STAGE HYPNOSIS IN THE SHADOW OF SVENGA Li: HISTORICAL INFLUENCES, PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS, AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines stage hypnosis as a contemporary popular entertainment form and investigates the relationship between public perceptions of stage hypnosis and the ways in which it is experienced and practiced. Heretofore, little scholarly attention has been paid to stage hypnosis as a performance phenomenon; most existing scholarship provides psychological or historical perspectives.

In this investigation, I employ qualitative research methodologies including close reading, personal interviews, and participant-observation, in order to explore three questions. First, what is stage hypnosis? To answer this, I use examples from performances and from guidebooks for stage hypnotists to describe structural and performance conventions of stage hypnosis shows and to identify some similarities with shortform improvisational comedy. Second, what are some common public perceptions about stage hypnosis? To answer this, I analyze historical narratives, literary and dramatic works, film, television, and digital media. I identify nine common beliefs about hypnosis and stage hypnosis, and I argue that the Svengali archetype, introduced in George du Maurier’s 1894 novel, Trilby, may have helped shape such perceptions. Third, does the relationship between contemporary practice and public perceptions matter to stage hypnosis as a performance phenomenon? To answer this, I interview volunteer performers and stage hypnotists and analyze my experiences as an audience member and volunteer performer, to determine how differences between perceptions and practices might influence the ways in which stage hypnosis is experienced and/or performed.
In general, my findings suggest several things. Prior perceptions about stage hypnosis did not correlate with interviewees’ perceptions about their ability to become hypnotized or with their ability to participate in performances. Their prior perceptions did appear to influence their affective experiences of their performances, however; when their experiences did not match their expectations, disappointment, confusion, and/or discomfort often ensued. Furthermore, my research suggests that as a performance event, stage hypnosis forges a contract with the audience which implies that what is presented on stage is “real” and that the volunteers’ behavior is caused by hypnosis. Thus, certain performance conventions seem to both reinforce and perpetuate audience expectations in order to create an entertaining event.
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CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCTION

Hypnosis is a complex and long-contested phenomenon. The current practice of hypnosis has roots in therapeutic traditions that emerged in the late 1700s, and many historical accounts link hypnotic phenomena to ritual trance and healing practices that extend into human prehistory. Currently, despite a lack of agreement among psychologists, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists about how, why, or even if hypnosis works, it is employed as a therapeutic treatment for anxiety disorders, chronic pain, and other afflictions. Alongside such therapeutic uses, hypnosis has been championed as a means to stop smoking and lose weight, maligned for playing a role in false “recovered” memories, and dismissed as outright fraud. Some of the most promising recent research has focused on the potential for hypnosis to provide analgesia without pharmaceutical intervention. Deftly summarizing fifty years of research in the journal *Consciousness and Cognition*, behavioral neuroscientist, Arne Dietrich notes that hypnotized subjects report or exhibit “analgesia, vivid images, hallucinations in all sense modalities, amnesia, timelessness, detachment from the self, and a willingness to accept distortions of logic and reality” (244).

Stage hypnotists use such hypnotic phenomena to craft public performances. Touring performers can be found working comedy clubs, cruise ships, casinos, and college campuses. Some performers offer private bookings for parties, schools, or corporate team-building activities. Regardless of the venue, stage hypnotists often coax extraordinarily uninhibited performances from audience volunteers. Many of their (presumably) amateur volunteers quickly and comfortably sing, dance, do celebrity impressions, and participate in complex group improvisations. While specific practices and techniques vary, stage hypnosis performances often follow the same, broad outline: the hypnotist requests volunteer performers from the audience,
leads those volunteers through a procedure designed to induce hypnosis, performs various “tests” of their susceptibility to the procedure, and then leads the volunteers deemed most susceptible in a series of performance activities.

Stage Hypnosis: Sampling a Century of Public Perceptions

At least since the publication of George du Maurier’s 1894 novel, *Trilby*, hypnosis, and particularly hypnosis-induced performance, have had a place in the popular imagination. Du Maurier introduced the world to the fictional character, Svengali, a hypnotist who has a mysterious influence over the novel’s eponymous heroine. Under Svengali’s spell, despite her natural tone-deafness, and without her knowledge or consent, Trilby becomes a celebrated singer. However, she has no memory of her vocal training or of her singing career during the hours when Svengali allows her to wake from the trance. After he dies, she loses her ability to perform and has no memory of ever having done so. Without him, she slowly weakens and dies. Thus, by the late 1800s, hypnotists were already linked with questionable motives and almost-otherworldly powers, and hypnosis-induced performance was already associated with a total loss of volition resulting from an amnesic trance state that only the hypnotist could terminate. The character of Svengali went on to appear in numerous plays and films, thereby reinforcing these impressions. In fact, the label “Svengali” has become synonymous with someone who exhibits undue influence over a performer. How have perceptions of stage hypnosis and its practitioners changed in the century since Svengali made his first appearance? In *Hypnosis: A Brief History*, Judith Pintar and Steven Jay Lynn assert that while the relationship between Trilby and Svengali illustrates assumptions about hypnosis that were common at the time the novel was written, “many of them persist into the present day” (2).

