Reflections on the Creation of Gothic Figures by Fantastic Magic

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines wider issues of disenchantment in conventional magic performance practice, ultimately exploring the spectatorship of bizarre magick which offers an alternative model of practice where the shift from enchantment to disenchantment is much less clear cut than in traditional conjuring. How bizarre sought to blur the distinction between real and performed magic is considered with reference to 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. This discussion is approached with direct reference to the author's own performance practice and research into bizarre magick and mystery entertainment.

1.   Introduction

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.

2. 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). 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 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.

3. Example Two

A few year later, in 2014 when demonstrating my work on experiencing the paraxial through performance magic and mystery entertainment 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 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 bizarrists 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.

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.

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 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/mentalist. 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.

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. 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;

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 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 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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