Making Manifestations

Building the Commercial Séance

Reprinted from Vibrations, the newsletter of the exclusive Psychic Entertainers’ Association, with additional comments and The Musing Box script.

by Lee Carle
Making Manifestations

Building the Commercial Séance

by

Lee Earle
Dedicated to the memory of

Jack W. Sutherland

Thirty years a friend; forever an influence.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANIFESTATIONS...THE ULTIMATE SEANCE</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BEGINNING</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEATING AND THE CIRCLE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNEMONICS IN ACTION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MAJOR CIRCLE</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MINOR CIRCLE</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFEDERATES AT THE TABLE</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GO WITH THE FLOW</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HOST / BUTLER</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PIECES - CRITERIA FOR REJECTION</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THAT'S THE SPIRIT - HOUDINI!</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEEP IT CLEAN (THE ROOM)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEN REASONS</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MUSING BOX</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

I am often asked, "If your séance was such a successful event, why did you close the show?"

That question deserves an answer in detail.

1) In May of 1989, the séance had been running almost two years, and I was getting a little tired of the grind. I had squeezed all of the experience and personal growth possible out of the show.

2) Phoenix is a winter resort city; much of our business came from referrals by hotel activities directors and concierges. We learned during our first two summers that we could, at best, only break even without that resort income. To "make the nut" required an infusion of capital for advertising. Faced with our third Phoenix summer season, a decision was necessary.

3) If we closed the show for the summer, it would take extensive rehearsal to get it back "on the boards" for the fall, IF we hadn't obligated ourselves to other enterprises. A drop in the quality of the show was inevitable.

4) Candidly, my percentage of a three-partner split after the Butler's salary, advertising, repairs, printing, etc., was less than I could make doing my standard after dinner and party mentalism.

Faced with the above considerations, only one decision could be made. It was made with no regrets. Well, one.

It was a helluva show!
MANIFESTATIONS...THE ULTIMATE SÉANCE

Let me describe the evening which each group of 12 guests experienced.

Our guests' first glimpse of the encounter to come was of a wrought-iron gate set into an ivy-covered brick wall. They leave their cars in our newly-paved, well-lighted parking lot. Once through the gate they are, literally, led down the garden path, their way eventually blocked by a large door. Mounted upon the door is a brass knocker in the shape of a gnarled hand.

A tuxedoed butler attends the knock and greets the guests, taking their wraps, and escorting them to their places at the séance table. The table is a specially constructed (no gaffs, just difficult to find in real furniture) 6 1/2 foot diameter table set in the center of a smallish room.

The room is decorated in the Victorian style with blood-red walls, ivory curtains and ceiling, dark oak hardwood floor and appointments, and an abundance of brass and crystal and lace. Centered above the table is an electric chandelier, hung all over with crystal ornaments.

After all the guests have been welcomed and comfortably seated, the butler pours a glass of white wine (or sparkling cider, if requested) for each guest and delivers a little background information concerning the expected events of the evening. Acting upon the Medium's instructions, he requests each guest to deposit a personal item in a small basket fetched from a shelf of knick-knacks.

Following the butler's reading of an interesting background document, a pounding at the door announces the Medium's arrival. He is framed in the backlit doorway as in a scene from "The Exorcist." He enters and greets those seated at the table, delivers a light disclaimer, and then proceeds with the séance.
The first event is the Light Séance; light in both illumination and content, providing an opportunity for the guests to adjust to the mood. Opening with a toast to the "spirit of the greatest name in magic ever to grace the American stage...", this segment includes such effects as Anneman's Pseudo-Psychometry, Burger's Voodoo, a classic Living & Dead (disclosure via pendulum), and a vivid psychological autopsy of the character of Harry Houdini. At the conclusion of this segment the guests have been treated to a series of credulity-stretching exercises so that what follows is now, seemingly, within reason.

The Dark Séance is the classic hands-clasped-in-a-circle, total-darkness encounter which the guests have been expecting all along. They are warned of esoteric dangers, intrigued with the placement of mysterious items about the table, and given the rules of conduct. They are then plunged into blackness; hearts pounding, pulses racing, and senses on alert from the fight-or-flight reaction generated by a surprising occurrence during the Medium's initial incantations.

Having jump-started their imaginations in this disorienting total darkness, we begin a full, frontal assault. Tambourines and bells fly about the sealed room. The Medium's voice changes in power and timbre, speaking now the words of the tormented spirit of Houdini. The unvoiced questions of the guests within the circle are answered; often with humor, always with candor.

