with the Ordonamancy exhibit the audience is offered the chance to gain a particular sooth-saying power in their daily life. The participant is merely shown the exhibit by the curator (performer) and left to discover this latent power for themselves.

Similar work by Mystery Entertainer Ashton Carter also pushes the audience into the realm of self-experience as they are asked to offer a chance to try the ‘baffling blocks’ (2017), presented as a mystery rather than a magic effect the audience are asked to experience and then question that experience. My own presentation of the *Strange Thing* (2017), similarly asks the audience to make up their own minds and deliberately provides no closure to the narrative. Both of these performances and the Cabinet showings are presented not as stage show but in grind format over a period of

several hours with audiences ebbing and flowing and making the choice whether to experience the journey offered. Thus, they are offered the facilitation of the magical experience, rather than a traditional magic show.

My journey from the original *Magiculum* publication to the Symposium has been one of finding a performance practice that found its origins in bizarre magick, moved through mystery entertainment and is now attempting to position itself somewhere else. In the tradition of bizarre magick, this work can happily be framed as experiments in facilitation. A process where the magician begins the work but does not see or control the pay off. The aim is to bring the experience of magic and magical thinking outside of the performance space. As a facilitator to break down knowledge and allow the participant to reconstruct their reality based on the spark given to them by the magician. It remains to be seen where these experiments will lead me.

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# *Appendix*

Taylor, N. and Hoedt, M. (2012) 'Magic and the M-word', in Drury, S. (ed.) *Liber Mentis*. London: PSYCRETS, pp. 262–276.

Taylor, N. (2014) 'Out of Tricks', in Landman, T. (ed.) *The Magiculum*. London, UK: EyeCorner Press, pp. 101–111.

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*Note: The versions contained in this portfolio are in author accepted manuscript format.*

## *Magic and the M-word*

Taylor, N. and Hoedt, M. (2012) 'Magic and the M-word', in Drury, S. (ed.) *Liber Mentis*. London: PSYCRETS, pp. 262–276.

"... to explore the hinterland of wonder." (Caleb Strange 2005:13)

Much has been written for magicians about the relationship between magic and meaning and it is not our intention to review that material here. Rather, we want to suggest a way in which we can look at the presentation of our magic as mystery entertainment, how an audience might read our performances, and how they may begin to construct meaning from them. Yet we are already presented with a problem, as we are using the loaded term 'meaning'. How can we understand this concept and does its definition change depending on its context within our presentation? Is it experienced differently by an audience than it is by the magician, and if so, what are the implications for the creation of meaning through a magic performance? More importantly, should one strive for meaning, or can we drop the M-word for a moment and develop mystery entertainment that can create a shared experience and understanding in our audience? Our reason for no longer using the M-word in this discussion is that it might help us begin to think about our magic differently.

Gumbrecht suggests that *"[magic] never presents itself as based on humanly produced knowledge. Rather, it relies on recipes[...] whose content has been revealed to be part of the never-changing movements in a cosmology of which humans consider themselves to be a part."*(2007: 82-83) Here, we see a magic that has real substance, a magic that does not need to seek meaning, but rather has a presence. Gumbrecht is,



of course, talking about something that we might have lost. Few members of today's audience really believe that magic exists ... or do they?

Discourse on magic and meaning usually shares a common introduction, often highlighting the way in which magic has become a trivialised form of entertainment over the last century. However, alongside this trivialisation of popular performance magic, mystery entertainment has always been with us, hiding in the fringes, being ambiguous and often resisting making it to the mainstream. The presence that the performance of this *fringe* magic often evoked seems tangible in its attempt to portray magic, or magick, as real magic and not *performance* magic at all. This distancing can be seen in the work of some of the modern magicians, where the presence lies in presenting a powerful form of mystery entertainment which often makes no claims regarding its origins. We can see this in the work of Geller, Kreskin, Berglas and more recently the blurring of form presented by Derren Brown (itself a nod to Berglas and all that went before). By distancing themselves from '*magic*', these performers circumvent problems of making magic have meaning: they are not using entertainment magic at all, they are using something else, and that 'something else' has valuable presence. Of course, the often quoted '*empty safe*' they guard is the same as any other magician, but in doing so, they create presence for their magic by referring to *something else*, cleverly disguising traditional effects and methods by hiding them within an audiences' collective cosmology. Performing real magic often involves avoiding all the trappings of magic at all: mentalists have been doing this for years, and many Bizarrists simply hate card tricks...

When we simply look at an effect for what it is, we can begin to see the 'empty safe' versus 'creation of presence' relationship in action, an opposition which can also be defined as a tension between the *meaningless* and *meaningful*. Firstly, the mechanics of a trick can be seen as essentially meaningless: the technique, the sleights, the threads. Although a method can be *meaningful* for other magicians (for instance, using a method by Tarbell rather than a more modern version of the same sleight), this is not perceived in any way by the audience and thus has no bearing on them. Secondly, and the most important for our discussion is the performance of the effect as it is seen by the spectators. This is where we can create presence.

However, this does not mean that effects can have no meaning at all: rather than in the technique, these elements are found in the presentation or denouement of the effect. Although, as described earlier, the method is essentially meaningless, i.e. it has no meaning in and of itself; the presence an effect can create is potentially *meaningful* or even profound. In order to demonstrate these claims, we will discuss this approach with reference to a classic effect: The Haunted Deck or Pack, which demonstrates this relationship between the mechanics and the creation of presence that is both internal and external to its performance. Dating back to an effect marketed by Louis Tannen in 1933 (as Haunted Pack), it appeared in print in the same year in Al Baker's Book One, presented as 'The pack that cuts itself'. Since then, many variations have appeared, but Baker's description still applies to each of the three modern incarnations that will be discussed here. The Haunted Deck perfectly demonstrates our point: although the method, the threads, are meaningless, the 'feat' that it demonstrates can be perceived as meaningful. The idea of a deck of cards which can cut itself, thus revealing a

previously chosen card, supposes the existence of an external force of sorts, a force strong enough to shift physical objects. Through presentation, the mystery entertainer can then heighten the affect that is created when performing the effect (or, as we shall see, deny it). In the case of the Haunted Pack, this can be done through a performance practice that favours presence. Compare, for example, the following performances of the Haunted Pack illusion, in which we can see the implications of the choice of presentation on an intrinsically meaningful effect:

- Penn & Teller, in *Phobophilia*: a can of worms is used to separate a picture, taken by Penn, of a 'dead' audience member from a stack of autopsy photos;
- Eugene Burger, in *Eugene goes Bizarre*: two presentations are shown here: in the more innocent version, the deck of cards has been 'trained' by the magician and can thus divide itself at the selected card on command. The second is a more bizarre approach, using a Tarot deck;
- Tony Andruzzi, in *Bizarre*: using a deck of Tarot cards and with the help of the god Asago, three cards are selected, providing the spectator with a brief reading.

