

## **Appendix: Kreskin the Television Personality**

In the mentalism world – although I have not seen him perform live – *the Amazing Kreskin* has a similar, albeit significantly more restrained, reputation for self-indulgence on the stage. Kreskin is known as a charismatic showman who, during the course of his performances, sings, plays the piano, name drops, tells anecdotes about celebrities, performs hypnosis, and gives demonstrations of pseudo mind-reading and hypnosis.

Between 1970 and 1980, Kreskin made a record-setting 61 appearances on *the Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Kreskin remained in the public eye appearing on television programs such as *Late Night with David Letterman*, *the Howard Stern Show*, and in 2009 became the first guest to make three appearances on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. Kreskin is a larger than life figure and was the model for John Malkovich's anti-heroic character in the 2008 film, *The Great Buck Howard*.

I was particularly influenced by mentalist Bob Cassidy's observation that during his stage show Kreskin '...spends most of his time name-dropping and telling stories about the old days on *The Tonight Show*, apparently wanting to establish himself primarily as a television celebrity.'<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Kreskin helped to define the superstar tactics and paraperformance approach which I would apply both onstage and off. Cassidy goes on to explain that by observing Kreskin, one may learn an important lesson. Namely, according to Cassidy, that 'a good performer should be able to entertain an audience for 20 minutes or more without doing any "tricks" at all. Mentalism is NOT about the tricks, it's about the performer and the overall experience that he provides to the audience.'<sup>2</sup>

I was deeply influenced by this line of thinking by Cassidy, and it challenged a perspective which I had previously come across in an essay by Bruce Bernstein. This essay, entitled 'The Presentation Excuses the Methodology,' Bernstein theorizes about how it might look like to watch a "real psychic" perform. He writes, 'If a real psychic could do what he or she does, and do it without

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<sup>1</sup> 'Can you be a magician and mentalist??' Penny For Your Thoughts. *TheMagicCafe.com*. 30 May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> 'Can you be a magician and mentalist??' Penny For Your Thoughts. *TheMagicCafe.com*. 30 May 2016.

resorting to trickery, what would this demonstration look like? How would he or she sound?”<sup>3</sup> Bernstein answers that it would probably look something like the following exchange: “Good evening. You’re thinking of the number five, and you’re thinking of the word “homeostasis.” You, sir, want to travel to the tropics... and your child, ma’am, I’m sorry to report, is going to drop out of art school. Thank you, and good night.”<sup>4</sup> According to Bernstein the exchange is ‘not very entertaining, is it?’<sup>5</sup>

I am not so sure that such a performance would not be entertaining. It certainly could be. But more significantly, Bernstein makes an unjustified assumption that a real mind-reader would do nothing on stage but give demonstrations in the manner of the classical conjurer. It seemed to me that Cassidy’s comments were more relevant and if a true psychic existed (and if their claims had been credibly validated) then such a person would probably spend very little time *proving* their ability. In fact, the description of Kreskin’s show, as provided by Cassidy, sounds to me, *exactly* like what a real mind-reader would do on stage.

Considering Kreskin’s influence on my performance, and thereby my life, I feel that it is merited to look more closely at the structure of his one-man show. An extremely thorough analysis of this show, as observed periodically over several decades, was made available on an internet forum for mentalists. The author, using the pseudonym “Thought Thief,” provides a remarkably in-depth and moment by moment analysis of Kreskin’s show, paying particular attention to Kreskin’s psychological tactics. Below, I am including only a small fraction of this analysis as it pertains to Kreskin’s opening monologue and ‘name dropping’ segment. He writes:

Each time I see Kreskin live I am struck by the brilliant psychological structure of his performance. Every word, sequence and gesture has a conscious and calculated purpose. From the outset, Kreskin seeks to charm, disarm and control. And he does so masterfully. His background in psychology is evident in everything he does. That his presentation has varied barely a word in the 20 years since I first saw him – and yet is delivered as if for the first time – is a testament to the careful thought and deliberateness behind this master showman's every utterance...

Kreskin next seeks to bolster his credibility with his audience (“folks,” remember) while also asserting control over the proceedings. He does this under the guise of

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<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2012. p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2012.. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2012. p. 138.

sharing anecdotes about his numerous appearances on *The Tonight Show*, *Regis and Kathy Lee*, etc., as well as testimonials from the likes of Johnny Carson... This is NOT vain name dropping. Kreskin is reminding the audience of his resume to build his credibility, to instill in the audience the belief that they are in the midst of someone famous and special, that they can and should expect an amazing experience. After all, wasn't Johnny Carson amazed?<sup>6</sup>

Kreskin serves as an excellent example of superstar behaviour. His claims, disclaims, and his fascinating book, *HOW TO BE A (FAKE) KRESKIN*, are discussed in depth in 'The End of Mind-reading.'

### **Works Cited in '*Kreskin the Television Personality*'**

Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2012. Squash Publishing. Print.

'Can you be a magician and mentalist??' *Penny For Your Thoughts*. *TheMagicCafe.com*. 30 May 2016. Web. 15 Mar 2018.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Kreskin Performance - Review and Analysis.' *Penny For Your Thoughts*. *TheMagicCafe.com*. 13 October 2002.