A photograph of a stage set for a performance. In the foreground, a row of black chairs with red seats is arranged in a semi-circle. The stage floor is dark, and the background is a large, textured wall. Several spotlights are visible, casting beams of light in various colors: yellow, purple, and red. The overall atmosphere is dramatic and theatrical.

INSIDE STAGE HYPNOSIS

Andrew Newton

Contents

Inside Stage Hypnosis	3
Why on earth did I do that?	42
Why didn't it work on me?	44
A bridge too far...	46
Street hypnosis	50
Stage hypnosis and political correctness	53
You're back in the 1970's	55
Hello Stranger, farewell credibility	60
A new approach to stage hypnosis	62

Inside stage hypnosis

Stage Hypnosis is safe... most of the time. But stage hypnosis's a delicate balancing act between entertainment and a complex psychological illusion.

I made my name and a very good living doing stage shows all through the 1980's and early 1990's and I was good at it. Playing to audiences of 2,000 plus was the norm rather than the exception – something I did all over the world, from England's green and pleasant land to the greener and pleasanter land of New Zealand and the sunburned splendour of Australia and South Africa. So it might seem a trifle hypocritical to now poke holes in stage hypnotism.

I don't have a problem with stage hypnosis, because hypnosis on stage isn't the problem. But I firmly believe that stage hypnotists *are* the problem and I'm sorry to say I regard them mostly as unprincipled and in some cases, downright dangerous with a callous disregard for the wellbeing of their subjects. And this is why...

In Britain, the only real public protection comes from the Model Conditions issued by the Home Office and attached to the 1952 Hypnotism Act. New updated conditions were introduced in 1994 and are an easy to understand four page list of do's and don'ts, musts and must nots. Under the 1952 Act, all public demonstrations of hypnotism in Britain have to be licensed by the local authority where the hypnotist is to appear. The only exceptions are private shows such as those taking place in private members clubs, private birthday parties, weddings, funerals and bar mitzvahs and private parties in private houses.

However, the vast majority of hypnotists appearing in Britain's pubs and clubs are unlicensed – a criminal offence in itself, but one which is also ignored by police and local authorities because stage hypnosis doesn't rate very highly on their list of priorities. Most hypnotists don't worry too much about the model conditions either because no one bothers applying for a licence in the first place, so many hypnosis shows are illegal... and uninsured.

Some hypnotists blatantly exploit a legal loophole that allows public demonstrations of hypnosis for scientific and research purposes, which are exempt from licensing. Simply asking participants to fill in a very short questionnaire at the end of a show does not constitute serious scientific study or research. These performers are nearly all members of the here today, gone tomorrow school of hypnosis, difficult to trace and even more difficult to control. Never has the stage-name been so useful – and advantageous when it comes to the rules regarding payment of income tax, as nearly all the low earning chicken-in-the-basket-style hypnotists get paid in cash.

Stage hypnotists can be divided into two main groups – the responsible performers and the cowboys. All stage hypnotists are responsible performers and all other stage hypnotists are cowboys. Responsible stage hypnotists go to great lengths to stress that they are eminently qualified to practice hypnosis and can pull out any number of phoney certificates to prove it. Like their therapeutic counterparts, they are usually members of fine, upstanding professional bodies and we will examine the truth of these shortly.

Stage hypnotists can't help themselves when it comes to talking about the welfare of their subjects. This strategy is intended to raise the cheap pub joke to the level of science. The

truth is that once they have picked up their two hundred quid, they will forget the subjects who earned it for them even exist. Every organisation representing stage hypnotists has a strict code of conduct which its members swear to uphold. Each organisation's code of conduct is exactly the same as the other organisation's code of conduct and ceases to exist the moment the hypnotist walks onto the stage.

If, in the unlikely event a local authority licensing officer should ever appear at a venue and demand to see the hypnotism licence, there are two things the stage hypnotist can do. First, they could try claiming that the show is for scientific and research purposes but this might be a bit of a hard sell if the show is taking place in a pub in front of a rowdy audience many of whom will be drunk. The other thing they can do is argue that what they are doing is not hypnotism but Tibetan Mind Control and therefore doesn't require a licence. Some of the smarter stage hypnotists claim that hypnosis doesn't exist anyway and they use a mixture of psychology, social compliance, misdirection, suggestion, and stagecraft. In the unlikely event of being confronted by a licensing officer, I'd put my money on the Tibetan mind control – trying to blind them with science never works.

In reality, because of the way the Act is worded, you do need a licence, but it might be worth a try. Anyway, it's the licensee of the premises – the landlord – who gets fined £2,000 and not the hypnotist, so why worry?

In any case, some local authorities are lax when it comes to licensing and some are very much on the ball.

Stage hypnotists would love to do theatres when in fact they only do pubs and bars in Benidorm in the summer. Lots of stage hypnotists use stage-names. This is because a lot of them are really painters and decorators during the day and do stage hypnotism at weekends for extra cash. This can be very useful if anything goes wrong and also has certain advantages when it comes to the rules regarding the payment of income tax.

But the real skill of the stage hypnotist comes when they are faced with a small and hostile audience in a rowdy club at one-o'clock in the morning. In that kind of environment, it is not possible to rely on the sober and infinitely more polite behaviour of the theatre audience. The hypnotist must now make the most of the limited working area between the subjects and the drunken and often rowdy mob out front.

There is only one thing worse than getting no volunteers in a situation like that and that is, getting one volunteer! Now you really have to deliver the goods... there can be no more excuses – you only have your skill and experience to rely on to hypnotise your one subject, and the odds of being successful in that are less than 50%.

There is a way to extricate yourself from this situation and it is this – you whisper to your one volunteer that if they play along, you will give them 50 quid after the show. After a couple of tame routines, you should be able to get more people to volunteer and so you will be able to bluff your way through your forty-five minute slot. At the end of the performance, you tell all your subjects that all the suggestions you have given them will be completely cancelled out – except for that first volunteer. In front of the audience and in a confident voice, you then simply tell him that when he wakes up he will firmly believe that the hypnotist promised him fifty quid. Then you retire to the bar and watch the fun. Unless of course you have to drive half an hour further up the the coast to earn another seventy quid in another bar.

I wouldn't touch those gigs.

There is a world of difference watching a good hypnotist in a theatre, where there are no distractions, where everyone has a good view, and audiences are well behaved, and a bad one struggling through with a noisy and disinterested crowd in a pub. There are plenty of hypnotists for whom this sort of gig is the cornerstone of their business. The fact is that you will see a far better representation in a theatre that you can possibly see in a pub.

Unfortunately for everyone concerned, it is precisely these conditions that lead to a lot of the genuine problems associated with stage hypnosis and we will examine these in due course. There is a world of difference between a hypnotist who creates an appropriate environment for his act, together with suitable routines and appropriate safeguards – and a hypnotist who charges in where angels fear to tread. Stage hypnosis is about resource management because its success depends entirely on the number of willing volunteers.

Usually volunteers have a pretty good idea of what they're in for as they make their way up onto the stage... a few silly routines, a little play acting or role playing before they're sent back to their seats with a couple of free tickets for the next show.

Stage hypnotism is not Karaoke and stage hypnotists are not all trained to the same standards – a disturbing majority of stage hypnotists are incompetent. More alarming is the fact that they are not aware that they are incompetent.

Membership of a pretend professional body does not confer competence upon a performer. Organisations representing stage hypnotists are always self-interest groups whose only reason for existence is to make it easier for the hypnotist to get a licence on the rare occasions they are forced to apply for one.

Volunteers for entertainment hypnotism may suddenly find themselves on unfamiliar ground – a stressful enough experience in itself, but when requested to perform acts or say things which might constitute a breach of trust between the hypnotist and the volunteer, stress levels can increase to an unacceptable level. Remember, we're not talking about a little mild embarrassment here – the difference between laughing with and laughing at – we are talking about a situation that could, if mishandled, get out of control.

The hypnotised subject may suddenly find themselves in a terrible dilemma. He or she may want to opt out of any further participation, but this is not as easy as you would think, especially considering the unforeseen and sudden demands of the situation and the pressure to perform. Volunteers are often faced with an unscrupulous hypnotist. Combined with the confusion of an unfamiliar situation and a baying audience, serious emotional confusion – even a state of fear – can arise, which, 99% of the time, goes unnoticed, or worse, is wilfully ignored by the hypnotist.

The symptoms of fight or flight are well known and understood, but not by your average stage hypnotist. Adrenalin is produced along with a hormone called cortisone. This is pumped into the bloodstream leading to other even less desirable symptoms... the lungs start panting in air, sometimes up to ten times more than is usual. Now there is the added danger that the subject might start to hyperventilate. Stored sugar pours out from the liver and into the bloodstream to feed the brain, which is now working overtime. Digestion stops as all energies are transferred to more important functions designed to assist fight and flight – fat is dissolved and sent to the muscles to provide energy for possible violent physical action... the heart beats so fast it can become irregular... muscles lock and blood is diverted to the hands ready to grip a weapon. Most noticeable is that blood drains from the face so that any wounds won't bleed too much and the mouth dries. The question is... do you really want things to get that far?

Stage hypnotists should be aware of these signs and be able to spot them, but the sad fact is that the vast majority of stage performers haven't got the first clue what it is that's happening, why it's happening, what to look for when it does happen, and what to do about it. If these signs are apparent, it means that the subject is under extreme stress.

The most obvious and safest course of action is to send the participant back to their seat in the audience where, back on safe and familiar ground, they will quickly recover their composure. But that is in fact the last thing a hypnotist wants to do, because no hypnotist wants to lose a subject! So the hypnotist will try to fight on to the bitter end.

When a subject is under stress, more blood is pumped into the brain. Platelets in the blood that carry oxygen to the neurons are forced into the millions of narrow capillaries. Filled with blood, the walls of the capillaries expand and press against the surrounding brain tissue and it is this physiological reaction which can cause headaches. As with the soldier in battle, the pain becomes noticeable only *after* the action is over.

Headaches can also be the result of physical actions carried out. Any routine where the head is moved violently from side to side, for example a suggestion that subjects are 'head banging' to punk rock music, and the hypnotist is asking for trouble. I have seen this done and some of the people on the pub 'stage' seemed badly affected immediately the music stopped. When the music started again, I intervened and was told to f*** off.

In pubs and bars there is always the risk that headaches might be the result of the consumption of large amounts of alcohol before or after a volunteer has taken part in a show. Individuals are often asked to carry out a series of instructions that are physically demanding – more and more of these shows are taking place in the summer heat of the Mediterranean where increased perspiration and therefore increased dehydration and thirst will exact their own toll on a subject who will then attempt to alleviate the symptoms by drinking more.

This becomes more of a problem when the hypnotist is appearing in a pub or a club where the show won't start until very late, where temperatures are very likely to be higher than in an air-conditioned theatre and where alcohol is, in the case of Spanish holiday resorts, cheap. This is just one reason why pubs and nightclubs are not ideal places for hypnotists to perform.

People are simply not as well behaved at eleven-o'clock in a bar as they are at seven-o'clock in a theatre. Without a clear barrier between audience and stage – obvious in a theatre – it is not always possible to exercise proper control at all times. There are all sorts of noisy distractions to contend with, and with an abundance of glassware close to the working area, it's an accident waiting to happen. One broken glass could be the cause of serious injury.

Most incidents of headaches and depressions occur when the hypnotist is working with only one or two participants. In this situation there is no 'safety in numbers' support group for the hypnotised volunteers to rely on and no one to share the burden of performing in public.

It is such a fundamental part of the human condition that people find it much easier to perform unfamiliar tasks when in groups than they do as individuals that the importance of this must not be ignored. It is far easier to get a large group of people performing together without fear of embarrassment, than it is to get just one or two individuals to do the same thing on their own. The lone volunteer feels exposed, vulnerable, singled out and totally isolated, and this will pile on the stress. The more stressed the subject, the less likely they

are to perform well, and the more stressed they will become – hence the headache. Some subjects of course simply get up and walk away, but a surprising number feel unable to do so because of the huge pressure of Social Compliance.

The hypnotist will press the lone subjects to one activity after another in order to keep the show going, which in turn piles on even more stress, and so both hypnotist and subject become trapped in a vicious circle, neither quite knowing how to end it – the hypnotist because he does not have the proper knowledge or experience, the subject because they find it increasingly difficult to say no, which further increases stress levels, and the post performance stress headache can be severe, not to mention the feeling that they have been forced to continue.

There is of course a simple answer to this problem. First, I have *always* avoided doing shows in venues where this kind of problem is likely to occur, and if a show in a large venue is selling poorly, the solution would be to fill it up by giving some tickets away! At least you will have a manageable audience even if most of them will have got in for nothing. However... although this ruse used to work very well in the 1980s when there were only 4 TV channels and no Facebook, the take up of free tickets is now a lot less than it was – around 20% of the ones you give away, if you're lucky. Also, *how* you give them away will affect numbers. There is a way of doing this successfully, but I'm keeping it to myself.

The bottom line is, if you're that desperate for 200 quid, you shouldn't be doing something else.

Even on occasions when there are lots of other souls on board, subjects can be prone to feelings of depression either straight after, or even hours after the performance is over, or worse, the following day.

Even when subjects have enjoyed the experience and have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into their roles there can be a sense of anticlimax when it's over. Members of amateur theatrical groups experience feelings of anticlimax acutely when a production comes to an end. After the weeks of rehearsal, the dress-rehearsal and five or six performances, once the last night party is over and everyone goes home until next year, amateurs (and to some extent professional actors) can experience the full force of that anticlimax. After appearing in a stage hypnosis show, when all their friends are patting them on the back telling them how funny they were, and after generating waves of laughter from the audience with their brilliant performance, participants can feel the same sense of anticlimax. As with the amateur and professional theatricals, the effect can seem profound.

In fairness, I have never heard of a bona-fide case of a subject suffering after-effects that could be described as long-term. Some volunteers have reported to me that they felt disappointed if the hypnosis didn't work, but that is a different thing altogether.

When this happens, volunteers will not understand the reason for their feelings and are likely to put the way they feel down to having been hypnotised. This is understandable and the problem is easily resolved by explaining it to them. But when? After the show is over, where can they go to get this information...?

A simple cure would be some good old fashioned relaxation and some positive suggestions. A few deep breaths and, more importantly, some words of explanation from the hypnotist works wonders. Breathe in and out slowly and relax. Relaxing will make them feel better and it is possible to correct any imbalance by doing this simple exercise. Unfortunately, at the time these words and actions are needed, the hypnotist is already on

the motorway.

In shows where subjects are asked to perform a series of loud or angry routines, and the nature of these routines can affect the way a participant feels afterwards.

I'm sure we have all had the experience of losing our temper with someone, perhaps saying things or behaving in a way we regret a few minutes later. The sense of shame after the event can be quite profound. This is as a direct result of chemical activity in the amygdale and hypnotised volunteers can experience similar feelings if they are asked to perform in a sketch which involves them pretending to get angry. Again, it is incumbent upon the hypnotist to make sure they return to their calm and collected state before moving on to the next item.

All these kinds of feelings and emotions are often confused with depression, and to be fair, the symptoms are often similar. The hypnotist should be on hand for any debriefing and explanation, bearing in mind that any disgruntled volunteer may want to seek further advice from a doctor and later, possibly a lawyer.

One of the conditions imposed by the Home Office is a requirement for the hypnotist to remain at the venue for up to an hour after the show has finished so he can be available for any necessary debriefing. Because the vast majority of hypnotists in the UK don't even bother applying for a licence in the first place, this stipulation is usually pointless. In any event, I'm wondering what sort of debriefing would be available from someone who knows nothing about the background psychology and whose only hope is that the problem will go away?

If a volunteer does decide to seek medical advice as a result of any unpleasant after effects, their first port of call will probably be their GP. The GP, who knows very little about hypnosis, is more than likely to refer his patient to the nearest hypnotherapist, someone who might know how to deal with the problem. In any event, the disgruntled participant may may not want to consult with the hypnotist who hypnotised them in the first place, presuming of course they are traceable, because the bond of trust between the two has been broken.

Now the plot thickens, as only a tiny minority of hypnotherapists know anything about the causes of these problems either.

Because of the historical antipathy toward their stage counterparts, some hypnotherapists might seize the opportunity to make their deeply held prejudices regarding stage hypnosis known to their new client. They won't have the first clue about the real cause of their client's problem mind you, but they'll book the client in for at least four sessions anyway – which is a massive negative suggestion in itself. However, only a tiny minority of hypnotherapists are likely to be able to grasp the real cause of the problem, simply because they do not have an understanding of the dynamics of stage hypnosis.

Because of the historical antipathy toward their stage counterparts, a lot of hypnotherapists seize the opportunity to make their deeply held prejudices known to their new client, which is another massive negative suggestion. At an unconscious level, the subject may feel that he has to continue with the behaviour – after all, he's ill – the nice caring therapist told him so – he has been 'damaged' and he has now convinced himself of it. The idea has now taken root in his mind will continue to flourish until someone who really does understand stage hypnosis takes him to one side and suggests, in the nicest possible way, that he stops wasting everyone's time and pulls himself together. Even so, it might be too late because by this time he might be getting addicted to the attention that's

being lavished on him, instead of embracing a sense of perspective and moving on – which is precisely the advice he should have received in the first place. Eventually he will appear on a television show called *'Hypnosis Ruined My Life'* where all his friends will see him and secretly wonder why he doesn't just get over it – the sad loser.

Volunteers in stage hypnosis sometimes 'play dead.' They don't respond to any of the suggestions, not even to the suggestion to 'wake up' or open their eyes. This kind of abreaction is admittedly rare, but not so rare that it can be summarily dismissed. The subject sits motionless and does not respond to any suggestions. Remember, hypnosis takes place in the conscious mind and so there is no doubt that the subject can hear and is aware of every word uttered by the hypnotist.

So why won't they open their eyes when the hypnotist asks them to? The answer is simple... the subject does not want to continue being part of the performance and this is their only exit strategy. They are either not hypnotised at all and simply don't want to admit it publicly, possibly because the experience is not what they expected, or because they have just decided they don't want to take part anymore.

So *now* what do you do? The audience can see this unexpected lack of response is out of the ordinary and obviously not what the hypnotist was expecting either, so their attention will be drawn to it as something rather significant. These are the words to say: *'In a moment I am going to send you back to your seat in the audience so you can enjoy the rest of the show, so one-two eyes open, wide-awake!'* At which point their eyes will open and off they will go as happy as Larry and the incident will be forgotten about in ten seconds. Once back on safe ground, they will quickly recover their composure. Note I use the word enjoy rather than just watch... always use the language!

It's a simple rule once you know it, but I have seen a lot of stage hypnotists push and cajole subjects, literally forcing them into action. This of course goes far beyond social compliance. At this point, the hypnotist turns into a bully, and that's just plain wrong. Again, the problem is that many stage hypnotists don't know how to handle the situation because they don't understand the nature of human behaviour! I have seen a hypnotist get into very deep water with this one, trying one thing and another, all to no avail, and in front of an increasingly concerned crowd!

At a meeting of the soon to be defunct British Council of Professional Stage Hypnotists, a so-called hypnotist pulled me aside and quietly asked what do do if someone wouldn't wake up as it had happened to him in Spain. I despair when I hear things like this. If he didn't know the answer, then he shouldn't have been doing it in the first place!

I have also seen hypnotists who have a 'carry on regardless' attitude to their subjects. One lady who complained to the hypnotist after the show that she had a headache was advised to take a couple of Paracetamol. This cavalier attitude is surely a cause for concern.

Most stage hypnotists wouldn't be able to recognise a case of mild hysteria in a subject if there was a big red neon sign with the words 'this is a case of mild hysteria' on their foreheads.

Compulsive or uncontrollable giggling is a case in point. Hysteria is highly contagious and can spread along the line like wildfire. Again, the simple solution is to send the affected person back to the audience as quickly as possible, thus isolating them from the rest of the group, or more accurately, isolating the rest of the group from them. Once a subject is

back on familiar ground, the problem will evaporate with a rapidity that borders on the miraculous.

Again, and I don't wish to labour the point, I am continually astonished by hypnotist's lack of basic knowledge. I have heard proposals ranging from *'tell her to shut up'* to *'give her a slap.'* This is an indication of the standard of stage hypnotism in Britain today.

Remember, hypnosis is a state of imagination. Under hypnosis, what one minute is purely imaginary can, the next minute, suddenly become very real, and so there are a host of imaginary problems, many of them based on preconceived ideas, that can all of a sudden become *too* real and take on an importance disproportionate to the intention implicit in the original suggestion. The imagination can run riot in hypnosis and a hypnotist needs to be fully aware of the potential pitfalls – a small problem such as a minor headache or minor emotional problem can turn a molehill into a mountain.

This is when the fun really starts. One small problem will almost certainly attract a gaggle of spectators, or worse, angry relatives and assertive husbands. This is guaranteed to attract an even larger crowd of curious sightseers. Now things are really out of control because the victim, as they is now known, feels that they will look foolish if they don't continue in their new role of helpless victim, and their ability to play the part grows with every passing minute, possibly culminating in an Oscar-winning performance in the back of an ambulance. Your life is now over and it's time to consider going back to painting and decorating. It's also time for the journalists to get their notebooks out, time for the photographer to call round, time for the handful of professional hypnotists to bury their heads in their hands and intone their traditional cry of 'Oh God, not again!'