Various visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile sensations are stimulated. Each guest sees/hears/smells/feels something different. Some claim to see detailed visions. Some see nothing. (Can you believe it? They spring for twenty-five bucks a seat and then CLOSE THEIR EYES!)
The finale of the Dark séance is a Hollywood-style climax with invading demons wrestling the Medium for control of the Circle. Flashes of light snap, attracting attention around the room; objects are in motion and self-destruction in all directions. The walls creak and groan. The table dances under thirteen pairs of sweating palms. A window flings itself open, glass crashing, light streaming in over the collapsed body of the Medium. In a quieting denouement, additional surprises from the spirit world are discovered and the seeds of wonder are sown within the minds of all present.

The Medium thanks the guests for their attendance and bids them "pleasant dreams". Then he makes an abrupt exit, leaving the butler to extend the final courtesies to the puzzled guests.

Total running time: about two hours.
THE BEGINNING

It all began in March of 1987. Eugene Burger had just visited our fair city for a lecture and book promotion, therefore spirit effects were the topic of conversation.

Jack Sutherland, owner of Sun Magic (of Phoenix, Arizona) suggested that he would like to present a séance in the unused room at the rear of his new shop.

I responded that he need look no further for someone to take on the task. After all, I had presented casual and impromptu séances several times in the past 20 years and felt (I thought then) fully qualified to put together a permanent séance room. Thus the adventure began.

We had several ideas in mind about what we wanted to do and, more importantly, what we wanted to avoid.

We wanted an elegant evening which people would remember for a long time, avoiding the "magic show in the dark" type of séance so often presented by magicians.

We wanted a show which would appeal to a broad spectrum of potential clients, powerful enough to challenge the skepticism of the most hardened but gentle enough to avoid criticism by the most conservative churchgoers.

We envisioned a show which would begin modestly then slowly change in temper and tone until we managed to wall out every last scrap of disbelief, rattling the reserve of the most determined skeptic. Technical excellence was determined to be a MUST. Moreover, the room had to be clean before and after the presentation.

Our goal was to create an entire evening of entertainment beginning with the arrival of the guests and climaxing with a strong finale at the séance table.

To our advantage was the fact that the séance room (formerly the master bedroom of the converted home) had its own entrance at the rear of the building. It would not be
Making Manifestations

necessary to walk guests through the bowels of the magic shop to access the séance. In addition, our address was smack in the middle of the prestigious Phoenix "yuppie corridor", a 3 mile strip of boutiques, nightclubs, and stereo stores.

Jack and I soon discovered that the investment necessary to carry off the Victorian decor we wanted was heavier than either of us was willing to underwrite, so an "angel" was secured to produce the séance. Our producer was Craig Nichols, a young man who had not only more money than good sense, but also a need to generate a business loss to offset his earnings for tax purposes. As the production developed, he became the perfect foil for my outrageous ideas, whims, and desires, injecting reason where none existed; counseling moderation when I cried for excess; becoming the Watson to my Holmes. (To his eternal surprise, the business went "black" and he'll have to find his tax losses elsewhere.)

The idea of a Victorian setting kind of grew with us. I can't honestly tell you where the idea came from; I can tell you that, in the early stages, substantial input was gathered from a lot of folks. We have this agreement among us that says basically, "No idea is too outrageous to be thoughtfully considered." An open, uncritical atmosphere must be maintained as a fertile field upon which ideas might be sown.

Perhaps it was the need for a theatrical decor, perhaps an intrigue with the era, perhaps because it was during that time that séances became drawing room entertainment, but for whatever reason we chose Victorian decor. Having decided in favor of that turn-of-the-century motif we turned to the actual details. We installed a hardwood floor; we painted the walls a rich, deep red; we hung ivory drapes, a crystal chandelier, and lots of framed prints on the walls.
An opening day of April 15th was set. The spirit of Murphy and the Ides of April were to be reckoned with, however - we opened June 3rd!

**SEATING AND THE CIRCLE**

We seat twelve people for our séance and number their seats by the clock; the person at the Medium’s left is one o’clock, the one at his right is twelve o’clock. We have seven "safe" chairs, those where one needn’t depend upon a skeptic's sense of fair play to prevent his grabbing or snagging any of our darkroom apparitions.

Of the five remaining seats, twelve and one o’clock are critical. The occupants of those chairs are the most important spectators at the table: When everyone is looking at the Medium during the experiments, they also see the reactions of those at his sides.

If these two are reactive, engaged, involved, then the rest of the table will follow suit. Conversely, if they are distant, withdrawn, skeptical, then their mood will infect the others.

Every now and then, I find one of these disbelieving types seated next to me. It doesn't happen often, because one of the butler's prime duties is to spot potential trouble and steer it to harmless seats. But if a hard-nosed skeptic (or potential troublemaker - count most magicians, sadly, among this category) is unavoidably at either side, I wait until after the psychometric readings and then shift the positions of several sitters so the "circle might be better balanced", relocating the duds across the table.

In other words, it is my show and I am the one who is in control. Who can deny the mysterious expert in the supernatural who has been commissioned to produce the strange proceedings? They move when I ask.
Extra benefit: Splitting up couples or pairs adds to their sense of insecurity in the dark, later.

