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Watching the Dead Speak

The role of the audience, imagination, and belief in late modern spiritualism

let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.
. . . Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs in the receiving earth.
(Shakespeare 1997 (1599): prologue to *Henry V*)

so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith (Coleridge 1847 (1817): XIV).

performances of everyday life . . . ‘make believe’ – [they] create the very social realities they enact. In ‘make-believe’ performances, the distinction between what’s real and what’s pretend is kept clear (Schechner 2002: 42).

This article began, as many do, in the form of a conference paper. In the live action of presenting a paper it is very easy to express, simply through gesture, the divide between actor and audience, watcher and watched. I, who am giving the paper, standing on the platform being watched, am the actor; you, sitting down in the chairs watching, are the audience. However, life is more complex, more provisional, and more ephemeral than that. The performances of everyday experience do not take place only in an auditorium; they happen in a variety of other locations, domestic and corporate, urban and rural. Moreover, the role of the audience, and the individuals within it, is not constant across all performances, nor is it fixed within discrete performances: it has an inherent potential for fluidity.

This article is going to consider my experience of this fluidity as a member of a late-modern audience during two performances of psychic mediumship. It will describe them, drawing on narration provided by my field notes,

and analyse them through theoretical discourses, provided by the discipline of performance studies. It will also go on to consider how post-modern, or for the purpose of this paper, late-modern audiences, are connected to their modern antecedents. I am using the term 'late-modern', as opposed to 'post-modern', because the paper sets out to explore contemporary society's ongoing continuity with its past, rather than its disjuncture. A late-modern focus suggests a society that is a development of what has gone before rather than a reaction against it—as one aspect of post-modern theory might propose. (Bauman 2000: 5–8, 28–9; Giddens 1990: 1–10, 149–50). And, with this connection in mind, the paper will explore a preoccupation attributed to modern society, an emergent sense of self-identity and self-consciousness that was synchronic with the 'golden age' of spiritualism (1880–1914) (Owen 2004: 7; Warner 2006). It will consider this modern self-awareness in relationship to an examination of the role of the late-modern audience at contemporary demonstrations of psychic mediumship. It will focus on how the performance conditions of these events stimulate the audience's imagination and beliefs and consequently affect their sense of self.

The rules of engagement

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In order to discuss the two performances of psychic mediumship on which this article will focus, I need first to talk about the theoretical discourses from theatrical theory I will be using to deconstruct and analyse the events. Both audiences and actors bring a set of expectations with them to a performance—a set of beliefs, if you will, about how this interaction will operate: these are the ways they, as individuals, expect this world of performance to work. These implicit expectations are rarely articulated either internally, by the individual to him/herself, or out loud, to the collected participants. These expectations are, most often, in the terms of Roland Barthes, 'naturalised'¹ and beyond

¹ French philosopher and social theorist Roland Barthes, through his observations of the relationship between cultural material, in particular photographs, and its use by bourgeois society, described how certain objects and processes could become so

question. That is not to say that all parties are in agreement. Each set of individual beliefs varies, one from the next, some subtly, some radically. This variation is negotiated in the collective interaction of these individual beliefs. Here, through their points of contact, and the spaces between them, implicit negotiations take place which lead to the formation of contracts of collective consensus about how a particular performance operates.

A commonly held view of theatre, which is broadly naturalist and often euro-centric, suggests that an actor does not begin a performance by coming out in front of the curtain to speak directly to the audience in order to explain the mechanisms of imagination that make a performance possible. There is a presumption that the audience know what the collective consensus is, about how this performance will work, and that this consensus includes an expectation that the actors will pretend they are part of a real world that has no sense of being watched. There is no need for a pre-show statement that says, 'you sit down there and watch us up here, as we pretend to be people other than ourselves, in order to enact a narrative through the physical construction of an imagined world.' The implicit agreement here is that there is an invisible, fourth wall through which the audience look. This prevailing view would have it that to give such a statement, in front of the curtain, would demystify the live performance, break the contractually sustained 'spell' between actor and audience, and render it impotent.