Any participants that do experience problems, even though they are relatively minor and unlikely to be long term, have no way of reporting their distress, and no one to report it to. Members of the public are usually blissfully unaware that stage hypnotists need licences.

Overall, in stage shows, subjects are always happier when performing familiar tasks and when there are plenty of other people doing these actions together, and in circumstances where the consumption of alcohol is not the principal attraction of the evening. The application of a little common sense allied with a modicum of vigilance also helps. 'Pushing the envelope' is all well and good if you are a racing driver, but when applied to hypnosis shows, what it actually means is pushing people, and pushing people is exactly what you must not do.

The real problems of stage hypnosis fall into four main categories...

- lack of knowledge and insufficient training
- the gung-ho attitude of the majority of stage hypnotists
- the problems associated mixing hypnosis with alcohol
- the problem of hypnotists ignoring the licensing rules.

Hypnosis in Britain had its last chance, or perhaps last trance would be a more appropriate expression, by the mid nineteen-nineties, for reasons that will shortly become apparent. Of course the popularity of these things always comes in waves – every few years there seems to be a resurgence of conjurors, mind-readers, ventriloquists, multi-instrumentalists and assorted speciality acts. When I was a boy, performing dog acts were very popular for a while – but there came a time when everyone thought that they too had had their day, but then along came the Spice Girls. And so it is with stage hypnotists.

I have never been happy with the term 'stage hypnotist' – the expression has connotations of collusion and fakery, that the stage hypnotist is somehow engaged in something rather unprincipled, unscrupulous, unethical.

Stage hypnotists and hypnotherapists use exactly the same techniques and methodology, even if the approach varies. Stage hypnotists claim they do therapy work for the extra cash, but this is usually restricted to selling a few stop smoking CD's at the end of a sweaty night in Torremolinos.

Hypnosis has been subject to some major changes in the last three decades, both on the stage and in the consulting room. Just as the number of stage performers rocketed in the 1990's after stage hypnosis was first aired on television, so did the number of hypnotherapists advertising cures for everything from smoking to fear of flying and, in at least one case, cancer. In 1980, there were maybe half a dozen hypnotherapists in Greater Manchester. Today (in 2019) there are at least two hundred.

As always, when we examine such societal changes, it is not the hypnotism that proves to be the most interesting area of study, but the personalities involved – the hypnotists themselves. To understand the convolutions of the stage hypnosis business in Great Britain, we should first take a brief look back in time and return to the claustrophobic music halls of Victorian England.

To Victorian audiences, hypnosis acts must have been truly thrilling. The hypnotist, it seemed, could send people to sleep with a snap of his fingers. His act consisted almost entirely of influencing the behaviour of his subjects in the same way as one would manipulate a shop window mannequin, often inserting needles into unsuspecting flesh... and that was about it. Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Dr. Walford Bodie was the best known exponent of stage hypnosis in Britain and more can be discovered about his incredible life and success in the **The Electric Wizard**, available on this website.

The Great Dr. Bodie literally injected a little electricity into his act and his demonstrations were truly astonishing. After the war, the British public was treated to the extraordinary demonstrations of Peter Casson, the first of the really modern stage hypnotists.

Petty Officer Casson made a name for himself in North Africa during the war entertaining in the sergeant's mess and using hypnosis to treat victims of shell shock. After the war he embarked upon a series of highly successful sell-out tours of the Moss & Stoll theatre circuit, playing for a week at a time in some of the country's top venues. Casson enjoyed huge success, was invited to appear on radio shows and even at the London Palladium – the only hypnotist ever to tread the boards there. Casson was the first hypnotist to be auditioned for a starring role on television, then still in its infancy, and still in grainy black and white.

He had come to the attention of the BBC due to his outstanding success on the theatre circuit. At the old BBC headquarters at Alexandra Palace, anxious to show off his skills to the distinguished gentlemen in grey suits, he succeeded in hypnotising a cameraman located in another studio. This frightened them so much that hypnotism was banned from television for the next fifty years. It is said that the film of this episode has been kept under lock and key ever since! The fateful experiment was undoubtedly the cause of the mindset that was to persist in television until the early 1990's.

In 1948 however, Casson encountered a much greater setback in the form of serious competition from American hypnotist Ralph Slater, whose one-man show ran for two weeks at Earl's Court and played to packed houses.

It was no coincidence that the medical establishment in Britain, long scornful of hypnosis, became interested in it for the first time, and not for academic reasons.

After one of Slater's performances a young girl who had not been on stage but had remained seated in the crowd had apparently become affected by the hypnosis and had fallen into a 'trance.' She was taken to hospital where it is said that she remained '*in a zombie-like state, sometimes quite coherent and at other times lapsing into a state of unconsciousness*'.

This is supposed to have gone on for a week before she was '*fully restored*'. You'd think the doctors would have caught on to the fact that these periods of coherence and unconsciousness were as normal as day and night, especially as they in fact coincided! But where there is a remarkable effect it is always tempting to look for a remarkable cause and the doctors should have known better than to lavish so much attention on someone who, with the gift of hindsight, was obviously desirous of it. After consulting m'learned friends, she promptly sued. Slater defended the case, but rapidly ran out of funds and was forced to dismiss his barrister and defend himself. Sensing disaster, he skipped the country and returned to the United States.

Questions were asked in parliament and this, after some cursory consultation with doctors – all of whom had previously claimed hypnosis did not exist) led to the passing of the Hypnotism Act of 1952. The Act was not intended to ban hypnotism, but designed to give local authorities the power to regulate public performances of stage hypnosis, based on local knowledge and some very flimsy conditions. Having read the newspaper reports of '*the girl who didn't wake up*' half the councils in Britain, including all those in and around London, promptly banned performances of hypnotism outright.

This succeeded admirably in driving stage hypnosis underground and a few second-rate Casson look-alikes continued to ply their trade in the working men's clubs and holiday camps, all private premises and thus exempt from licensing. And so the situation continued up until the late 1970s, by which time, town clerks and licensing officers had forgotten all about the 1952 Hypnotism Act and stage hypnotism began to experience a rebirth. Ironically, that rebirth began almost as far away from London as you could get.

On the other side of the world, Frank Quinn, who merged his first and second names to become *Franquin*, toured Australia and New Zealand during the 1950's and 1960's before retiring to the Gold Coast a multi-millionaire. Franquin was the inspiration for another Australian hypnotist, the diminutive Martin St. James, whose brash style struck a perfect chord with antipodean audiences.

While all this was going on down under, the equally diminutive Robert Halpern had started in the late 1970s to play at the Pavilion Theatre in Glasgow and the Caley Picture House in Edinburgh. Halpern's success dwarfed even that of Peter Casson. In 1980 Halpern walked away from the Pavilion, after a three month season, with over three hundred thousand pounds in his pocket – about a million in today's money. I achieved a similar success at the Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool and at the City Varieties Theatre in Leeds, and my three hundred thousand came from summer seasons in the tax haven of Jersey. Halpern and I both understood that the secret of success was to concentrate on two or three cities, generating word of mouth as the only publicity, and bleed the place dry.

In the days before hypnosis was allowed on television, the plan worked flawlessly. Cunningly, I had another string to my bow which I kept very quiet about. Twice a year I would board an aeroplane and endure twenty-nine hours of purgatory to spend a few weeks in New Zealand, where, over a fifteen year period I managed to do twenty-seven

farewell tours and sell a greater number of tickets than the total population of the country. My name was mentioned in parliament by the Prime Minister, David Lange, who jokingly wondered whether I would be available to hypnotise the leader of the opposition.

In the 1970's and 1980's, hypnosis on stage was carried out by less than a handful of people, a league of extraordinary gentlemen, an exclusive club which probably had no more than a dozen members worldwide! Apart from a few professional rivalries, we generally behaved like gentlemen, with the public perception of the art of hypnosis a priority. Generally speaking, with one notable exception, stage hypnotists were educated, literate, well versed in psychology and knew their subject inside out.

In 1979 and by mutual agreement they formed the Federation of Ethical Stage Hypnotists (FESH) a move which was ostensibly designed to lead to greater acceptance of our art at a time when stage hypnotism looked like it was coming back into fashion. In actual fact, the creation of FESH was actually a thinly disguised attempt to persuade more local authorities into granting licences. Peter Casson even did a small theatre tour, the first for more than fifteen years.

And so it went on through the 1980's. Casson never really made the comeback he had hoped for and anyway, most of the old school were by then retired and Halpern and myself dominated the field for the next ten years and with great effect. No other hypnotist did the theatres and that was where the big money was, not to mention the respectability attached to playing highly reputable venues. By the late 1980's Halpern was close to retirement and disappeared from the scene altogether, hotly pursued by a slightly miffed tax inspector. I was selling out two-thousand seaters from the Manchester Apollo and Liverpool Empire to the Edinburgh Playhouse to the Bristol Hippodrome, and I sensed the time was right to up the stakes and take hypnosis into the Capital once again... and that was where it all started to go wrong.

In order to crack the London market and appear in the West End, I needed to persuade the City of Westminster to grant me a licence and this I did by cleverly using the 1952 Act to my own advantage. I pointed out that far from being legislation which banned stage hypnosis, the Act was really legislation which encouraged councils to allow, but regulate, public demonstrations of hypnosis. This idea appealed to the bureaucratic mind, and it opened the door for a 'test' show – not in London, but in Folkestone, at the Cliffs Pavilion Theatre. Five members of the licensing committee travelled down in a luxury fifty-two-seater coach and watched the performance before drinking my wine and helping themselves to my sandwiches.

A few weeks later, a decision was made to allow me to perform for 14 weeks at Wyndham's Theatre on Charing Cross Road, just off Leicester Square – right in the heart of the West End. Starting in early February 1987, each show was monitored by two officers from the licensing committee, neither of whom knew the first thing about hypnosis. At one performance someone in the audience seemed to fall asleep. I was summoned by the officers and explained the incident was as it appeared – someone had fallen asleep.

Determined to make the London project as much of a success as all the other regional theatres I was doing at the time, I engaged the [now disgraced and deceased] publicist Max Clifford. After all the time and effort I put into what was obviously a major undertaking, I had to then sit back and wait for three months while the councillors at Westminster made their deliberations. Eventually, following a meeting of the full City of Westminster Council, the policy of banning stage hypnosis in the Capital was reversed. Unlucky for me as it turned out.

It is not in my nature to sit around while there are so many other things to get on with so while I waited for a decision, I went on tour, first to Las Vegas for three months, returning briefly to fulfil another ten week summer season in Jersey before a further six week tour of New Zealand and Australia. After my usual UK theatre tour, the following January, I disappeared to Kenya for my annual holiday. In the meantime, a radio DJ called Paul McKenna, who had interviewed me in London, had told me about his idea of making therapeutic hypnosis as big a business as Anthony Robbins had made the corporate training industry.

McKenna convinced me that his interest was in therapeutic hypnosis only and I thought his idea was actually very good, but not something that I would be interested in. I taught him everything I knew about hypnosis - he even stayed at my home in Alderley Edge a couple of times.

McKenna had turned up regularly at my shows in London and started popping up at other venues in the country and whilst the following year I was again in Las Vegas polishing my hypnotic skills and in Kenya polishing my hot air balloon piloting skills, McKenna was in London polishing his political skills and began to work as a stage hypnotist. McKenna's performances in London were almost identical in almost every detail – and I have the videos to prove it – even down to throwaway one-liners, the exact order of the exact same sketches and routines, and most disturbing, his stage persona took on an eerie and rather creepy resemblance to mine. Followers of the cult of NLP will recognise this behaviour as 'modelling', but it really is very creepy when you see someone copying the way you dress, speak, behave... the way you raise your eyebrows... your turns of phrase... your persona... I came to the conclusion that there was something not quite right about him. He had spoken to me several times about wanting to start his own religion.

In London, a place I could never get out of quickly enough, I disliked Max Clifford's publicity stunts and in certain instances refused to do them. The show-biz events I was expected to attend left me bored witless after about five seconds. I have never been one for courting publicity – I have always preferred anonymity away from the stage, although I have now realised that you can't have both. The design of my advertising materials over the years bears witness to this. Only very rarely do I allow my own image to be used in publicity material, and then only after a lot of moaning and groaning. In any event, my interest is not primarily in stage hypnosis – I enjoy playing music (I am the percussionist in an amateur orchestra and a brass band, something I enjoy immensely) and I love Africa, which is why I am now based in Cape Town, and flying my own aeroplane, although I gave that up when I reached the age of 55.

Paul McKenna and I managed to co-exist based on the mutual understanding that a line was drawn on the map and one did not appear north of that line and the other did not appear south of it. Certainly the arrangement worked well for a number of years as we each kept to our agreement. The very brilliant Peter Powers had taken Robert Halpern's place in Scotland. I have great respect for Peter – particularly for the originality of his work. I rank him as one of the best in the world – he has a grasp of hypnosis that only comes from natural talent.

By the late 1980's Paul McKenna and I joined the newly formed antidote to Casson's FESH, the British Council of Professional Stage Hypnotists (BCPSH) with the express purpose of persuading the Home Office to introduce a rule that only those hypnotists with expensive public liability insurance would be allowed licences. The real aim of this enterprise was not designed to ensure public safety, but was a deliberate attempt to put other stage hypnotists out of business, thereby creating a monopoly for ourselves. To this

end, together we plotted the overthrow of the BCPSH president, Dr. Adam Cordean BSc., PhD., a man, who it turned out, was neither the owner of a BSc. or a PhD. and not a real doctor. Interestingly, when this regrettable fact was brought to the attention of the rest of the members, which by this time consisted of about two dozen amateurs, no one seemed to mind and so the plan backfired somewhat, leaving us no alternative but to resign.

And then, as often happens with the best laid plans, the situation changed again. Ever the opportunist, I had negotiated with Thames Television for a one hour TV special which was broadcast on 10th December 1992. This was followed by a 22-part series of half hour shows for SKY TV which was then shown all over the world, from Australia to Zimbabwe and was even included in some airlines in-flight entertainment programmes, something which caused me mild embarrassment on a Qantas flight to Sydney and more discomfiture when I found myself looking up to see an episode of The Andrew Newton Hypnotic Experience on a television monitor in Singapore airport.

Carlton Television went with Paul McKenna and Channel 4 followed with Peter Power's 'Naughty Naughty Hypno Show' which turned out to be the best of the three – not only because of its superbly original material and departure from the usual sterile studio format, but because its success came from Peter's natural roguish personality and thoroughly mischievous sense of humour. Peter, whom I know to be an extremely kind and generous man has since achieved huge success in Australia and now has three TV series to his name, making him, at the time of writing, the world's most successful stage hypnotist, an accolade he richly deserves. His TV shows include stunts aimed on a roller coaster and flying in a helicopter. Peter has a rare gift for originality and that is the secret of his deserved success.

But all this is merely an aside, because what happened next would ensure the demise of Stage Hypnosis in Britain for good.

Six months after hypnosis got its first outing on television, it became an overnight craze. An army of hypnotists suddenly appeared and were to be seen in every pub and club, in every holiday caravan park and at the end of every pier. The Stage newspaper even created a special section in their classified advertising section to accommodate them all. In one memorable issue, there were more hypnotists advertised than all the other acts put together, all claiming to be 'the world's greatest' – a remarkable achievement given their recent arrival. All promised to be both outrageous *and* ethical at the same time. There was even a hypnotic double-act and at least two hypnotists who did their act in drag. A couple of hypnotists even used the fake title of 'Dr.' Yet another hypnotist appeared totally naked, promising his audience that he would not make anyone do anything he would not be prepared to do himself! Perhaps the worst bottom-of-the-barrel example was 'Dr. Hypnogasm,' not a real doctor of course, but an 'artiste' who promised an erotic hypnosis show, and who was also available for corporate events, theatre, summer seasons, private functions and, just in case there was any doubt, assured bookers that his act was, of course, ethical, having been passed by the International Association of Stage Hypnotists, an organisation of which he was the only member.

Hypnotism became an overnight and runaway success and it seemed that anyone without any other gainful employment was jumping on an already creaking bandwagon. In the pubs, stage hypnotism had become the new karaoke and at the height of the craze, which lasted about twelve months, it is estimated that there were more than two hundred stage hypnotists on the loose. At the same time, more organisations came into being claiming they represented stage hypnosis, memberships exchanged with the same casual abandon as the stolen sketches and routines.

As long as the hypnotist can hide behind the talent of his subjects, he can mostly get away with it. Remember, that the vast majority of stage hypnotists are not *entertainers* – and that's the difference! They lack the ability to read an audience and to actually *entertain!* The ability to entertain, to hold an audience, is something that cannot be taught or learned – it is a completely natural talent – you've either got it or you haven't! Most stage hypnotists are merely ringmasters.

If you wanted to become a TV repairman, it would not be enough to know how to turn the TV on and off and change channels – customers would presume that you would at least know something about electricity. Stage hypnosis is a vastly complex subject that requires a wide range of knowledge of a variety of diverse but related subjects and the majority of stage hypnotists do not have the faintest idea about the psychology that underpins hypnosis – I know this because occasionally I get to meet them. The mere mention of social compliance theory or Stanley Milgram will draw a blank stare. The sum total of a stage hypnotists 'years of experience' is usually a few tips exchanged in a bar in Benidorm and the attitude '*It works because it works and that's good enough*' is NOT good enough. The vast majority of stage hypnotists are ignorant of the possible consequences of their actions and wouldn't know how to deal with participant's problems, should they arise.

There was an explosion in the number of hypnosis training schools of dubious merit where none had existed before. They offered qualifications that will never be worth the paper they were printed on. Diploma mills churned out bogus qualifications and certificates by the score – something of a change from the days when Peter Casson, asked by a licensing magistrate in Liverpool '*how is a person hypnotised?*' answered, '*It's a secret*'.

But like every other fad, the novelty wore off just as quickly. Hypnosis was now no longer unique or special – it was now commonplace – and as with all commonplace things, was destined for the dustbin of show business history... just as it had been in 1952. Audiences that once flocked in their tens of thousands to the Dominion in London and the Apollo in Manchester now stayed away in equal numbers. After all, why pay £10 to see a proper hypnotist in a theatre when you can see one for free in the local pub? Johnny Hillyard, an old FESH stalwart eloquently observed that the painters and decorators who now populated the industry were not entertainers, they were... painters and decorators.

I have always believed that on the stage, hypnotism had to be presented as something special, not something cheap and nasty – the days of getting subjects to cluck like a chicken were long gone before I even started. The real secret was to offer the audience refinement, and that meant the whole theatrical experience – uniformed and well-drilled staff, the best sound and light systems so that the audience would hear every word and enjoy every effect, excellent lines of sight, carefully chosen music because exactly the right music can enhance the experience of participants and audience alike. Refinement meant attention to every detail – the chairs we toured for the subjects were a set of heavy-duty cinema seats with arms, upholstered and bolted together for safety. In at least three theatres, I bought carpets for the stage. Even the lighting of the stage before the show started had my attention.

I was uncompromising because I believed that the same rules that applied to grand opera should apply to the hypnotic experience. I *always* strived to not only give the audience what they wanted, but to give them something better than they expected. But the pub hypnotists spoiled that illusion. To an ordinary member of the public, a hypnotist is a hypnotist, is a hypnotist. Every stage hypnotist I have ever seen repeats the same tired platitude that it's the subjects that are the real stars of the show! This is not a philosophy I agree with – the hypnotist is the star of the show because it's *his* talent that brings it alive,

otherwise it's just a bunch of people on stage doing stupid things. Top Gear without Jeremy Clarkson became just another show about cars!

Being an entertainer is not something that is offered along with accountancy as a career option. A true entertainer is sharp and understands timing, originality, and their act is honed to perfection through years of sweat and fear, good nights and bad.

Whereas before television, Stage Hypnosis had been the exclusive domain of well informed and educated performers, it became over-populated by people with a poor command of the English language and worse. The new breed of stage hypnotist didn't just read one book, they hadn't read any books and their starting experience was based on the observing other hypnotists performing in pubs – and that set the standard.

The vast majority of stage hypnotists are woefully ignorant of the possible consequences of their actions, stripping away every trace of hard won respectability from a profession that had hitherto held such qualities in high regard. If ever there was good reason to ban stage hypnosis, they are it.

Soon after the hypnotic Cambrian Explosion, a series of sensational stories began to appear in the tabloid press. People were emerging from hypnosis shows with headaches, some were lapsing into unexplained and incurable depression, some claimed their lives had been ruined, their brains had been fried – by stage hypnosis! Suddenly there was a flood of these stories. And then along came the big one, guaranteed to strike dread into every God-fearing reader of the Daily Mail. A woman had died after being hypnotised on the stage!