Sometimes I will use a skeptic at my elbow to good effect. After all, if I can blow a declared skeptic's mind (and get a dynamite facial reaction in the process...) then the rest of the evening is guaranteed to be super smooth. Much the same effect as doing a sucker trick early in a kid show. Make believers out of the doubtful (or at least shake their skepticism) and your bona fides are more easily established.

The other three seats I noted are critical because many of the darkroom apparitions take place (or transit) over these seats. We don't want these chairs filled by folks who sit too tall in the saddle!

MNEMONICS IN ACTION

Mnemonics, the technique used to easily memorize data for precise recall, plays a very important role in the séance. Each of our guests is "clipboarded"; requested to ask a question of the spirit to be contacted. The butler explains that each guest should sign the slip of paper, keep it safe upon his person, and tender it to the Medium when requested. Of course we never get around to collecting the written slips, which makes the mystery even deeper. In a sense, those folded slips of paper, discovered still in pockets (or tucked within brassieres - yes, it has happened) when the guests are at home, become little "mind bombs". The questions were answered by the spirit, but the Medium didn't collect the papers. Hmmm.

We use the Micro-Thin Message Boards (conveniently manufactured by Yours Truly) in "Manifestations". There are enough boards ready to have one for each guest plus a couple of spares. Each is loaded with a slip of paper and plenty of fine tip ball point pens are at hand. In reality, we
Making Manifestations

could use only 3 boards to service all 12 guests (and without resorting to the perforated paper dodge, I might add) but why complicate matters?

When the butler has collected a few of the boards, he leaves the room to refill the wine decanter and takes the boards with him. (LESSON: DON'T LEAVE FOLKS ALONE TOO LONG - ESPECIALLY IF THERE ARE ANY MAGICIANS PRESENT!) The butler returns to the séance room with fresh wine and the Medium is opening fresh questions, taking advantage of his time alone with the material to mnemonicize it. After a few shows, the questions asked began to fall into certain categories and I proceeded to formulate stock answers for most of them. Often the questions demanded improvisation of a new, suitable answer. Since our spirit is Houdini, and since our butler advises the participants to address their questions in the spirit's direction, most of the questions we get are related to the how and why of escapes, contact with Bess, descriptions of the "summerland", and "Did you enjoy Tony Curtis's portrayal of your life?" (Really!)

Each question is mnemonicized as it is read from the clipboard, associating the question with the person's name. Later, after I have made my entrance and have introduced myself to each of the guests, I learn which face goes with each question. The nature of the questions often betrays the attitude of the guest. Confrontational, "trick" questions will put those guests on my lookout list. If the "circle needs to be balanced" then those persons are moved to the "safe" seats. If, on the other hand, the question implies acceptance, belief, or gullibility the Medium's readings and answers from the spirit (not to mention that person's position at the table) can be adjusted accordingly.

So I enter the séance room armed with a great deal of information - the questions each of the guests asked of the
Making Manifestations

spirit, whatever inside information we have, and a clue to the attitude of each guest.

Mnemonics plays another part as well. Before the Medium's entrance, the butler informs the guests that the Medium has requested each person to deposit a personal item (jewelry, keys, etc.) in a basket on the table. These items are to be used as the basis for readings per Anneman's Pseudo-psychometry. The butler notes who deposits each item and memorizes (via mnemonics) the clock position at the table to which the item must be returned. (WARNING: NEVER "BALANCE THE CIRCLE" BEFORE DOING THE READINGS, IT CAN CONFUSE EVERYONE.)

Using a clever signaling system built into the room, the butler informs the Medium of the ownership of each item. The Medium then delivers a stock reading, tempering that delivery with the knowledge gained from the written questions and from any other inside information we might have garnered about the guest. At the conclusion of each reading, the item is returned to the proper person. No envelopes, no clues, no kidding!

THE MAJOR CIRCLE

One of my major considerations in setting up the circumstances of the séance was the potential modus operandi of the various pieces. After all, we wouldn't want to trust only the good nature of those "across the veil" for our program, thus most of our scenarios depended upon other than spiritual intervention.

In the true old-time séances, the Medium (and perhaps an assistant - read: stooge) would free himself to cause havoc around the table. Not wanting to slow things up with a rope tie or Medium's cabinet (after this is ENTERTAINMENT), and preferring to avoid depending upon confederates at the table, I decided to use a variation of
the old séance grip. I wanted a better rationale for the hand-to-wrist sequence than just "that's the way we do it". So I invented the Minor Circle.