But audiences are more sophisticated, complicated, and fluid than that. They, with the actors on stage, are active participants in this process of make-believe. In the opening epigraph of this article, I quote from the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V*, where this breaking-down of the fourth wall, and the explicit articulation of implicit expectations, is part of the script. Here the audience's complicity in creating the pretend, performed world is part of the performance itself. The actors ask the audience to forgive them for being unable to recreate the Battle of Agincourt in its entirety on stage, and to 'play along' by pretending to believe that they see not one man, but an army, not floorboards, but muddy fields with horses '[p]rinting their proud hoofs in the receiving earth' (Shakespeare 1997 (1599): prologue). Shakespeare's classic script challenges one of the prevailing assumptions—the commonly held view of theatre under consideration—about how performances work; an assumption that suggests it is a process that divides actor from audience. Shakespeare exploits this implicit complicity of the audience, by stipulating

common place as to gain a 'naturalistic truth' enabling them to be accepted as beyond question; they become naturalised. See Barthes 1957.

that it is not only the actor who plays, who imagines, but also the audience who actively engages in this process of make-believe. This is how performances operate, not as processes of division between watcher and watched, but as a provisional concordance of belief and imagination between all parties.

These provisional rules of engagement set up a framework within which the audience's set of beliefs, about how this world of performance works, interact. It is a world that is set apart from the everyday where space and time operate differently: it is a liminal world. Just like its epistemological source, the architectural limen, the liminal world of performance is a threshold, it occupies the metaphorical space between the everyday and the extraordinary, the natural and the supernatural, and, in the events under consideration in this paper, it bridges the worlds between the living and the dead.

So, how does this interaction of implicit and explicit beliefs and processes of reality and make-believe make themselves manifest in performances of psychic mediumship? We have already established that audiences are not passive, fixed vessels but active in the process of making meaning in a performance. The ways they do it change, across different performance genres, and even during the performances themselves. It is clear that audience members have an inherent potential to change their role, but where does the impetus to change come from?

The suspension of disbelief

so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith (Coleridge 1847 (1817): XIV).

The second epigraph for this article comes from a letter that Coleridge wrote to a fellow English poet, Wordsworth. In it, he explains that readers, and for the purposes of this paper, audiences, fully engage with a performance by creating a moment of 'poetic faith', a process by which they draw on an internal, personal truth in order to *willingly* suspend their disbelief. For Coleridge, this is done in order to find a closer connection to the 'supernatural' world of the Absolute. By suspending their disbelief audiences are setting aside the inconsistencies between the real and performance worlds. They do this in order to 'play along' with—and within—the liminal world they are occupying, creating and sustaining. But Coleridge identifies a further point of signifi-

cance: this suspension of disbelief is in fact, a *willing* suspension. Audiences choose to be complicit in the world they are sharing with the actors who are performing.

This suspension of disbelief is not fixed, sustained in one state, because audiences are fluid. They change what they do, and what they think, during the course of a performance. This impetus to change roles is not simply forced on the audience from the outside. Audiences are self-aware, and reflexively engage in personal observation as the event proceeds—Should I be laughing at this bawdy joke if I'm sitting with my children? Should I like Macbeth this much; he's just murdered someone? And, in the case of public demonstrations of psychic mediumship, how do I feel about myself now my father has just forgiven me from beyond the grave? These moments of internal reflection challenge the beliefs and expectations the audience brought with them. And, as the performance continues, they are processed, fed back, and challenged anew, in relationship to the continuing events of the performance. They are interpreted by the audience through a process of comparison to the meaning-making contracts that were constructed at the outset. These contracts, like the audience members who constitute them, are in a state of constant change.

This fluidity means audiences are 'multiphrenic'.² They are in a place where plural truths, rational and irrational, are embodied, processed, lived, and deconstructed, simultaneously. The particular performances under consideration are, like all performances, full of enticing contradictions: they present tensions between truth and fraudulence, the sacred and the secular, entertainment and efficacy. They are places, not of binary oppositions, but of simultaneous, provisional and ephemeral states. The article will now move on to consider, in light of two performances of psychic mediumship, how audiences negotiate these complex contradictions and how performances create conditions that allow both actors and audiences to sustain multiphrenic states both as individuals and collectively. The first performance is a public demonstration on the stage of a provincial theatre, and the second is a closed séance in a private home.

2 'Multiphrenic' is a phrase Michael Mangan uses in his book *Performing Dark Arts: a cultural history of magic* (2007) to explain the capability of audiences, in an age of technological rationalism, to move beyond the apparently dominant discourse of 'modern knowing as rational, sceptical and scientific' to sustain a simultaneous engagement with 'a rich alternative culture . . . saturated with images of magic' (p. 191).