The approaches taken by the different performers result in three very different performances. The Haunted Deck as performed by Penn & Teller could be said to reduce or shift meaning away from the original theme behind the trick: their presentation, rather than introducing the use of an invisible force that divides the photos, hinges on the idea that the worms know which of the pictures is fake. Although spectators are likely to know that such a scenario is unlikely, it does divert attention from the existence of a larger magical universe, an idea which Penn & Teller

have always attempted to convey. Instead, the use of worms and autopsy photos aims for an intention to gross out the audience, with the main affect that is created being one of revulsion (which is heightened when, after the final phase, the magicians appear to throw handfuls of worms at their audience).

By contrast, Burger's presentation *evokes* a variety of emotions. The *Eugene goes Bizarre* video contains two versions of the Haunted Pack, showing it both as a piece of close-up magic and as a piece of bizarre magick. The first of these presents the effect in what Burger dubs a '*conventional*' way: with patter that is light-hearted and humorous in nature, the cards deal themselves as ordered by the magician and volunteer. While still incorporating the idea of an outside force, this force is essentially benign: as is stated, it is the magician himself who trained his '*tool of the trade*' and who is in control, instructing the cards on what they are supposed to do.

The second presentation, like Andruzzi's, uses Tarot cards and invites the volunteer to consider a question to which they would like to have an answer. The card trick thus becomes a reading, framed by a story as to the origins of the Tarot deck. Instead of drawing on the influence of the magician, this time the cards are literally moved by some form of supernatural power, a universal force that speaks through the deck to provide the spectator with an answer to their question. Furthermore, the change from the use of an ordinary deck of cards to Tarot influences the perception by the audience, as the deck conjures up a multitude of outside references and expectations.

The final performance, by Tony Andruzzi, goes beyond Burger's presentation. The patter links the illusion to history, taking the spectator "*back to the times when magic*

*was real*", thus emphasising the larger framework of magical thinking. During the effect, Andruzzi calls upon the god Asago to perform the effect, literally inviting the supernatural force to prove its power by moving the cards (and, in the same way, heightening tension by actively calling up a spirit). It is made clear that there is actual contact with Asago, emphasised by the need to end the '*ritual*' after the final phase, blowing out the candle and thus closing the circle. Still in a safe environment and in the presence of the magician who is (supposedly) able to control the god, the spectator is put in a situation where direct contact with the spiritual world is established and made visible by the movement of the cards.

Keeping this in mind, the presence of an effect (remember, we are no longer using the M-word) can be defined as the way in which the performance of an effect connects with elements of the world *outside* the performance of the method. A meaning/less sleight can be made *meaningful* by introducing additional elements through the use of patter and props, or, as in the example of Penn & Teller, the opposite can be achieved. An effect can reference recent or well-known events, urban legends, or simply a universal, supernatural power which can predict the future and allow one to read minds, thus creating a framework of presence.

Such a framework will strongly influence the way in which a performance is perceived and interpreted by an audience, yet this perception by spectators provides a challenge in its own right. Magicians can, and need to be able to, manage their audience through careful attention to their performance practice. At the same time, however, one should realise that an audience can contain any number of people with any number of backgrounds, and thus any number of responses to the material.

Performance theorists such as Helen Freshwater have drawn attention to the idea that an audience can no longer be referred to simply as a coherent entity, a nameless 'it', but should instead be seen as a collective of individuals, each of whom bring their own ideas and interpretations to a performance. (2009:5) This emphasis on the individuality of a spectator can be found in the work of other writers. In "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes notes this shift from source to receptor: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." (1977:148) Similarly, Martin De Marinis speaks of the audience, rather than the performer, as a "*maker of meanings*." (2003:112) Although an author, or performer, can try to put across any number of ideas in their work, it cannot be known whether these ideas will be received and interpreted by the spectators in the desired way.

How a performance is perceived by the audience is informed by several factors: firstly, by pre-existing ideas and expectations, and secondly, through the process of experiencing the actual performance, a phenomenon which can work both for and against the performer. Eugene Burger, in his foreword to Hass's *Performing Magic on the Western Stage*, draws attention to the perceptions of the concept of magic:

On the one hand, the idea resonates positively with us: we are drawn to the idea of magic. It is an idea filled with possibilities that suggests the fulfilment of our deepest dreams. [...] On the other hand, magic has also always been seen as something suspect. Magic has never fully been trusted and never been felt to be fully trustworthy. (2008: ix)

In addition to these deeper preconceptions of the term 'magic' and what it encompasses, an audience can be influenced, quite simply, by images from the media or by their own experience; most often from mainstream performance magic. Have

they seen any *TV* specials on magic or have they been to a similar show before? Do they hold on to stereotypical images of magic, of a moustachioed, tuxedo-clad man, who pulls a rabbit out of a hat? When prompted, every individual will have some answer to the question '*what is magic?*' a definition or, more likely, an anecdote, a notion of what they believe should be featured in a magic performance. Elements such as these can be influenced both by individual experience and tastes, as well as cultural conventions and social norms, all of which will have an impact on the way in which an actual performance is perceived. As a result, every spectator will go away from a show with a different story, based on their background and pre-existing knowledge: the more one is familiar with the field of magic and thus adept at reading the '*texts*' presented in the performance, the more one will get out of the experience. However, even the most 'die-hard' fan will not get every single reference, thus allowing for different interpretations by different people depending on knowledge and background: *"So for each of these readers there will be elements of the repertoire that remain inactive as far as his image-building is concerned."* (Iser, 1978:145)