THE MINOR CIRCLE

"You see, the hand-to-hand, flesh-to-flesh contact we often see depicted in films is the Major Circle, wherein the energy of all within the circle is channeled in order to control a spirit. Our purpose here this evening, rather, is communication. Thus we will employ the Minor Circle. Please reach out with your left hand (the psychic hand) and place it upon the circle of chain which has been laid out upon the table. Now to complete the circle (and to account for all hands), place your right hand lightly upon the wrist of the person to your right."

A little imagination will show that, in effect, the Medium is now in position for the séance grip. When he reaches over his right shoulder to kill the lights he removes his hand from the wrist of the person to his right. In the dark his LEFT fingers come to rest lightly upon the wrist of the person to the right. In that person's mind, the Medium removed his hand to extinguish the illumination and then returned it to reform the Minor Circle. In reality, the right hand is now free to perform its ghostly duty.

An added bonus when using this dodge is the chain itself. At "Manifestations" we lay the chain out on the table in a five pointed star. It is a pretty design, some give it mystic connotations, and it adds to the mystique of the table.
CONFEDERATES AT THE TABLE

More often than you might imagine, a well intentioned magician/guest would try to "help" with the effects. Most often this occurred during the psychometry phase of the "light séance". I would find flash paper, spirit keys, and other magical paraphernalia deposited in our basket.

The Medium's dilemma is this: Should he take advantage of this boon or ignore it? My policy has been to ignore it. If I were to use the device, then someone else could claim credit and be in a position for polite blackmail. Worse, if one of the lay guests happened to notice the bent key before I did, then the cry of "foul" might ruin the mood.

We hadn't anticipated any "help" and thus were unprepared when it occurred. It turns out that one evening, on instinct, I made the right decision. Unknown to me, when the butler collected the personal items one evening, a bent key was placed in the basket by a friend who was in attendance. The butler had made a habit of commenting on each item deposited in the basket in order to help "burn" the item into his mnemonic keytable. Had I attempted to make anything of this machina ex Deus, the willing suspension of disbelief would have suffered.

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

Yes, even running a weekly séance has them.

During the "blow-off" (finale) of "Manifestations" the table begins to jump and cavort about in the dark. The modus operandi behind such activity is the raised left knee of the Medium under one of the table's supporting beams. Simple but non-technical (read: more dependable).

On those evenings when we had multiple presentations, during the Halloween madness in the last two
weeks of October, I noticed a slight stiffness in my left leg. Upon examination of that area I noticed a tremendous bruised area about 3 inches across! It seems that the human knee has precious little padding on top, and the constant thumping under the table (with the weight of 13 sets of hands & arms & et cetera upon it) caused the contusions.

Shortly after one show, I felt a little trickle of moisture on my lower leg and discovered not only a torn trouser leg (my best suit, too!) but a 1 1/2" open cut. A corner of a piece of the bracing hardware had become uncovered and managed to rip not only trousers but flesh as well. I still bear the proverbial "scar on the left knee!"

Another possibility to be aware of is that you'll be taken too seriously. We had a young girl, 15 or 16 years old, who attended with friends who did not bother to explain that "Manifestations" was a show. Add to this set of circumstances the fact that she was the product of a rather fundamentalist religious upbringing and the scene is set.

When the lights came on after the dark portion of the séance, this guest was speechless in her seat, pale, and whimpering as she continued to impress her fingerprints into the edge of the table. She was certain she had seen Satan's hordes. It took over an hour's worth of gentle efforts and several cups of coffee to talk the young lady back to earth and to convince her that all she had seen was a splendid performance. Some folks take this stuff seriously!

One group of 12 was a charter of the room for an evening. All present were employees and associates of a prominent evangelical illusionist. The fellow at my right would, at regular intervals during the performance, quietly lower his head, close his eyes, and move his lips in what I can only assume was silent prayer. Whether he was praying for my soul, his, or the success of the show I can only guess!

The puckish imp within me is delighted at the response, however!
Making Manifestations

GO WITH THE FLOW

When the all Christian group was attending "Manifestations" I sensed, during the opening remarks and initial effects, that the mysterious, semi-obsessed character of the Medium simply wasn't playing.

What would you do in this circumstance? Put even more effort into projecting the character as planned? Or resign to fate and lighten up the proceedings a little?

Remember that an intimate presentation such as this requires that ALL of the guests be "on the same page" so to speak. If one or two of the guests are inattentive or distracted then it is likely that the performance as a whole will suffer. Secondly, all those attending deserve the entertaining evening for which they have paid, even if they are making it difficult for you.

By maintaining the pretense that I believed in spirits, demons, apparitions and the like, I was serving a dish which that particular group simply couldn't digest. I decided to ease up just a bit on the histrionics and began to shift the presentation toward "tongue-in-cheek."

The opposite situation has occurred even more often...a table full of believers in psychic phenomena who make the Medium's life easy. In this situation, my personal ethics demand that I introduce an attitude of (pseudo) scientific examination into the proceedings, encouraging those present to examine their blind acceptance; to question their assumptions. This has the added benefit of making the Medium appear to go the extra mile, seeming overly fair and trustworthy. (Hee, hee.)