Performance 1: Shaun Dennis

The auditorium of six hundred is full. The medium on stage is in full flow and he says, 'I'm getting a gentleman—I can feel a tightness in his chest. Can anyone own this?' Several dozen hands are raised. He continues, 'I'm getting the letter B or D.' Some hands go down, others go up. He closes his eyes and nods. He says, 'Please more slowly, one at a time.' He opens his eyes and explains that there are several spirits coming forward to speak through him and he's having difficulty hearing the gentlemen with the chest pains clearly. He closes his eyes again. And apparently listens, nods again, and says, 'Thank you.' He opens his eyes and says, 'I've got a name, Helen: he says he's sorry about the car.' There's a gasp from a group of four people in the row in front of me—they whisper an agreement: it must be a message for them. The medium looks directly at them, makes eye contact, and says, 'Can you own it?' One voice says, 'Yes. It's my Dad.'

And the psychic's colleague, wearing a black t-shirt emblazoned with the word 'Crew', brings a microphone up to their row that is passed, with great solemnity, down to the voice. Again, the medium makes eye contact and says 'Can you own this?' And the, now amplified, voice rolls around the auditorium with the words, 'Yes, it's my Dad'. (Field note extracts, Goldingay 2006b)

I saw the work of Shaun Dennis, 'psychic medium, stage and platform demonstrator' (Dennis 2008) in a traditionally styled, proscenium arch theatre, where he, the actor/medium on stage, like me giving the conference paper, was separated from the audience in the auditorium. In order to explore the relationship between the watcher and the watched at this event, this section will focus on a small, apparently insignificant moment, as described by the preceding field notes above. It is a moment where Dennis speaks directly to the audience members, who, through their process of response, change their roles.

As the event opened the rules of engagement were clear. We waited facing an empty stage: the actor was to be separate from the audience. The clarity of this separation was not fully exploited by lighting, with the usual dark auditorium and lit stage. The architecture of the building however, with the framed platform the medium was about to occupy above and the audience seating below, was sufficient to set up clearly defined, implicitly accepted, power structures for the engagement. We would follow his lead.

His arrival is announced by a voice off-stage that says, 'Please welcome, Shaun Dennis.' It seems most likely that Dennis announced himself. This a technique often used by compères and stand-up comedians. But here, in particular, it highlights one of the implicit agreements audiences have with their performers, that, in this liminal space, one man can be an army, floorboards a battle field, and there is more to human experience than 'meets the eye'. The disembodied voice off-stage sets up two potentials. Firstly, and primarily, it prepares the audience for the actor's entrance so that they can be appropriately welcomed. Secondly, in this case, another more subtle, implicit, possibility is also reinforced; it suggests to the audience, that by suspending their disbelief, they may be able to perceive possibilities that are beyond their everyday experience.

Dennis enters: we clap. We know this is part of the appropriate behaviour expressed by those in the role of the audience. We, through this action, explain that we have already decoded signs, and consolidated our broad, collective rules of engagement for the performance. We have understood what is taking place, and can differentiate between different kinds of performances of platform mediumship and the appropriate behaviour an audience should demonstrate. Through clapping we show we understand the distinctions between a public demonstration of psychic mediumship in a theatre and a demonstration in a Spiritualist church service. In a church setting, although the medium is announced by their local sponsor, they are not usually welcomed with applause; it is not one of the rules of engagement for a sacred event. In this case, we are in a secular building: but, are we witnessing the sacred or the secular? Which rules of engagement should we apply? The edges between entertainment and efficacy are already being blurred. The set of beliefs each individual has brought with them, their consolidation, and their fluidity is already in evidence.

Our clapping subsides: Dennis explains what he will be doing during the course of the event, and what techniques and processes he will be employing in order to speak on behalf of the dead. This gives our roles further clarity, we the watchers, he the watched. Dennis then begins to communicate with 'the other side' and to speak the words of the dead that he has been given. Here, the previous clarity of roles fogs as another performer is introduced, a third party at the event who was previously mute; the dead. Now there are two performers, the newly-apparent dead, who Dennis is able to hear, but the audience cannot, and Dennis, who the audience is able to see and hear. With this introduction of further actors, a second liminal world is constructed within

this performance event that is itself already set apart in space and time. A liminal location within a liminal location is created.