The second part of audience perception is defined by the performance itself. Although a given when discussing magic performance, the fact that a show is done '*live*' greatly influences the perceptions by an audience. A spectator cannot take in everything that is happening: every moment of the performance, the attention will be focused on an aspect of an action or effect, thus blocking out other aspects. Although to a certain extent, attention can, and must, be directed by the magician (or, more importantly, misdirected), a live audience can never be completely controlled, and because different individuals may focus on different things, their experience can never

be identical: *"This is to say that each spectator takes in particular facets of the performance moment by moment and also has a particular sense of how the performance unfolds in time. Thus, no two spectators see exactly the same play."*

(Fortier, 2002:136)

Despite these discrepancies between individual spectators, the experience of a show can be described as a linear one, in the sense that *"audiences do not know what you intend to do until the ending is revealed."* (Burger, 2000:77) At the same time, the course of a performance will create certain expectations: when a coin is made to disappear, the predictable next step might be to make it reappear, or to transform it, thus creating a situation which can be manipulated by the magician. Furthermore, because of the nature of magic performance, these expectations extend beyond the limits of the performance into our perception of the world. As Grixti states:

[W]e react to given situations according to how we perceive them, and interpretations are built out of mental constructions of reality [...] which develop in the course of our numerous experiences within our specific milieu. It is these which are challenged or removed when we are faced with the very strange or the 'uncanny.' (1989:153)

Because of this, it can even become possible for a magician to change the preconceptions of the audience, turning a sceptic of psychic phenomena into a believer as they see their ideas challenged in real time, right in front of them. Although the issue of belief/disbelief is an on-going debate amongst mystery entertainers, the fact remains that, regardless of any precautions on the part of the performer, a spectator may still see their pre-existing beliefs enforced or altered.

Having outlined the elements that have an effect on the perceptions by the audience, it will be helpful to look at the 'modes of the audience,' or the different roles



that spectators can have during a performance, as defined by Alice Rayner:

[The audience] functions as an "I" (and an eye and an ear) with a view toward the object, maintaining a subject/object relation; a "you" as a collaborator with performer and in recognition of the differences of the other; an "it" or "they" as the "telos" or "reason why"; and as "we" in a rhetorical but temporary assertion of a community identity. (2003:253)

In other words, the roles that a spectator can have are the following:

1. As an individual, watching the performance;
2. As a you, indirectly working together with the performer, providing them with a 'soundboard';
3. As simply being part of the 'it' that makes up the audience and is the reason for the performance;
4. As we, being part of a larger group and partaking in the shared experience of a particular event with the rest of the audience.

Although Rayner has modelled her theory on traditional theatre performances, the links to performance practice in magic are obvious. However, it should be noted that, in addition to the four modes outlined above, the audience of a magician can take on other roles: being called onto the stage as volunteer or stooge, or asked to cooperate in a myriad of other ways and this inclusion, in which spectators suddenly become performers themselves, will greatly alter the way in which the performance is perceived by the individual.

The concept of meaning in performance and our understanding of how this is transmitted to an audience is complex. However, an understanding of the territory is important for any practitioner working in a performance medium. As we stated at the

beginning of this chapter it should be possible, with an understanding of "meaning", to stop worrying about the M-word, and focus instead on the creation of presence. We suggest that development of presence within magic (k) performance allows for an holistic approach that can be used by the mystery entertainer to produce a tangible effect on an audience. As a way forward we would like to suggest a three-stage model that will allow us to create, and ultimately evaluate, presence in our work. Using the model, creating presence can be broken down into the following stages: *Crisis*, *Dramatise*, & *Complete*. These stages allow the performers to focus specifically on developing presence within their work and should be seen not as mutually exclusive categories, but rather as pointers for developing practice.

### 1. *Crisis*

Identifying the *crisis* means finding the element that is beyond the performance of the effect itself. In our example of the Haunted Deck this can be seen as the suggestion of an external force. However, this stage can go much deeper as the performer may choose to tap into the collective psyche of the audience. The term 'crisis' has been chosen as this stage is often based on crisis of belief, frequently in the zeitgeist and usually around the ambiguity of belief systems, for example, psychic powers may exist, NLP could be all powerful, witchcraft might work, and the dead might just be able to talk to us. This is often an element that cannot be fully controlled but rather it is something the performer can tap into; it is the cosmology of the moment, the elusive *something* that can create a sense of presence amongst an audience.

The mystery entertainer can use the ambiguity of the crises to great advantage.

## 2. Dramatise

We can now attempt to dramatise an effect based on the crisis we have identified. The aim here is to exploit the moment in order to develop magical presence and we should aim to do this in a way so as to maintain ambiguity. Occasionally, we may wish to simply dramatise the crisis itself, or, and this is often the case for the mystery entertainer, we may wish to develop a presentation that presents the crisis in an unsettling way. The two versions of the Haunted Deck presented by Burger illustrate the two sides of this moment of dramatisation. Often it is good practice to create a moment of *what if...* The dramatisation of the effect demonstrates the performer's action in response to the *crisis*. This action could be singular, i.e. the magician as demonstrator or experimenter; or collective, i.e. the magician is among the members of a seance party. The key here is to embody the crisis and dramatise this to maintain presence.

## 3. Complete

The effect should lead to a confirmation of the initial crisis, but it will rarely solve it; rather, it allows for a continuance of the *what if...* In the Andruzzi Haunted Deck spirits are contacted through apparent recourse to ancient ritual magick and their continued presence is confirmed. Likewise, during a seance, signs of spirit activity confirm that the dead just may be able to speak with us. The 'crisis' remains, but through demonstration may seem a little more *real* to the spectator.

As stated above, this model is in development, but even at this stage, it represents an attempt at moving away from 'meaning' and looking at our performance practice

from a different angle. The difficulty in any model is a 'one size fits all' approach. This is not our intention here: the creation of meaning or presence discussed in this chapter underlines our belief that mystery entertainment in whatever guise should tap into an audience's psyche in a way that mainstream magic simply does not. We should aim to look at the wider picture of meaning transmission and audience response, remaining in the fringes, allowing for ambiguity with a magic that creates real presence.

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## *Out of Tricks*

Taylor, N. (2014) 'Out of Tricks', in Landman, T. (ed.) *The Magiculum*. London, UK: EyeCorner Press, pp. 101–111.

I want to reflect

... on my own discovery of magic.

... on my journey to a way of thinking

a way of thinking that I am happily unconvinced about.

