

Unfathomable, May – July 2016



Unfathomable – written by and starring the Deans – was previewed at the Hayfield Manor on 22 May 2016 in Cork, Ireland, as a benefit for the local charity, *Teddies for Loving Care*. The show premiered at *The Old Bull Theatre* in London on 19 July 2016 with a touching introduction from the legendary mentalist and *International Man of Mystery* David Berglas who became a household name in England in the 1950s for his ‘nationwide psychological experiments’¹ on BBC radio. His 1954 TV show, *Meet David Berglas* attracted over 19 million viewers.

In *Unfathomable*, we collaborated with Martin T. Hart, the author of the 2015 book *Piddington’s Secrets*. Hart produced the London performance and provided technical advice on pseudo-telepathy. Additional performance advice was offered by David Berglas. Theatre director Andy Crook* provided consultation during the devising process and director Amanda Noar oversaw lighting and sound design. *Unfathomable* extended the dark TED Talk approach of *Post-Cartesian Telepathy* into a full five-act show. Each act began with the discussion of a telepathy-related

¹ ‘David Berglas – interview transcript.’ Theatre Archive Project. 7 Dec 2008.

* ‘Biographies of Collaborators.’ See appendices: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

concept and concluded with a demonstration. *Unfathomable* was described on the online magic news magazine *MagicWeek*, as ‘the most baffling two-person telepathy demonstration this side of history.’²

In an attempt to maximize the power of our apparent telepathic demonstrations, we used humour judiciously, and adopted a contemporary – albeit retro – aesthetic. We aimed to project personas which were theatrical and interesting, but hopefully perceived as authentic by our audiences. Our movement throughout the show was precise and designed to reflect the movement of chess pieces – moving in straight lines, diagonal lines, and even “L” patterns – in line with the squares painted on the floor of the stage.

Our costumes were contemporary, but reflected the retro feel established by the 1950 black and white *British Pathé Newsreel* about the Piddingtons which was screened at the start of the show.³ In that newsreel, Sydney Piddington wears a loosely fitting double-breasted navy pinstripe suit and Lesley, dressing for warmth on the Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, wears a light-coloured overcoat with a matching scarf tied into a bow. In line with this, I wore a custom slim navy double-breasted pinstripe suit. Maggie wore a leopard print dress which was cut in a 1940s style with a mandarin style collar and matching bow. The elegant cut of the dress existed naturally in tension with the leopard print fabric. The rather sexual and animal connotations of the leopard print further existed in tension with Maggie’s sweet demeanour throughout the show. Despite the “flashy-ness” of our anti-costumes, they were selected to appear as semi-formal wear, rather than theatrical costumes.

We incorporated a new “danger” stunt – a form of Russian roulette with glasses of juice and one glass of toxic chemicals – into this performance. Our poison test was original both in presentation and in methodology and incorporated an “author’s reading” from a non-existent pulp style novel ostensibly written by Maggie entitled *It’s the Thought that Kills*. Following the show, mentalism historian David Britland – a columnist for *Genii Magazine* and the author of *The Mind and Magic of David Berglas* and *Chan Cansasta: A Remarkable Man* – told me in person that our poison test was ‘the best acid test [he had] ever seen.’

² ‘Unfathomable.’ *Magicweek.co.uk*. No. 837. 9 Jul 2016.

³ Piddingtons, the. ‘The Piddingtons Keep Millions Guessing.’ *British Pathé*. 1950.

Clearly, we continued to navigate the complex relationship between a retro aesthetic and issues of power and chauvinism. However, in *Unfathomable*, we began to address these issues in new ways. For instance, during our poison test we inverted the roles of “sender” and “receiver” as I was blindfolded with cotton gauze and cotton bandage, while Maggie ostensibly guided me telepathically away from the poisoned glass. We also created opportunities for Maggie to take centre stage in capacities other than “receiver”. For instance, we featured her singing and ukulele skills during her solo performance of *Moon River* and promoted her abilities as an author of ‘murder-by-telepathy pulp thrillers.’ In Act Five, Maggie delivered a meta-theatrical monologue in a self-referentially melodramatic and virtuosic, whirlwind *tour de force*. This monologue was entitled ‘The Deans meet the Piddingtons’ and eccentrically described our “life story.”