The message here is to learn to recognize when "serious" won't play and when "enough is enough" when among the naive or innocent.
THE BUTLER

From the start we planned to make "Manifestations" a two-man show; one is the Medium at the table and the other is the operator of the backstage machinations. It became clear that the distant and mysterious character of the Medium was not consistent with the personality necessary of a good and effective host. Thus the character of the butler was created, forcing the second person (Craig) to wear two hats.

Later it became obvious that, while Craig wore his financial chapeau quite well, the butler's hat just didn't fit. As it turned out, the solution to our personnel dilemma was right under our noses...Barry Schor, an employee of Sun Magic, was not only available and interested, but also had extensive experience in the food & beverage industry. Serendipity strikes again. Barry became our butler and, for the first six months, was the only person to get a regular paycheck.

One way we take advantage of the butler is simple - servants and people in uniform are basically "invisible"; their presence is almost never remarked upon. Thus the butler makes a perfect spy, gleaning tidbits of information while pouring wine, filing away comments the guests make as the séance groundwork is laid. This data is delivered to the Medium whenever possible, enabling some dynamite revelations during psychometry or the Dark Séance.

When the Medium takes over, the butler retires to his "backstage" position, ever ready to fetch more wine or to direct guests to the restroom should the occasion arise. He is the "safety man" for the performance, keeping an eye on things, guarding the telephone, alert for cues from the Medium that improvisation is necessary.

Of course, the butler has at least one other duty - that
of manipulating many of the manifestations orchestrated into the programme.

"Pay no attention to the man behind that curtain!"

THE PIECES - CRITERIA FOR REJECTION

Remember when I said that one of the things we wanted to avoid was a "mental magic show in the dark" presentation? Of course that places severe limits on the choice of effects and methods. Add the additional constraints of Victorian decor and the Medium's character (bizarre rituals, blood, flashes, and smoke were ruled out early!) you find precious few items left around which to build a performance.

At the start, only two pieces were guaranteed inclusion in our program: Anneman's Pseudo Psychometry (ala William Larson), and some sort of revelation via Ouija board. Eugene Burger's "Voodoo" variation of the ashes business was soon found to be too good to exclude.

We knew that the length of the show was important. Too short and the performance would be unable to compete for the entertainment dollar. Too long and it would overwhelm (and potentially, bore) those present. A compromise total time of two hours was reached, with 15 minutes of that in the room with the butler before the Medium's arrival. Only an hour and 45 minutes to fill.

We analyzed that the dark, blackout portion of the séance would be the draw, but under the old adage of "always leave your audience wanting more", decided to save the spooky part for the climax and limit it to no more than 20 minutes. Answering 12 questions and manifesting various visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile occurrences would more than fill that time. Our timetable allowed a generous hour and 25 minutes for the "light" séance.
Let's see, 12 to 15 minutes for psychometry, 5 minutes for "Voodoo", and 10 minutes for the Ouija to speak left just under an hour to script.

Early trials showed us that the Ouija was just too darned slow to hold a group which paid for entertainment...other ideas needed to bloom.

Dr. Juris (a local performer and one of my mentors) made a few suggestions and from them blossomed my presentation of the Music Box, all wrapped up in the maudlin fabric of a pathos-filled story revealing a dark part of the Medium's past. An early bit with "Mental Heat" and a newly-devised living and dead test developed into tasty treats and were duly inserted into the menu.

We assume the spectators possess all different convictions and beliefs, thus we must first get their attention so we can later shift the focus as desired. So we open with the "Mental Heat", go into psychometry, living & dead, "Voodoo", and end the light séance with the music box. Still over 25 minutes were awaiting material.

THAT'S THE SPIRIT - HOUDINI!

Ohmygosh! How to fill those gaping voids between effects? Telling ghost stories?

As a matter of fact, that's just what we eventually did! The ghost in this case is the spirit of Houdini. And we perform what amounts to a psychological autopsy on the character of Harry Houdini, weaving the fabric of the story to fit snugly around those pieces we chose to use. Some antique handcuffs and unpublished promotional photos of H.H. himself added more hooks upon which to hang elements of the story. We tell of the "metamorphosis" of young skeptic into international superstar; of the struggle to attain the summit; of the determination to remain at the
pinnacle; of new technology's slow erosion of that mountain known as Vaudeville. As the table is plunged into the darkness, each within the circle has a new understanding of the character of the man known as Houdini.

The Houdini angle has other benefits to offer: First, the name Houdini is instantly recognizable; it gets us some friendly press. Second, a great deal is "known" about his feats, attitudes, & accomplishments, so we have a lot of great "hooks" for presentations and exposition. Third, by limiting questions to those addressed to Houdini, we avoid the potential embarrassment (not to mention liability!) due to putting a guest in contact with dear Great Aunt Sarah.