There are now also two audiences, Dennis, who observes the dead, and we the audience who observe him. This is where we, the audience, are more richly engaged with suspending our disbelief. Whether we believe he is speaking to the dead or not, we are still prepared to engage sufficiently with this performance on some level, so that it, in part, fulfils its purpose as it sets out to change us, to convince us that there is something taking place that we cannot see. Dennis has become multiphrenic, simultaneously being watcher and watched. He is also taking on the more complex, intermediate role of conduit. Here he listens to the dead, 'watching', then becomes a conduit for the dead as he interprets and communicates what he 'hears' to the audience. This takes place whilst he, in the role of narrator and compère, simultaneously sustains and 'holds' the performance space for the audience. There are two processes at work for Dennis as 'medium' as he works to engage his audience. As conduit he is concerned with the efficacy of his communication whilst as compère he is concerned with the entertainment of the audience. The audience's multiphrenic position at this time is more subtle; they are still separate from the actor, but during this exchange they are embodying several possibilities as they suspend their disbelief. They sustain both the residue of sceptical technological rationalism and the possibility that this presentation is indeed evidence of a supernatural realm.

Dennis shifts role again: he begins to communicate more directly with the audience. He no longer closes his eyes in order to listen to something apparently behind him, but opens them in order to take in the width of the auditorium and shift his dialogue from the dead to the living by asking, 'Can anyone own this?' This is an interesting choice of language; he is encouraging us to 'own' his message, to take responsibility for it, to confess to our complicity in it. There is a well-established discourse in performance studies, developed, in part, from the work of Bertolt Brecht and his 'active spectator'. It asks questions about the responsibility of an audience member at a live performance. It argues that rather than being simply passive, (as with the broadly naturalist, Aristotelian view of theatre presented in the introduction) that audiences have a great deal of power: the collective, and in particular the individuals within it, have the ability to change the thing they are watching, to intervene if they wish, and to alter their world as a consequence of what they experience. With this power to change the world comes responsibility, and this responsibility makes us not watchers, but witnesses.

Dennis, then, is asking the audience to explicitly admit to an implicit potential within the performance—to own what he is saying. Once it has been ‘owned’ with a response from a member of the audience, things begin to change again. The respondent’s role shifts from that of watcher to that of a potential witness to what is about to follow. The audience’s shift is more subtle. If we have the potential to intervene in what we see, then we, even if we are sceptical of what is taking place, are complicit in it and, on some level, our non-interventional presence bears witness to its validity. Once the person the message is ‘intended for’ has become clear by a process of elimination, and someone has indeed come to ‘own’ this communication from the dead with the whispered words, ‘Yes, it’s my Dad’, she then shifts fully from being an audience member to becoming a performer. She is about to witness to her belief, and in part, to our ‘belief’ also.

The apparent fixity of the power relationships between actor and audience are challenged further when Dennis introduces a theatrical device into the auditorium that is usually reserved for the stage, a radio microphone. As the extract from the field notes describes, once Dennis identifies an audience member for whom he has a specific message, they are given a radio microphone so they can be heard more clearly. This is an apparently simple action, using a seemingly benign, ‘naturalised’ piece of technology. However, the processes involved are much more interesting if we consider them in relationship to how the role of the audience might change in response to its introduction, and how the action of an audience member speaking through the microphone is, in fact, the culmination of several implicitly agreed transactions of change.

The introduction of this device again changes the roles of the performers and spectators. The entire audience become performers in two ways. First, we are placed in a state of potential: although we have not been selected for this message, we may be selected for the next and this anticipation encourages us to invest ourselves further into the event. Second, as we look around the auditorium to see where the microphone is going, we are all watching each other. The microphone means we all become simultaneously both watcher and watched. This shift then, for some, becomes concrete, physicalised as they are given the microphone to pass down the row to the person for whom the message is intended. They too, for a fraction of time, are fully performers. The increase in energy and excitement, instigated by the shift in our role from observers to participants, slows, quiets and shifts again as our attention returns to Dennis who has, in the interim, continuously held eye contact with the

respondent. He says to her, 'Can you own this?' She replies, now amplified with the microphone, 'Yes, it's my Dad.'

