

*Visions and Revisions, December 2014*



*Visions and Revisions* took place as part of a residency at Corcadorca's Theatre Development Centre in the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, Ireland in December of 2014. Portions of the performance were devised with UCC Theatre students Clelia Crawford and Aisling Reardon, and alumnus Helena Reilly. In *Visions and Revisions*, I attempted to juxtapose myth (the second sight and spiritualism) with reality (suggestion/hypnosis and body language/ideomotor response).

The set and costume of the show were designed in order to be deconstructed in parallel with the pseudo premises of mentalism over the course of three acts. In Act One, I purported to genuinely perform clairvoyance and spirit channelling. Soon after, I confessed that these abilities were fictional; they were simply advanced psychological techniques disguised as psychic abilities. In Act Two, I purported to demonstrate these super-psychological techniques. Soon after, I confessed that these abilities, too, were fraudulent. Act Three contained only genuine demonstrations of suggestion and body/mind-reading using truthful presentations.

I began the performance wearing all black: black trousers, black shirt, black jacket and waistcoat, and black necktie. By wearing black, I acknowledged the shadowy liminality with which spiritualists have long been associated. During the course of the purported séance, my jacket was removed and my tie loosened. By the end of the performance, I was wearing only black trousers

and a white t-shirt which worked in opposition to the all-black costume of the séance. The short sleeves resulted in the exposure of multiple esoteric tattoos on my right arm. The set was similarly deconstructed; beginning with flats, backdrops, and tables, and ending as a bare stage.

The most notable aspect of this performance for me – in retrospect – was my performance of trance mediumship while touching the shoulder bone of a lamb and surrounded by a circle of salt. As previously noted, although I may have appeared to perform this demonstration sincerely, my aim in fact was satirical, and before the conclusion of the performance I denounced my mediumship as fraudulent. Contrary to my expectation, however, I personally found the performance of mediumship to resonate more powerfully than expected. I further found the denunciation of the mediumship to be less satisfying than anticipated. This experience was similarly reported by audience members in the feedback session following the performance.\*

I was significantly impacted by the comments of one audience member in particular; a first-year University student who had attended a number of my physical theatre classes. During the post-performance feedback session, he admitted that during the performance he found himself ‘really believing’ that I possessed the abilities that I had claimed. He explained that it seemed ‘completely natural’ to believe during the performance, but afterward he found himself confused, since he doesn’t ‘really believe in those sorts of things.’\* Following the feedback session, he further expressed to me that he found it exciting to finally witness the second sight abilities of which he had previously only heard and read. He also told me that he felt disappointed and ‘a little sad’ when I described these abilities as fake.

This student’s comments stand out to me as extremely significant, and it was from this experience that I decided to stop attempting to publicly debunk psychic phenomena. Following this performance, I no longer openly operated as an open-eye mentalist. I had not previously considered that the position of the skeptic/debunker – like the position of the mentalist/psychic – could negatively impact audience members. This discovery had much in common with a paper, entitled ‘The Ethics of Disenchantment,’ which I would subsequently hear presented by Professor Franc

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\* ‘Discussion following Visions and Revisions.’ See appendices:  
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Chamberlain at *The Magiculum*, a gathering of the Magic Research Group at the University of Huddersfield in 2017. In this paper, Chamberlain explored some similar ‘concerns [he] still had’ about performing ‘as a “Gypsy” fortune-teller’ at an event decades earlier, exploring the often neglected ethical dimensions of (emphasis added) ‘enchantment *and disenchantment* in contemporary performance magic.’<sup>1</sup>

### **The Exposed and Inscribed Body**

The exposure of *my* – rather than a character’s – tattoos, in conjunction with the act of undressing, raised a number of important theoretical issues including nudity, undressing, and the modified body. Given the popularity of prominent tattoos (particularly hand tattoos) among contemporary mentalists,\* an analysis of tattoos in quasi-performances is appropriate.

Throughout the course of my praxis, I received numerous esoteric tattoos relating to my research including: an eye within a pyramid, Rhine symbols, a hypno-spiral, hieroglyphs, the Heisenberg Uncertainty theorem, a black cat and number 13, a face and bones marked POISON, the two-person alphabet code of Houdini, as well as discreet hand and knuckle tattoos. These tattoos belong as much to my fictional psychic identity as to my *actual interest* in the performance of psychic phenomena.

Regarding tattoos – along with other modifications and customizations of the body – Laurie Hicks writes, in ‘Explorations of Visual Culture: Written on the Body’ that tattoos, piercings and other body customizations ‘are not seen as something separate from who we are as physical beings,’ and consequently comprise a ritual process of ‘marking the body as an art form’ and ‘as a site for the inscription of meaning.’<sup>2</sup> Whatever the actor’s motivation for marking the body may be, the presence of an actor’s, *rather than a character’s*, tattoos, foregrounds complex issues regarding the presence of “the real” versus “the illusory” in performance.