The Sharron Tabarn case is the one most often referred to in the argument for the banning of stage hypnosis. The facts of the case are as follows:

1. Sharron Tabarn went to the Roebuck pub in Leyland, Lancashire where she worked part time. On this occasion though, she went there to meet a friend and watch a hypnotist show starring the world's number one hypnotist, Andrew Vincent, a former bus driver who had virtually no experience whatsoever, having learned hypnosis by watching another hypnotist in a disco in Spain and on the strength of that decided he was going to be the next Paul McKenna.
2. Sharron was driven to the pub by her friend Pat while Pat's daughter looked after Sharron's two daughters.
3. A little later, Sharron's estranged husband Darren turned up at the pub with *his* friend after he found out from a mutual acquaintance that she was going to the show. Darren is a man who had not at that stage accepted Sharron no longer wanted to be in any kind of relationship with him.
4. Sharron had planned to take part in the show, and to that end, had not consumed any alcohol. She had read somewhere that you couldn't be hypnotised if you were inebriated. This indicates she was looking forward to the experience of being hypnotised. The last stunt of the show was a suggestion that Sharron would 'feel' or 'imagine' a ten thousand volt electric shock which would cause her to leap from her seat.
5. In at least one television programme, Mrs Harper stated Sharron had a fear of electricity and claimed that Andrew Vincent had suggested '*10,000 volts of electricity shooting up your arse*' went unchallenged. This struck me as extremely uncouth, which is why I made a note of it. However, according to Pat, Vincent did not say this.

6. According to Pat, who was present throughout the whole show. Vincent's exact words were *'I will count to 3 and clap my hands. When I clap my hands you will wake up BUT – in between the count of three and me clapping my hands you will experience 10,000 volts of electricity on the seat of your chair and it will really hurt'*. Pat says she remembers these words very well.
7. Sharron consumed a moderate amount of alcohol, estimated to be no more than one pint of lager and returned home late. According to Pat, when the party returned to the house Sharron *'displayed all the symptoms of not coming out of hypnosis'*.
8. After the show Darren gatecrashed the house and wheedled his way into staying the night. Darren invited himself to stay the night, sleeping downstairs.
9. After what would have been an awkward end to the evening, Pat slept in Sharron's double bed with her (Pat's) 15 year-old daughter. At the time Pat went to bed Sharron moved her youngest daughter Sharne into the same bed as her eldest daughter, Coral, with the intention of sleeping in Sharne's single bedroom. So... Pat slept with Sharron's daughters in Sharron's double bed. Sharron slept in her daughters single bed.
10. At some point during the night Darren got into bed with Sharron and when he woke up in the morning found she was dead – fully clothed. Sharron had apparently choked on her own vomit. It was then that Darren raised the alarm.
11. There is evidence that suggests Darren was controlling and possibly violent. When Sharron ended the relationship, the house she vacated had multiple holes punched in the doors. Sharron's body, already in a state rigor mortis was laid, like a board, half off the bed and with her feet preventing the door from being shut in small room. Pat and her daughter went into the girl's room and took the two sleepy children downstairs whilst hiding their eyes from the sight of their dead mother.
12. The incident is initially blamed on the hypnotism show and the Home Office Pathologist, Dr. Edmund Tapp, was called in to investigate the cause of death.
13. At the inquest, witnesses who were experts in the field of neurology, psychology and hypnosis are called and are unanimous in their opinion that the death has nothing whatsoever to do with hypnosis but rather the result of a fit which could have happened at any time. One expert calls any connection between the death and hypnosis 'laughable'.
14. Sharron's mother, Margaret Harper, makes appearances on television and in the national press. She is interviewed in various tabloid newspapers and magazines, believing hypnosis was the cause of death and stating that Sharron had always had a pathological fear of electricity, something not mentioned at the inquest. There is no mention of epilepsy in the pathologists report, yet epilepsy becomes the buzz word in hundreds of subsequent tabloid newspaper and magazine articles.
15. The case is taken up by Mrs. Harper's MP and questions are asked in parliament, reminiscent of the debate which led to the 1952 Hypnotism Act.
16. Mrs. Harper forms the Campaign Against Stage Hypnotism (CASH) and lobbies for the inquest to be reopened. A cynical Peter Casson remarks that all cheques should be made to CASH. There is no evidence that Sharron's family benefitted financially from the campaign.
17. Referring to the evidence of the experts, High Court judge Lord Justice Simon Brown

declares that there is no evidence to suggest that hypnotism played any part in the death and refuses permission for the inquest to be reopened.

18. The stage hypnotist concerned is not prosecuted under the 1952 Hypnotism Act but leaves the business anyway to pursue a career as a cleaner of wheelie-bins.

19. The verdict of the inquest and of the High Court is subsequently overturned by a Channel 4 television documentary titled *Hypnosis Ruined My Life* and tabloid newspapers.

Before I continue, I must point out that it was *not* Sharron Tabarn's death that destroyed the image of stage hypnosis in the eyes of the public. Instead, it was the disgraceful behaviour of the new breed of stage hypnotists after the story first broke that provided the final nails in the coffin.

The old-school 'league of gentlemen' were experienced enough to know that the best way of dealing with the situation was to keep their heads down and say nothing. Peter Casson, Paul Mckenna, Edwin Heath – we all understood that to be interviewed on television would be to put ourselves in front of a media firing squad. So we kept quiet, naively expecting everyone else to do the same.

But the 'Johnny-come-lately's', as Peter Casson called them, and whose experience consisted of maybe a handful of shows, clamoured for the opportunity 'to be on TV', believing it to be a short-cut to fame and fortune. In fact, all they succeeded in doing was to expose themselves as incompetent semi-literate thugs. Unable to answer questions coherently, it was their laughable lack of knowledge – and their antics – that killed it. The low point came when Alex Smith, then working under the name Alex LeRoy, dropped his trousers and flashed at Mrs Harper on the morning BBC TV show Kilroy.

I have always held the view that it is not beyond the realms of possibility that hypnosis was a contributing factor in Sharron Tabarn's death and I stated this publicly at the time. For my trouble, I was told to keep my mouth shut and threatened with physical violence by anonymous callers.

No transcripts or copies of the coroners report were made publicly available. For the facts, all we had to go on were media reports and television programmes where Mrs Harper was interviewed, quoted or featured.

I have had the opportunity of communicating via email with Sharron's friend Pat who provided me with information which throws more light on the case and demolishes the tabloid version of what actually took place that night.

Sharron consumed only a small amount of alcohol – contrary to Andrew Vincent's claim that she was drunk after the show, which was an outrageous lie.

What is true, is that Darren spent a considerable amount of time talking to Andrew Vincent at the bar after the show. Doubtless one of the topics discussed – as is often the case when hypnotists get sucked into conversations with audience members, making the most of the opportunity to bask in their own reflected glory and showing off their brilliance – was the mechanics of hypnosis. I have no idea if Vincent was aware that Darren was Sharron's husband. What is also true is that Darren was a violent individual.

The 'old school' hypnotists declined to appear on the programmes because they had the intelligence to understand they would not be able to comment because they had not been there, or physiological issues about which they would know very little. Instead, viewers

were treated to the embarrassing spectacle of scoundrels such as Alex Smith/LeRoy behaving extremely badly and pronouncing on matters they knew very little about. Mainly they moaned about how much money they were allegedly losing.

There are good and bad in every profession. One cannot condemn the Catholic Church because a minority of priests abused children, or ban cars because some motorists drive carelessly. With stage hypnosis however, incompetence is the rule rather than the exception. I have met many over the last four decades and never cease to be amazed at their lack of knowledge, arrogance and base stupidity.

The current licensing system provides no public protection whatsoever – it is actually nothing more than a pointless bureaucratic exercise. There are no checks on the competence of hypnotists. Licensing departments never monitor performances and pub hypnotists flagrantly break the rules because they are not under the same scrutiny applied in theatres, where responsible managers and house staff are in attendance, and are likely to report any incidents or bad behaviour.

Sharron's refusal to drink alcohol is significant because it indicates she was taking the prospect of being hypnotised seriously – in which case, she would have been unconsciously 'psyching herself up' for it – something that is known to increase suggestibility. Suggestibility is not a constant and Sharron's behaviour is not unusual – people often decide to volunteer before they arrive at the show.

In psychological terms, for many people, taking part in a hypnosis show represents a 'peak experience.' This means they have heightened levels of concentration and involvement. Sharron's experience of hypnosis might have been more (or less) profound than she expected. It might also have been very different than she expected. It might have been less pleasant than she expected. There might have been a time when she felt exploited, embarrassed or 'used,' or the whole experience might have been disappointing. She may have experienced some confusion and/or disorientation. We will never know because no one asked her about it.

What particularly worries me is that when Sharron returned home, she still '*displayed all the symptoms of not coming out of hypnosis*'. There was opportunity to interview Sharron, but I strongly suspect that Andrew Vincent did not 'de-programme' Sharron properly. But would that failure be enough to account for her death?

By following Sharron to the Roebuck pub and then following her again to her friend's house, estranged husband Darren was engaging in classic controlling behaviour and this would have been stressful for Sharron. In addition, there is the question of the 'electric shock.' Even imaginary experiences under hypnosis can for some people feel very real. Something that normally causes fear (in this case, electric shock) can result in delayed shock which may not become apparent until later. There are plenty of examples in clinical research where tangible physical effects have been produced with hypnosis. Additionally, when under stress, the brain produces cortisol and it is not unknown for stress to cause individuals to feel nauseous, sometimes hours or even days later.

Cortisol is a steroid hormone produced by the adrenal glands. The release of this hormone is a multi-step process involving two additional hormones – corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) tells the pituitary gland to release adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) which tells the adrenal glands to produce cortisol. This causes the amygdala to recognise a threat, sending a message to the hypothalamus which releases cortisol. The hypothalamus is in charge of the stress response. When a stress response is triggered, it sends signals to two other structures – the pituitary gland, and the adrenal medulla.

In survival mode – the ‘fight or flight’ response – optimal amounts of cortisol can be life saving because it helps to maintain fluid balance and blood pressure while regulating some body functions that are not crucial in the moment, like reproductive drive, immunity, digestion and growth.

But when the cause of the stress is continual, cortisol continues to be released, and chronic levels of cortisol can cause serious problems. Too much cortisol can suppress the immune system and increase blood pressure and blood sugar levels. Stressful situations that are unlikely to occur again cease to be a problem – the cortisol ‘emergency’ is over and levels quickly return to normal without any long term effects.

In my view, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Sharron’s inability to awaken was caused by the sum of all the parts – increased suggestibility, feelings of disorientation, tiredness, the emotional stress of Darren and his friend turning up, the memory of the ‘electric shock’ – means that stress levels would have been elevated.

The official cause of Sharron’s death was pulmonary oedema – excess fluid in the lungs. Put bluntly, without waking, Sharron suffocated on her own vomit. However, there has been no explanation offered as to why Sharron did not wake up when she was sick, which would have been the normal reaction – and that’s the missing piece of the puzzle. Nor is there any explanation of why her younger daughter (who was in the same bed) did not wake up.

I can not, in all conscience, dismiss the possibility that Sharron’s inability to awaken was in part due to the fact that she has been hypnotised a few hours earlier. Sleep apnea, also known as sleep paralysis is something most people have experienced and it can be linked to stress. Sleep paralysis feels as if you are ‘awake yet not awake’ and like being caught in a nightmare, unable to wake up properly.

The conventional wisdom is that stress and sleep apnea may be connected. The degree to which we experience stress is thought by many experts to interfere with our sleep. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been linked to sleep apnea. However, beyond PTSD, researchers have not drawn a specific connection between stress and sleep apnea.

And then of course, there is the blindingly obvious... Hypnotherapy has long proved to be a useful way to combat insomnia. Hypnosis helps deep relaxation and aids better sleep.

I have met people who have participated in hypnosis shows and they have often commented how well they slept after being hypnotised. Did Sharron achieve a very deep state of hypnosis while on stage at the Roebuck pub? Without the opportunity of being able to examine Sharron this will remain pure conjecture.

But I believe it is possible that the combination of these factors – disorientation after taking part in the ‘show’, stress caused by the controlling behaviour of Darren, feeling nauseous and vomiting while asleep, conspired together to cause the death of Sharron Tabarn.

I am not saying that taking part in stage hypnosis was the cause, but it may have been a contributing factor. It has been pointed out to me by some less open-minded stage hypnotists that I am not a physician or a neurologist. I knew that already, but I can use my knowledge and experience of human frailty to understand why things can go wrong.

Andrew Vincent did not have a licence to perform at the Roebuck and possessed tragically little knowledge. He claims he had ‘a drink and a laugh with her [Sharron] at the bar afterwards’. I have no way of knowing if this is true, but if Sharron ‘*displayed all the symptoms of not coming out of hypnosis*’ I am curious as to why Vincent didn't notice it,

and if he did, why he didn't deal with it or do something about it. If true, Vincent is guilty of rank incompetence at the very least and probably an unforgivable negligence.

It would not surprise me if Vincent was lying – I believe he has lied about the events in the Roebuck ever since. As far as I am aware, he was not called at the inquest, but he should have been.

In the twenty years since Sharron's death, the understanding of hypnosis has advanced considerably, thanks to major research projects such as those carried out at Stanford University. There, researchers use fMRI scanners to look deep inside the brain to see what actually happens during hypnosis. The results astonished even the researchers. If this research had been available at the time, Sharron's death might have been taken more seriously.

By involving Derek Crussell, a failed stage hypnotist turned ambulance-chaser – a man desperate to make a name for himself, the case was faulted from the start. He may have played the expert, but in reality, he was barely competent. I met him in 1981 and the gaps in his knowledge were breathtaking. It would have been better to engage someone who really understood stage hypnosis, its culture and all its complexities. The problem would have been in finding a stage hypnotist willing to support the family – had I known then what I know now, I would certainly have supported them.

I have my own personal memory of Derek Crussell, having first seen him in action in the late 1970's, wearing a white suit resplendent with gold medallions – being booed off the stage at a caravan park social club in Skegness. Need I say more? If Crussell had looked less ridiculous when he was wheeled out to condemn stage hypnosis (he still wore his white suit and medallions) he would have done the Harpers a great favour. As it was, his appearance negated any credibility he might have had. Instead of 'expert hypnotherapist' Crussell came over as someone you wouldn't want near your children.

Derek Crussell, now deceased, operated his hypnotherapy business from the front room of his house in South London. By the time of the Sharron Tabarn case, Crussell had over the years generated a little media coverage for himself by making a career out of trying to destroy stage hypnotism. Crussell made himself available as Margaret Harper's personal expert – but he should have known better than to prey upon this woman's grief. Desperate for publicity, Crussell needlessly prolonged Mrs. Harper's suffering.

I am aware that a number of medical experts gave evidence at the inquest, but none of them had the slightest idea about stage hypnosis or its potential difficulties. What most people don't realise is that the dynamics of stage hypnosis, with its emotional highs and lows and pressures of social compliance is very different to those of hypnotherapy. As far as I am aware, the expert [medical] witnesses at the inquest concentrated on the physiological causes rather than the psychological causes... or the events that followed. That is like saying the cause of a person's death was because they jumped off a bridge whilst ignoring the reasons they jumped off the bridge in the first place.

Coroners and judges are servants of the law, and the law requires proof positive before blame can be apportioned and verdicts can be delivered, and in the case of Sharron Tabarn, there was simply not enough hard evidence to lay the tragedy at the door of stage hypnosis. However, I do not think that the possibility of hypnosis as a contributing factor was sufficiently explored and I still believe this omission meant that Sharron was dealt a short hand at the inquest.

What was needed was a stage hypnotist who could have explained the connection between the hypnosis and Sharron's death. Again, hypnosis was at most only a contributing factor, but had the coroner included those words in the judgement, it would have made all the difference and may well have been the final death knell. What was really needed was someone who really understood the nature of stage hypnosis and the culture underpinning it. Michael Heap didn't understand stage hypnosis because his only experience of hypnosis was hypnotising student volunteers in a lecture room at Sheffield University – he has absolutely no experience or understanding of stage work. Hypnosis on stage is a completely different animal, involving as it does social compliance and the 'safety in numbers' factor.

I would be interested to know how many people took part in that show at the Roebuck. The reason is that when there are very few participants, the workload can be much more stressful, creating feelings of anxiety which can continue after the show is over. It is not enough to say '*when you wake up you will feel and be exactly as you were before you came up onto the stage*' because a) you have no idea how they felt before they arrived on the stage – it could be anything from apprehensive to nervous – and b) those words are devoid of meaning anyway because participants have been through what in psychology is called a 'peak experience' – something which creates a sense of involvement, something which is unusual, and something which can cause them to question their own sense of self-control. Sometimes subjects feel pressured into continuing because they cannot find an 'exit strategy' so they feel even more stressed. In the theatre shows, participants are allowed the option of not returning to the stage after the interval, as often happens. It is the second half of the show where participants really have to 'perform' – the first half is really just a careful, measured and rather long-winded selection process, something the pub hypnotist does not have time for.

The TV series I did in the early 1990s is a case in point. The care taken on those shows was second to none. Every move was discussed and examined in advance. Conversely, the sort of 'stunts' that the pub hypnotists get their participants to perform would see me banned from a legitimate theatre – an environment where there are very different standards. In the pubs and clubs, the likelihood is that many of the audience don't even know there is going to be a hypnotist performing and so are not interested in watching the show, meaning there is constant chatter and noise – all of which can add to sensory overload and confusion.

Participants are often asked to perform stunts out of sight of the hypnotist. Unfortunately, there are no provisions in the Home Office Model Conditions that prohibit this sort of thing. Again, the people that drew up the guidelines do not understand the culture or the dynamics of stage hypnosis.

One star witness was Dr. Michael Heap, a psychology professor at Sheffield University, an individual who did know something about hypnosis, but whose main focus was a war of attrition with stage hypnotist Peter Casson, whom he despised. Nonetheless, Heap confirmed that hypnosis could not have been the cause of death. In this of course, he was correct. But he overlooked the possibility that it may have been a contributing factor. He also neglected to mention that he hadn't witnessed the show at The Roebuck pub, nor had he seen the sketch where Andrew Vincent had asked Sharron who her dream film star was.

When Sharron replied '*Charles Bronson*', Vincent pointed to a man who was sat with his girlfriend and told her that *he* was Charles Bronson and that she would sit on his knee and give him a passionate kiss. The man was embarrassed, and his girlfriend was appalled.

When Sharron opened her eyes, she shot off the man's knee and appeared to be very confused and upset.

Of course, Sharron would have known Darren would be watching her every move. Darren went to talk to Vincent at some length after the show. The more I discover about the show at the Roebuck, the more murky it gets, and the more appalled I become.

There is another side to this avoidable tragedy that was never reported in the press. According to Pat, *"When volunteers were called, there were only around 8 -10 volunteered. This would have meant that the chances of a good subject were drastically minimised? Obviously, Sharron was highly susceptible which meant that, bar 2 or 3 occasions, she was the 'star' ('victim') of the show. It was horrendous the way Vincent used her, relentlessly, again and again. She was rushing here and there, performing tricks and being 'brought out' and put 'back under' in rapid succession"*.

So Andrew Vincent got 8 to 10 volunteers. This is not enough to guarantee a safe show of longer than maybe 10 minutes, post induction. It sounds from Pat's account that Sharron was the only 'good subject' and that's why he worked her so hard... Andrew Vincent was on stage for over an hour. No wonder she emerged from the experience confused, stressed, and exhausted. In my opinion – and no doubt I will be shouted down by the so-called stage hypnosis 'fraternity' – that lack of knowledge and care amounted to psychological abuse. This factor, more than anything else, was – I believe – the main contributing factor that the whole case should have turned on. But then no expert witness was aware of this, because they simply didn't have all the information. It was the story of the five blind men and the elephant all over again.

And then of course there's Darren, intrigued at the power Vincent had over the woman he was obsessed with...

Lancashire coroner Howard McCann recorded a verdict of death by natural causes after hearing how Sharron's heart stopped due to congestion in the lungs from inhalation of vomit. If they had managed to get an expert on stage hypnosis, they might have heard a different story. It is my view that although they considered hypnosis, the medical experts were not able to understand the *culture* of stage hypnosis. Nor did they inquire into the lengthy conversation Darren had with Andrew Vincent at the bar after the show.

Lord Justice Simon Brown rejected the challenge saying *'It is now time to draw a line under this tragic case... nothing could be achieved by ordering a fresh inquest... Any jury, properly directed, would conclude that Sharron's death was probably the result of some kind of fit unprompted by hypnosis'*.

It is rarely a single event that causes tragedy, but rather a chain of events. The coroner was looking for a physiological cause and had not taken into consideration all the other factors. It is understandable the coroner would have been inclined to ignore the hypnosis show as a contributory factor and the pressure caused by Darren's unwarranted – and unwanted – presence. I doubt Dr Michael Heap, a psychologist, would have been aware of the full picture. Sharron, although a willing volunteer who had taken her participation seriously, even to the point of not consuming any alcohol, had found the experience distasteful and humiliating. Remove any one of those factors and Sharron Tabarn would in all likelihood still be alive today and visiting her daughters in Australia. Had all the elements of the case been presented properly, it is possible the coroner might have recorded a different verdict.