Dennis responds. At this point several things take place simultaneously. First, space and time collapse as specific members of the living speak with specific members of the dead. This process means a third liminal space is constructed as the watchers disappear. They move to occupy a world that is outside that which is sustained within the gaze between Dennis and the respondent, which contains the spirit he speaks for. The actors apparently lose all awareness of us; we are no longer there, as their intimate bond is constructed. Second, the majority are now audience again, but watching a new performer, who is not on stage, but in the auditorium. Third, the liminal space now extends from the bounded safety of the 'other' world of the stage, into the more everyday world of the audience. The introduction of the microphone challenges the power relations on stage. It gives authority to the respondent who was formerly watching and facilitates their newly accepted role of being watched. However, it simultaneously challenges this new found authority, because in this performed exchange of intimacy the performers share a volume. This is a volume that is not ordinary, but one that allows the audience to become voyeurs, to listen in. We are now able to hear private moments where intimate family secrets and personal anguishes are exchanged. With the arrival of the microphone the members of the audience are reaffirmed as witnesses to beliefs; the respondent's belief in life after death and our own belief that this intimate exchange is not private but part of a product to be consumed for our pleasure.

How does this event, and other demonstrations of psychic mediumship, challenge belief, and the expectations we negotiate through the process of performance? We, as audience, accept our part in the performance through our own suspension of beliefs and disbelief, becoming willing witnesses to a collective engagement with an unseen liminal world. We embrace the possibilities that performance, and the performative roles and techniques it uses, present us with. We become active spectators and complicit witnesses to that which we engage with. To witness is to step beyond Shakespeare's 'make-believe'—which asks its audience to pretend they can see the Battle of Agincourt on stage—to allow the performance to become more concrete, to seep out into the reality of our everyday experience. In the final quotation of the epigraph I cite Richard Schechner who makes a helpful distinction between 'make-believe'—the playful, act of 'pretend' that Shakespeare asks his audience to engage in—and 'make belief'—the type of performance that requires its audience to accept that what they are seeing, in the enactment of

certain public events, is true. Such a performance is exemplified by the party political television broadcast or political rally that asks its audience to believe what they see and hear is factual, that they are witnessing a force for good in their world and therefore the party is worth voting for. These performances set out to ‘make belief’ in their audience, rather than to engage their audience in ‘make-believe’. But as I experienced in Dennis’s performance, and will go on to explore in the next example of a public demonstration of psychic mediumship, these apparently clear binaries between real and pretend are not sustainable, and collapse in the complexity of lived experience. Shaun Dennis, although working in the pretend world of a theatre, is himself asserting that there is life after death. He is attempting to make the audience believe that the living can communicate with the dead.

Performance 2: soul rescue

In the suburban sitting room the clock on the mantelpiece reads eight o’clock.

M says, ‘Shall we begin?’

All the lights, except a small lamp in the corner, are extinguished. M turns on a tape of soothing music. The small, closed séance begins.

The group collectively speaks the Spiritualist ‘Great Invocation’ that begins: ‘From the point of light within the Mind of God, Let Light stream forth into the minds of Men.’ It ends with a rousing ‘May Christ return to Earth!’

I feel a tap on my knee, look up, and M points towards J. He is slumped in his chair, his breathing slow, but laboured. I can hear a rasp in the back of his throat. The criss-cross of muscles over his face is flickering, contracting. J grunts, nods his head, and, with great fluidity and rapidity, lifts up straight from his hips, rolling along his spine until it is fully extended. His chest expands and he looks straight ahead with his eyes closed.

M says, ‘Welcome friend’ and J begins to speak. (Field note extracts, Goldingay 2006a)

This is an extract from my notes made during six-months of fieldwork in 2006 with the *Soul Rescue Group* affiliation of mediums in the South West of England. They meet bi-weekly to hold a closed séance—‘a circle’ working without an audience, a single affiliation to a larger religious group or any financial exchange—from the home of one of their members. The purpose

of these séances is altruistically to 'rescue souls'. For them, these 'souls' are spirits who, on dying, having left the physical world, but instead of moving on to the Realm of Spirit, they have become trapped in a sort of limbo between this world and the next. The circle has nine members. During séances the group's three 'mediums' enter into full or partial clairvoyant, clairsentient or clairaudient trance. This is in order to allow the dead to speak through them to a convenor. He, along with the rest of the group, the 'sitters', helps this trapped soul to 'find the light' and move on to the next realm. The group sees this private aspect of their work as their 'moral duty to heal the world' and as something of equal importance to their paid work of clearing unwanted spirits from homes, or giving private psychic readings, in addition to their other public, altruistic church based work as healers and platform demonstrators. (Evans 1997, 2006)