At the preview of *Unfathomable* in Cork, I paid particular attention to the framing and situating of the performance itself. By framing the performance at the Hayfield Manor, Cork’s only five-star hotel, we were able to create an air of gravitas – a sense of “event” or “happening” – before the performance even began. This sense was compounded by our decision to use the performance as a fundraiser for the *Teddies for Loving Care (TLC)*, a non-profit charity which provides sanitary teddies to children during extended hospital stays. Although it was not explicitly mentioned during the performance, this charity is associated with Freemasonry, as indicated by the labels of the teddy bears being sold at the event, and a number of high-ranking Freemasons were in attendance. I hoped that, this too, would contribute to the special or controversial nature of the “event.”

By holding the event as a fundraiser, we were able to secure the room at the Hayfield Manor for a significantly reduced price. While the event was free to attend, a “20 Euro donation” to the charity was suggested. In this way, we placed a fair “value” on the event, without necessarily discouraging people without means from attending. Incidentally, the event was a success for the charity – collecting nearly 400 Euro after the cost of the venue was deducted.

Above all, the decision to frame the performance as a fundraising event was indicative of our superstar status. We were attempting to frame ourselves, not as college students trying to earn a fast buck, but as celebrity Z-listers – who didn’t need the money – endorsing an important social cause. In an article in *The Sunday Independent Life* magazine, in an article entitled, ‘Art of the show-off,’ Pat Fitzpatrick humorously discusses the trend of ‘raising awareness’ for causes. He

writes, ‘You can’t be criticized for raising awareness – it’s a brilliant self-promotion tool, if you have the slightest talent for fake sincerity.’⁴

The charity fundraising frame of *Unfathomable* was designed not only to establish us as – at least, aspiring – Z-list celebrities, but it also gave me leverage to invite real local “celebrities” to act as special celebrity judges for the event. It seemed self-evident to me that celebrities attract celebrities, so my intention was to use the presence of local “celebrities” both to promote the event, and to raise my own status by association. For the performance at the Hayfield Manor, our celebrity judges included Muster Rugby player Billy Holland and former *Miss Pride Cork* Foxy P. Cox. The celebrities in attendance in the London premiere included David Berglas, bestselling psychologist Richard Wiseman, television personality Debbie McGee, and the mayor of the London borough of Barnet.

The inclusion of celebrity judges further served to reinforce the special nature of the event. The Piddingtons always featured celebrity judges during their BBC Radio broadcasts, ostensibly in order to ensure the fairness of the proceedings to the listening audience. Each of Dunninger’s broadcasts, as well, included celebrity guests, referred to as judges, who were ‘deemed to be unbiased participants in the telepathy experiments.’⁵ Biographer Joseph Atmore describes Dunninger’s judges in this way:

Those that acted as impartial judges came from the worlds of literature, commerce, theater, the military, opera and motion pictures.... Typically, there were three judges who participated in the broadcast show. These judges would be situated behind a table off to one side of the stage. At the onset of the show, they would be introduced by the smooth voiced announcer and then each in turn would make a scripted sceptical remark regarding Dunninger’s powers. By the end of the evening, they would appear to have been convinced that Dunninger had the power to read thoughts.⁶

Atmore points out that while there is no reason to suspect collusion on the part of the judges, they nonetheless, ‘had nothing to gain by trying to expose Dunninger’ who was a vigorous promoter of war bonds and belonged to the same talent agency as many of the judges.⁷ Dunninger’s genius,

⁴ Fitzpatrick, Pat. ‘Art of the show-off.’ *Sunday Independent Life*. 22 Apr 2018.

⁵ Atmore, Joseph. *Brain Busters*. 2001. p. 6.

⁶ Atmore, Joseph. *Brain Busters*. 2001. p. 11.

⁷ Atmore, Joseph. *Brain Busters*. 2001. p. 12.

according to mentalist Lee Earle, ‘was to hitch his wagon to the stars, combining celebrity guest appearances with seemingly impossible challenges... The staggering results inevitably dominated conversations in barber shops and beauty parlors nationwide.’⁸

Since my performances were for a live audience – rather than for broadcast – a case could be made that adjudicators were not necessary. However, the presence of the judges added an air of gravitas, and even opened the gate for the playful examination the notion of “celebrity” itself. In this way, the judges served a psychological function which was greater than their technical function. The inclusion of judges also mimics the structure of “reality” television talent contests, such as *Britain’s Got Talent*. In fact, before long, I was to find myself standing in front of four “real” “celebrity” judges on the set of Season One of *Ireland’s Got Talent*.

Works Cited:

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⁸ Atmore, Joseph. *Brain Busters*. 2001. p. 82.