I have always been disgusted at the unwillingness of the stage hypnotists to even consider the possibility of a connection. Instead, they closed ranks and treated Sharron's death with

contempt. Their couldn't-care-less dismissal of a young mother's death was not only callous, it was a disgrace – as were the anonymous threatening phone calls to Mrs Harper and to her friend, Pat.

After 40 years practicing hypnosis, I consider myself a veteran of more than 6,000 performances. I have witnessed some very strange and unexpected things happen on stage. Most of them were very minor departures from normal behaviour and would have been missed by the audience, but to me each one was a cause for immediate action. I have sent back to their seats in the audience people who suddenly start rocking back and forth, people who suddenly start groaning, or laughing hysterically, or shaking uncontrollably. I have seen people suddenly turn pale and at least two volunteers have been sick. One participant became so relaxed he wet his trousers. All these people I sent back at the first sign of trouble. Once back in their seats they all quickly recovered.

I have been asked on maybe a dozen occasions to talk to participants whose friends or family were not convinced they were '*their normal selves in every way*' after a show. A few gentle and understanding words usually do the trick... except on one occasion when a woman begged to talk to me about her husband, whom she loathed. She told me that during the hypnosis had provided her with the one time she had felt truly free for years. She said her husband was controlling and she was not allowed to go anywhere or see anyone without him being there. She had faked a bout of dizziness after the show just so she could talk to me in private for a few seconds – before her husband appeared. I explained the reasons why I could not do that there and then, but promised I would see her as a hypnotherapy client. A week later, she sat in my office and unloaded seven years of misery.

Every stage hypnotist in Britain has at some stage had some kind of problem or other. This is the great secret that hypnotists will never admit to – hence the public corporate denial – but these things are discussed by stage hypnotists in private. I believe that the hypnosis affected Sharron Tabarn to the degree that she was unable to cope with the events that followed – the unwanted controlling and husband, the stress, and the ability to awaken while she vomited.

In the 21st century, thousands of hypnosis 'shows' take place worldwide every year. In the United States, there are hundreds of stage hypnotists working fairs, colleges, comedy clubs, private parties, etc. Some perform three times a day. Stage hypnotists are active in Spain, throughout Europe, in Australia, Canada, Russia, China, in fact in almost every country in the world. More than a quarter of a million people take part in stage hypnosis annually, yet there have been no more deaths, although there have been plenty of 'incidents' – particularly in America where stage hypnosis is completely unregulated, including at least one case of mass hysteria at a high school show where more than 120 students were affected causing ambulances to be called and students receiving medical treatment. The hypnotist concerned got carried away, hypnotising one after another, students falling like ninepins. College kids in the audience were keeling over and within seconds, the whole thing got out of control. In that instance, I blame the hypnotist.

Between 1994 and 2002 there were at least half a dozen UK TV programmes which questioned the safety of stage hypnosis. The main problem with these shows is that they always wheeled out the same sad-faced inadequates who regurgitated their same hard luck stories. These programmes always start out with the best intentions of balance and fairness, but in the end they always succumb to the irresistible urge of sensationalism.

Myself, Peter Powers and the ever modest Paul McKenna were noticeable by our absence on these programmes and thus the defence of hypnosis was left to amateurs with

lamentable inexperience in the art of the interview and no inkling that once their piece reaches the editing suite, they will be made fools of, which without exception, they always were.

The result was, as strangers to erudition, they appeared on the small screen looking not only bad, but sad. Margaret Harper appears on them all because as the mother of a dead child, she's good value for money. In fairness to Mrs. Harper, although her treatment by the television companies has been five-star – surrounded by production assistants and researchers whose only wish is make good television... sorry... I mean make 'good television', it is hardly surprising that she was seduced by the chauffeur driven cars, the five-star hotels and all the other perks that go with being the central attraction on TV. I have had all that and I can assure you, it's absolutely fantastic!

I believe that Mrs. Harper is genuine in her belief that her daughter died as a result of being hypnotised in an illegal show in a pub. I am even more in sympathy with her than you may imagine – in fact I am certain that although not the cause, the hypnosis was definitely a contributing factor. Nothing I say can ease a mother's loss of a child or ease the pain Sharron's family must feel. But... no matter how hard I try, I cannot write off the possibility hypnosis was a factor in Sharron Tabarn's death.

A couple of years after the Sharron Tabarn case finally faded from public view, I was doing a show in one of my regular theatres. One of the people I had just hypnotised was lying on his back on the stage, which is completely normal after a postural sway induction. Then, working my way along the line of volunteers, I suddenly saw the young man's mouth fill with the contents of his stomach, the mess spilling out of his mouth, down the side of his face and onto the stage. Quick as lightning, I stepped quickly over two prostrate volunteers and rolled him onto his side into the recovery position. In the two or three seconds it took me to get to him to open his eyes, I noticed that there had been no reaction from him, no gag reflex or other movement of his body. He did not open his eyes and I came to the inescapable conclusion that had I not intervened quickly, he might have choked.

On coming round, the young man told me he had been drinking heavily before the show and this was confirmed by his friends in the audience. It was without doubt excessive alcohol consumption that was the cause of him being sick, but the incident is an object lesson in how important it is to be vigilant, take responsibility and remain in control.

If any stage hypnotist tells me that stage hypnotism is absolutely safe, I always quote this example – and others. There is no activity on earth that is one hundred percent safe –there are risks crossing the road or at the fairground or even walking down the stairs – around 600 people die in the UK every year falling down stairs. It doesn't matter how many times you look left and right, you could still get hit by a cyclist. Human beings can be unpredictable and while you're busy 'giving the audience what they want', it is vital to remain aware of the possible pitfalls, of which there are many. It is simply impossible to retain sufficient control in a noisy pub or beachfront bar – especially when they're all pissed.

Around the same time the Sharron Tabarn story broke, one Lynne Howarth won an undefended action against Stage Hypnotist Phil Daemon (not his real name, a stage-name) and largely because the hypnotist couldn't be bothered to turn up to defend the action, was awarded £6,500 in damages. And that's typical of the attitude of most of today's hypnotists.

The facts of Lynne Howarth's case are simple. Claiming she was abused as a child and

when, during the course of a stage hypnosis show she was made to act like an eight year-old – once, part of the stage hypnotist's stock of tired but tested material – the memories allegedly came flooding back and, as all eight year olds do in this situation, she picked up the telephone and called her lawyer.

Who is really to blame in the case of Lynne Howarth? Is it the hypnotist, who was just copying something he'd seen another hypnotist do on another pub in another town, or the man who assaulted her when she was eight? What sort of emotional upset does this woman experience every time she walks past a school playground or catches a glimpse of children's television? The Howarth case is not of interest because it was the first time someone actually succeeded in a civil litigation against a stage hypnotist, but because Ms. Howarth's claim was un-opposed.

The final award of £6,500 was derisory. 'The world's No. 1 hypnotist' Phil Daemon was yet another former bus driver who subsequently gave up hypnosis to run pub karaoke contests. By the time the case came to court he was either too lazy or too indifferent to offer a defence, something which adds a cheerless postscript to the story. Nevertheless, it is a depressing indication of the calibre of the people who became involved in stage hypnosis in Britain in the early 1990's, and the two remaining true professionals are still paying the price. All this left a nasty enough taste in everybody's mouth, but the pub hypnotism business still went on.

Then in 1997, Christopher Gates sued Paul McKenna in the Civil Court claiming he suffered depression and had become schizophrenic after being told to imagine that he was eight years old in a show at the Swan Theatre, High Wycombe. The case was rejected by the judge after listening to expert testimony from, amongst others, Dr. Graham Wagstaff of Liverpool University.

It struck me at the time that by using Graham Wagstaff as an expert witness McKenna was playing a desperate card. The defence relied upon the premise that the plaintiff Gates' schizophrenia could not possibly have been caused by hypnosis because hypnosis doesn't exist in the first place. This defence could have seriously backfired. Any suggestion that hypnosis doesn't exist could be misinterpreted by an unprepared public who might then consider that, well... hypnosis doesn't exist, so why bother going to see a hypnotist? But then I suppose with hundreds of thousands of pounds at stake, anything is worth a try.

I spoke to the journalist who first broke the Chris Gates story in that bastion of truth and accuracy, the now defunct *News of the World*. He told me that he had visited Gates at home and that Gates had claimed that he was left in a permanent state of being eight years old by McKenna. Most of the interview was conducted with Gates' girlfriend while the twenty-five-year-old eight-year-old sat on the floor and played with a selection of building blocks and colouring books. The journalist, who died a few weeks later in a mysterious motorcycle accident in France, told me that he became suspicious when Gates asked for £15,000 and not a trip to Toys-R-Us. He told that he didn't believe a word of it but it was just too good a story to pass up.

Given the opportunity to tell his side of the story in the Sunday Times in January 2006, McKenna appeared humiliated. *'As soon as the story broke I stopped touring; adverts and corporate work were cancelled. I worked out the case cost me four or five million quid. But the money was the least of it. I was so traumatised I couldn't sleep, I lost a lot of weight and I began to believe my own bad publicity: I could help other people with stress control, but I couldn't help myself'*.

Poor chap. Still, it makes a change from believing his own good publicity. McKenna has a habit of exaggerating his wealth and a loss of four to five million pounds at that stage of his career defies reasonable belief. Was his income adversely affected? Yes, I believe it was, but then we were we all struggling at that time in the UK. I was incredibly fortunate because I hadn't put all my eggs in one basket – tours of New Zealand and Australia continued unaffected and in 1997 I expanded my interests to include South Africa, where I was treated like a king and only got robbed twice.

Perhaps his weight loss and mental state had more to do with all the ecstasy tablets he was throwing down his neck at the time or his cocaine habit which, until recently, he managed to keep very quiet about. The more likely truth is that by the time the story broke, stage hypnosis in Britain was already dead in the water.

The McKenna/Gates case is an object lesson in how not to deal with a potential problem. Christopher Gates had a history of mental illness and schizophrenia *before* he went on stage at the Swan Theatre. Schizophrenia is a genetic illness and cannot possibly be caused as a result of hypnosis, although stage hypnosis could in certain circumstances exacerbate feelings of stress paranoia.

Nevertheless, McKenna should have sent him back to his seat at the first hint of trouble, presuming of course he noticed Gates' distress in the first place. McKenna did not attempt to make himself available for any kind of debriefing, other than to spout some psychobabble about Gates being 'in touch with the dark side of his mind' when he was subsequently telephoned by Gates' girlfriend. He could have afforded himself the opportunity of offering some reassurance or even some hypnotherapy, but Gates might as well have called Darth Vader. Hoping a problem will just go away on its own is not the answer.

Only a very small minority (less than half a dozen cases) have claimed genuine mental health problems as a result of being hypnotised on the stage. These complaints date to the mid 1990's and there have been none since, because out of the nearly two hundred 'stage hypnotists' who arrived after TV, most disappeared as quickly as they had appeared in the first place and the current total of stage hypnotists in Britain is now much lower, maybe thirty or so, but without the Mediterranean and the cruise lines, they would be doing very few shows.

According to Government figures, approximately one in six people suffer some kind of mental illness at some time in their lives. It doesn't take a genius to work out the odds that very occasionally there may be a coincidence of an individual who is unaware they may be suffering a mild form of mental illness and who then volunteers to be hypnotised on stage. Common sense dictates that a much more scientific approach should be adopted when investigating these claims but as yet, there is no empirical evidence to suggest a link and stories in tabloid newspapers do not constitute empirical evidence.

Derren Brown relates a truly hideous tale of how he had been booked to appear at a student ball at Bristol University when he was still doing his own stage hypnosis act. One of the young students, a girl, was obviously drunk and Derren quite rightly refused to hypnotise her and sent her back to her seat – which was absolutely the right decision. Some time after the performance was over, the girl collapsed and an ambulance was duly summoned. Later she was taken to hospital where she was diagnosed as suffering from alcohol poisoning and had her stomach pumped.

But the first thing the demonic Derren knew of the incident was an announcement over the public address system asking the hypnotist to immediately present himself at reception.

There, he saw the girl flanked by paramedics and the usual crowd of no-agenda sightseers. It was at this juncture that the ambulance driver suggested that he try to bring her out of hypnosis. This, he attempted to do – and that was the mistake. Personally, I would have refused. Why? My reasons are straightforward and logical. First, the girl hadn't been hypnotised in the first place. Second, she was obviously dead drunk and third (and most important) to attempt to interfere in a matter that is patently nothing to do with you is tantamount to an admission that it might be.

My response would have been something along the lines of *'Oh, I remember this girl... I didn't hypnotise her because I considered that she was drunk so I sent her back to her seat. It is absolutely impossible that she has been affected in any way, shape or form by what was happening on the stage. So I would get her to hospital and pump her stomach. I don't know... students eh?!'*

A cautionary tale, nonetheless. What is interesting about the story is the way everybody automatically associated the girl's drunkenness with hypnosis. I don't know... the public eh?! Some of them are really f***ing stupid.

I never do pubs, nightclubs, private parties, corporate dinners, firm's Christmas do's, in fact anything where alcohol is the main attraction – and for all the reasons stated above. I limit myself to legitimate theatres or town halls or venues where the audience is sat in rows – theatre style – and not getting up and down going to the bar. I research my venues beforehand and only perform in those where I am able exercise the degree of control the job demands. Thus I have never had anyone complain of headaches or depression, nor have I had anyone level the accusation that I have psychologically damaged them. I have never received a complaint from a member of the public, the police, the licensing authority or the medical profession, although I admit one of my subjects slipped and fell off the stage in Blackpool in 1980. The man, who had not believed he could be hypnotised in the first place but had come up to 'give it a try' was miraculously only slightly injured and took it all in his stride, but the incident served as a massive wake-up call for me. After that, I was careful to the point of paranoia.

Perhaps the worst damage to stage hypnosis was the erroneous claim made by 'the world's greatest hypnotist' Delavar on at least one high profile TV programme, stating that anyone could learn stage hypnosis in a couple of hours. That completely asinine remark did more harm than anything. Trawling the internet, it appears the standard price tag for this powerful knowledge at present sits at around £200. But Delavar, a founder member of FESH, was a puddled old fool, and everyone in the business new it. I long ago had formed the opinion that was probably quite mad, judging by the way he carried on in meetings and his habit of referring to hypnotism as 'ypnomatism'. TV research assistants really should do their homework before they book these idiots.

Most hypnotherapists are in it because they genuinely want to help people and there is always the confidentiality of the consulting room and the reasonable expectation that the hypnosis will be beneficial. The common or garden stage hypnotist on the other hand is in it for the easy money – if you can call £200 a night easy money.

The vast majority of stage hypnotists couldn't give a stuff about their volunteers. Paul McKenna once said about his subjects in a philosophical moment, *'they're scum really... just a bunch of fucking bastards who should do as they're told... total bastards all of them...'* Maybe he was just joking...

His well publicised altruism has been of benefit to certain celebrities and mainly reserved for those he thinks he can use for his own advancement. He stayed at my house on a

couple of occasions (my wife told me never to invite him again) so I know him quite well and it is my opinion that there is no one Paul McKenna likes to help more than Paul McKenna. He has successfully cultivated a super clean image, the result of tens of thousands of pounds spent on PR.

The cat-out-of-the-bag public knowledge that hypnosis was an easy skill to acquire was without doubt *the* most damaging news of all for stage hypnosis. Where audiences had once marvelled at the hypnotist's mysterious skill, they now felt as if some cheap fraud was being perpetrated on them. All the mystique vanished virtually overnight.

The 1994 Inquiry into stage hypnosis, chaired by the Home Office and with expert opinion from a panel of medical specialists, psychiatrists and psychologists, and epidemiologists, some of whom came from the Royal College of Psychiatry, concluded that, with the attachment of a couple of extra conditions to the licence, stage hypnosis could be considered as safe as any other activity which involved the participation of members of the public. This news got precisely one column of five centimetres in length in the Guardian but otherwise went unreported.

It is ironic that the more outlandish and absurd tabloid stories, some of which were presented as 'evidence' to the panel, served only to support the theory that stage hypnosis was safe, as faced with a collection of ridiculous anecdotes, the professionals were more inclined to ignore the real problem.

I have always felt the Home Office inquiry was hurried and did not examine the real problems of stage hypnosis carefully enough. Too much attention was paid to supposed embarrassment suffered by hypnotised subjects, and whether this embarrassment could lead to other, more serious conditions.

As far as embarrassment is concerned, people are far more robust than one perhaps imagines. In any event, participation in stage hypnosis has no more embarrassment potential than being the subject of a practical joke at the office, or a television reality show or 'prank' show, something the subject of the prank *hadn't* volunteered for. The hypnotist on the other hand is an easy target for blame and traditionally bears the burden of responsibility for loss of face. The effect on an individual say, forced to accept demotion at work is far worse – and permanent.

Potential embarrassment is *not* the problem and never has been. What the inquiry failed to do was to look into the culture of stage hypnotism. If they had done that, a rather different picture would have emerged.

There are untold urban myths and stories of accidental 're-stimulation' of hypnotic suggestions. about people who have suddenly been transformed into clucking chickens, or have fallen asleep at the wheel due to hypnotic suggestions delivered days or weeks before. Not one of these has any basis in fact.

What about individuals who don't volunteer but inadvertently fall into hypnosis in the audience? On the three occasions I have seen this happen in my own six thousand plus performances, it has been due to instantly explainable and non-hypnosis related causes.

On the first occasion, I discovered a person had that very morning arrived back from a trip to Australia. When he fell asleep in the audience, the natural reaction was for everyone to assume he had somehow been affected. The second occasion was entirely due the effect of our reliable friend, alcohol. In this case the gentleman was so drunk, he snored loudly through there rest of the performance, much to the amusement of his friends. And then

there was an encounter caused by that most dreaded of conditions – the need for attention. In that instance, the tried and tested method of ignoring the sleeping beauty eventually worked wonders!

In recent times, we have become increasingly subject to a compensation culture, fuelled by no-win/no-fee arrangements with solicitors. Add to this an insurance market that was already reeling from the massive pay-outs resulting from the Piper Alpha disaster, multi-billion pound asbestosis claims and World Trade Centre attacks, and one can start to understand why the insurance companies were beginning to think twice about insuring anyone that represents even the slightest risk... such as stage hypnotists.

Typically, most stage hypnotists expect to get something for nothing – a lot of them were out to make a quick buck from the hypnosis bandwagon but with the notable exceptions of myself, McKenna, Ken Webster and Peter Powers, few stage hypnotists carried their own public liability insurance. Those who were members of Equity get by using the union's own brand insurance which is free to members. After the McKenna/Gates case, this insurance was withdrawn and had the all too predictable effect of driving the hypnotists back underground, back to the private birthday parties and caravan parks – which is where they were in the 1950's and 60's and where there are no checks and no redress when things go wrong.

Many hypnosis shows in Britain are not only unlicensed but also uninsured. It is possible to get the required insurance but, like any other type of insurance it comes at a premium.

Why on earth should a responsible insurance company provide free cover to a group of individuals about whom they know nothing? If someone wishes to insure their car, the insurance company wants to know where the car is kept, who is going to be driving it, even what colour it is. The paradox is that as far as the insurance companies are concerned, the problem is not that there are too many hypnotists but that there are too few hypnotists to generate a sufficient balance in premiums to cover potential pay-outs.

It is up to the stage hypnotists to prove themselves worthy of trust once more, although it has to be said that for the majority, public approval does not seem to be very forthcoming.

Unable to find work in Britain, some of the ex-painters and decorators have moved permanently abroad, to the holiday resorts of the Med, to the Canary Islands, to Torremolinos, Benidorm and Greece. It is in the cheap package holiday infested bars and pubs that most now ply their trade, pandering to the very worst excesses of their inebriated and uninhibited audiences with routines that twenty years ago would have resulted in their arrest on charges of indecency. The average fee for a night's work in these places ranges from £70 to £100, which is why the majority have given up their dream of being the next hypnotist on TV and have headed back to B&Q.

Paul McKenna has successfully reinvented himself as the Messiah of the 'make your life a happier place to live' business, running NLP training courses, self-improvement seminars and marketing hypnotic therapy CD's and books. McKenna these days prefers to be known as Dr. Paul McKenna PhD., a qualification which, according to the Daily Mirror, is entirely bogus. But it's gratifying nonetheless to see that he's more than willing to carry on a great tradition. Apparently, there was only one question on the examination paper – have you got \$2,600?

In the interests of completeness (and not getting sued by the self-important popinjay) he did claim that in preparing for his doctoral thesis, he read a staggering twelve books, including the airport bookshop favourite, *Brain Power*, and spent five hundred hours

writing it and completed it in a mere eighteen months – an achievement of which the academic world must be in awe.

McKenna claims that he was made ‘a laughing stock’ by journalist Victor Lewis-Smith and sued for libel. La Salle University, the organisation that conferred the doctorate was, without any shadow of a doubt, a cheap diploma mill and was subsequently proven to be just that in the United States by a Federal Court (its founder was sentenced to five years imprisonment for fraud.)

