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Taylor, Nik

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## **The *Fairy Goblet of Eden Hall to Hunting Mammoths in the Rain* - experiencing the paraxial through performance magic and mystery entertainment.**

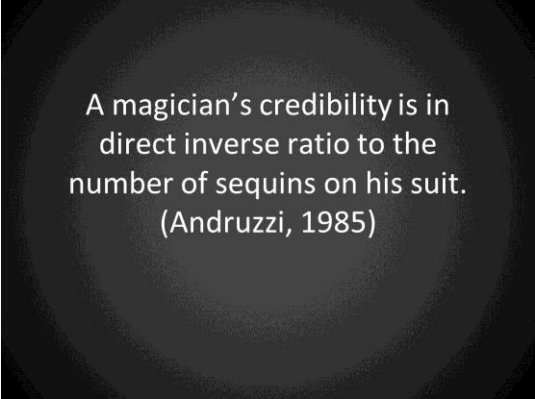
*Presented at Tales Beyond Borders, 24-25 April 2015, The University of Leeds*

In this presentation I will be discussing the imaginative places performance magic can take an audience. The magic I will be describing is odd and strange. The magician is rarely called a magician; and the audience is rarely called an audience. Terms such as *guests* or *participants* are more usual; with a *mystery entertainer* or *paranormal entertainer* guiding them through their experience. As these imaginative places are challenging to define, I will illustrate this presentation with some examples of this kind of performance magic in practice. In magician parlance these pieces are called, *effects*.

Firstly, I should clarify the kind of performance magic I am talking about here. I can probably assume that most people here would have come across performance magic in some form, and probably on TV, at a child's party, at a wedding or, perhaps, even live. Magicians such as Dynamo, Derren Brown, David Copperfield, Kris Angel – or a little further back; Paul Daniels, Doug Henning or David Nixon might spring to mind. However, in the wider 'magic assemblage' - a term coined by Simon During (2002) - we can see that performance magic is a complex form with many genres and sub-genres. Some of which are more visible than others; close-up, big box illusions, mentalism, and con-games are forms you might be familiar with.

But in this presentation I am not talking about these. In this presentation I'm talking about an all-together darker and perhaps dangerous form of performance magic. A form that grew from the work of practitioners such as Masklyn ye Mage, Caleb Strange, and 'Doc' Shiels. A form that came to be known as *Bizarre Magick*, although,

as I have hinted at earlier, today it is more likely to be known as *paranormal entertainment* or, in my opinion better, *mystery entertainment*. However, I will continue to use the term *Bizarre Magick* for this presentation.



A magician's credibility is in  
direct inverse ratio to the  
number of sequins on his suit.  
(Andruzzi, 1985)

*Bizarre Magick* is an underground form of performance magic that was initially pioneered in the 1970s. The name itself, *Bizarre Magick*, was first coined by Raven and Shiels in the inaugural issue of the *Invocation* in July 1974. Although experiments in this form go further back this and I shall refer to these as the proto-bizarre. The genre rose, according to Stephen Minch writing in 2009 '... wraithlike from the sod of two specialised schools of magic: pseudo spiritism and mentalism' (Minch, 2009, p.58).

Bizarre Magick effects and proto-bizarre effects often appear in a form where through story-telling and complex staging the purest sense of a *real* magical experience for the spectator is achieved. The effects I've chosen to illustrate this discussion come from the both the proto-bizarre and the later modern bizarre. I will attempt to fill in some of the gaps, but a key point here is that I am identifying and discussing bizarre magick effects that have a strong experiential element for the participants.

The first effect *The Fairy Goblet* [of Eden Hall] (Smith & Lyons, 1941) is an important pre-cursor to the bizarre movement and a truly experiential piece. Similarly, the later, *Hunting Mammoths in the Rain* (Strange, 2005, pp.3–13) takes the participants on an experiential journey back to primal shamanism and real magic.

