

The Psychology of the Séance, From Experiment to Drama

In which the authors first conduct an experiment showing how suggestions and prior belief strongly determine what observers report seeing during a séance—then use the findings to perform five nights of public theater in a former Victorian prison as an entertaining way of communicating about skepticism and critical thinking.

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A few years ago we wrote an article for *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* describing an unusual experiment examining eyewitness testimony and the psychology of séance room phenomena (Wiseman et al. 1995). We staged three séances, each attended by twenty-five people, and the experiment was designed to assess the reliability of the participants' testimony. All of the phenomena that occurred were faked.

During each séance, the participants were seated around a small table in a darkened room. A book, a hand bell, a slate and a maraca, all of which had been treated with luminous paint, were situated on the table, and everyone was asked to concentrate on these objects and try to make them move.

One object—the maraca—was gimmicked to roll across the table and fall to the floor. All other objects remained stationary.

All participants completed two questionnaires. The first, given before the séance, asked whether they believed in the paranormal. The second, after the séance, was concerned with their experiences during the event.

We discovered that 27 percent of people incorrectly reported that at least one of the stationary objects had moved. Also, significantly more believers than disbelievers reported the illusory movement of stationary objects, and tended to interpret the séance phenomena as genuine paranormal events.

Last year, we decided to continue research on this topic by investigating suggestibility in the séance room. Some researchers believe that conditions commonly associated with a séance (darkness, uncertainty, fear, etc.) may make people susceptible to suggestion, and that by suggesting that phenomena are occurring, mediums can create a reality in the minds of sitters. We set out to put this idea to the test.

Our new experiment took place in March 1997 at a convention held by the *Fortean Times*—a U.K.-based magazine covering a wide variety of “strange phenomena.” This time we staged eight séances, and, as before, twenty-five people attended each, with all participants completing a similar pre-séance questionnaire. The setting and séance objects remained unchanged, apart from the inclusion of a wicker ball, which was gimmicked to move instead of the maraca.

The fourth author, Andy Nyman, is a professional actor and magician. Andy kindly agreed to play the part of the medium, and he followed a set script for all of the séances. Initially, the participants were asked to join hands. All of the lights were then extinguished and the objects on the table became visible from their luminous glow. The group was first asked to concentrate on the ball. It slowly rose approximately twelve inches into the air, moved around the séance room, and gently returned to the table. Andy then asked everyone to concentrate on moving the table. The table remained completely stationary, but Andy suggested that it was in fact levitating with comments like “That’s good, lift the table up, that’s good, keep concentrating, keep the table in the air.”

Two weeks later, all the participants were sent a questionnaire about their experiences during the séance. We first asked people whether they thought that any of the phenomena they had experienced were actually paranormal. As with our first experiment, participants’ belief in the paranormal affected how they interpreted what they had seen, with 40 percent of believers stating that the séance was genuine, compared with only 2.6 percent of disbelievers.

A second question examined whether the verbal suggestion had been effective. The results were startling. A massive 34 percent of people stated that they had actually seen the table levitate. Again, participants’ belief in the paranormal played a key role, with 51 percent of disbelievers correctly stating that the table didn’t move, versus just 31 percent of believers.

Our questionnaire also asked people whether they had had any unusual experiences during the séance. Almost one in five people said that they had, and reported various strange feel-



Co-authors Andy Nyman (left) and Richard Wiseman: Out of the lab and into the theater.

ings, including cold shivers when concentrating on the objects, a strong sense of energy flowing through the circle and a presence in center of the room near the table. Thirty percent of believers reported these experiences compared to just 8 percent of disbelievers.

In short, we discovered that believers were significantly more likely than disbelievers to interpret the fake and illusory phenomena that happened during the séance as genuine paranormal events. In addition, more than a third of people were convinced that the table had moved as result of a few authoritative comments from our “medium,” and the degree to which they were affected by these suggestions was related to their belief in the paranormal. Finally, believers were more likely than disbelievers to report unusual experiences during the séance.

At the end of the experiment we sent a short report of our findings to everyone who participated in the study and received some intriguing feedback.

Some people couldn’t believe that the table hadn’t actually levitated and wondered whether we really had brought about a genuine paranormal levitation without realizing it. Luckily, we had recorded all of the séances via an infrared camera, and a quick look at the resulting footage revealed that the table had indeed remained earthbound throughout all of the séances!