Besides, the crusty old vaudevillian can provide very interesting conversation in the dark. Occasionally he lapses into yiddish idiom (thank goodness for Craig and Barry - both of whom have Jewish mothers - for those little insights into character which this goy could never otherwise achieve); other times he waxes reminiscent over "the good old days." And woe unto the guest who asks the modus operandi of a favorite trick!

KEEP IT CLEAN (THE ROOM)

Because of our backgrounds as magicians, we were often overly concerned about tipping the gaff. More accurately, we wanted to make sure the room was "jealous magician proof." Perhaps we were running when we weren't being chaste, but it was one of our early priorities. Later that requirement became a matter of pride. The room is clean from top to bottom when the séance is concluded. Thump the walls, lift the tablecloth, or inspect the hat rack - there is nothing to find. Our obsession with keeping the room clean would sometimes come into conflict with our parallel desire to keep the operation low-tech. Clean always won.
That's not to say we abandoned threads in favor of reels. When threads would serve, then threads we used. But you'd not find the spool in the room or on the Medium's person.

So part of the joy of creation was the constant effort to get the various paraphernalia and accoutrements in and out of the séance room, during pitch blackness. Small noises were no problem; after all, Houdini is constantly speaking to the Circle - larger noises could be masked with a cavorting tambourine. Simple? Try floating a brass bell, improvising an entertaining answer to a guest's question, and lifting a heavy table with a sore knee - simultaneously! Now reach out for the transfer of another secret gaffus. Careful...don't let the bell ring. Now do it in the dark when you mustn't risk bashing a paying customer in the snoot.

'Tain't as easy as it sounds. As a matter of fact, being the Medium for a 2-hour séance pushed me to the limit of my technical knowledge, acting skills, and performing expertise. Nice work if you can get it! I am, by training and experience, a comedy performer. Upon undertaking the task of creating the character of the Medium, many who know me well warned of the danger of lapsing into punishment or going for the easy laugh and spoiling the mysterious mood we wanted to establish.

As a result, my early efforts produced a cold, humorless, lecturer devoid of emotion and supercilious to a fault. As I wore the character every week a line would develop here, a wry crumb of humor would appear there...until I realized that the Medium and I were merging. He was taking on facets of my personality and I, if not careful, would absorb some of his.

Taking a lead from Burger's "Spirit Theater", I began to allow more dry humor to emerge. Now, I even go to the trouble to set up some bits for the small enjoyment they
provide at the proper time. After all, we cannot expect the audience to maintain a constant state of intense interest. To build those dramatic peaks and valleys, to relieve those pent-up tensions a little relief is prescribed. Here's an important note: I always make the effort to point the humor at myself or at the process - never at a guest.

The Medium is played as if he were an outside expert/consultant commissioned to preside at the ceremony. His arrival is eagerly anticipated; his uncharacteristic departure at the finish is unsettling. The butler is unable to reveal any details, should the guests request. The Medium is a "strange cat."

PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION

"Manifestations" was lucky to have succeeded at all. The serendipitous combination of Craig's media contacts and my promotional experience unlocked a few doors for us, but on the whole only tenacity and single-minded perseverance could open those doors wide enough for useful access.

We harbored no illusions about the public clamoring to get in once we opened. It was a given that the vast majority of potential attendees might, if setting priorities, put visiting a séance room just after root canal work. We were left with the hard, cold facts of selling a show to the public at large.

One of the ugly realities one must face when putting a project like this together is public apathy. Realistically, the majority of the vast ticket-buying public doesn't give a hoot in hell about attending a séance, and the remaining minority of that potential audience is broke! I hope you weren't counting on the magic/mental community to keep your operation afloat...were you?
Here is a stunner - you must decide early on whether you intend to make your séance an ego-building adventure or operate it as a business venture. If you can afford to sponsor a séance with no guarantee of success beyond family and friend support, please call me yesterday - I have a heck of a proposition for you.

But if you intend to keep your séance on a pay-as-you-go basis, assuming you get it jump-started to begin with, then you must consider how to "package" your product in order to successfully market it. In order to keep even a small show like "Manifestations" running (12 seats X 2 shows X 50 weeks a year = 1200 pairs of shoes parked under the circular table), you need to sell tickets. And to peddle tickets, you must have something to offer.

In order to break the vicious cycle of zero inertia, an infusion of cash is required. Here is the "price of the book": Figure your start-up costs and multiply by five. It's a simple piece of advice but one for which we paid dearly. If you are serious about producing a successful séance you cannot afford to underestimate your expenses. It would have broken our hearts to abort our "baby" because we couldn't afford to nurture it any longer.