The exposure of my tattoos in *Visions and Revisions* resulted in a number of interesting comments in the post-show feedback session. One late middle-aged gentleman, for example, referenced my

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<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain, Franc. ‘Editorial for JPM Issue 5.’ *Journal of Performance Magic*. 5(1). 2018. p. 1.

\* Luke Jermy and Peter Turner serve as two highly prominent and influential examples.

<sup>2</sup> Hicks, Laurie. ‘Explorations of Visual Culture: Written on the Body.’ *CultureWork*. Vol. 9. No. 3. Mar 2005.

tattoos numerous times, stating that ‘maybe [he was] just old and doesn’t understand tattoos’ but that he had a sense that when I was in only a t-shirt, ‘the ringmaster had left the building.’ Other spectators agreed with the gentleman to some extent, expressing that it seemed that by Act Three I had stepped ‘out of character.’\* These comments were clearly related to the deconstruction of my costume and the revelation of *my* tattoos, which blurred the boundaries between myself and the artificial aspects of the persona I was projecting.

Bert O. States, for instance, has written of the ‘effortless hard work that produces on the actor’s brow beads of perspiration that do not belong to the character.’<sup>3</sup> An even more stark example occurs when tattoos appear in performance, but without belonging exclusively to the character. States has also described the way in which dogs and children on the stage are never wholly subsumed within the narrative illusion.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Aoife Monks writes in *The Actor in Costume* that, ‘the nude body appears stubbornly resistant to its inclusion in the fiction’ and further notes that ‘the performer’s presence seems to magnify when naked...and this presence is often felt to disrupt the field of the narrative illusion.’<sup>5</sup> While I will explore the issue of striptease and nudity in a later section as it pertains to the public “strip searches” of my latter performances, I will point out here that the exposure of tattoos may have a similar impact – regarding the phenomenal modes described by States – as the exposure of other “private parts”. For that reason, I will briefly introduce the issue of nudity on the stage.

Karl Toepfer, in ‘Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance,’ argues that ‘theatrical nudity awakens complicated “problems” concerning the “reality” of the performing body.’<sup>6</sup> Monks similarly points out that there is, among spectators, the ‘desire to retain the body as an aesthetic object, and to prevent the appearance of the “real” in performance.’<sup>7</sup> Yet, Monks also argues that the “real” actor is ultimately inaccessible to spectators, and that ‘the notion that a body can ever “just” be naked, erroneously suggests that bodies can exist beyond the effects of representation.’<sup>8</sup>

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\* ‘Discussion following Visions and Revisions.’ See appendices:

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<sup>3</sup> States, Bert O. ‘The Actor’s Presence: Three phenomenal modes.’ *Acting (Re)Considered*. 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> States, Bert O. ‘The Actor’s Presence: Three phenomenal modes.’ *Acting (Re)Considered*. 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. pp. 100-101.

<sup>6</sup> Toepfer, Karl. ‘Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance.’ *Performing Arts Journal*. Vol. 18. No. 3. Sep 1996. p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 104.

According to Monks, this is true not only of the human body, but of all objects on the stage. She argues that ‘the observable qualities of objects invariably become “untrue” when put onstage, are rendered theatrical simply through their inclusion in the frame of the playing area.’<sup>9</sup> On this, Monks further writes, ‘When actors appear on the stage, they always appear dressed in inverted commas, become “actors”: heightened representations of themselves. This is the truism of the semiotic approach: all objects become “objects” when they enter the stage space, rendered unreal by their inclusion in the delineated world of art.’<sup>10</sup>

I will also note – with regard to undressing on the stage – that Monks argues that ‘it is not in the body’s bare state that the presence of the performer is so asserted: rather it is in the body’s revelations through the additions and removals of clothing that this effect on presence is possible.’<sup>11</sup> According to Monks, ‘If we look closely at undressing we can see that the body is not revealed, in some sort of truthful state beneath the clothing, but is rather reformed and remade by the act of undressing.’<sup>12</sup> In other words, according to Monks, ‘Undressing doesn’t betray the secret of what is beneath the costume; it simply establishes more secrets and more costumes.’<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the loss in status brought about by stripping down layers of my costume, Aoife Monks observes that ‘clothes... are crucial for masculinity’s status, a status that is undermined by the loss of those clothes when men undress onstage,’<sup>14</sup> and suggests that ‘this may be why the idea of naked men may not be so erotic – their drop in power, which is less usual in the traditions of representing men, might be viewed as disturbing rather than sexy.’<sup>15</sup> This conclusion was reflected in the feedback that ‘the ringmaster had left the building.’\*

This performance also surfaced questions of gender stereotypes and patriarchy in performances of mentalism. My decision to place myself at the centre of a triangle of women who served essentially as “assistants”, and whose actions invoked the imagery and iconography of witchcraft – by which

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<sup>9</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. pp. 38-39.

<sup>11</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 101.

<sup>13</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 109.

\* ‘Discussion following Visions and Revisions.’ See appendices:  
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women were historically persecuted and oppressed by traditional male dominated power structures – brought to my attention the need to explore such issues further.

### **Works Cited:**

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