*(Taylor, 2013)*

## *Preamble*

Magic is a performance form for which I hold a deep passion. Just as my journey as a (non-magic) performer has been punctuated with personal experiments from what could be broadly described as performance art to acting in traditional theatre, both as a performer and a theatre technologist, my journey in magic has also been fragmented and experimental.

This essay comes at a moment when I'm at yet another crossroads in my practice. I have just come out of a sabbatical where I developed a chapter on the links between the dramaturgy of seance and the performance of modern folklore. At this point I have just embarked on some studio practice and I do not know where this is heading. This essay will serve as a way of reflecting on some elements of my personal journey

through magic and consider some areas I feel are important and need to be explored in a studio. Most of the text below comes out of the rehearsal space and 'free-writing'. I have tried to place these fragments in some kind of coherent order.<sup>53</sup>

### *What/Saw*

I saw everything as the product of some intangible agency. Magic was everywhere. Clouds were not there simply to make rain, no, clouds were there to make shapes of fighting dragons, leaping tigers and the occasional fluffy bunny. I did not know what magic was; the world was simply a place of happenings.<sup>54</sup>

### *This Did Not Happen to Me*

I had seen the Magic Shop from afar several times; I had passed it once or twice, a shop window of alluring little objects, magic balls, magic hens, wonderful cones, ventriloquist dolls, the material of the basket trick, packs of cards that looked all right, and all that sort of thing, but never had I thought of going in until one day, almost without warning, Gip hauled me by my finger right up to the window, and so conducted himself that there was nothing for it but to take him in. (Wells, 2007)

### *Finding Magic*

A freemason and magician (MMC) loved coin magic and his son, a professional actor and magician (not-MMC) played a magic show for my sister and I one afternoon, in an attic room made into the best kind of makeshift theatre. In full evening dress they made coins appear, disappear and clang into a silver champagne bucket. They

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<sup>53</sup> I am fortunate to be in the position of coordinator for the Magic Research Group, giving me access to the facilities afforded by the University of Huddersfield's Drama Department.

<sup>54</sup> I fitted into a category that Kelemen would later term the 'intuitive theist'(Kelemen, 2004).

multiplied shiny red billiard balls. They made giant silver rings link and unlink. They made a silver ball levitate behind a large sparkly cloth. This was magic.

Every other week, I would see the latest trick. Coins, always coins, but often with routines that included elegant brass boxes or gleaming silver tubes. These treasures came from a mystical purveyor of magic, a place called *Davenports*.

My 'Davenports' was a less mystical place at the top of our high street named Bennet's. Referred to locally as 'Bennet's Bungout' it was an early forerunner to the pound-shop.<sup>55</sup> And so armed with my life savings (usually between ten and twenty-two pence) I would buy a magic trick: cheap, shiny, plastic, ill-fitting and rough at the edges. Lovingly hand crafted in Taiwan. I had tricks that I could perform, and in the summer we held little variety shows in our back yard.

As summers passed and the seventies turned into the eighties, my interest in magic continued to develop and the occasional *Paul Daniels Magic Set* would appear at Christmas, each box of delights containing tricks chosen by Paul himself, all lovingly crafted in Taiwan. But one year I received a book that changed the game: *Ali Bongo's Book of Magic*. Not only was this a book of effects, it was a book of close-up and stage effects that you could make yourself, and it included advice on showmanship, performance and staging. There were even plans on how to build your own table and close-up mat. There was such a thing as a close-up mat? Starting with *The Pongolian*

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<sup>55</sup> You could buy a lot for a pound then; Beer was 15p a pint, twenty cigarettes would cost you 30p and a loaf of bread and a pint of milk would set you back 19p.



*Compass*, I made everything. Sad to say my family witnessed about two years of material gleaned from that book.

Soon I found myself stuck economically, but by saving my pocket money, I could just afford the *Demon Catalogue*<sup>56</sup>, even though I could buy nothing advertised inside - it was a book of dreams.

### *Finding Magick*

Exchange and Mart was another one of those catalogues of dreams, it was the eBay of the eighties, you could send off a stamped addressed envelope to any one of the countless classified ads and get another book of dreams back. I resisted the urge to send for a leaflet that would allow me to find out once and for all what a 'marital aid' was, and chose instead to send for a product list from the infamous emporium *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* in Leeds; from that I bought a copy of *Techniques of High Magic* by Francis King and Stephen Skinner, a cassette tape of *Magical Calls, Chants, and Incantations*, and a packet of *Herbal High Smoking Mixture*. The latter was certainly herbal, but it didn't seem to get me high and tasted awful, the other two kickstarted a lifelong interest in the occult arts. This was real magic and a year later I had saved up enough to buy my first Tarot deck *The Tarot of the Witches*. Magick for a while had replaced Magic in my life.

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<sup>56</sup> The beautiful catalogue from Davenport's Magic Shop.

## *Happenstance #1*

The first of three encounters that caused me to change my perspective on magic (with a small 'k') and kickstarted a paradigm shift in my approach, and the first was seeing *Brecht on Magic* by Ian Saville in 1985. This was a show where 'Ian Saville begins the transformation from bourgeois to socialist conjurer, with the help of three Gods from Brecht's play *The Good Person of Sichuan* and a grumpy ventriloquist's dummy of the playwright himself'. (Saville, 2004)

In his opening routine he shows the difference between a 'socialist magician' and a 'bourgeois magician'. My consciousness was raised and I realised that I had become disillusioned with performance magic because I was trying to be a bourgeois magician! A working-class boy trying to be a bourgeois magician! Ian's act was the first time I had seen the fabled form that was 'alternative comedy'. Anti-establishment, frequently political, but a vibrant new art form that was perfect for someone like me. Reality check: I was a bad alternative comic performer- I just hope the audition tapes were wiped and we can forget about it. However, my thinking about magic and the term 'bourgeois magician' has stayed with me all this time.

## *Theatre and Folklore*

Fallow times and then an ultimate escape to university, led me to a career in acting and small-scale touring theatre. Alongside this I embarked on a faltering academic career examining myth and folklore in contemporary drama that took me into myth and folklore. Magick was still more important than magic. I would still perform but it was nothing more than a quiet hobby.