McKenna won the case against the Mirror, but the judge, Mr. Justice Eady agreed that much of his claim was baseless. McKenna claimed that he had ‘earned’ his ‘PhD’ getting *‘top grades for most, if not all’* of the courses he completed. The judge was of a different opinion, calling the claim *‘manifestly inaccurate... This... is quite incomprehensible... he did not complete those courses’*.

Defending Counsel for the Daily Mirror, Mr. John Kelsey-Fry QC, argued that *‘Mr McKenna is an intelligent man... We suggest that such a man could not conceivably have believed that the programme he undertook could legitimately have placed him in the upper ranks of academia. What he wanted was not betterment, education and study but the three letters (PhD) he was seeking and which he got. He wanted them for sound commercial reasons’*.

I seem to remember that in the late 1980’s, Paul McKenna and I were chairman and secretary respectively of the now defunct British Council of Professional Stage Hypnotists. McKenna and I both knew that the outgoing chairman ‘Dr.’ Adam Cordean PhD. was nothing of the sort. In fact the whole farcical situation was one that caused us both much amusement, so much so that in personal correspondence (which I kept for posterity) and telephone conversations, for a while, we jokingly referred to each other as ‘doctor’. Sometime later, Paul told me that he was considering buying *‘one of those dodgy American degrees’* if only he could find one which *‘looked the business’*. This became a recurring discussion, even though he knew as well as I did that at the time, there was nowhere in the world where one could obtain a genuine Ph.D. in hypnotism. Imagine then my amusement when my attention was first drawn to Victor Lewis-Smith’s excellent and well researched article.

I do not believe for one moment that Paul McKenna obtained the phoney PhD. for commercial reasons – that would be unfair, even though phoney it is, and even though he managed to convince Mr. Justice Eady that he had, at the time, sincerely believed it to be genuine, which was the only reason he got off. On several occasions in interviews, most memorably on the ITV flagship programme This Morning, the great man himself makes much of the fact that he failed his English O level and yet managed to write a best-selling book. The acquisition of a phoney PhD. was undoubtedly obtained to massage his own ego and one in the eye for those who had once had the audacity to think that he was just a sad tosser.

The truth is that those who take short cuts by purchasing diploma mill credentials know very well what they are doing and wilfully ignore all indications to the contrary. They know full well that what they are doing is distinctly dodgy and they rely on the assumption that no-one will ever question them. McKenna would have got away with it had he not been rumbled by the Daily Mirror. When he was, he threw his toys out of the cot with an enthusiasm of biblical proportions.

The wily McKenna says that he asked for a refund when he discovered that it wasn’t worth the paper it was written on (this was after the article appeared in the Daily Mirror) but it is impossible to ignore the fact that he continued to use the letters PhD. on his therapy CDs,

which, in my opinion, are amongst the worst I have ever heard – half-hearted efforts with a wish-washy induction, repetition of a few banal stock phrases and, you guessed it, devoid of any originality whatsoever. These recordings were also presented to the court as part of his ‘thesis.’ Had work of such extraordinary brevity been presented to a genuine academic institution it would have been rejected out of hand. I wonder what Mr. Justice Eady would have said about it had McKenna's 'dissertation' been on the subject of say, law...

At University College London, there has been in existence for more than twenty-five years, a pioneering unit which specialises in hypnosis and it is led by the brilliant Professor David Oakley. The unit is not only world renowned but is the only centre in the world that offers specialist training in hypnosis studies. It is also the only place in the world where hypnosis studies are validated by a recognised academic institution, in this case, a British university. To my (not great) surprise, McKenna has stated that he had never heard of it.

McKenna's libel victory is shallow, even though he may yet (at the time of writing) get a modest pay-out by way of damages. It should be around the 1p mark. Do not despair however – this is almost bound to be offset by the fact that the judge indicated that McKenna might have to pay a sizeable proportion of his own costs as *‘the matter could have been resolved at a much earlier stage had Paul McKenna presented Victor Lewis-Smith with a copy of his dissertation. This he failed to do...’*

There are at least 4,000 hypnotherapists in the UK alone, working the same kind of miracles every day of the week. The vast majority are content to devote their time and energy trying to help people without the self-aggrandising publicity machine that is part and parcel of every ‘cure’ McKenna achieves. I, and many of my colleagues, rate his ability as distinctly average – a very dangerous thing for me to say, given the way he normally responds to even the slightest criticism.

In fairness, Paul McKenna is not the only offender. Alex William Smith, today also known as Dr. Jonathan Royle PhD, by his own admission, bought his doctorate/PhD from the non-existent Chelsea University. He now claims he has a doctorate and PhD from the American Universal Life Church – cost: \$265 – no Bible study required. Using the name Alex Leroy he performed lewd shows in pubs (for scientific and research purposes) once suggesting to a young woman that she would think she had just been raped. Years later, he claimed it had all been set up and the woman was a paid stooge. He gave Channel 5 a video of him having sex with a young girl who appears to be unconscious, again, also much later claiming the girl was a paid ‘glamour model’ and the stunt itself was faked. Fake or not, the footage was shown on the BBC's current affairs programme *Here and Now*. It doesn't take a genius to understand that sort of behaviour is bound to damage the reputation of hypnosis and hypnotists.

To get round the problem of possible public opprobrium, a lot of stage hypnotists have invested in a cunning contingency plan. A quick trawl of the internet reveals a surprising number of stage hypnotists (in Britain especially, although perhaps not so surprising, given that stage hypnosis in Britain seems to attract a certain type of individual these days) who claim to have PhD's. A quick check of these credentials, *without exception* awarded by bogus academic institutions, reveals that the owners are not only trying to fool others, but are also fooling themselves. Some have taken an even shorter route to academic excellence by simply awarding themselves the coveted letters Ph.D., without the inconvenience of handing over the \$200 it normally costs. You may have noticed that I hold these charlatans in utter contempt.

The ups and downs of stage hypnosis in Britain however are a localised phenomenon. Other countries seem not to have been affected – in New Zealand, Australia and the

United States business is booming. Although entertainment hypnotism has been televised all over the world, only in Britain has there been a major upsurge in the number of hypnotists eager to take to the stage – this really has been a totally British phenomenon, at least up until recently.

The United States seems now to be awash with stage hypnotists, most of whom survive on the college circuit. In Sweden and Norway, where British hypnosis shows have been regularly aired on TV, only one Norwegian has taken to the stage – and because stage hypnosis is still banned in Norway, he performs only in Sweden. The same is true in New Zealand and South Africa. The smaller populations in these countries may in part explain this, but I think a more likely cause is to be found in the subtle cultural differences that suggest audiences in those countries are amused by it but have no desire to go into it themselves.

So will stage hypnotism in Britain come full circle and eventually go through a resurgence of popularity sometime in the future? Somehow I doubt it. The bandwagon has been and gone and that being the case, it's too late to jump on it.

Robert Temple, a young man who dyes his hair bright red has recently dipped his toe into the theatre circuit. Out of a dozen shows, nearly half were cancelled. At the Theatre Royal St. Helens, the show had to be abandoned mid way through as participants failed to return to the stage after he interval. How embarrassing! And worse, the Theatre Royal St. Helens – a venue I used to fill in the 80's and 90s, is no longer willing to take hypnosis shows.

Still, at least he had the decency to apply for licences and get insurance. What a pity he chose as his grand finale a stunt where he got a woman to simulate having an orgasm. Classy!

The real problems of stage hypnosis however are nothing to do with to the rules and regulations imposed upon it or the exigencies of insurance and licensing. The main problem is that when it comes down to it, it is a novelty act, and one that really belongs to the last century.

Given that such a simple science carries with it the baggage of such great public misunderstanding, it is surely no big surprise that the public have turned their backs on it as an entertainment after so much bad publicity. In contrast, every year at least half a dozen punters are genuinely injured on fairground rides, and yet there is never a call for the banning of fairground rides. Certainly there has never been the emotional outcry that was the result of the boom in stage hypnotism. A fairground ride is a machine and people understand that machines sometimes go wrong, but hypnotism eludes public comprehension and in that respect it is still as doubtful as it was when it was Mesmerism.

It is unfair to round on Mrs. Harper, a mother who lost a daughter in circumstances that are difficult to rationalise. But the same cannot be said of the other half dozen habitual moaners who learned to love the camera every bit as much as the camera loved them.

They all had similar stories to tell – depression, time off work and damaged lives. They just can't bring themselves to accept that everyone had a good laugh at their expense at the office Christmas party. Now their workmates and colleagues will never look at them in the same light again. If there has been damage to their self-esteem or if they think that their position in the hierarchy has been compromised, it begs the question, why did they get up there in first place? I am wondering if they would suffer the same emotional affront to their dignity if they suddenly found themselves the victim of a practical joke, something which they would have no control over. In the case of the hypnosis show they took part in, they

did volunteer... and the hypnotist is too easy a target for blame, providing a useful abdication of responsibility for their own loss of face. What would be the effect of say, company downsizing where they were forced to accept a demotion?

It is impossible to ignore the fact that these sort of complaints contradict some expert's views that hypnosis is simply social compliance and nothing else. On the other hand, might it be that their consequent distress and numerous visits to the shrink is also a continuation of their role-playing? Might it be that they are just plain barmy? Or were they mentally fragile in the first place? Were they already self-absorbed individuals who have suddenly found something worth moaning about and people who are willing to listen and sympathise and give them attention?

If you look carefully, it *is* possible to detect a pattern because their stories are uncannily similar. None of them believed in hypnotism in the first place and didn't think it could ever happen to them, but somehow they were the ones that ended up being 'the star of the show,' the one subject that everyone found the most hilarious. Now that their heady fifteen minutes of fame has expired, they unconsciously satisfy their newfound need for attention by exchanging their dignity for a starring role as injured party in front of a larger television audience. If only they could get some compensation, maybe their life would be better. They feed off the programme makers in the same symbiotic relationship as the programme makers feed off their need to play the victim. Sometimes they too get the red carpet treatment of five-star hotels, first-class travel and the satisfying – though fleeting – feeling of importance.

All this grumbling and whining about stage hypnosis is a peculiarly British disease – nowhere else in the world does stage hypnosis attract this sort of kangaroo court justice. In every other country stage hypnotists carry on their craft without the slightest hint of criticism.

So what makes the Brits so different? We are not particularly a nation of complainers. But I think the answer lies in our love affair with tabloid newspapers and our inability to spot when we are being fed a line.

Our European cousins read proper grown up newspapers and as a consequence are more capable of exercising individual critical judgement. The British tabloids on the other hand are juvenile and dwell on the sensational. The Sun, Britain's best selling daily, has a reading age of ten. Brought up on a diet of scandalous gossip and cheap, tasteless, artificial culture, is it any wonder that an unhealthy fascination with the absurd has become part of the national psyche? Only in Britain could a paediatrician be confused with a pedophile and have his home attacked by the mob.

The French and the Germans take much more of an interest in their country's politics than the British do. When the French hit the streets it's because they have something to say and they want their government to listen. When the Brits hit the streets it's because it's an excuse to throw stones at the police. The European ideal is one that encourages self-improvement by means of literature and art. French children routinely visit art galleries without their parents, Swedish teenagers have much more common sense and aspire to better themselves, not society. As a result, they can be trusted to behave.

Compare the centre of Stockholm late on a Friday night with downtown Manchester. Both cities are just as busy with drinkers and club-goers, but Stockholm is safe. In Manchester you're far more likely to get your head kicked in by a drunken yob. In Italian cafes, whole families eat together – and that includes the teenagers. The Brits on the other hand aspire to nothing more than getting pissed. And there's the difference. Did you know that the

French refer to the British as 'les f***-offs' because of our reputation for loutish behaviour and the liberal use of the expression?

In Britain, the myths and legends surrounding stage hypnosis have become part of urban mythology. Have you heard the one about the hypnotist who told a man that his wife had stolen his belly button? Everyone thought it was a scream in the pub but in the middle of the night he took a kitchen knife and cut out his wife's navel. This never happened – but it's a story that has been quoted to me several times over the years. Trying to find the real victims of these stories is like trying to find the little old lady who tried to dry her poodle in the microwave. She didn't exist either.

Another problem is that the new breed of stage hypnotists have no inkling of what things were like before hypnotism went on TV. Not one of them has any class. The best you could say about them is that they're fairground barkers in suits. When the league of extraordinary gentlemen were performing night after night, there were none of the bars, bistros and restaurants that have in the last two decades become permanent features in Britain's city centres. When I was pulling them in by their thousands, week after week, year after year in Liverpool and Manchester, there were just a hand-full of night clubs open in those cities. Now there are literally scores of themed pubs and bars, of comedy venues and restaurants and multiplex cinemas, where the entertainment and the booze is cheap.

A magician can perform to a table of diners, but to create the same thrill, a hypnotist is dependent on the numbers game – there simply must be a crowd a crowd, and the bigger the better.

Numbers are important. In a theatre a large crowd means lots of volunteers which means lots of happy and willing volunteers. In the pubs and bars, the small numbers means the hypnotist may be in a position where he is begging for volunteers. That means the odds will be inevitably stacked against him. So... in order to get paid, the hypnotist is forced take risks and press the volunteers harder to get a show out of it. He's not going to go back there anyway, so why worry? Gone... but not necessarily forgotten.

Television has changed too. The outrageous behaviour of the self-absorbed contestants on Big Brother and most mainstream 'reality' TV shows make the antics of the stage hypnotist look positively tame! When Channel 4 broadcast a programme with the title 'The Top 100 Sexual Accidents,' shown with the appropriate close-ups, voyeuristic entertainment plumbed depths I never thought possible. The great British public has simply found other sources for their love of mischievous amusement.

But there is another, deeper, more fundamental reason that stage hypnotism is in the doldrums and that is, unlike many other forms of entertainment, it stagnated a long time ago. On television it was always destined to be, because of its nature, a one show joke. Even in the twentieth century, hypnosis on stage remained stuck in the nineteenth century.

In most hypnosis shows there are precious few new tricks – the same tired routines and identical one-liners are run out over and over again by talentless clones and because of these limitations, hypnosis has been unable to progress in the same way that stand up comedy and street magic have evolved and caught up with the times. So far, not one stage hypnotist has had the creativity or originality to put a different gloss on it by claiming to be, say, a 'Performance Hypnotist', which might take it up a notch or two. Or 'Mesmerist' – there's another good one.

Peter Powers, always thinking outside the box, is the only exception. He has abandoned all the old ways and has taken entertainment hypnosis to the next level – and it works

brilliantly. In *The Power of One*, filmed for the Comedy Channel in Australia, he puts his volunteers in helicopters, on the beach, paddling a raft up Queen Street – Sydney’s main thoroughfare – and in other situations no other hypnotist has even dreamt of before. Setting up two subjects to have a domestic argument, oblivious of the fact they are on a rollercoaster was nothing short of pure genius. At present, he is also the only hypnotist with a series on TV, so that makes him the best hypnotist on TV. Well done Peter – it couldn’t have happened to a nicer person.

David Blaine provides one example of how magic has moved into the modern world. Although the tricks are the same, his dress sense (or lack of it) as well as the persona he portrays is much more tailored to more youthful, though not necessarily more sophisticated, audiences. Stage hypnotists however refuse to give up their flash suits and waistcoats and exchange them for a t-shirt and a pair of jeans because they are reluctant to give up the illusion of authority they think is essential to maintain the image.

Even Derren Brown (using a blend of ‘mind reading’ trickery, suggestion, magic tricks and plain old fashioned flummery) seems stuck in this mould. Except of course he’s smart enough not to mention the word hypnosis, something he relies on heavily in his live shows. Derren has taken hypnosis, or mesmerism, or whatever you want to call it, back to its original music hall roots, even donning an updated version of the time-honoured Victorian frock-coat. He plays it for amazement rather than amusement and that, as it turns out, has been a very smart move on his part. But I feel I have to point out that despite his current popularity, he has, on occasion, to quote Brian’s mum, been ‘*a very naughty boy!*’

If a stage hypnotist had pulled some of the stunts Derren Brown has perpetrated on his guinea-pigs in his TV shows, there would have been a public outcry. In one episode, a young student was hypnotised whilst playing a video game in a pub. Once in hypnosis, the unsuspecting young man was transferred on a hospital gurney to a warehouse where, ‘awakened’ he found himself a part of the game for real, gun in hand and actor zombies all round, all coming to get him, and it turned out to be an experience that he clearly found frightening and upsetting. Had that stunt been labelled with the word hypnosis (and hypnosis it indeed was) the viewing audience would have been outraged by it. But without the ‘H’ word attached, it was magically elevated to the status of the brilliant!

‘How did he do that?’ a student (in Manchester) asked in sincere admiration. *‘He used hypnosis’* I replied. *‘Oh no, I’ve seen hypnotists – they make twats out of people... but that was fucking brilliant what he did!’*

When the great Derren approaches a young lady in the middle of a busy road and sticks her feet to the ground so she is now fixed in the midst of heavy traffic, viewers are impressed. This is yet another old stage hypnotist’s trick – watching a seventeen stone Barnsley miner struggling to get his feet off the floor before he can go back to his seat in the audience used to be hysterical. But even though there is a clear element of risk in stationing a member of the public in the middle of a street in heavy traffic, we are not actually *laughing* at her. So that’s alright then.

Even inserting needles into the arms of popular crooner Robbie Williams (haven’t we seen this somewhere before?) was, for most viewers something momentarily spectacular. If a stage hypnotist had attempted this, it is likely there would have been moaning and groaning on an epic scale as the Tabloids united to condemn the act and hunt the hypnotist down on behalf of outraged readers. But not on this occasion. Derren is an enigma, unfathomable, and he’s smart enough to know not to use the ‘H’ word... and of course, he’s on the telly.

In his defence I would also add that I have nothing but admiration for the way he has relentlessly sought to expose as frauds spirit mediums and others of their ilk who rip off susceptible and defenceless old ladies. Good on you Derren for that.

People's critical faculties undergo a temporary suspension when they witness something they can't explain. This is why magicians have never given away their greatest secrets. In the same instant a secret is given away, one voluntarily relinquishes the respect (and love) of the audience... especially if they're told it can be learned in a weekend...

Just as an aside here, an historical footnote if you like, Derren Brown was, at the time of writing, managed by a theatrical agent called Michael Vine. Michael Vine also managed Peter Casson in his later years. Apart from his hypnotism shows, Casson also presented a 'paranormal' show on the stage which was later (very poorly as it turned out) imitated on TV by Paul McKenna, whom Casson used to refer to as 'the little prick', probably because of McKenna's somewhat reprehensible strategy of purposely putting on a special show in London on the same night as Peter Casson gave his lifetime farewell performance at the London Palladium.

Psychological Illusion is the new hypnotism. Stage hypnotism is dead... long live stage hypnotism. (I heard the Spice Girls are making a come-back... is that right?)

In the UK [as of 2018] there are currently around thirty people claiming to be the world's best, rudest, most outrageous, funniest hypnotist. In the summer many of them Ruch to the clubs and bars of Ibiza and Benidorm, where simulated sex acts performed under hypnosis are now the norm. In the age of anything goes, market forces are the only safety net.

While *hypnotherapy* is now respectable and mainstream... the mere mention of the word 'hypnotist' still puts people on their guard. I have lost count of the number of times I've heard people say '*don't look into his eyes!*' If I really did have a pound for every time I'd heard it, I'd have enough to buy a small family car.

I don't expect everyone to have as full an understanding of hypnosis as I have, but in a lot of people's heads, the word seems to instantly conjure up images of demonic Svengali-like power exercised over innocent virgins, not to mention an aura of demonic nastiness.

The antics of stage hypnotists are partly to blame and misunderstanding dates back to the 1760s, to Franz Mesmer, and tainted by a history of quackery and charlatanism spanning two and a half centuries.

Hypnotherapy offers rapid relief for a variety of issues and psychosomatic ills. So it begs the question, why are people still shackled with a prejudice that really belongs in the dustbin of history? All the stage hypnotists in the world apart, the public perception of hypnotism has been dictated largely by Hollywood. From the early silent movies of Lon Chaney to the more recent Manchurian Candidate (the original *and* more recent remake) the movie industry has unwittingly shaped our perceptions of hypnosis, perceptions which have evolved into beliefs and prejudices.

Public perception of any phenomenon, from art to war, is always dictated by the cultural mores of the society of the time. Religious conviction has often been found to be opposite to scientific evidence, resulting in ludicrous beliefs. The main difference between Catholicism and Protestantism is whether the Spirit of Christ resides in a wafer!

Hypnosis, Hypnotism and Hypnotists suffer from a serious image problem because humans unconsciously recognise this perceived 'power' as an attempt to manipulate belief and behaviour, with all the imagery that goes with it.

The irony is hypnosis is very easy to understand as a series of simple and easily explained psychological techniques.

When (last year) I offered some free tickets to a show I was putting on to support my local theatre to the nice lady who worked in my local shop, she politely but firmly declined, with the words '*oh, hypnotism, oh... no thanks.*' When I equally politely asked why, she replied, with all the confidence of someone who understood these things, '*Oh well... you know...*' which said it all... and yet it said nothing.