Let me describe them:



*The Fairy Goblet* by Lew Smith and L.V. Lyons (1941) relies on the careful construction of a ritually charged atmosphere to create an apparently real experience within the minds of the audience. Based partly on the real Luck of Eden Hall (now in the V&A). The *Fairy Goblet of Eden Hall* is seen glittering and glowing during a ritual in a 'weird and uncanny manner', and, in candlelight, the guests are invited 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 & Lyons, 1941, p.761)

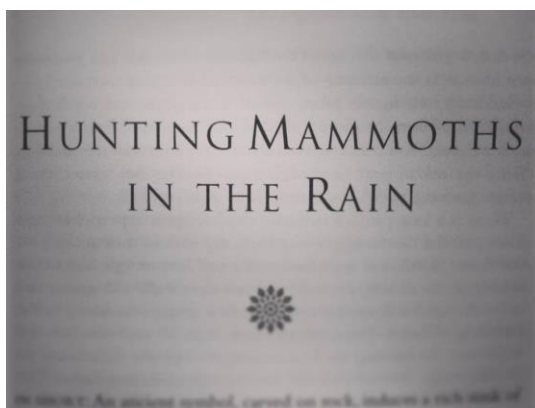
The goblet is then solemnly introduced;

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 & Lyons, 1941, p.792).

A traditional verse is recited and the ritual begins proper as each guest is invited to step forward and experience what amounts to a vision of a past memory or emotion. After this, an offer is made by the facilitator for the guest to share that memory with the rest of the group. The performer/magician/facilitator is seen as sharing a gift that allows the guest to take part in a piece of powerful experiential magic that is designed to evoke strong 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, 1941, pp.762–763)



Sixty years later, we have Caleb Strange publishing *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 dark, primal ritual. Standing now in a space surrounded by ancient stones bearing megalithic cup and ring marks, they are suddenly accompanied by drumming and dancers, and surrounded by a circle of fire. As twilight moves deeper into night the participants witness the ancient lines carved on rocks 'twist', 'curl' and swirl. This signals the beginning of an intense trance-like journey aided by one of the participants. And using the 'ragbag' of a 'modern Siberian shaman' the magician/facilitator attempts to reveal – according to the script;

'pre-historic memories – tribal experiences lost in the ancient centre of the brain.' (Strange, 2005, p.3)

Here one participant acts as a conduit falling back in time and the sharing the feeling of 'the rich, stinking earth', 'the shaking ground', and the primal hunt itself. Again from the script;

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, 2005, p.8)

As I have suggested, there is, of course, a rich and deep continuum of this kind of work and these two examples only really bracket the genre. Many experiential effects have been published based in such areas as wiccan ritual, high magick, ghost stories, popular Gothic and horror fictions and beyond. And work of this type was regularly submitted to magician-only journals such as *Jinx* (1934-42), *Cauldron* (1967-68), *Invocation/New Invocation* (1974-1996), *Séance* magazine (1988-89). For me these works culminate in perhaps the most well known monograph (at least amongst practitioners) of an experiential performance piece: *Brother Shadow's Have Séance Will Travel* (1995) – which is based entirely on carefully guiding the imagination of the participant on an emotional journey. It 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 & Houston, 1998).<sup>1</sup> Again this work attempts to evoke the vision of a lost memory for each of the participants. The goal being in any of these effects is to impart an element of the experience of *real* magic without necessarily ever signalling that the facilitator is a performance magician at all.

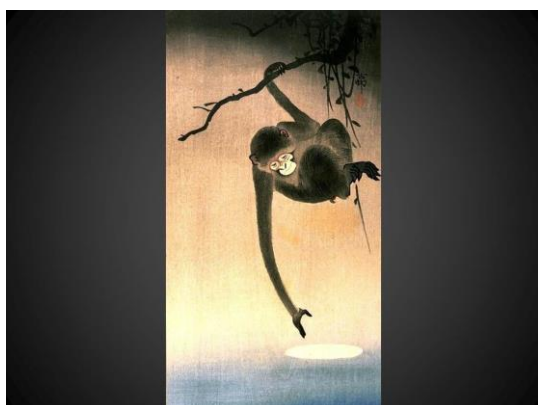
In my own practice as a performance magician and a Bizarrist, I find Bizarre Magick the most vibrant form of performance magic there is. When it is done well it can blur the line between the real and unreal, between illusion and disillusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Further consideration on the importance of this work in Séance practice can be found in Taylor (2015).

