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Impersonating Spirits: The Paranormal Entertainer and the dramaturgy of the Gothic Séance

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 historical, the geographical, the environmental, the physiological and the scenographic sign-system of the Gothic. Voodini has discussed his practice in a number of key publications including; *The Paranormal Entertainer* (2008a), *Reader of Minds* (2008b), *The Jack the Ripper Séance* (2010a) and *How to Host a 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 of the Victorian parlour show. Voodini describes this as "old school Victorianaesque" 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), and, in his performance séance the ghosts themselves do not define the Gothic space, rather it is the placing of them within a recognisable and rich semantic arena creating, 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). 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 attempted to throw out the established trappings of popular contemporary conjuring and re-frame 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 bizarrists were: 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 1991, 96) (Burger & 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 is fully discussed in Taylor and Nolan (2015), and while bizarre magick as a performance form 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 & 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 & Cordy

2007). For ostension to occur, legendary narratives such as these are not simply re-told 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 behavior, or as Hutson (2012) terms it “magic thinking”, is the propensity of finding occult meaning in the world around us and acting 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 & Vázsonyi (1983) point out that ostensive action is not acting; “actors intend to create illusion, not delusion” (Dégh & 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 accepted notion of the magician. 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. Creating 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 & 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 & 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 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 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, “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, 762–763). Further emphasising the move away from being overtly performance magical.

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 *Jinx* (1934-42), *Cauldron* (1967-68), *Invocation/New Invocation* (1974-1996), *Séance* (1988-89) and Ormond McGill's own collected *Psychic Series* (1951). These works culminating 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 & Houston 1998). The séance itself is a ritual happening with a sombre, serious atmosphere that is relaxed and not fearful in anyway. 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*.

However, not all séance performance practice can be seen to exhibit this level of ostensive action, the "theatrical" séance can 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 does, however, draw 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 12 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 *Book of Spirits Séance* (2005), on the other hand, is advertised as a séance for those “that 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 an *International Association of Spirit Mediums* (fictional) 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 cold case surrounding the disappearance of a fictitious 5-year-old girl named Emily. During the performance the guests are gathered to “solve the mystery of the tragic loss of five-year old Emily Lipenski” (Piazza 2007, 6) 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 commonality with the model of traditional performance magic where the effects are performed with a level of theatrical disillusionment. Here the magician is seen as an actor (in Dégh & 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 nineteenth century spiritualism was, according to During (2002), a “variegated movement”, and “difficult for outsiders to understand” (During 2002, 150). This fuzziness 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, pseudo science, the heavily draped rooms, candle-lit halls, etc., 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 genre” as having “similar attitudes to setting atmosphere and style” (Bloom 1998, 2). Often theatrically mirroring the popular Gothic seen 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, historical memorate become “enchanted” and so are charged with spirits or ghostly activity. This plays upon a phenomena observed outside of paranormal entertainment where spontaneous ostensive action and magic behaviour occurs in other perceived uncanny spaces. See for example Lindahl’s (2005) discussion of pilgrimages to gravity hills where visitors experience ghosts apparently pushing them up 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). 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, 172–173), 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 memorate based within the Gothic mode. For example, if the séance is performed in an old building a believable dark and suspenseful history for the building 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 is to reassure themselves they are acting to protect or overcome the perceived threat and thus “controlling their fates” (Ellis 2001, 201–202). 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 Champion-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 the 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: Firstly, the work provides a visual and visceral form that through performance and paraphernalia creates an imagined space where hallucinations of the past can be glimpsed. For example, in Voodini's *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 rest of the 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 2010, 25; Voodini 2014), and, secondly 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 glass moving and spelling out messages from the dead. Thus transforming the paraphernalia 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 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 part real, part 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 the people of an imagined Victorianaesque 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 of 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 we see spirits contacted not as material entities, but rather through haunting and possession.

The next element of the séance chimes 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”, they 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 a 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 are empowered to take part in a fully in-the-dark séance where they will experience the presence of spirits first hand. Encouraged by the paranormal entertainer to form a circle, the group are 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, 2008, 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 relax and they recount their experiences. It is now up to the paranormal entertainer to close the narrative and this chimes with the *showdown* experience discussed above. In séance performance it 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 a movement away from any clear trappings of performance magic, it is the conjuration of a feeling of ambiguity in 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 & Neale, 1995, 24). The Gothic séance performance is 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 with added spirits of Victorian children. They are presented in the séance room as viable entities – even though they may only be figments of a complex Gothic imagination.

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