Of course, this attitude (again, part of the cultural psyche) very definitely has its roots in Stage Hypnosis. Today's stage hypnotists must also shoulder a fair share of the blame.

To get a taste of what we are up against, I suggest having a look at this clip from YouTube:

[Click on the picture to watch:](#)



The 'you are in my power...' image is totally ridiculous, but we seem to be stuck with it. The common belief is that the victim's will is compromised – a notion reinforced by memories of George Du Maurier's scandalous book 'Trilby' and the hypnotist Svengali. The sinister image, the power to take away pain, the clear wide staring eyes, the intimation of the 'Mesmeric Influence' and sexual control hit a cultural nerve with contemporary readers at the turn of the 20th century and we've been stuck with it ever since.

In the book, Svengali was portrayed as the stereotypical loathsome Jew, which at the time can only have served to pile on the prejudice even more. John Barrymore played Svengali to great effect in an early silent movie, coining the phrase 'look into my eyes', something that caught on very quickly.

Both the book and the film centred on the sexual/subservient role-playing of the powerful Svengali and the helpless Trilby, a theme repeated in the popular musical The Phantom of the Opera. How many of us could resist rushing to the aid of, and falling in love with, a sweet but frail damsel in distress? Hollywood is awash with such fantasies, all variations on the same theme, from the earliest portrayal of Robin Hood to the more recent Pretty Woman.

Svengali stoked the prejudices of Edwardian readers, most notably when it came to the revulsion of foreign, alien, and Jewish types preying upon innocent womanhood, of male domination over women, an idea that to the genteel ladies and gentlemen of the age was distasteful – as was the idea of any kind of foreign influence on British society. Distasteful – and yet strangely thrilling at the same time. Edwardian gentlemen and ladies secretly read it anyway and the book sold in vast numbers.

In Du Maurier's book, Trilby is in a perpetual trance (nonsense by today's understanding of hypnosis) and at the mercy of the manipulative Svengali – the epitome of the public

misunderstanding of Hypnotism. Astonishingly though, most people alive today have never read the book – yet many believe it to be the truth! And the prime example is the woman in my local shop.

The clinical value of hypnosis has been clearly stated by the British Medical Association (BMA) and repeatedly in the British Medical Journal and The Lancet. Praiseworthy articles on the benefits of hypnosis as a therapeutic tool have graced the pages of Nature Magazine, Scientific American and many other serious and respected publications.

The irony is that throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was stage performers who kept interest in hypnosis – or magnetism or Mesmerism as it was sometimes known – alive. Doctors Esdaile and Braid took a risk when they started experimenting with mesmerism, although both played it safe by mainly confining their experiments to India, thereby avoiding the stigma of the music hall.

High profile hypnotherapists get better results and the higher the status of the stage hypnotist, the greater are perceived to be his powers. As with many other things in life, reputation is everything, and entertainers in particular guard their reputations with a jealousy of biblical proportions. And a bit of theatricality can often help the hypnotist!

Stage hypnosis went through an evolution (spearheaded by Dr. Walford Bodie) from the macabre to the fun. Hypnotists slowly began to grasp the idea that exciting the pleasure centres of the brain had a more positive effect at the box office. Whether stage hypnosis is harmless fun or a dangerous evil is purely a matter of cultural belief and historical perspective.

Hypnosis can provide a quick and easy road to recovery and most people now accept the efficacy of hypnosis as a valuable medical tool, but the correlation between psychology, neurology and hypnosis is understood by depressingly few stage hypnotists. A great deal of skill is required not only to produce hypnotic effects but also to understand their cause and effect. One of my great concerns has always been that far too many stage hypnotists rely on the fact that it works because it works and that's good enough – it isn't.

The 1952 Hypnotism Act was a poor compromise between an outright ban and no action at all. In a rush to do something and yet do nothing, the government simply passed the buck to local authorities and left it to them to make the decision. Nonetheless, the publicity surrounding the Slater case, and the introduction of the Act, only served to darken further the name of hypnosis.

Is hypnosis really mind manipulation and dangerous influence or gentle persuasion and amateur dramatics?

The tabloids, together with some late night television talk shows, had a field day. The media coverage following the Sharron Tabarn case had a huge effect on the public perception of stage hypnosis – a state of affairs that has existed now for more than twenty years.

It was quite by chance that ITV, in March 2015, commissioned and broadcast 'You're Back in the Room.' Fronted by the popular and forever young Philip Schofield, the hybrid comedy hypnosis/game show occupied prime time on a Saturday evening for four weeks. The show itself was dreadful, but tacky as it was, did a lot to rehabilitate the image of stage hypnosis in the public eye.

Derren Brown, who has deservedly done very well from his Mind Control television series but takes great care to distance himself from hypnosis, something he relies upon in many

of his live shows, is worthy of attention. Derren is a very wise man, although less than totally honest, but then who cares...? it's only entertainment! I mean, when you see a magician in Las Vegas, you don't really believe he's actually sawing that poor defenceless woman in half do you?

So, is there any difference between hypnosis and mind control? Derren Brown sends out mixed messages – part of his schtick is claiming that you are not even aware of the messages... probably because he also relies on sleight of hand magic and card tricks which he very cleverly dresses up as 'mind control' to accomplish his mind blowing feats. I admire Derren Brown – he's a first rate top class showman. But mainly I admire him for his courage in exposing of a variety of fakers and charlatans, including spirit mediums and religious 'miracle' workers. We should all be grateful for this work.

The supposition that hypnosis is a 'trance' or trance-like state is one of the greatest misconceptions. People who undergo hypnosis do not fall into a trance or any other state of unconsciousness. They do not fall asleep, neither are they unaware of their actions. The truth is rather disappointingly mundane. People under hypnosis may be relaxed, but they are wide-awake, fully aware, and at the same time highly focused on the task in hand. Hypnosis is a clever piece of mental chicanery and its causes and effects are well understood.

The perennial problem is that with hypnosis, the culture of both the past and the present is the problem of the future. Many more people would consider hypnotherapy if it were not for the characters historically involved. Stories of hypnotists changing people's lives for the better are few and far between because they are not newsworthy, but the story of the rogue hypnotist, often embellished, can linger for years.

And here's another irony! The very people who discovered its potential were flawed themselves – showmen masquerading as healers, healers masquerading as showmen. One stage hypnotist said to me *'it's not just about the laughs, it's also about how many smoking and weight loss CD's you can flog them on the way out.'*

Hypnosis is really just a social situation where one ordinary human being uses well understood tried and tested psychological techniques to influence another ordinary human being. The preconceptions and expectations associated with hypnosis will probably never change and I am sometimes tempted to consider support for a ban on all hypnosis other than that performed by properly qualified and trained persons.

But then, given the nature of hypnosis and suggestion, the logical conclusion would be that all advertising would have to be banned, along with all religion, in fact any phenomena that influenced emotion. That would take enormous political will and would be practically impossible unless we were to turn our society into the sort of a democracy practiced in North Korea. Of course it would mean that political campaigning would also have to be banned and along with it, politicians... and anyone with an opinion about anything. See the problem?

Why on earth did I do that?

A thrill-seeking personality combined with a degree of disorientation and an overwhelming desire to comply affects the judgement of those who take part in stage hypnosis. The hypnosis is genuine... but what other factors are coming into play?

People who take part in hypnosis shows often ask themselves '*why on earth did I do that?*'

Believe it or not people who take part are genuinely hypnotised. The success of hypnosis is largely dependent on a participants willingness to follow the suggestions, to focus their attention, to allow themselves to relax, to access their imagination and 'let themselves go' – but not necessarily in that order.

The ability to relax helps you concentrate... So let's just imagine for a moment that your consciousness is like a large cinema screen with lots of things going on, all of which demand your attention. Now imagine that by following the suggestions you can focus your attention on just a few square inches of that screen, and by doing so, you can ignore everything else that's going on. All of a sudden, what's happening on those few square inches becomes of prime importance and by ignoring what's happening on the rest of the screen, only what's happening on the few square inches becomes all important.

Some observers – and some clinicians – have commented that people who take part in hypnosis shows are merely extroverts. But that explanation is dismissive and does not account for the large percentage of people who take part who are not extroverts. Introversion and extroversion are secondary in stage hypnosis because an individuals behaviour is governed more by how others in the group react rather than their own response to the instructions given them by the hypnotist.

Social compliance is a factor – as is an unconscious desire to cooperate with the rest of the group.

There is also the participant's ability to enter into the world of imagination by their own willingness to participate.

A sizeable proportion of those who volunteer to get up onto the stage may also be natural risk-takers. An aptitude for risk-taking is a major influence on an individual's decision to volunteer for new and novel experiences and there is now growing evidence that people who act impulsively and are prone to thrill seeking may have less grey matter in their brain.

Volunteers in stage hypnosis shows are mainly younger people, so a recent study of the brains of more 1,200 young adults might be of interest. The study found that areas of the cortex involved in decision-making and self-control were thinner in 'sensation-seekers.'

The researchers, led by Professor Avram Holmes of Yale University and working closely with researchers from Harvard and Massachusetts General Hospital, used Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) to scan the brains of the volunteers. The researchers found that many of them were also predisposed to substance abuse.

It is the thinner brain that makes an individual more likely to use drugs rather than drug abuse causing a thinner brain. These findings were reported in the *Journal of Neuroscience*.

After measuring the size of the relevant areas of each participant's brain the teams then compared them to the results of a questionnaire on their behaviour. Volunteers were asked about their need for 'novel and intense' experiences, their willingness to take risks, and whether they made rapid and impetuous decisions. Participants were also asked about their use of alcohol, tobacco, energy drinks and caffeine.

People who appeared to seek high levels of stimulation or excitement had a reduced thickness in areas of the brain involved in decision-making and self-control. [Two specific regions, the anterior cingulate and middle frontal gyrus, showed the biggest differences.]

This relationship was just as strong in people who did not use drugs as in those who did, showing that it is brain structure that affects behaviour and not the other way round. Other research has shown that drug use can affect brain anatomy, but it is genetics that governs thrill-seeking and impulsive behaviour.

Having had the opportunity to observe in excess of 62,000 individual participants at very close quarters, I can confirm that participants are often extroverts and a surprising majority arrive on stage simply because it's a chance to experience something new.

For most people, getting on a stage to be hypnotised is just as exciting as getting on an extreme theme park ride.

Heart rate may also be an important factor in the decision to participate in stage hypnosis, because fluctuations in heartbeat can also affect decision making [stress often causes normally rational people difficulty with judgement and coherent decision making] especially when taking into account unusual social or moderately stressful situations. Volunteers with rapid heartbeats seem more likely to succumb to the persuasion that is stage hypnosis.

Great excitement makes people more open to suggestion, more likely to be carried along with the flow, and a racing pulse or heartbeat that is a dead giveaway.

Cognitive ability, long thought to be an exclusive function of the mind, can be affected by heart rate. Fluctuations in an individual's heartbeat can and often does affect judgement – similar to the way falling in love or one too many drinks can affect judgement. In fact it appears that the thinking process and heart rate work hand in hand to affect reasoning.

Researchers at the University of Waterloo in Canada and at the Australian Catholic University have identified some of the particular conditions where this variability impacts judgment. The results of their study are published in the specialist journal *Frontiers in Behavioural Neuroscience* and follows on from earlier research on the cognitive processes of judgement.

So we are left with the inescapable conclusion that it's the thrill seekers and the people with the desire for excitement that are the ones we are looking for when they traipse up onto the stage at the start of yet another night of hypnotic hilarity.

And it bears out what I've always believed to be the truth – people who are easily excited make the best subjects, no matter how calm or laid back they appear to their friends.

Why didn't it work on me?

It is rare that hypnotherapists take the time to talk to, or question clients about their subjective experience of hypnosis after a session. It's even more unusual for stage hypnotists to take the trouble to question their volunteers about their experience. In my early days, I used to do it a lot and I found it very helpful.

In the real world, time is money... the therapist needs to get on to the next client, which is understandable if they're running late. The stage hypnotist doesn't want to be seen chatting to his subjects after the show in case there are accusations of collusion – also understandable given the stage performer's need retain credibility. Added to which, he might have a three-hour drive home to look forward to!

One of the advantages of speaking at student psychology and professional therapy conferences, as well as teaching hypnosis at Europe's prestigious Hypnoseakademiet, is that I do have chance to explore an individual's subjective experiences. In addition, at the student psychology conferences, members of the audience are free to ask participants about their hypnotic experience – how it felt, what could they remember about it, and most important of all, *was it real?*

Attending one of these events and listening to the questions and comments of both audience and participants alike could be something of an eye opener, especially for stage hypnotists, who generally don't have a thorough enough grasp of the theory, or fully understand the nature of what they're doing. Of all the questions asked after more than 6,000 public shows, lectures and demonstrations, the most compelling is – '*why didn't it work on me?*'

It's no secret that not everybody gets hypnotised when they volunteer for stage hypnosis. This is also true of those taking part in demonstrations for psychology students. The main reason is that it was just because of the time available – a good 'get-out' if ever there was one! But not all stage hypnotists are equally experienced. Skill comes with experience...

But there are more complex reasons why some volunteers 'fail' whilst others seem to enter hypnosis easily. For instance, the circumstances may not be conducive to relaxation and focus of attention. Think of a stage hypnotist plying his trade in a noisy bar where the patrons are either completely pissed by 9.00 or high on drugs by 9.30, and you get the picture.

I believe there are two reasons stage hypnotists never bother enquiring about the experiences of the people they've hypnotised. The first is because they're not interested – so long as they get paid, that's enough. The second reason is that they might be disappointed by answers that might any illusions they have about their own ability!

In the case of the hypnotherapist, there is a host of methodology to fall back on if a client proves unreceptive to hypnosis. All the client wants from the session is to feel better, and sometimes hypnosis might not always be the best solution. Anyway hypnotherapy is 90% therapy and 10% hypnosis, but either way, hypnotherapists do not encounter the same barriers as their stage counterparts. And if necessary, there's always the possibility of another session. Individuals may have preconceived ideas about hypnosis and expectations of what constitutes hypnosis, which is why the therapist is at an advantage, because there is time to explain and prepare the client.

Most people's experience of hypnosis is that of watching a stage show or seeing it (heavily edited) on TV. This exposure can give people completely false expectations of what will happen if they choose to undergo hypnotherapy. Hypnosis on the stage can be spectacular as volunteers perform in spectacular ways, and it's easy to believe that spectacular results must have spectacular causes, and that there must be something else happening, something unexplained, something more than just relaxation and a few well-chosen words.

In the therapy room, there is plenty of time to prepare the client. On stage, you're working against the clock and so you take what you have before the audience starts to get restless.

Hypnosis takes place in the conscious mind – not in a zombie-like state where those in hypnosis have no knowledge or recollection of what is going on and will 'awaken' at the end miraculously cured or with trousers round their ankles. Having said that, I have seen clients relax a little too much, and actually fall asleep in the chair. This is a fail.

After a stage show or a demonstration at a conference, the question '*why didn't it work on me?*' can be an emotional issue... after all, they have seen their friends 'go under' and yet were unable to participate themselves. Rejected volunteers *can* experience feelings of disappointment or concern there might be something lacking in them. This is particularly true when one is working with young people. Sensitivity to perceived rejection has to be handled with the utmost care. It might not be enough to simply say '*it was just because of the time*' because that explanation is not truthful.

Some people *are* more suggestible than others, but suggestibility is not a constant. People are generally more suggestible in the evenings, while suggestibility itself can vary wildly because of a host of external influences – the weather, what sort of day you've had, what kind of mood you're in – whether you are feeling happy or sad, or confident or vulnerable... Even environment can have an effect on suggestibility, as can the approach adopted by the hypnotist. Different day, same hypnotist, better weather, different result. Alcohol can have an effect on suggestibility because the defences are down. An individual's critical faculties and ability to distinguish reality from imagination can change with the wind! The fact is, suggestibility is a variable the individual has little control over.

Hypnotists should try to understand the range of emotions failure can produce in an individual. Most, though not all, young people are remarkably robust. Explaining that in any group, there are individuals who are more suggestible than others – just as in any group there are going to be people who are good at maths, at music, or art, or sport. This is a good start but the most important thing is to understand the needs of the person asking the question.

You should take the opportunity to sit down with them for a couple of minutes and chat... Try to find out what their strengths are... what they are good at... what they enjoy doing... and hand out praise for those achievements... and reassure them that they are perfectly normal. You could even try '*My boy, you beat me fair and square – you're too logically minded for my trickery!*' It's an old chestnut, but it can also be a useful one.

It's part of the human condition that people don't like to feel left out – especially if they're the only one it didn't work on. I have had considerable experience doing this sort of work and it's something that should not be underestimated. Now all I have to do is to convince other stage hypnotists to adopt the same attitude – and that could prove to be a lot more difficult.

A bridge too far...

'The Human Bridge' (pictured) is now an illegal act in almost every country that has rules on stage hypnotism, and with good reason. Yet some hypnotists still insist on doing it.



Just to give you the background info, there are very few countries that ban all forms of hypnosis – even hypnotherapy – outright. These countries include Israel and the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan. Even China allows hypnosis shows!

In certain parts of the United States, hypnosis, even hypnotherapy, carried out by qualified and experienced psychologists, is taboo, mainly because the dominant culture is one of Bible-thumping right wing Christianity, where stage hypnosis is only practised in churches, and then only on Sundays.

In the 1980s, before I calmed down, started to get sensible and act like an adult, I made my name, and my living, doing lots of stage hypnosis shows. Playing to audiences of two thousand plus on my travels around the UK, Australia and New Zealand was to me, a regular annual circuit. I enjoyed the travelling, I loved seeing new places, I liked the idea of having four months off every year to pursue other interests, and if I'm honest, I also liked the applause. And then of course, I also liked the money...

So... it might seem a little hypocritical to poke holes in stage hypnosis, and especially when it comes to stunts like the one pictured above.

I admit that I did this, 'the human bridge' stunt, sometimes called 'catalepsy', or at least a version of it, as a finale to my own show – the stunt was the ultimate proof that hypnosis was real – that anything was possible with the power of hypnosis. Up to 1989, I must have done the stunt over a thousand times. And then one day, I came unstuck. That was in a small theatre in Nottingham when I did the trick to rapturous applause. After the performance I found out that my star subject had, six months previously, undergone surgery for a broken back.

Sure, I had taken all the usual precautions and asked all the right questions... 'have you ever had any problems with your back...?' 'No' answered the unsuspecting volunteer. 'Are you fit – I mean, do you do any sports...?' 'Running' he replied. And so, with all the boxes ticked, I went ahead and did the stunt, satisfied I had all the bases covered. Not so... I had

neglected to take into account the fact that in hypnosis, a participant will nearly always make an unconscious decision to 'comply' with the demands of the situation – especially if unaware of what is to happen next. Worse, when it becomes clear what is expected, participants often feel powerless to raise any objections. And before they know what's happening, they follow the natural course and comply.

The 'human bridge' stunt may look impressive – visually, it's a great convincer – which is probably why it has survived for more than a hundred years! Audiences assume the stunt is absolutely safe because the hypnotist is so skilled, and after all, if it wasn't safe there would be a law against it... wouldn't there? At the very least, surely the guy in charge, the one with the microphone and the smart suit, the one who's name is on all the posters, must know what he's doing... doesn't he?

Actually, he might not... because I didn't.

Apart from the fact that any reasonably healthy adult can do this stunt without being hypnotised, when done properly, the stunt is a clever illusion anyway. So in reality, it proves nothing, and yet it has been part and parcel of the stage hypnotist's stock-in-trade, dating back to the late 19th century.

So what's the trick? The modus operandi at first appears relatively simple – one must first choose a subject (by tradition, male) that looks fit and healthy. And nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand it will all pan out as planned – and the visual impact will be greeted with tumultuous applause.

In reality, the human is a carefully stage-managed illusion produced for maximum effect. Done right, the chairs are set at an oblique angle so that from the audience's perspective, it appears that one chair is under the neck of the subject and the other is under his ankles. As with any good illusion, the chairs are carefully positioned diagonally so that they lie under the centre of gravity of the subject, one chair under the shoulders and the other under the legs between ankles and knees. Far from being a trial of superhuman strength, it is actually more of a balancing act.

You would be amazed at the number of stage hypnotists who do not understand the mechanics of the illusion and try to do it for real!

Even if it's set up properly, how can anyone be absolutely sure their star performer won't experience problems after stress has been placed on his body? How can the hypnotist know how the person might feel the next morning, which is when he is most likely to experience stiffness in his back?

A major problem with stage hypnotists is that they often perform routines without the slightest understanding of the possible consequences, or are blissfully ignorant of the background psychology.

When a hypnotist's training comprises of a couple of hours chatting with the guy he met in a bar in Benidorm over a few drinks (astonishingly, this is often the case!) or garnering often inaccurate information from the Internet, this is inevitably going to be a recipe for disaster. Sooner or later the hypnotist is going to find himself in a very sticky predicament as did I!