### *The Word Gets in the Way*

Magic is a term so complex, so problematic. Perhaps I should stop thinking about it in terms of definition and look at it in terms of execution? For a long time I was stuck and then, as if by magic, I read a couple of books on myth that changed my approach. In the first the author, when faced with the complexity of myth as a term, found that there was a great temptation in arguing that 'myth is now so encyclopaedic a term that it means everything or nothing.' (Gould, 1981, p.5) Gould saw that the plethora of recorded material concerning myth had resulted in a generality of meaning. Likewise, William Righter in *Myth and Literature* also recognised the problem and firmly stated, 'I shall abandon the futile effort to capture the elusive essence of [myth]', and instead he chose to 'examine the variety of uses to which modern writers [...] have put it.' (Righter, 1975. pg.7). They chose not to examine what was meant by the complex term *myth*, as it simply got in the way.

### *Happenstance #2*

By this time I was working as a drama lecturer and my second encounter was when I met 'Deception Expert' Stuart Nolan. Fresh into his awesome NESTA funded project, Stuart was looking to meet other magicians in the area, and we just happened to work at the same university. Stuart and I hit it off at once and through our discussions and 'magic days' I started to see what a beautiful and complex thing magic could be and how magic could work within my research and performative practice. About a year later I made the brave and foolhardy(?) decision to abandon my PhD in myth and folklore and instead carve a way in performance magic research.

For a while Magic took over from Magick. My mind was set on tricks; I still did not know what kind of performer I was, but I knew magic would play a role.

### *We advertise the impossible and then attempt to ...*

We advertise the impossible and then attempt to perform it and if we do that then surely the magician, as a magician is a performer, has a privileged position as a performer- different to, say, an actor or a dancer?

### *Many Magics*

A journey that has visited many magics; religion and belief, detachment and deception have led to a search for meaning within magic. Life Magic (Hass, 2007) is the stuff that helps us live in this world. It's the yellow stuff the teacher would put on my knee whenever I fell in the playground. It was kept in a glass jar labelled 'magic'. The glass, the label, the liquid inside meant so much.

### *Bizarre*

I had discovered this thing, a form that contained, 'weird and bizarre magical effects', 'stories and other forms of presentational motivation', elicited responses 'other than laughter and applause', relied on 'the creation of atmosphere and mood,' and sought to 'explore and generate a sense of mystery'. (Burger, 1991, p.96) Now this was a form I could relate to, it seemed to throw up questions of the nature of performance magic and how it might relate to magic with a 'k'! Why didn't I know about this?

### *Happenstance #3*

As I began working my magic(k) into my academic career, I was deconstructing the short 'magic play' *Will the Witch and the Watchmen* (Sharpe, 1976) and working on *England's Home of Mystery*, a social history project charting the rise of magic in the golden age. I discovered through one of the many on-line magic forums, and subsequently ordered a DVD of a performance by 'Academic Magician' Dr Todd Landman. It was extraordinary stuff, merging academic discourse with magic. From this I discovered *Psycrets*, the British Society of Mystery Entertainers and my journey had begun. Magic and magick are almost inseparable. To help me out I dropped the 'k' as I knew what I wanted magic to be.

If magic has any claim to being an art, it lies in its unique ability to make a spectator confront the impossible, along with the exhilarating feeling this entails as a trapdoor opens under everything he thinks he knows about reality and his mind goes into free-fall. (Ortiz, 1995, p.19)

### *The Problem with the Binary*

*I was looking for an answer in binary; magic or magick, the positive or the negative, the sacred or the profane, the fascinating or the demonic. To borrow from Pruyser, I failed to see the 'illusionistic' world as my mind went between the 'autistic' and the 'realistic'.<sup>57</sup> I had forgotten that clouds could both make rain and be dragons.*

Neale discusses the notion of *monkey movement* in the practice of performing magic. To illustrate his point Neale uses the traditional Japanese image of the monkey

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<sup>57</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of Pruyser see Neale, 2013.

swinging from a branch over a lake looking down at a reflection of the moon in the water and sees the illusion of the real moon shimmering just below the surface (e.g. Ogata, 1900). Of course, when the monkey reaches for the 'moon' the surface of the water is disturbed. The illusion has gone, for a moment, until the monkey once again looks down at the moon's reflection in the now still water. Thus for Neale the experience of performance magic is a playful movement between illusion and disillusion. The magician is the manager of this process playing a trickster by presenting magic (the illusion) but framing it as tricks (the disillusion). Several performance magic genres express themselves in this manner, but there is often an interplay between the degrees of illusion exhibited as the magician performs magic framed as tricks. (Neale, 2008, pp.218–222) What happens when we lose this interplay? When illusion and disillusion become one we will have magic.

### *Magic Matters*

Magic matters because it can elevate an experience to the beautiful; it can make you believe what you see; it can make strange for you; and, yes, it can amuse. Magic is a way of being in the world that makes sense according to our principles and our innate magic behaviour. Magic is not an interrogation of these principles, rather it is a process of embracing them and accepting them for the roller coaster ride they are. An experience that not only for a moment in time is real, but also an experience that

should stay with you. The paraxial region<sup>58</sup> must be there, it's fine to think of the illusionistic world.

### *Populus and Via*

Right now I think of magic as the interplay between the geomantic figures of Populus and Via.



**Figure 1: Populus and Via**

*Populus* represents stability, security, and the status quo. It is fortified by the waxing moon, it moves towards the light. It is a safe place to be. But *Via* is a rapid river running through this balance, represented by the waning moon it takes us into the dark places. Full of energy it represents an unstable path; it is a symbol of change. It is real magic and mystery cutting deep into the heart of stability. That's the power the magic holds.

*... a culture without magic or mystery would be insane. (Maven, 1991)*

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<sup>58</sup> An imaginative space which is neither entirely "real" (object) nor entirely "unreal" (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two'. (Jackson, 1981, p.19)

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## *Identity and Persona*

Taylor, N. (2020) 'Identity and Persona', in Landman, T. (ed.) *The Magiculum II*. Nottingham: Lulu Press Inc., pp. 58–63.