The evening begins over tea and cake as these old friends pick up conversations about families and current affairs. The séance opens with the question: 'Shall we begin?' And, here, in my nodded response, that mirrors the behaviour of everyone else, I am already complicit in what is about to take place. We collectively speak the *Great Invocation*, all watchers, all watched. There is an assumption that I know the prayer's words: I do not. And from here on, from the beginning of this experience, the rules of engagement between actor and audience, as suggested by our commonly held view of theatre, shaped by the division between the watchers and watched, are challenged and moved: the balance is changed. This shift can be seen most clearly in terms of numbers, particularly if we begin by considering the audience. I am the audience—the *one* person who has come into this liminal world to watch, and thus the assumption that the audience is in the majority is already lost. I cannot lose myself in a crowd. In this setting I am as visible as the actors.

As with other performances, I have expectations about patterns of behaviour that will be appropriate for this performance and, during the event, I continually decipher and respond to cultural signs and signifiers. However, unlike other performances, not all the rules of engagement are implicit. One key aspect of my role as the audience is made clear to me from the outset. When the circle's convenor, M, invited me to the séance, he explained that if I was to attend, I would have work to do, that I would act as a 'sitter'. The sitter's role is to join with the circle in order to supply the collective energy that enables the medium to enter into, and sustain, their trance state. M described how sitters provide the 'power' for the intensification of the liminal world that bridges the realms of the living and the dead, thus creating the right conditions for the medium to become a vessel of communication for those who

have ‘passed over’. In this engagement the rules of interaction, unlike the previous performance, were discussed explicitly beforehand: what was expected of me was articulated clearly. However, the opportunity to discuss what my supplying of this energy might mean, and how I might produce it, never arose. So when I agreed to attend the event I was already accepting that, beyond the privilege of entering a closed séance, I had a responsibility to the group and the success of the event: I was a witness.

We conclude the *Great Invocation* and wait in silence. I mirror the posture and behaviour of the other sitters. At this point to call myself ‘audience’ is inadequate; the terminology is too broad. There are other terms that might better describe my multiphrenic role. The group sees part of its purpose in the world as evangelical, a position that is not uncommon in classical spiritualism. They believe that they should be sharing their experiences and providing proof of life after death. And so, on some level, my presence as a researcher was welcome—although that does not mean I was free from suspicion. The role of ‘researcher’ shares points of commonality with the role of the audience through the actions of watching and interpreting. My role might also be understood in terms of ‘observer’. In discourses surrounding ethnographic methodologies the term ‘observer’ is often placed at one end of a continuum that connects at the other to the term ‘participant’. This participant-observation pairing is a useful means of describing the oscillation of my role in relationship to the event.

But, what of my relationship to the group? A further discourse, prevalent in the sociology of religion, considers the ‘insider versus outsider’ status of the researcher (Arweck & Stringer 2002; McCutcheon 1999). At the séances, I was always an outsider, not part of the community I was studying. However, I did have specific responsibilities for the functioning of the event, and at the séance’s close I was thanked for my contribution and asked for feedback and observations along with the rest of the circle. So, at times, I was in part an insider; here this clear distinction of my relationship to the community fogged. As the séance begins, my multiphrenic state is particularly complex: I am the audience, the researcher, the witness, the participant, the observer, the insider, and the outsider. My role is super-fluid.

J begins to speak: M touches my knee to direct my neophyte attention. And, the circle’s collective focus shifts to the primary actor, the medium. The audience now watch. Those previously separated by their designations, of sitter or medium, share the same role as we wait for the message. Earlier, settling down as a group and preparing for the séance, we all watched J as he transformed from his everyday, pedestrian self—with a body that had strug-

gled to take a cup back through to the kitchen only minutes before—into the medium before us, sitting upright with great ease. In the moments preceding his first words he transforms again, becoming the vessel who, on entering a trance, goes through a series of observable physiological changes. These include shifts in body position and mobility, muscular contraction and breath patterns. In a later interview he puts these changes down to ‘transfiguration’, the moment when the soul of the dead person enters the vessel’s body to speak (Goldingay 2006). J’s changes in role are clearer than mine. With the words ‘Shall we begin?’ his pedestrian-self becomes his medium-self. And then, as he enters his trance, his medium-self becomes a vessel, carrying a simultaneously separate and inherent ‘other’.