Other people said that they had found the whole exercise fascinating and had become far more skeptical about the evidence for both séances and the paranormal. This type of feedback made us wonder whether it might be possible to use the concept of the fake séance to help promote skepticism and

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critical thinking. After much discussion we decided to develop the séance into a show for the general public. The scene was set for "Séance—An Evening of Spirit Theater."

The show was devised, written, and performed by Richard Wiseman and Andy Nyman. March 1998 was chosen for the show, in order to coincide with British National Science Week. The week is full of events designed to help the public to understand science, and we thought that the séance show would be an unusual but appropriate addition to the calendar.

A venue was required that ideally would be damp, dark, and uninviting. The House of Detention—a disused, underground Victorian prison in the heart of London, and a popular tourist attraction, met the criteria perfectly. With the venue established, we contacted various media, including BBC television and radio, and managed to generate considerable interest in the venture.

We staged two performances each evening for five nights, and had a maximum of twenty-five people attend each performance.

In the first half of the show the audience was led through the maze of prison corridors and told about the history and psychology of modern séance. The first stop was a dark cell, where the story of the Fox sisters was told. The audience heard how the sisters had started the craze for spirit communication in the 1840s, and how the social conditions of the time helped to spread the notion across America and throughout the world.

The tour continued into a second cell where the audience was told how many of the professional mediums working during the Victorian era were tricksters. This concept was illustrated with an outline of the life and times of Henry Slade, whose career as a medium was cut short by being repeatedly exposed as a charlatan and who eventually died penniless in an American workhouse. The audience was shown the secrets behind some of the tricks used by Slade to fake spirit slate writing and manifestations.

The next section of the show took place in another dimly lit, claustrophobic Victorian prison cell and illustrated how a séance can be the perfect setting for suggestion and mild hallucination. This section centered around the story of D. D. Hume, a medium who was responsible for some of the most impressive séance phenomena, including a famous 'levitation' at Ashley Place, London.

Finally, the audience was shown a short slide show of rare and historic photographs, illustrating how even the most eminent witnesses of séance phenomena may be less than reliable. Sir William Crookes's investigation into the medium Florence Cook was given as an example. Crookes, an eminent Victorian scientist with a distinguished reputation, vouched for Miss Cook's materializations and spirit contact. Only later did accusations of illicit meetings and an extramarital affair between Crookes and Cook raise questions about the research.

At this point the audience had heard how séance conditions were perfect for trickery, suggestion, and self-deception. However, to make these points in a more vivid and experiential way, everyone was invited to travel back in time and take part in a theatrical reconstruction of a Victorian séance.

The audience was quickly led along a narrow ventilation shaft into the heart of the prison. Here, lit only by candlelight, Andy Nyman sat at the head of a large table. The audience tentatively took their seats and the séance began.

The first section was designed to create a tense atmosphere and involved telling a Victorian ghost story—The Murder of Marie Ambrose. During the story the audience had to look through a packet of Victorian photographs and select their favorite image, set an old pocket watch to the time of their choice, and randomly choose a four-digit number. At the end of the story Andy revealed a report of the murder from a turn-of-the-century newspaper. The photograph chosen by the group proved to be identical to the picture of Marie shown in the paper; the watch had been set to the time of Marie's murder; and the four-digit number corresponded to the year that she died. The séance was set to begin.

Luminous objects, including the maraca, the hand bell, and the wicker ball, were examined by the group and placed on the table. Everyone joined hands and the candles were extinguished. In pitch darkness Andy slowly summoned the spirit of Marie Ambrose. After a few minutes, the objects moved and levitated from the table, to gasps and screams from the participants. These phenomena were achieved via a mixture of techniques actually used by fake mediums at the turn of the century and from the lessons learned from our experiments into séance psychology.

The show quickly sold out and gained a great deal of media coverage. Perhaps more important, it provided an unusual and compelling way of communicating skepticism. Research carried out at museums suggests that hands-on exhibits are far more effective than more traditional types of displays. Our show extended this concept to provide people with an extremely memorable experience that helped them appreciate that the evidence for some paranormal phenomena is far from reliable.

We have now carried out two large-scale experiments into the psychology of the séance and have used these studies as a basis for a unique initiative designed to communicate skepticism to the public. Our results strongly suggest that witnesses are often less than reliable and that their beliefs about the paranormal influence both their experiences during the séance and the way in which they interpret these experiences. In addition, we have found the concept of the fake séance an appealing and effective tool for illustrating the main findings of our research and communicating a skeptical perspective on paranormal phenomena in general.

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Reference

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