### **workshop notes longing to be a diagram**

*Fear of magic*

*Magicians/people who dislike magic*

*The puzzle fiends - can these people understand kayfabe?*

*Magicians who have no place for kayfabe*

*Magicians who are sceptics*

*Sceptics who have no place for kayfabe*

*Magicians who fear magic*

*Magicians who undermine their own performance - pat lines and poor humour*

*An outside world resistant to magic – a need to turn towards an inner world*

*Make no claims to be magic*

*But make no claims **not** to be magic*

*Approach the work with an open mind - not the mind of the magician*

*Beware snake oil*

*The Magician Actor*

## *Finding Identity*

As an experiment I wanted to imagine a reality where Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin did not write the phrase ‘A conjuror is not a juggler; he is an actor playing the part of a magician’ (Robert-Houdin, 1859). Instead I wanted to see it as an anonymous phrase that carries no baggage, no problems in translation and no historical case for study. This is because while its context is intriguing and useful, the often-circular debates surrounding its meaning and interpretation can cloud the phrase’s usefulness in practice, certainly for me. Since the last volume of the *Magiciulum*, I chose to examine my practice (at least in part) against this re-imagined phrase stripping it of all its context. Trying to see if it is meaningful to, or useful for, my identity as a mystery entertainer. This ultimately became a thought exercise rather than a practical one, but I felt that there was no harm imagining this strange message appearing in my notebook out of nowhere, albeit slightly edited. And so, the following appeared, attributed to no one.

*You are not a juggler. You are an actor playing a magician.*

## *Many Imaginary Years Ago*

The phrase appeared when my magic journal was still young and showed no signs of wear, tear, and crinkled pages. Perhaps as a cautionary scribble, in dark ink. I do not know how it got there, but I accepted its message, the words made it into my thoughts and caused me to rethink my practice. I alluded to this imaginary moment obliquely in the first volume of *The Magiciulum; Out of Tricks* (Taylor, 2014). At this point I had re-discovered magic, but I was struggling with what I saw as being a juggler, indulging in

seemingly endless practice sessions with tricks and sleights. All joyful moments, yes, but with no real meaning other than the softest possible allusion to The Trickster figure. An identity I had haphazardly adopted in performance. I was lost in the unromantic circle of online magic shops, mis-leading advertisements and the subsequent jiffy bag rage when the latest promised miracle I had purchased online proved not to be. I found myself juggling and not acting. Yes, I was playing a heightened version of myself, but this was the type of magician that had two-minute miracles, puzzles, and an emptiness of the unfilled potential of the art.

*I realise that I am on tricky ground here. In my belief that the juggler magician has the potential to do magic a disservice. I am not suggesting that other good and great magicians who invest in sleights and 'ta dah' moments of magic have gotten things wrong. Rather, for me, while I felt it was possible to create exciting moments of magic through the mode of the juggler, it was not a mode for me.*

*You are not a juggler. You are an actor playing a magician.*

### ***The Wrong Persona***

So, ceasing to be a juggler was the first step in my journey in finding identity as a mystery entertainer. I did not want to be a trickster magician I wanted to be someone else, something else. Initially I struggled to find this persona, I thought that I did not want to be Nik Taylor, and for a while I became Dr Orlando watt, and from an actor's point of view that made sense. I was playing a character with an intense pseudo-scientific interest in investigating mystery. The open demonstration of spirit contact excited this character. When these were played to an audience the character's

excitement was palpable. I was acting a role to perform magic. However, I was frequently believed by the audience to be this character, and thus not seen as an actor playing a role at all.

This set up an ethical dilemma for me, I discuss elements of this in *Magic and Broken Knowledge* (Taylor, 2018). For me this was uncomfortable. As an actor, when I played a part I expected no one to believe that I was that role after I left the stage. I realised that mystery entertainment is a powerful art, and the perception testing 'boundary work' (Mangan, 2007, p.xv) a performer appears to accomplish on stage, can elevate the practitioner to a different level, they are acting but appear not to be. Oddly enough I felt a new kind of dishonesty, I noticed that while I was comfortable performing mystery that, at least during the performance, appeared real, I was, however, uncomfortable doing this while playing a role that felt so distant from myself. If I wanted the performance to appear honest, why not perform with apparent honesty as myself, as Nik Taylor?

*You are not a juggler. You are an actor playing a magician.*

### *Framing Nik Taylor*

As a consequence of being an actor, a magician and a drama, theatre and performance academic this simply led to more thinking than might normally be considered healthy. I became intensely interested in the notion of framing character, acting and mystery performance. Todd Landman provides a very useful consideration of this in *Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse and Effect*

(Landman, 2013), where the author constructs a typology of performance magic based initially on the notion of the magician, the mentalist, and the mystic.

For my own performances to be framed as mystery entertainment (mystic) I felt that I did not need to play under a different name. The reality I wanted to portray on stage should be woven into my own identity, or at least some/a heightened part of it. If we take this further and assume we suggest that the magic we demonstrate is also our vocation in life (everything is soaked in 'the other'), then mystery entertainers cannot help that everything they do is framed as performance. This is the often quoted notion of the 24/7 magician (see Burger, 1991, p.45). For a while I considered how under certain framing, ostension, magical thinking, and boundary work could be at the heart of the persona of Nik Taylor. My interest here was kayfabe, how could I be Nik Taylor, a persona that seamlessly weaves real magic into my 'real' life. How could I appear to be a magician 24/7? What role to play and when? Does that role ever leave me? The difficulty for me in taking that role was that my performance magic practice (and research) was woven so deeply into my professional practice as an academic that the balance/distance between the real and the humbug was always a little wobbly – again see (Taylor, 2018)

*So, I still wasn't happy with this identity, I doubted its authenticity, my authentic self (of course, can you even be that when what you do is faked – well yes – sort of). I doubted its velvety-ness – again I felt that I was moving far away from myself, I was becoming that character again. I also started to slip dangerously into looking a little Victorian, and I hesitate to say this, and by association - steampunk. That was a step too far.*

*You are not a juggler. You are an actor playing a magician.*

### *Letting go*

So, this summer I felt that I was becoming too close to this work and I needed to let this era of practice go. I was exchanging experiencing joy in performance for overthinking and I was no longer enjoying the character of Nik Taylor as mystery entertainer. I had a haircut, lost the styled beard and dumped the velvetiness of my neo-Victorian persona. I like to think I grew up a bit. I knew I wanted to draw a line under this aspect of my performative self. One way I knew how to do this is to teach it, share it, then move on.