I went to see a hypnotist in a bar in Manchester's Gay Village, hiding at the back in time to see the performance descend into farce before it had even begun. Faced with a drunk and rowdy audience, the hypnotist tried to get the crowds' attention by introducing 'the human bridge' at the start of the show. The subject collapsed onto the floor, the girl sitting on him

sprawled on top of him, to howls of laughter from the crowd. Laughed off the stage, I managed to get talking to him when things had calmed down. Astonishingly, he blamed the audience.

His mistake, born of inexperience and a tragic lack of knowledge, was being there in the first place. The venue was totally unsuitable and he started when the crowd was already drunk. He knew who I was and took the opportunity to try to pick my brains. That wasn't going to happen either!

Frankly, I think I was fortunate that the stunt never *actually* went pear-shaped on *my* stage, but with hindsight, I concede I was playing with something that was insanely dangerous and had the potential to cause serious life-long injury. It was my own personal epiphany after the Nottingham show that changed my mind once and for all. In fact it gave me a mighty scare, and that was enough... In retrospect, I think the show was better without it anyway.

By 1996, after the UK Home Office held its much publicised enquiry into stage hypnosis, there was already an 'in house' school of thought busy examining several aspects of the safety of stage hypnosis before the Federation of Ethical Stage Hypnotists (FESH) came into being. It was something that had been discussed at length at FESH meetings, along with on-stage age regression (not to be confused with on-stage play acting) and demonstrations of anaesthesia and analgesia – all banned now in Britain. The UK Home Office, having heard evidence from stage hypnotists and experts from the Royal College of Psychiatry, officially banned demonstrations of 'catalepsy'... And yet some stage hypnotists still insist on including it in their acts.

Today's stage hypnotists often seek refuge behind the corporate denial of the stage hypnosis fraternity (a mythical and laughable concept if ever there was one) but the human bridge is something now relegated to the dark side.



Above: An idiot abroad! – an amateur stage hypnotist at work in New Zealand. If you look closely, some of those kids look very young. Another worry...!

In the UK, there is also a prohibition against hypnotising those under the age of eighteen for the purpose of entertainment. Youngsters may not always have the maturity to cope with the emotional roller-coaster ride of the stage hypnosis show, where volunteers are expected to perform one routine after another in rapid succession. The younger the subject, the less likely they will be able to deal with what happens.

This is particularly worrying where the element of social compliance is paramount, or in cases where the hypnotist relies solely on the group dynamics, or in circumstances where youngsters may feel isolated – which they most certainly will if they find themselves being asked to perform tasks on their own, isolated from the security of their own peer group.

The fact is, hypnotising young kids for the entertainment of adults is... unsavoury.

I think that's the right word. And one of these days, there will be tears, followed by a confrontation with an angry parent and a letter from an even angrier attorney, who, I can assure you, will not see the joke.

I hereby make myself available as an expert witness, should you wish to sue!

Below: Is this safe?

'The Hilarious Hypnotist', Dave Upfold – an accident waiting to happen.



Street hypnosis



Left: American hypnotist Justin James performing street hypnosis in front of a crowd of hardly anyone.

Here, he hypnotises a girl to guess the size of his penis.

Street hypnosis does not show hypnosis at its best. I believe it demeans hypnosis and the hypnotist because it turns hypnosis into a cheap trick. Not only that, I do not believe for one moment that the street is a safe environment. Insurance policies exclude street hypnosis, and with good reason – most local authorities insist on £5million worth of public liability cover.

In the UK, the hypnotist is required to stay at a venue for 30 minutes after the show is over in the event participants might need aftercare. How many hypnotists would be willing to stay with someone they had hypnotised in the street for 30 minutes? Certainly no UK licensing authority would grant a licence for it!

In the eyes of the Home Office, street hypnosis represents an unacceptable risk. What if a participant starts to abreact in a public place? The street is not a theatre or a bar... before long there will be a crowd... and an ambulance... and very likely police.

American hypnotist Dustin Reichert summed it up perfectly in a comment on 22 June 2019: *'Well my style was like this, bring the camera crew and just walk up to people... it was hard many times and many didn't want to. But so many were more than willing and those tended to drop down the best.'* So just like stage hypnosis.

If you have a professional camera crew present (the bigger the the crew, the better) that lends credibility and a sense of security for the volunteer. Try going up to a complete stranger on your own and asking them would they like to be hypnotised and I guarantee you will get a very different reaction than a street magician offering to do a magic trick.

A quick trawl of some of the scores of videos on YouTube show that street hypnosis volunteers tend to be young. As with stage hypnosis, younger people are more willing to be hypnotised.

US hypnotist Zach Prince says: *'I will say though... from my experience with street hypnosis thus far, the younger people tend to be much more open and curious in general and I've found that the older people are, the less likely they are to agree to being hypnotised spontaneously on the street so most of my videos end up being the younger ones who were willing to give it a go in the first place.'*

Unless you're confident enough to get your subjects into hypnosis while they are standing, most people don't want to lie on the ground – also an obstacle to their cooperation.

I am familiar with the argument that street hypnosis is good practice and can improve your skills, but there is no real evidence it will develop or sharpen your skills, although it might improve your own confidence. Apart from that – it's pointless. There's no money in it and any 'free publicity' from what amounts to a cheap stunt is unlikely to sell many tickets – if any.

It is possible to be hypnotised in an environment with noise and other distractions, but that ability is the volunteer's – not the hypnotist's, which makes the exercise even more pointless. If you want to practice, there are better ways to go about it, as I will explain shortly.

The opinionated and never wrong Justin Tranz – always ready for an argument if he feels threatened – says TV producers will be more likely to book you if they see you doing street hypnosis on YouTube. As if producers spend their day searching YouTube for hypnotists!

Anyway, there are so many would-be hypnotists doing it – particularly in America – any perceived value is watered down.

One or two people being hypnotised on the street simply isn't as impressive as a proper live show – Given the very small numbers of onlookers street hypnosis attracts, it's an ineffective and ridiculously time consuming way of getting people to a show. If you want a TV producer to spot you, surely the best way to do it would be to invite them to a show and buy them dinner.

As hard as I try, I see no evidence street hypnosis is useful 'exposure.' Only close friends of the volunteer stick around to watch. Others may pause to watch for a few seconds, but they soon wander off, and none of them look like TV producers. In any case, TV producers already know what hypnotists do – it's not like you've just started raising the dead! So why waste your time?

If you want to impress, try street magic – it's much more exciting, much more likely to attract a crowd, and less weird. And let's face it – the person most impressed is usually the hypnotist.

There are more effective and efficient ways of attracting people to a show, especially in these days of social media.

In the good old days, hypnotists often performed stunts for the local press – hypnotising a willing volunteer to sleep in a shop window was a favourite and I've done a few stunts myself while touring New Zealand.

If you can persuade the local radio station to lend you a member of staff, you can take them from shop to shop while they attempt to buy a can of elbow grease or striped paint! Carefully managed, you'll get much more exposure because you'll be reaching thousands of listeners instead of just a few passers-by.

So what does street hypnosis achieve, other than providing an opportunity for Justin Tranz to mouth off?

French hypnotist Chris Seyner says: *'Personally, I never did street hypnosis and neither will do. I don't think that's a waste of time, I think it can actually help you to improve some skills, yes, but surely not the best way to do it. In France, we have a TON of 'hypnotists'*

doing street and it doesn't help to get bookings, or at least not why I call 'bookings'. Sure, if you want to have a 100€ gig you can try to do some street, but that's not the gig which I have interested with. Also in my opinion if you are a pro, why do you need to go in the street? That's being said I actually prefer to have only professional videos of my YT channel, because, well, I am a professional so it should reflect that. Actually in France, street hypnotists destroy the business...

'But [Zach Princible's] is an interesting video since it shows how failure can happen so often, that's being said I am not actually surprised. Don't know in other countries, but in France, people are very tired of artists or people in the street asking them to do stuff. Most of them just want to be [left] alone.'

I don't see America's top hypnotists begging on the street... the same goes for the UK where street hypnosis is generally considered cheap and nasty.

Marc Savard is quite happy with his regular gig in Las Vegas and his huge following on YouTube. Secretly, I admire Savard's originality and success although I'm not sure some of his sketches would work in the UK. But Marc Savard is a real entertainer, a true professional, and his natural talent shines through. Which is why Marc Savard doesn't need to do hypnosis in the street.

Joel Harrison asked: *'How would you recommend a person with no 'professional' gigs booked right now be active, learning, growing, and advertising?'*

My answer was this: *'Do what I did... hire a small venue, invite loads of people, promise them a free drink and have a go! If you're human enough, they'll forgive your mistakes, and enjoy themselves. Sure it'll cost a few dollars, but it's a much better environment and you'll have your own captive audience! More important, you'll learn more in one evening than you would in days of f***ing about on the street like a hooker's pimp.'*

Stage hypnosis and political correctness

In the US and UK, colleges and universities are imposing draconian restrictions on what people can and can't say. In civic society, we are all having to exercise a kind of self-censorship in case we say something that was funny five years ago but might now be considered offensive.

Comedians and academics are being 'no-platformed' if subject matter offends the inflexible dogma of the new liberal Left. We are increasingly being intimidated by 'safe space monitors' with very different ideas of what is now acceptable, and the snowflakes are forever hunting for new targets for their woke venom.

At a recent student lecture, I called a male student 'sir'. How was I to know he was 'transitioning?' For that mistake, I was booed. At another, I referred to a colleague as 'she'. In order to escape the baying hounds of the thought police, I had to apologise, even though my colleague wasn't at all offended and could not herself understand what the problem was – but she thought it would be better to humour them.

Years ago, at the Bristol Hippodrome Theatre, two women volunteers came up onto the stage along with a huge crowd of people. They did not know each other, but they had been shopping at the same store – they were wearing identical outfits, and so with perfect comedic timing, I stood them next to each other – and the crowd roared with laughter!

At the Liverpool Empire Theatre a subject was lying hypnotised on the stage so I lifted his foot to show the audience how relaxed he was. But his artificial lower leg came off in my hand. The audience shrieked with laughter at *my* embarrassment.

At Manchester's Apollo Theatre a girl's blonde wig slid off, exposing her dark hair – and again the audience roared. If any of that happened today I would be accused of ritual humiliation!

We have sleepwalked into an Orwellian world of newspeak and thought crime. But hypnotists can adapt and beat the PC Stasi at their own game! Instead of 'ladies and gentlemen [outdated and clumsy anyway] 'Hello everyone' is good. It's also less formal. Instead of 'zhe' or 'zher' or other such bollocks, I try to remember participants' names. It tests the short term memory, but it's respectful and it humanises both them and me.

Many of the traditional popular skits that have been around for more than a hundred years are no longer acceptable. A couple of years ago, it was OK for subjects to cuddle up on stage, but this skit is now on the taboo list – as is finding someone of the opposite sex attractive, or the X-ray glasses, or anything vaguely sexist, homophobic, or God forbid, transphobic!

These days, I keep three or four unused volunteers on the stage on stage and ask to '*watch carefully everything I do and make sure I'm not cheating.*' Actually I'm making sure there will be no allegations of inappropriate physical contact! We tiptoe where angels fear to tread – the slightest mistake, and they'll be onto you like a pack of hyenas!

The traditional objection to stage hypnosis in the UK has always been one of ritual humiliation, but no one took much notice – market forces always decided the size of your

audience. But that was before internet warriors started searching for things to be offended by on behalf of others who wouldn't be offended anyway.

Don't get me wrong – the liberal Left loves comedy – so long as it ridicules the conservative Right (the more vitriolic, the better – reference almost everything on the BBC).

If the self-appointed guardians of public morality latch onto stage hypnosis, it won't matter how strong the argument that volunteers are creative & enjoy it as much as everyone else, hypnotists will find themselves with a huge problem. All it takes is a few 'activists' to start posting on Facebook...

As hypnotists, we should already understand the Madness of Crowds! Social media hysteria can spawn a lynch mob overnight. That will be no fresher's-week shows, no graduation balls, and theatres that will no longer hire their venues lest the woke brigade demand your cancellation.

Most people of course will see stage hypnosis as harmless fun, but will they be allowed to see it? Bookers and venue managers will be as terrified of #stop-hypno-hate-shows as big corporations are of accusations of racism.

In the UK, this nightmare scenario actually happened... 1994 saw a media feeding frenzy of unprecedented proportions after the death of Sharon Tabarn. A Campaign Against Stage Hypnosis was launched and every week some new horror story emerged.

The number of [UK] theatres unwilling to hire to stage hypnotists now outnumber those that do where few refused before 1994. Mainly they hide behind the cowardly excuse '*it doesn't fit with our programming*' – a sure sign the luvvies have been given the keys to the box office.

The UK Home Office said it had plans to broaden licensing rules, impose time limits on the amount of time participants can remain on the stage [ironically something I agree with.]

The Home Office also say there are plans to put a complaints procedure in place. It is being advised by eight psychologists and academics, two neurologists and one hypnotist. Those plans are temporarily on hold due to the Covid crisis, but no doubt they will resume when normality returns.

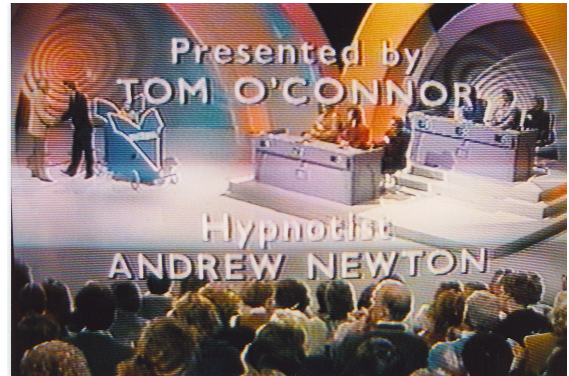
In the last 30 years, on both sides of the Atlantic, but especially in America, the number of stage hypnotists has boomed. Most treat stage hypnosis like a McDonalds franchise, serving up the same jokes and sketches with little variation.

To keep up with the times, stage hypnotists need to have a serious think about the future. New and original material will have to be invented and perfected.

Stage Hypnosis needs a new strategy and a dramatic image makeover – we need to reinvent our approach and rethink material and the way we present it. We need to get ahead of the game and inject an originality which suits the new world order.

You're back in the 1970's

After a 20 year absence Hypnosis is back on TV. *You're Back in the Room* may have rehabilitated the reputation of stage hypnosis, but it did nothing to make it credible.



I once met Phillip Schofield in Christchurch, New Zealand of all places, and I'm pretty sure it was in 1981 or perhaps 1982. I was touring with Hot Gossip as first-half support act for Arlene Phillips' soft-porn-disguised-as-choreography dance troupe. Phil was fronting a show for TVNZ called *Shazzam!* an antipodean Top of the Pops style programme for kids.

After the Hot Gossip show at Christchurch's Theatre Royal, Phil dutifully put in an appearance backstage, like the true professional that he is, and the dancers, myself, and a couple of the roadies ended up downing Steinlagers in the bar at the Vacation Hotel. The other thing I remember was that he told an appallingly lame joke about a bunny-rabbit, the punch-line of which I forget – but it was his disarming and genuine personality that made everyone laugh hysterically at something that wasn't that funny which was a clue to his true talent, or maybe we were all pissed by that point. A very few years later, he popped up on British TV to continue his journey to mega-stardom. I am genuinely happy at Phillip's success.

Fast forward 35 years, past *This Morning*, *The Cube*, innumerable TV Awards Specials and we get to *You're Back In The Room*, a stage hypnosis-based game show where contestants are given the opportunity of winning up to £25,000 – all they have to do is perform a number of relatively simple tasks while the hypnotist suggests ways to muck them up.

It reminds me of *Mesmerised*, a show I did for Yorkshire Television in 1993 – a stage hypnosis-based game show fronted by comedian Tom O'Connor where contestants were given the opportunity of winning up to £25,000 – all they had to do was perform a number of relatively simple tasks while the hypnotist suggests ways to muck them up.

I mention this not to show off, or boast that I did it first, but to establish that I know how these things work and so I can comment on them. In any event, I'm not going to badmouth the presenters or the show or the contestants – I'm going to explain the effect to programme had on the public perception stage hypnosis in general.

Hypnosis was absented from UK TV screens as understandably cautious broadcasters fretted over potential lawsuits after the disasters of the early 1990s. After more than two

decades, hypnosis is back on TV back with a prime-time Saturday night slot.

The *ALL NEW Your Back In The Room* (YBITR) is basically the same every week, with contestants performing simple, lightweight tasks – looking through X-ray glasses, forgetting numbers, dancing like a ballerina, and of course, falling in love with Phillip – all material that dates back to 1900 and Walford Bodie and the staple diet of Hi-De-Hi era holiday camp hypnotism, with a dollop of *Generation Game* slapstick thrown in for good measure.

Given the restrictions imposed by the format, it's hard to see how it could be improved – short, simple, quick-fire stunts, are easy to programme in and are undemanding for the subjects. Add to that the customary cutaways to camera where the participants swear on their children's lives it was all real and we're back in the 1970's... so '*ALL NEW*' it aint.

And therein lies the show's insurmountable problem – what was funny 30 years ago is not nearly so now, unless of course it's the first time you've seen someone hypnotised, and maybe there's a whole new generation that hasn't. But the real disappointment was that there was not a single original idea or stunt less than 30 years old! In short, we'd seen it all before.

Occasional on-screen reminders of what the contestants are supposed to be doing – *Jane thinks she's in love with Phillip! John thinks he's walking through treacle! Jim thinks there's a terrible smell!* and so on – speaks volumes about the programme-maker's view of their audience. Whichever way you look at it, YBITR was created with Sun readers in mind.

Celebrities drafted in from shows like *Coronation Street* (another device from 1992) attempts to bestow some credibility the proceedings – the celebs laugh and giggle along with the audience. It reminded me of a terrible pantomime I saw when I was a kid – the cast, rolling about laughing at private jokes were the only ones in the theatre who were.

Contestants on YBITR are pre-auditioned for their ability to perform. Understandable the producers don't want to take too many risks, but working through nearly a thousand potential participants to find a final 20 is ridiculous – and a cheat. Stage hypnosis utilises language and suggestion to draw imaginative performances from subjects, so what happened to the skill of the hypnotist?

Pre-selecting subjects is a luxury stage hypnotists don't have – it smacks of collusion and is only one gene away from hiring stooges, though Paul McKenna often recruited subjects from his stage shows for his TV shows, something I absolutely refused to do when we filmed *The Andrew Newton Hypnotic Experience* for SKY. [Between you and me, I pray none of those shows will ever see the light of day again!]

In any event, auditioning to find the liveliest performers creates more problems than it solves. The subjects either perform too well, in which case it looks like they're actors (a suspicion loudly voiced in the press and online) or they're stale by the time the cameras roll. If I presented an audience with subjects as over-the-top as those on YBITR, the audience would be shouting '*fake!*' long before the interval!

Stage hypnosis performed live is a unique experience for both participants and audience. It only becomes credible when volunteers are allowed to be themselves and bring their own personalities to the party.

The YBITR contestant's application form* includes questions such as *Who are your favourite celebrities and why? Who is your favourite singer/popstar and why? What is your favourite television show?* These are almost certainly used to identify applicants who may

be able to do impersonations – something that used to be a stock-in-trade of stage hypnosis. They also inquired about potential contestant's jobs or hobbies or interests that might link to some of the tasks they will be asked to do whilst hypnotised. The question as to whether a candidate has ever seen anyone being hypnotised is an interesting one. It would indicate that they are looking for people that know what to expect, or know what is expected of them. If you believe in hypnosis, then you will probably be more suggestible. *

Have you ever trained as a hypnotist or hypnotherapist? Is undoubtedly a clever ploy to weed out any potential trouble-makers – the last thing a hypnotist wants on stage is another hypnotist, and in fairness, this is a very sensible precaution, given what some of these people are like!

YBITR has not had nearly the same impact hypnosis did when given its first airing in 1992. In the intervening 25 years, Derren Brown and a succession of reality shows have numbed our ability to be amazed or shocked. Of course, any entertainment is better when it's experienced live, and this is especially true of stage hypnosis, which doesn't translate well to TV – it only becomes exciting when it's unrehearsed and spontaneous.

Live, audiences get to see the process of hypnosis – an integral part of the experience for participants and audience alike. No way can this be shown on TV, for obvious reasons, but by not including it, the experience is made rather feeble. Then, when the action starts, the live audience has the opportunity to edit with their eyes and pick up on important action in a fraction of a second. On the small screen, the audience is at the mercy of the editor – you just don't get the full picture in 48 TV minutes. More important, modern stage hypnotism is based on character development – routines are now more complex and inventive and live audiences have time to get to know the subjects, something which makes it all more natural *and* compelling.

All that aside, YBITR is very much Phillip Schofield's show and not the hypnotist's. Phillip's almost child-like innocence – the same trusting, unaffected personality that gets him through all those hideously embarrassing moments on *This Morning* – is what makes it watchable.