As a practitioner I am still playing with putting this into some form of useful theoretical context. To this end I have found it helpful to draw on Mangan (2007) who, in turn, is drawing on Jackson (1981) by borrowing from the science of optics to identify the 'paraxial region' as a useful metaphor for the 'spectral region of the fantastic'. For Jackson this 'imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image) but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two'. (Jackson, 1981, p.19). Mangan extends this notion in his discussion of early modern magic (in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century) by describing it as 'multifocal' and 'able to contain paradoxes and contradictions'. As I develop my work in Bizarre Magick I am starting to think that this can be applied to the experiential side of the practice. I feel (to quote Mangan again) that the; 'ambiguous space between efficacy and entertainment' appears real in 'mind of the audience [...] and I'd like to suggest that the imaginative spaces created by Bizarre Magick can be just as 'creative and playful' as Mangan suggests the experience of 17<sup>th</sup> century magic was. (Mangan 2007, 56–57)

In order to move the audience into this imaginative space it is the magician who must attempt to place themselves and the audience within the paraxial region. They must be able to move 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. So to illustrate this, it might be useful to look at the traditional magician and then look at the Bizzarist; as, for the traditional magician, the movement between the real and the unreal is regular and often embedded into the form.



Magician and theorist Robert Neale (2008) calls this pacing *monkey movement*. 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. This can be seen in the work of a 'traditional magician'; playing very much the trickster role and presenting magic (real) but intimately framing the magic as tricks (unreal).

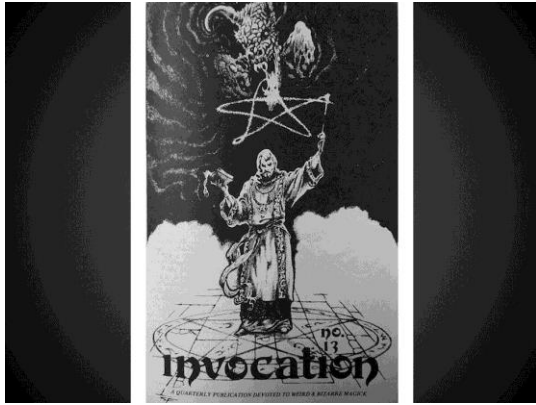
It is an accepted trope of the performance magician, and something the early Bizarrists fought against. This is not to deride the traditional magician, but theatrically it is, in my opinion (and the opinion of many other Bizarrists) simply not very challenging. It is **trickster** magic – something Hass refers to as 'reversal and disruption' (Hass, 2008a, p.22) – it is **tricks** – or even worse - **puzzles** to be solved.

Bizarre Magick strives for something more. It is a more theatrical kind of magic that at least for the moment of performance offers the participants a gateway into the paraxial. It can induce something that Hass (in a different article) terms 'visceral cognitive disturbance' (Hass, 2008b). Magic's performative intention is deliberately blurred. This blurring, rather grandly, helps us, according to Burger and Neale, awaken 'to another realm of experience; the magical dimension that lies behind and beyond all experience.' (Burger & Neale, 1995, p.24)

The role of the magician and their relationship to the audience in such work is complex and I feel a re-labelling as 'paranormal entertainer' or 'mystery entertainer' helps – take for example, Derren Brown with his 'psychological illusionist' moniker.