So, began the fourteen-week project *Phantasmagoria – Tales to be Told Out Loud*. (Taylor, 2019). I worked with a group of undergraduate performers sharing the practice that I had been involved in over the last ten years or so with the goal of producing an evening of mystery entertainment. The project was certainly, although never explicitly, about my personal journey through this performance form. The premise was simple, each performer would devise through workshop and rehearsal a story that would be illustrated or have within it at least one performance magic effect. The stories, although almost entirely fictitious, would have an explicit geographical connection with the converted church we would be performing in.

In the final show the participants (limited to twenty per performance) began their journey by taking part in demonstrations that were broadly speaking theatrical mentalism (again using Landman's typology), they then moved into the main studio space which was set as a small parlour theatre and were told stories that were either

illustrated by a particular effect or had the effect integrated into them. These effects deliberately ranged from horror theatre, traditional bizarre (if such a thing is possible) and sleight of hand card effects. The common thread in this section was practice that demonstrated a range of influences and modes of performance. The audience were then led into rooms to experience stories of a pagan nature, still framed as mystery entertainment, but alluding to the boundary work of tarot, voodoo and folk horror. Finally, the evening was concluded by a full séance that was framed as an attempt to make spirit contact with the people who featured in the stories the audience had just heard. This final section was my séance act, performed and adapted by others. The show played for three nights. When it was over I started writing this chapter.

*You are not a juggler. You are an actor playing a magician.*

### *Framing a new identity*

The best thing I hear when people talk about experiencing magic is, ‘I don’t want to know how it is done.’ This is a lovely response, the participant knows that there is something being done (the method), but the other something the performer has done has reduced the need in that participant to seek an answer to a puzzle. They are happy with the moment of magic and there is an appreciation of wonder. The juggler presents tricks and the element of puzzle returns, and equally if we embody or live the part without an apparent authenticity that we are comfortable with, these moments of wonder can become blurred. The part of our persona that appears to be magic, is not all of our persona. Our performance persona is made up of so much more. In terms of the ‘authentic,’ the clear, and the seamless in persona, we need only to look at performers such as Todd Landman, for example. His *Academic Magic* informs his

persona but never overwhelms his identity, it sits alongside everything he does, seamlessly woven into the fabric of his role. As I leave my explorations of the bizarre behind and move on to a new chapter in exploring my performance persona, I hope I can find something as seamless and more fitting to my practice.

At this stage, I know what I do not want to do rather than what I want to do. I ended my contribution to the last volume of the *Magiculum* by saying that I was interested in the interplay between the geomantic figures of Populous and Via. As I write this, the steadfastness of Populus has given way to the rapid river of Via and once again I am on the energetic unstable path!

*You are not a juggler. You are an actor playing a magician.*

*So perhaps I am a bit of a juggler, but I think that is part of playing a magician. I've left that other Nik Taylor behind, and now I'm finding a new performance identity.*

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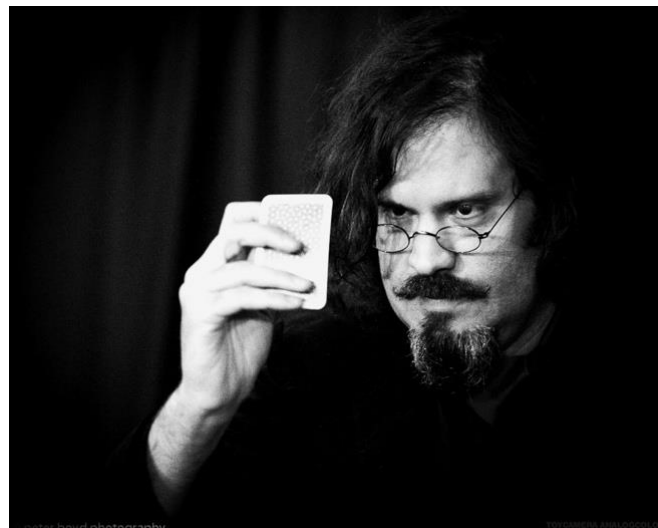
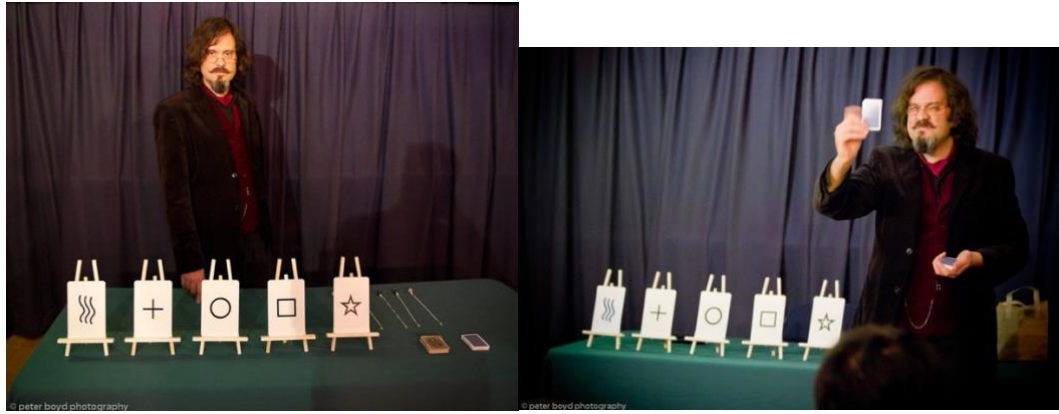
## *Photographs of Practice*



Taylor, N. (2009a) 'Bizarre in the Bar'. The Ninth Biannual Conference of the International Gothic Association, Lancaster University, July. Performing Phil Goldstein's *The Wagers of Sin*



Publicity shots and giving readings



Taylor, N. (2010: 2011) 'How Psychic are you?' Hallowe'en Happening, Laurence Batley Theatre. – Ludic Séance.





Taylor, N. (2014c) 'The Gift of Hermes'. Hester Reeve - YMEDACA, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 30 August.

Table for The Gift of Hermes.