Apart from repeatedly saying 'aaaaand, sleep!' and giving the suggestions, Keith Barry barely gets a mention and precious little screen time. It really is all Phillip and the irony is, with a little training and supervision he could have done the whole thing himself.

I tried my own experiment after the end of the first series, asking people general questions about the show. Most could remember some of the contestants – the ones who did this or that, but *no one* could name the hypnotist. However, someone did comment that the show was living proof that some TV stars will do anything for money.

Keith Barry is a household name in his native Ireland. In the United States, his reputation comes from a Derren Brown-style magic, mind-reading and mentalism series, much of which was filmed 'live' on the streets, just like the early Derren Brown shows. He's also made appearances on the Ellen De Generes show. I suspect his foray into the dodgy world of stage hypnosis is designed to break him into new markets. If that's the plan, it might work – Keith Barry is also the hypnotist on the Australian version of YBITR. The big obstacle he will face in Australia is Peter Powers, whose reputation in Oz is huge, and with three spectacular TV series under his belt, Peter makes YBITR look as exciting as a dead wombat.

However, his inexperience with hypnosis very nearly highlighted one of the pitfalls of stage hypnosis – sometimes subjects interpret the hypnotist's suggestions too literally. Take the

woman hypnotised to think she was on a rollercoaster and became momentarily but genuinely frightened? Most people would have missed the significance of that and in fairness Barry stepped in and put it right. But it shouldn't have happened in the first place and I'm surprised they let it go out. Then again, we've all made mistakes and only another hypnotist would have spotted it.

Britain's stage hypnotists have breathed a sigh of relief and mainly because the show hasn't had the disastrous effect hypnosis had last time it was on TV. There has been no sudden explosion in the number of stage hypnotists and this is because it hasn't had the same impact. Neither has it attracted any adverse publicity, and as YBITR steered clear of anything I do in my stage shows, I'm also happy.

In fact, other than the positive rehabilitation of stage hypnosis in the eyes of the public, something we are all grateful for, YBITR has had no positive or negative effect whatsoever. The expectation stage hypnotists had of getting lots more booking on the back of it proved to be a forlorn hope. This speaks volumes about the impact and popularity of the show. I have seen neither increase or decrease in audience attendances – my life goes on as normal.

The main failing of YBITR was that it turned out to be a one-show joke. The BARB (Broadcasters Audience Research Board) ratings dropped from an average of 4.5million viewers per week for series 1 in 2015 to under 2million for series 2. In Australia, viewing figures dropped by a quarter of a million after the first episode and attracted much negative online ridicule.

The YBITR format has also been sold to France, Colombia, Slovenia and America where they have employed their own hypnotists. In the United States, the FOX Network's researchers have already emailed hundreds of stage hypnotists and hypnotherapists asking them to provide subjects. I was astonished when I received mine via email. Why can't their guy find five good subjects from the studio audience on the day? This is more than just playing it safe – asking for people who have already been hypnotised indicates a lack of confidence on *someone's* part.

However, in the land where repeats of the Jerry Springer Show are still popular, they might just get away with it, and I can't wait to see how it goes down in the Bible belt!

Keith Barry will tour the UK this year, doing what he does best... a Derren Brown-style magic, mind-reading and mentalism show which might also include a hypnosis segment. In the meantime, he's got himself a nice little earner doing the voice-over for the show's sponsors, SCS furniture.

One-two, wide awake – *You're Back In The Room!*

* The application form for participants for *You're back in the room* covers all the usual bases with questions about being available in London on certain dates and interestingly 'Susceptibility tests' which would take place in Manchester or London prior to recordings.

Sensibly, the form warns would-be participants not to apply if they have problems with epilepsy, fits, paralysis or stroke, severe repeated headaches, migraines, disease of the brain or nervous system, high blood pressure, heart attack, angina pectoris, raised blood cholesterol or any other disorder of the heart or blood vessels, excessive use of alcohol or drugs, are pregnant, you or any member of your immediate family have suffered from mental health issues.

Interestingly, they also want to know applicants are actors or have been known by any previous names. There are questions about age, gender, and whether potential participants are married, divorced, single or in a relationship. They also want to know if applicants have children, what their occupation is, what accent they have, their background, and of course ethnic background – White, Black, African, Caribbean, Black British, Mixed, Multiple ethnic groups, Asian, Asian British, Other ethnic group, Would rather not say.

They want to know if potential contestants are disabled, require special access, registered disabled or have any conditions which may impact on the ability to participate in the show?

They want to know if you have any criminal convictions or any charges held against you in a pending case (other than minor driving offences which have not resulted in a ban or a custodial sentence).

The programme also wants to know what social media you use, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Other – Have you ever seen anyone being hypnotised? Have you ever trained as a hypnotist or hypnotherapist? Have you appeared on TV or Film before including extra work?

And then ‘A bit more about you’ including information about who your favourite celebrities are and why? Who your favourite singer/popstar is and why? What your favourite film/television show is? As well as information about your hobbies and interests and why you want to take part in the show.

Finally, they inquire if you have any fears or phobias, and if so what are they? Oh, and a recent photograph. Most of these questions are of course standard – after all, no production company wants a contestant who is likely to drop dead during filming, nor do they want anyone who is an actor, because that would undermine the credibility of the show, and understandable that they don’t want anyone who is about to stand trial for murder, although that could turn out to be a ratings winner!

But hidden in the list are some questions which show that in the selection process, they are looking for people who might have special skills, such as impersonating a favourite pop star or celebrity, or jobs or hobbies or interests that might link to some of the tasks they will be asked to do whilst hypnotised. The question as to whether a candidate has ever seen anyone being hypnotised is an interesting one. It would indicate that they are looking for people that know what to expect, or know what is expected of them. If you believe in hypnosis, then you will probably be more suggestible.



Hello Stranger, farewell credibility



TV's second attempt at a Hypnosis show...

Hello Stranger, Channel 4

I often get requests from people who have suffered emotional trauma and want to forget about things that have happened to them, and sometimes, people who want to forget about failed relationships and ex partners. This, I cannot do because it is impossible, but I can, with the cooperation of the client, create some emotional distance which will help them get over it. The techniques I use are very powerful and all these clients leave feeling a lot happier and more secure than they did when they walked into the office.

Memories can not be erased or repressed, and hypnosis can not make people *forget*. Not even the most skilled hypnotist working with the most suggestible mind can erase every memory of major experiences – especially the experience of a long-term relationship.

In 1994 I made a series of short films commissioned by the City of Melbourne titled '*The Land of In-between*' in which I used hypnosis to make participants see all the things Melbourne had to offer 'with fresh, and more enthusiastic, eyes'. This experiment was successful, even though the local press complained that the cost – some AU\$1.5million – was extortionate. However, this was about changing people's attitudes and feelings about the joys of living in Melbourne, not making them forget an entire city existed!

When it comes to stunts like *Hello Stranger*, stage hypnotists in particular understand the limits of hypnosis can be when presented with a task that is in reality, impossible. *Hello Stranger* attempted to go beyond those limits and beyond what is possible and credible. As a result, the show lacked all credibility, with many viewers complaining it was faked. I believe the viewers were right, and this is why...

In 2017, I was invited to London by a production company to discuss an idea for a show in which couples would be hypnotised to tell the absolute truth. Participants would be brutally honest about their partners – especially when they met their partner's parents, friends, priests, that sort of thing – about their true intentions, about what they thought of their family, their parent's house, their car or their favourite holiday destination... and so on. I think you get the idea.

It had all the potential of being really funny, but the problem was the joke had the potential of becoming stale after one show, although if you got the right people, you might get a few episodes out of it. One major problem would be that as these encounters would happen with a film crew present, the participant's parents and friends would be in on the joke and their reactions, instead of being priceless, would be worthless. When I pointed out the limitations and the difficulties involved – and the long term offence that might result – the

idea was binned. [Having said that, I think that with the benefit of hindsight, there is a way I could make it work.]

Step forward 'medically trained' hypnotist Aaron Calvert, although where he trained and to what standard, we are not told. According to his website, he marks '*a distinct departure from traditional 'cluck-like-a-chicken' comedy hypnotism*'. Well, that's what they all say, and Calvert is merely trying to distance himself from the typical stage hypnotist, but still willing to use hypnosis in a naff television dating show. A search of the internet reveals his only previous experience is putting on a hypnosis show at Urmston Boys Grammar School in Manchester.

In *Hello Stranger*, Calvert hypnotises couples to forget they are in a long-term relationship. In the pilot show, George & Lucy, a couple from Worthing, whose four-year relationship has lost its magic, are hypnotised to think that they're meeting for the first time. They also go on dates with strangers – strangers who do not seem to mind their date is already in a relationship, or that they are in a state of hypnosis, or that they are being filmed, or that they might be party to breaking up an established relationship, or that the whole thing might be immoral.

Any hypnotist worth their salt would know this is ridiculous. 'Amnesia hypnosis' – a term invented for the show – does not exist in reality. Memories of relationships are too deeply ingrained to be forgotten, even temporarily, because there are too many reminders – the mere sight of a familiar place, menu, shirt, smell, behaviour, and most important, where they are living, is enough to create dissonance and set the mind working in such a way the plan would fall apart in minutes. Nonetheless, we are told that the Amazing Aaron has managed to wipe four years of memories. George & Lucy were not allowed to keep their phones, ostensibly because pictures of each other might trigger memories, although there was no such concern when they met for their own 'first date' at the end of the programme.

As if proof were needed, on George's first blind date, when asked about his previous relationships, the hypnosis appeared to be wearing off, and Calvert had to step in to 'top him up.' Yawn... We were told that only 30% of people are susceptible to hypnosis. This is complete bollocks and shows up Calvert's amateurism, not to mention his poor knowledge.

But back to the moral issue. What would be the consequences if they fell in love with one of their dates and split up forever? What would be the legal implications? Were Channel 4 or the production company's insurers aware of this potential problem? Perhaps they were pre-occupied with the idea that a dating show – always a ratings winner – with a twist, might actually work. Sadly it didn't.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of fame-hungry people apply to be on reality shows – Love Island attracted 85,000 applications in 2018 and scores of couples turned up to audition for *Hello Stranger*. Some people will do anything to get on TV, seeing it as a short cut to fame and fortune and most will go along with even the most ridiculous ideas.

Viewers were quick to take to social media calling *Hello Stranger* a hoax, which it was. Sharp-eyed observers noticed the couple clearly recognised each other, talked over each other and acted totally differently when together than they did on the other dates.

George and Lucy are vloggers who document their lives online and by their own admission, offer a glamourised version of their existence for the benefit of followers. Was this a golden opportunity to publicise their vlog? They were paid a fee for their participation in the programme.

A new approach to stage hypnosis

Regarding the current licensing regulations, performances of stage hypnosis are usually rubber-stamped and licences issued as an administrative exercise rather than as a means of ensuring safety and moral decency – which was the original purpose of the 1952 Act, but this is what happens when governments pass the buck.

Willing volunteers, are usually happy to carry out suggestions because the hypnotist has created an appropriate environment for them to do so.

Many volunteers enjoy the experience because it's an opportunity to take part in a comedy show. This does not mean that the subjects on the stage are merely playing along for the fun of it – far from it! But beware – hypnotist can produce a profound change in the mindset of volunteers, and hypnosis has neurological correlations just the same as any other emotional state.

Of course no one can be made to anything they really don't want to do, or would contradict their morals or values, which is why hypnotists have to tread a very careful line. Nonetheless, there must still be controls in place.

A new set of regulations would be easy enough to put into force if the Home Office decided to get their act together, although such a move would have no effect whatsoever on hypnotists who ply their trade in the bars of the Costa del Crime.

The way the law stands at the moment, it is the venue that has to be licensed by the local authority for a hypnosis show rather than the hypnotist. At present, hypnotists are merely required to make a declaration as to whether they have ever had a licence refused or revoked in another town, or have ever been convicted of any offence under the 1952 hypnotism act. The glaring and obvious problem is that licensing officers never enquire into experience or competence or character of the hypnotist!

Different licensing authorities have different rules. In Leeds for example, the rules are rigidly enforced – hypnotists must provide details of the content of their performances and provide proof they have adequate public liability insurance. Ten miles further up the M1 Wakefield City Council ignores the requirement of the hypnotism licence and so stage hypnotists can act as they please, without any conditions in place or the need for expensive public liability insurance.

I had a conversation with the licensing officer in Wakefield and he told me that Wakefield puts hypnotists in the same category as hairdressers. Hairdressers don't need a licence, so why should hypnotists?

Conversely, overregulation would simply force stage hypnotists underground, as happened in the 1950s.

Astonishingly, many stage hypnotists undergo no training whatsoever – the learning process consisting of watching other stage hypnotists and copying what they've seen. Useful tips can be gleaned for the price of a pint after a show in a pub. This is surely a recipe for potential disaster, as we saw with the Sharron Tabarn case. In addition, stage hypnotists typically engage in a kind of corporate denial when it comes to discussions on the safety of stage hypnosis.

However, there is relatively simple solution.

In order to achieve both consistency in the rules and a reliable standard of competence, the law needs to change so that it is the hypnotist who is licensed and not the venue. As with driving licences, hypnosis licenses would be subject to inspection, monitoring and annual renewal. And licences could be suspended or taken away for bad behaviour.

However, the idea that stage hypnotists should be left to monitor themselves is ludicrous, unworkable and akin to handing the lunatics the keys to the asylum.

Attempts have been made in the past to set up governing bodies for stage hypnosis. The Federation of Ethical Stage Hypnotists (FESH) was the first such organisation and was set up by the supreme grand master himself, Peter Casson in 1978. FESH eventually descended into farce because of infighting and professional jealousies. When credible advice was needed, in 1994, FESH had by then lost all credibility.

Licensing

The only workable system would be to force all stage hypnotists to attend a one day course where they could be briefed about all the things that can go wrong – and how to deal with them. Every stage hypnotist has experienced problems at some time or another, especially when they first start out. Because they are ill equipped to deal with them, volunteers are usually left to sort themselves out while the hypnotist works out the odds of getting sued.

All stage hypnotists should be made aware of the potential pitfalls and schooled on the correct way to deal with them. Licence applicants must attend one day seminar to ensure they understand how the new conditions will be applied and their importance. The seminar will include information on potential abreactions, headaches and post performance depression that can result from participation in demonstrations of stage hypnosis, and how to deal with common problems.

There would be an opportunity to educate hypnotists' about the background psychology but also what to do if things do go wrong. For example, what action would be appropriate if a subject started to hyperventilate or was consumed by uncontrollable giggling? How should the hypnotist deal with a subject who abreacts or complains of having a headache after the show?

As soon as they have passed a short test, they can have their licence.

The requirement for public liability insurance would still remain in place of course, and a monitoring system should be put in place. But how to do this?

Surprisingly, making this work, and at very little cost, would actually be a lot easier than one might imagine – it just requires some 'out-of-the-box thinking' and the solution is simple.

The best people to monitor the activities of stage hypnotists are... the very people who take part in the shows. Better still, they will take on this role for no pay and in the event the hypnotist misbehaves, they will be the first to file a complaint – on a dedicated website set up specifically for the purpose.

Participants who feel they have been mistreated or abused, or who have suffered after-effects would be able to record their experience and also lodge complaints. Hypnotists

would be required to hand a card to all participants at the end of the show. The card would display the website address and an explanatory note of what the website is for.

Complainants would be asked to provide information such as the name of the hypnotist, the date and place of the performance, and the nature or description of the complaint.

The system would also have the advantage of monitoring the real effects of stage hypnosis on a database.

The rules need to be set not by bureaucrats but by those who know and understand stage hypnosis – and the *culture* of stage hypnosis. Such experts do exist. Astonishingly, if such a test were introduced tomorrow, the majority of stage hypnotists would fail. Most are ignorant of the psychological processes involved or the potential consequences of their actions.

This new and efficient system could be financed by a charge attached to the licence.

Penalties for non-compliance should be severe, with large fines and suspension or permanent withdrawal of licences. Any such action would of course be open to appeal.

To my knowledge, no one has ever been prosecuted under the 1952 Hypnotism Act – no one has ever been fined or hauled before the courts, yet there have been many opportunities to do so.

We also need a more rigid definition of hypnosis for the purposes of entertainment to stop unscrupulous hypnotists claiming a show is for scientific or research purposes, but either way, the individual licence would negate that – simplicity itself?

The new individual Hypnotist licence would cover all performances, both public and private and the same rules (below) should apply to all public and private performances.

There are some places where performances of hypnotism should not be allowed. Pubs, nightclubs and bars are not suitable venues for hypnosis shows. A simple solution would be the introduction of a rule that prohibits demonstrations of hypnotism in the same space as alcohol is being consumed. This would still allow hypnotists to work in private function rooms in pubs, hotels or clubs while at the same time allowing the hypnotist a degree of control.

A new and updated circular could give local authorities the power to decide whether or not a venue was suitable for stage hypnosis, using their local knowledge. Authorities could still bar performances in places known to be rowdy or where alcohol is the main attraction.

In theatres, the environment is more controlled and hypnotists can be monitored by theatre staff. Providing the management of theatres are happy with the presentation, they should be trusted to make decisions as to whether the 'act' is suitable for their audiences.

Welfare of volunteers / participants

Warnings should be given that audience members who are under medical supervision of any kind, or who had previously suffered from depression, or drug addiction should not volunteer. Anyone currently taking anti-depressants, or who had been prescribed anti-depressants, or anyone who has previously attempted or who has considered attempting suicide should also be warned against taking part.

The number of subjects taking part in a performance of stage hypnosis should be limited

to a *maximum* of 10 in any performance. The reason for this is that the hypnotist can not possibly monitor more than 10 people at a time.

The maximum time subjects can take part in a performance of hypnosis shall be limited to 2 hours and must include breaks so that participants can rest and reorientate.

The hypnotist shall draw the audience's attention to the fact that anyone who is pregnant, or who is under the supervision of any medical practitioner, such as a doctor or other health professional, including mental health professionals, should not volunteer to take part in the performance.

Subjects should be made aware that they have the right to withdraw at any time.

No demonstration of physical strength should not be allowed, particularly catalepsy, otherwise known as 'the human bridge' or pain control (anaesthesia or analgesia) should be demonstrated.

The suitability of the hypnotist

Membership of an organisation claiming to represent stage hypnotists is in itself insufficient proof of responsibility on the part of the hypnotist.

It is a fact of life that Theatre managers are likely to be more responsible than pub landlords and therefore the behaviour of hypnotists is more likely to be scrutinised. Any venue manager will have the right to express any concerns to the website.

Participant's time spent on stage

Because of the 'safety in numbers' or social compliance issue, a sliding scale of how long people can be kept under hypnosis should be agreed. People who find themselves the sole participant can feel alone, exposed and vulnerable, so time limits need to be set. For example:

- If the hypnotist has only one participant, the maximum time they can take part in hypnosis should be no more than 10 minutes
- 2 participants - 15 minutes
- 3 participants - 25 minutes
- 4 participants - 30 minutes
- 5 participants and over - no time limit up to two hours including a 15 interval, but with regular breaks for all participants.

The meaning of regular breaks means that participants should be given regular opportunities to 'take a back seat'. To many stage hypnotists, this might sound draconian, but the reasons for it are obvious.

Participants should be made aware that they have the right to withdraw at any time.

Content

Nothing shall be presented in the performance which could be construed as being of a sexual nature or offensive to any group.

This will be bad news for the 'sex-show' hypnotists – they will have to throw away their vibrators and think of material that's non-sexual.

Any and all actions must be carried out in the presence of the hypnotist and only within the working area, performance area or stage. This will stop participants being sent off in the interval to perform tasks where the hypnotist is not present.

The hypnotist must respect a participant's right or wish to no longer participate.

Participants must remain seated at all times throughout the performance (excluding the selection and induction process) except in cases where ONE participant only may be allowed to stand or move around the stage or working area if it's necessary to do so, for a particular task to be performed. The hypnotist must stay within reach of the participant to ensure they will not fall or lose their balance.

All hypnotists must provide an up-to-date DBS certificate. This must be renewed annually. Any convictions for sexual assault will automatically disqualify the applicant from being licensed. There is at least one stage hypnotist in the UK whose real name (not his stage name) appears on the sex offenders register.

Street hypnosis should be banned outright. Open public spaces, especially at night or late at night are unsuitable for the practice of hypnosis as they are not controlled areas.

There are obvious impracticalities if the hypnotist is asked to remain at the premises for half an hour after the completion of a demonstration. Audience members will have left the venue and would not think of returning. 15 to 20 minutes should be enough time for any affected participants to come forward. After that, complaints can be registered on the website.

In 2019, the Labour Party called for the franchise age to be reduced to 16 on the grounds that 16 year-olds are now intelligent enough to know their own minds. Young adults are wiser than they were 50 years ago and at 16 they are old enough to join the army or get married, so why not be hypnotised? Teenagers are more robust than we give them credit for, but I think 16 should be the limit.

Licensing officers or the police should be given the power to alcohol test hypnotists as some hypnotists are known to drink before performances – if you are going to be a stage hypnotist, you need to be on your toes and wide awake!