The way that J enacts that aspect of himself that is ‘a medium’, is different from the way that Shaun Dennis enacts this ‘medium-self’. The clairvoyant Dennis is an interpreter who sustains multiple awarenesses of three worlds whilst demonstrating; the world of the dead, the everyday world of the living, and the liminal world of the performance. J however, as a full-trance medium, does not remember anything that takes place in any realm from the moment he enters trance to the moment he leaves it. He explains that this loss of consciousness ‘is just the way I like it’ (Goldingay 2006a). J argues that he is not interpreting what the dead wish to say, nor locating who the message is intended for, but simply allowing the soul who is to be rescued to occupy his body and to use his vocal chords in order to speak their own words. For J then, as he enacts his medium-self, his role as a facilitator is sharply defined. He is not multiphrenic but ‘non-phrenic’, choosing as he does to enter full trance and to be completely unaware of the performance he is giving.

J speaks and an ‘other’ appears. This is someone who is expressed through J’s body as the voice of a dead person. Those who are sceptical of the possibility of communicating with the dead would say he is now, most fully, an actor. They might argue that he is creating, for the watching audience, a living, breathing fictional character. There is a particular popular mythology surrounding acting that suggests that for an actor to create a character they must undergo a process that requires them to embody full transformation in a way that is not dissimilar to J’s description of his working process. The suggestion is that actors need to become their characters and to do so they need to be an empty vessel, devoid of themselves, for the character to fill: that to act is to be taken over by another. This particular technique would be commonly recognised as ‘method acting’. Here actors do not make a distinction between the world of performance and their everyday life. During the performance period they claim to fully become, to be taken over, if you will, by their char-

acter. This comparison is an interesting one but it disregards the importance of the lengthy process of creation an actor goes through, via rehearsals and direction, scripts and props, costumes and the other players, that help actors create their characters.

This position is challenged further if we consider the mythology of 'method acting'. In a comprehensive survey of more than 300 UK and USA based actors completed in 2007, Eric Hetzler demonstrated that one of his key findings contradicted the popular assumptions held by some members of the media, and even some performance theorists, that actors fully experience themselves 'becoming' their characters (Hetzler 2007). For the majority of his respondents this was an untenable position. He explains that, for example, if an actor is playing the role of a serial murderer, it is hardly appropriate for them to live this character in the real world. Actors then, like audiences, sustain plural awarenesses of their roles and states of self. They simultaneously have a sense of their everyday self, themselves as an actor, and themselves as a character, in addition to a reflexive sense of how they are simultaneously both like and unlike the character they construct.

However, there is another position. This is not one that would sustain the assumptions of the sceptic who argues that mediums set out to be actors, but one that suggests that actors, like mediums, seek to become the vessel through which 'others' speak. This ability to become a vessel, to quiet the contradictions that living plural, simultaneous roles presents the actor with, is sought by some actors because it is perceived to be a means to create better performer focus and therefore better performances. They, through training, often based on Eastern martial and meditative practices, seek states they describe as 'optimum performance' or 'flow'. These are usually expressed in the metaphorical terms of 'when the body becomes all eyes' or 'standing on the edge of the breath looking' (Zarrilli 1998, 2004). Here the actors are seeking the means to create, during their performance, a state of conscious trance where they are able to move beyond their sense of sustaining multiple, separate awarenesses, to find a seamless single state of being at one with their character, fellow actors, the liminal world of the performance and their audience. Here they are not, like the approach taken by Shaun Dennis, interpreters connecting plural worlds, or non-phrenic and in full trance like J, but 'omni-phrenic', simultaneously occupying the parallel real and pretend realms of the performance.

What I saw happen to J was more complex than simply pretending. I saw physiological changes in his body preceding the trance and I heard a voice speak that was of a similar vocal range and quality as J's everyday voice. However, the soul that was being 'rescued' spoke freely for twenty minutes us-

ing words and accents that were other than the medium's everyday language. In his performance, I did not see a dead person speak again, but I did see a living person transformed by a performed process.

Make-believe and make belief

. . . performances of everyday life . . . 'make believe' – [they] create the very social realities they enact. In 'make-believe' performances, the distinction between what's real and what's pretend is kept clear (Schechner 2002: 42).