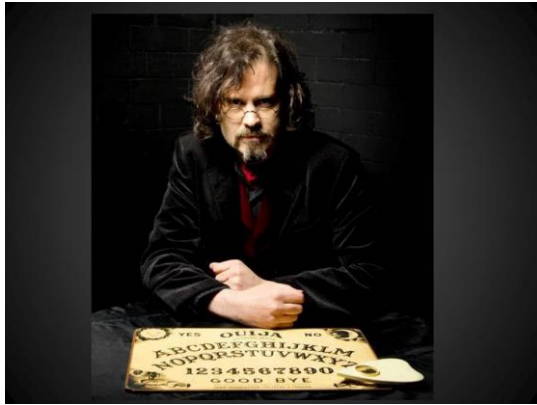
By re-framing himself, he is able to blur the edges in his work and, in turn, this allows him to draw on, for example, current trends such as NLP as reasoning behind his effects.



So for experiential magic to take an audience into the paraxial the magician must move away from the established view of the magician. Early Bizarrists (and indeed proto-Bizarrists) knew this. Take, for example, the image of the magician encouraged by *Invocation Magazine*. Steven 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. Here the magician seen as a skilled practitioner of ritual, able to command elemental forces and summon demons, and indeed many of the key effects of the time appeared to achieve this very thing. In experiential magic the magician/mystery entertainer/facilitator places themselves in a performative grey area. Which means, according to Doc Shiels, he must not, simply appear as an actor playing the part of a magician, he must BE an awesomely and demonstrably **real** cantrip-casting magician! (Shiels, 1988, p.19)

We have seen this work in the mainstream where a magician can invite the audience into the paraxial by forming a contract based on little or no acknowledgment that performance magic is taking place. Is real magic being performed? A useful example is Uri Geller who, breaking through in the nineteen seventies began a mind power craze similar in scope to the spiritualism craze promoted by the Fox sisters over a hundred years earlier. We also have magicians such as Alexander the Great performing at the beginning of the last century who held special ladies psychic advice matinees – brilliant pieces of theatre in themselves, and later practitioners such as Chan Canasta (1920-1999) and The Amazing Kreskin (1935 - ) who

performed in the sixties and seventies and who avoid mentioning magical method, instead suggesting remarkable mind power.



In my own performance practice this contract is important – my main act is séance where getting to the paraxial is a key aspect of the work. Working with story-telling, hauntings, the gothic, popular perceptions of the supernatural, I hope to facilitate an atmosphere where all traditional magical tropes are absent and through a guided process lead into a dark séance where the participants experience apparently real spirit contact. Once again drawing from Mangan, this work aims 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, 2007, p.xv)

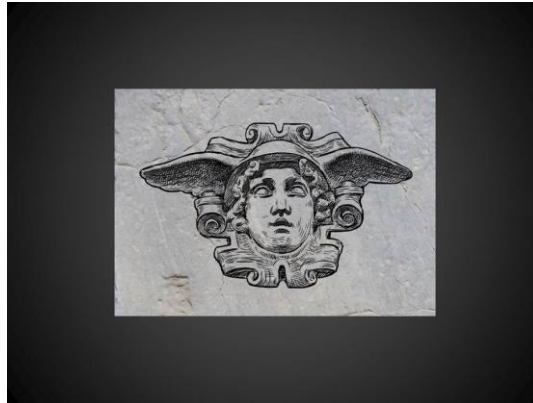
In experiential magic, at least for the moment of performance, a spectator is given the chance to experience real magick and while the notion of the paraxial can be useful in describing this experience, admittedly it is only part of the story and my practice continues to explore new avenues of enquiry.<sup>2</sup>

I want to finish with a little piece of experiential magic that we all can enjoy – not to the grand scale of the illustrations above, but a little moment where you might experience a tiny bit of the paraxial. It is based our ability to see the magical in divination and so you may perhaps get an answer to a burning question. It’s a little

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<sup>2</sup> See Taylor, 2015 & Taylor & Nolan, 2015

piece I performed at Yorkshire Sculpture Park for Hester Reeve's YMEDACA project. It's called *The Gift of Hermes*. (Taylor, 2014)



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