I'll tell you how serious I am about "Manifestations" - In our first 9 months, I drew exactly $100.00 from the books. Every other penny of income was diverted to repaying Craig's investment, paying operating costs, supplies, advertising, printing, etc. We were open over 6 months before we went "in the black." On more than a few of those performance nights I had to refuse far more lucrative engagements in order satisfy the commitment I had made to the séance.
Where is the "target market" for such an entertainment?

1. Resort hotels (lots of 'em around Phoenix) and their guests

2. Theater-goers

3. The metaphysical community (we thought of channelling Elvis, much greater potential there, but couldn't do it with a straight face!)

4. Company parties and client entertainment

5. The curious

Here's another economic reality: We were limited by having only 12 seats to sell. The marketplace pretty well sets the maximum price of any commodity, and tickets to Manifestations were no exception. We compromised upon $25.00 per as our tariff. Considering our maximum gross as $300.00 per show (of course seats never go unsold, do they?) then how cost effective is advertising?

Our operating expenses run about 25% of the gross, or about $75.00 per show. That buys the wine, pays the butler, cleans the tablecloth, replaces the candle, purchases the incense, and places a little aside for petty cash. Before our startup investment was amortized the entire balance of the gross went toward retiring that debt. Even now, a significant percentage of our cash flow is diverted toward capital investment. Have you any idea how expensive 13 antique chairs might be? I do.

But for example's sake, let's assume that the
remaining $225.00 for the show (12 seats x $25.00 per, less overhead) is free & clear. How much of that could we afford to invest (waste?) on advertising? I have no idea what advertising rates in your city are, but to get a 3 line listing on the back page of the local trendy preppie news journal in my town cost us over one hundred bucks per week.

HOUDINI - What's a nice ghoul like you doing in a place like Manifestations? Ask him yourself. Call 234-3887 for reservations.

MANIFESTATIONS...the Ultimate Séance.
Experience an evening of spirit theatre.
Reservations required, 234-3887.

Little tickler ads like the above proved to be the most effective advertising we bought. Of course they had to be in the right publication, read by the right people. And that doesn't guarantee that the seats will be filled. Certainly the effort will fail if the ad is a one-shot affair. To be effective, the ad must be seen by the public over and over again. Those in the advertising business will be able to tell you the threshold for number of impressions, etc. All I can tell you is that those advertising expenses can really add up in a hurry.

Back during our first Hallowe'en season we recklessly promoted Manifestations with every media outlet we could imagine. We even set up a little event with one of the radio stations which was carrying our commercials.

The idea was that the twelve seats would be occupied by six "on air personalities" and their spouses. We further reasoned that, when our commercials were played, the announcer or D.J. would add a few live comments such as, "We attended, and it's a gas!" or "My wife and I had a fantastic time there!"
We reserved a prime show on a prime night (the 8:00 p.m. show, Friday before Hallowee'en, as I recall) and awaited their attendance. Not a single one of the radio people showed up! There were no last-minute telephone calls and no apologies, not even after the fact. We lost a sure $300.00 in seats we could have sold because the station's advertising and sales department did not follow through with our verbal agreement for the performance.

A lesson learned here; first, get it all in writing. Second, confirm in advance and on the evening of the event that all is going as planned.

As the Butler and I waited for the group to make its appearance we entertained ourselves by making up a top-ten list alá the David Letterman show. I thought you might enjoy it.

TEN REASONS TO AVOID BROADCAST PERSONALITIES

or

SPIRIT THEATRE MAKES LOUSY RADIO!

10. They French-tongue their wineglasses.
9. Houdini wasn't AFTRA.
8. They break in every hour to announce the weather.
7. They insist on an all-Elvis format.
6. They're not comfortable sitting outside the booth.
5. Their voices don't match their faces.
4. They think theirs is the only medium.
3. They get nervous when they hear the word "handcuffs".
2. They think a manifestation is a male broadcasting award.
1. They only hear spirit voices when they play the seance backwards.
THE MUSING BOX

The following is the presentation I used for the music box effect. I have included some asides concerning presentation & blocking. This is an extremely powerful piece. Acted well, it brings tears to many around the seance table.

The medium speaks:

"It is important, before we form the circle and summon those from another plane, that you gain one more piece of knowledge. I can relate it best in the form of a story...

"Once upon a time ... there was a man who had a child. He had only the child in his life. His wife had died in childbirth, delivering to him his son. While another might have become embittered at the loss of the love and transfer that anger to the child, this man took the love he had felt for his wife and redoubled it upon the son.

"In fact he spoiled the child and bought him anything he desired. 'You’d like a bicycle son? How about this ten-speed racer?', he would suggest. "'You want to join the school band? Play the trombone? And the clarinet? Fine. I’ll buy you both!' "'What’s that in the window of that antique store? It’s a music box, son, do you want it?'