**A WEEKEND OF  
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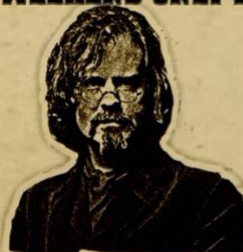
**THE  
STRANGE  
THING!**



Curiosity and mystery play with an audience's sense of wonder. Kempele's CHESS PLAYING TURK, CABINETS OF CURIOSITY and BARNUM'S AMERICAN MUSEUM provoked puzzlement and enchantment. Outside of these experiences the mood was to the contrary; FRANCIS BACON saw wonder as 'broken knowledge', MAX WEBER famously declared the modern world as disenchanted and HEIDEGGER observed that modern science was rooted in the valorisation of certainty and the demotion of wonder. However, beneath and running through all of this remained the 'curiosity' as an object of wonder - an artful deception - perhaps even a humbug. The Strange Thing is none of these, and all of these simultaneously. I can tell you what I know about it (which isn't a lot), but I'm happy with that. I'm happy with the Platonic Wonder of that precedes certainty. LET'S ENJOY THE WONDER TOGETHER!

**PRESENTED THIS WEEKEND ONLY BY**

**NIK  
TAYLOR**



Nik Taylor is a Research Magician and Subject Leader in Drama, Theatre and Performance at the University of Huddersfield. He is co-editor of The Journal of Performance Magic.

Nik has published on Science Performance, and Bizarre Magic and the Gothic. As a performer, Nik specialises in Bizarre Magic, Sideshow, Séance and Divination. He co-curates Mr Punch's Cabinet of Curiosities a dark museum of weird and haunted artefacts.

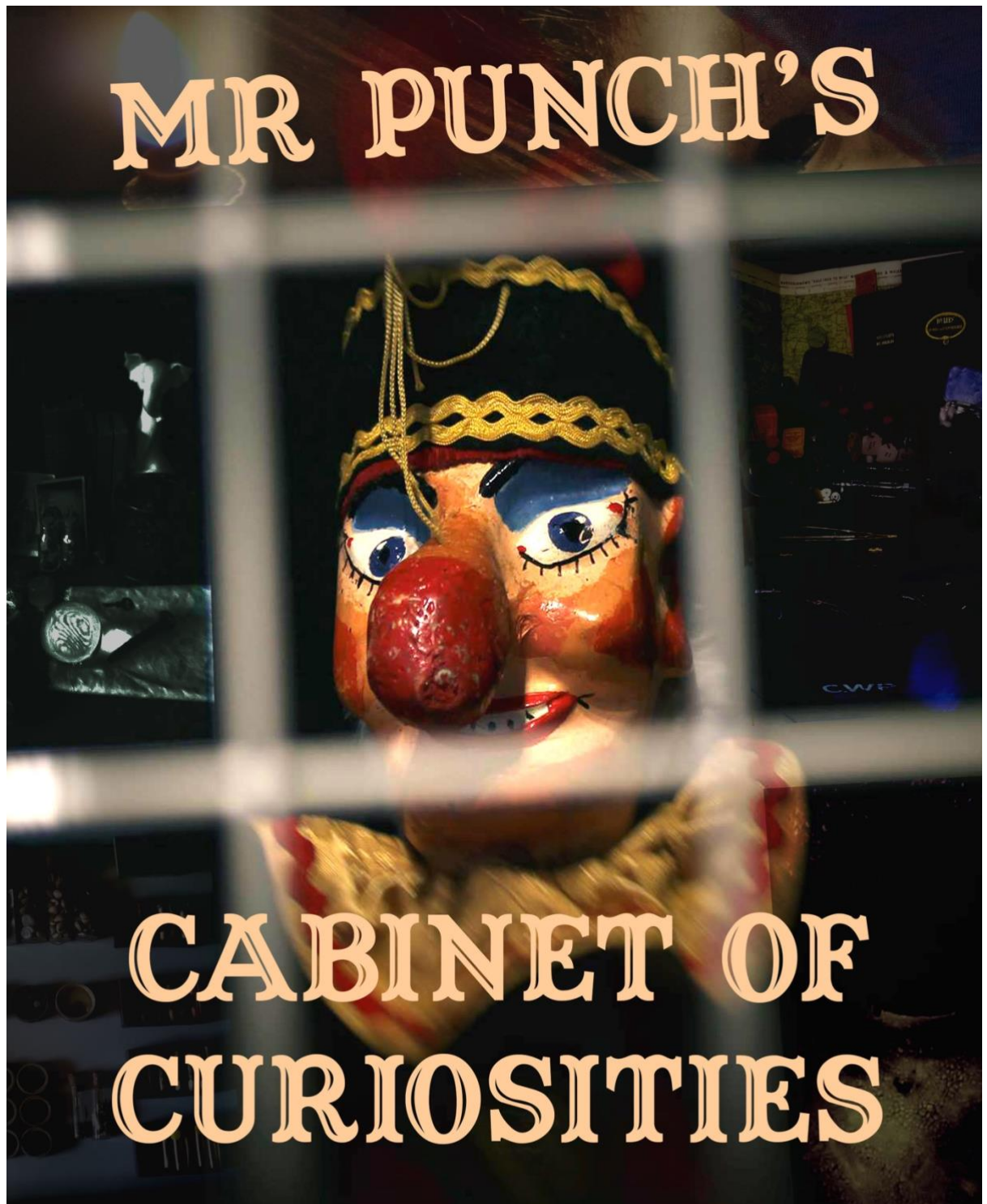
Nik advised on the Thackray Medical Museum's The Magic of Medicine exhibition and Proper Job Theatre's performance of Nosterate and he performed in Hester Reeve's YMEDACA at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Ethereal communication via [NIKTAYLOR.CO.UK](http://NIKTAYLOR.CO.UK)

Taylor, N. (2017) 'The Strange Thing'. Weekend of Wonderful Things, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 15 July. –

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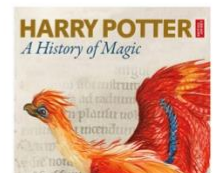


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Taylor, N. and Carter, A. (2015-present) 'Mr Punch's Cabinet of Curiosities'



Taylor, N. and Carter, A. (2015-present) 'Mr Punch's Cabinet of Curiosities'





Taylor, N., Curzan, R. and Carter, A. (2016&2017) 'Curzan, Carter and Taylor'. Hallowe'en Happening, Laurence Batley Theatre. – Suggestion and Ideomotor Effects



Taylor, N. and Carter, A. (2019) 'Séance: A view from through the veil.' Leeds Trinity University. – performers and pendulums.