In the transitions taking place in, and in-between, these two performances of psychic mediumship, the edges of the pretend and the real, the sacred and the secular, that which is entertainment versus that which is efficacious, merge. As late-modern audiences we are very good at decoding the information we are presented with, and reading it in relation to our expectations. We recognise that performances contain aspects of both make-believe and make belief. When watching performances that most obviously set out to make belief, to convince us of their truth, we expect there to be elements of pretend and elements of entertainment within it. Our interpretation of the performance's explicit message is tempered by our knowledge of its subtext: we suspect that politicians lie, that company boards want our money, and that churches want Believers. And, whilst we watch performances that invite us to make-believe, to play in a pretend world, we expect to connect that world sufficiently to our own realities to be deeply moved, challenged and uplifted by what we experience. The ephemeral effects that performances have on audiences—the effects that change audiences as a result of make-believe—are those same effects that those who seek to make belief would like to create in their potential believers.

Thus, any simple, clean divisions between entertainment and efficacy, sacred and secular, make-believe and make belief are not sustainable. If we take the example of the work of Shaun Dennis, its setting is make-believe. It is created in a theatre; a building that we know is constructed to hold a pretend, performed world. This world of course reflects and recreates the real world outside, but it is, by its very nature, a forum of pretend. We buy tickets knowing that he sets out to capture and sustain our attention by entertaining us. However, through these devices and processes established for the pretend of theatre, Dennis is asking us to engage with the supernatural, to suspend our disbelief in the possibility of communication from 'the other side', and believe

that what he does is in fact true. He wants to make us believe that he can give messages from the dead, to believe in life after death.

In the example of the Soul Rescue Group their primary purpose is efficacious: their séances set out to rescue souls who are trapped in a sort of limbo; entertainment is not part of their intention. In discussion with the group at a later date about another platform medium I had booked tickets to see, one of the sitters commented on his approach. She said, 'He's quite a good clairvoyant. But he's a bit of a showman.' (Goldingay 2006a). Here she was expressing the sophisticated process of interpretation that audiences go through. She is acknowledging the plural roles the platform medium takes on, in this case clairvoyant and showman. She is acknowledging that different situations require different techniques to engage an audience but that, sometimes, the entertainment aspect of these events overshadows their efficacious purpose.

Moreover, her distinction between the clairvoyant, as the vessel of truth, and the entertainer, as a misleading showman, is for many outside spiritualism, who are sceptical of its members' ability to discern subtle differences in intention and delivery, counter intuitive. They would expect her to have only one relationship to the 'truth' content of a psychic's demonstration of life after death: they would expect her to believe it absolutely and unconditionally. In the enduring conflation between acting, mediumship, fraud and pretence there are two positions at work; the first is that for many, mediumship is fraudulent, and, in a different, but not unrelated way, so is acting. There continues to be an ongoing tension between the Church, and its moral residues in society, and the association of theatre with immorality and pleasure. Mediums are seen as con-artists who, like actors, exploit the vulnerable for financial gain. Actors are placed alongside these con-artists and conjurers, who through a minor shift in perception can be seen to be presenting themselves as fortune tellers and prophets. The second position argues that spiritualism, and public events that provide evidence of life after death, are acts of religious significance and should not be conflated with, or considered in terms of, 'performance'. This position is antithetical to the former. Spiritualism is often seen to be at odds with the established Christian church but they share a broadly similar distrust of performance because it explicitly 'pretends'. For some it is morally unacceptable to use performance as a means of examining the processes of a truthful spiritual experience.

So, what of our relationship to our modern antecedents and their emergent a sense of self-identity and self-consciousness? Anthony Giddens suggests, in his book *Modernity and Self Identity*, that these questions continue to be of paramount importance:

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity—and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. (Giddens 1991: 70)

These performances of psychic mediumship present a particular focus from which to consider our late-modern relationship to the self and our creation of it. Like our modern forbears, for us late-moderns, the self and our beliefs about the world are not absolute. For most people, most of the time, the word is made of provisionals and possibilities. We recognise that the playful enactment of make-believe is not the same as the instructive purpose of make belief that attempts to change us. But we do recognise that they share a common point within the consciousness of the super-fluid self. They have the power to change us, temporarily at the very least. The performance of psychic mediumship continues to be a forum where we late-moderns can pretend and change, believe and suspend our disbelief, in order to explore our relationship to mortality.

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