"The child joined the Little League. The father purchased the very best Micky Mantle bat and glove. There was nothing he would not do for his son.

"Of all the things the little boy owned, the music box was his favorite. Perhaps because father and son would wind the spring and then listen to the melody, singing along and laughing and tickling and roughhousing. The tune it played was, ‘Puff, the Magic Dragon.’ That will give you some reference to the time when all this took place.

"The little boy took that music box everywhere he went; to the swimming hole, to band practice, to the ball games. It was his
prized possession. One day, while riding his bicycle to one of those extra-curricular events, the music box fell out of the boy's backpack onto the street. The little boy ran back to retrieve it, heedless of the traffic. He didn't see the truck bearing down upon him. The driver had no chance to stop...

"Both the boy and the music box were smashed.

"Needless to say, the father was devastated. First the loss of his wife and now the senseless loss of his son. It was more than he could bear. He allowed himself to be consumed by self-pity.

"His health failed, his business was ignored. Ever deeper he fell into a bottomless pit of despair. The man recognized his mental condition. He tried to cheer himself. He even returned to the store where he and the boy had found the music box and bought a duplicate box in which to keep the remaining momentos of that short relationship. But there was no recovery.

"At wit's end, he felt there was only one way of ending his melancholy. So he gathered about him all those precious reminders of his departed family and then took to hand that one, sure method of ending his suffering." (Pantomime taking a gun in hand, cocking it, and holding it to your temple.)

"Just as he was about to take that final, irrevocable step...the box began to play." (Music comes from box.) "The box began to play!

"He took that as a sign. A message from the wife and child, 'Don't do it, darling', 'I love you, Daddy, please don't...'
(Pantomime placing the gun aside, then slowly open the lid of the box a crack - the music grows louder.)

"He found strength in that music. He found hope in that message. And the faith that there is a silver lining to the darkest cloud. That there is a greater destiny for us all." (Snap the box lid closed, music stops.) (Pause until you can't stand it.)

"I've kept that box. All these years I've kept that box as a reminder that when you reach the end of your rope you tie a knot and hang on. You turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones. You search for a purpose. You choose life!
"I was a skeptic once. I would have said that the mechanism triggered by some small vibration or that the mechanism was wound and activated, but was jammed by the coagulation of lubricants. That the warmth of my body as I held it close caused the oil to flow and allowed the gears to turn.

"But, you see, that can't be the case. When I bought the duplicate music box, it was only a box." (Begin to slowly open the lid to the box.)

"There was no mechanism inside" (Open the box completely and slowly show the interior to each guest.)

"And now you know why I am no longer the skeptic."

The modus operandi behind The Musing Box is a concealed music box mechanism. Unlike previous variations upon this theme, the gimmick is employed in such a manner as to cause the music to actually come from the box on the table.

The gimmick, a modified music box movement, is concealed under the table, on the performer's knee. Raised into contact with the underside of the table top, the sound vibrations are conducted through the solid table and reverberate within the empty box which is atop the table, directly above the gimmick. The best box to use is one which has a hole on the top, as does a guitar, providing superior acoustic properties. The music actually comes from the box! You can place a microphone near the box and pick the sounds up quite clearly.

Also, because sound travels more quickly and more efficiently through dense wood than through air, the ears of the spectators "tune in" to the stronger (and immeasurably earlier) sound from the box, ignoring any airborne sounds. If a tablecloth is in use, it will serve to further muffle the airborne music. Avoid using a thick or lined tablecloth; it will insulate the conduction of vibrations from the table.
Pressing the box firmly against the table will help offset a thicker cloth. Of course, the thinner the table the better, but surprising results can be obtained when using a thick oak or mahogany dining table.

The music movement is placed upon the performer's knee and raised into position. The release lever actuates the movement when it touches the underside of the table. To prevent the movement slipping off the knee, use a bit of duct tape or masking tape folded back upon itself as a stick surface to anchor the mechanism.

To modify the mechanism (all the parts you need can be found in a well stocked hobby or crafts store), bend a piece of high tensile strength piano wire (NOT a paper clip, please!) so that it is held in place by the longer pan-head screws and extends within the enclosure to stop the little butterfly governor. When the lever is depressed due to contact with the underside of the table, the butterfly is released to turn freely and the music begins to play.

When all three screw heads are in firm contact with the bottom of the table (thus more efficiently conducting the sound vibrations—directly from the metal frame which holds the vibrating comb—through the table and into the box) the resulting sound illusion is magnificent. Time this for when you crack open the box on the table.

On the next page is an illustration of how to rig the piano wire into a contact lever. It may be necessary to remove one of the mounting screws which holds the mechanism to the floor of the enclosure. You might even have to drill through both the wooden floor and the metal frame in order to thread the piano wire through.
Making Manifestations

KEPT FROM SPINNING

FREE TO SPIN