Nearly one hundred years later, in 1993, “Mr. Norman” agreed to let a stage hypnotist
help him stop smoking. After receiving smoking-cessation suggestions, Norman took part in the rest of the hypnotist’s show. During the performance, the hypnotist suggested that the participants would “feel extremely sexy” when they went to bed later that night. Norman claimed that when he went home, he developed “an overwhelming urge to have sexual intercourse with his furniture and domestic appliances” (Heap, “A Legal Case” 143). Over the next four years, Norman reported a range of extraordinary symptoms and received multiple diagnoses, including major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizo-affective disorder, and paranoid psychosis (Heap, “A Legal Case” 143). In 1997 he sued the hypnotist for causing his mental illness. The psychiatrists representing Norman claimed that his aberrant behavior and his mental illness was directly caused by the post-hypnotic suggestion to “feel extremely sexy” when he went to bed and by the hypnotist’s failure to properly remove him from his “trance” at the end of the show. On the fifth day of the trial the proceedings were terminated, not because these claims were refuted, but because Norman’s financial backer withdrew (Heap, “A Legal Case” 143).

In 1993 Sharron Tabarn, an otherwise healthy 24-year-old woman, died in her sleep several hours after participating in a stage hypnosis show. Unbeknownst to the hypnotist, Tabarn suffered from a fear of electricity, and at the conclusion of the performance he told the participants that they would receive a 10,000 volt shock to “wake” them (Heap, “A Case of Death” 100). Although such a shock sounds dangerous, a real 10,000 volt shock would be harmless, and can be generated by a good trudge across a carpet. However, some psychologists argued that if Tabarn believed that 10,000 volts was a lethal shock, perhaps her fear and belief contributed to her death. The coroner ruled that she died from natural causes, but Tabarn’s mother insisted that stage hypnosis was to blame; she appealed the coroner’s verdict and mounted a campaign to prohibit stage hypnosis in the UK. Both the appeal and the campaign
were unsuccessful, but generated enormous publicity and public debate (Heap, “The Alleged Dangers” 118).

In 1994 Christopher Gates was watching a stage hypnosis show performed by Paul McKenna. According to Gates, McKenna somehow persuaded him “against his conscious will” to participate in the show, placed him in a deep hypnotic trance, forced him to perform humiliating and embarrassing activities he would normally have resisted, and failed to properly “dehypnotize” him when it was over (Wagstaff 97). With no previous history of mental illness, Gates claimed in a 1998 lawsuit that participation in the stage hypnosis show caused him to develop schizophrenia, and physicians and psychiatrists testified on his behalf. While it was clear that Gates’s schizophrenia followed the stage hypnosis show, the judge found no evidence that his illness was caused by his participation and ruled against him (Wagstaff 98).

The vocabulary used in these cases may have changed since du Maurier’s time, but the author would probably recognize a number of the concerns about hypnosis in general and stage hypnosis in particular that they reveal, such as the hypnotized person becoming an automaton at the mercy of the hypnotist, the powerful or even dangerous potential of the mind under the effects of hypnosis, the chance that post-hypnotic suggestions could cause long-term effects, and the possibility of getting “stuck” in hypnosis. Like du Maurier’s Trilby, the volunteers in these stage hypnosis performances experienced unusual and even devastating changes following their participation. It is not surprising that they and/or their loved ones looked for an explanation. It is also not surprising that participation in something new and unusual, such as stage hypnosis, might be blamed for a subsequent injury or illness. In his book Deeper and Deeper: Secrets of Stage Hypnosis, stage hypnotist Jonathan Chase likens people’s experience to the hypothetical example of a man who gets food poisoning from his favorite curry restaurant after participating
in a hypnosis show. Since he has eaten at the curry place for years and has only been hypnotized once, he naturally assumes his illness is some terrible side-effect of hypnosis, even though food poisoning is the much more obvious and likely cause of his symptoms (31). The reactions of both the hypothetical curry-eater and the people involved in the above cases are understandable. What is surprising about these cases is that the physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, and judges involved were willing to entertain the possibility that stage hypnosis caused severe mental illness or even death. What is it about stage hypnosis that invites such speculation? Why has this procedure, with roots stretching back at least to the late 1700s, grown in the public imagination into a potentially damaging and even lethal weapon? What role does this perception play in contemporary stage hypnosis practice? Pintar and Lynn suggest that “Centuries-old assumptions about the hypnotic relation and the nature of hypnosis survive today to varying degrees in popular belief and practice, despite being widely discredited by researchers who reject them as myths” (2). In labeling these assumptions “mythical,” Pintar and Lynn identify them as “cultural images” (2).

Central Research Questions and Objectives

While a great deal of research about stage hypnosis exists, nearly all of it comes from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience. Very little has been written about the performance of stage hypnosis as performance. Therefore, in this study, I offer insights about stage hypnosis from my disciplinary perspective by examining it as a performance phenomenon, and by attempting to understand the relationship between public perceptions of this type of performance and the ways in which it is experienced and practiced. My research explores three main questions, each of which grew organically from my investigations into the one before:

1. What is stage hypnosis?
2. What are some common public perceptions about stage hypnosis?

3. Does the relationship between contemporary practice and public perceptions matter to stage hypnosis as a performance phenomenon?

With little scholarly conversation about stage hypnosis as a performance phenomenon within which to situate my ideas, I began by asking basic questions about the nature and practice of stage hypnosis, such as: How are stage hypnosis performances devised, structured, and performed? What broad performance conventions can be identified? What, if any, purpose do these conventions serve? How do stage hypnotists describe their work? What is the experience of audience members who become volunteer performers? How do they describe and view their performances?

While researching these questions about the nature of stage hypnosis as performance, I frequently encountered statements by stage hypnotists and hypnosis researchers about widespread public beliefs and misperceptions regarding hypnosis and stage hypnosis. This prompted me to investigate the presence and prevalence of such beliefs, and to search for their possible origins and influences. I asked questions such as: How has hypnosis and stage hypnosis been represented in the literary and dramatic traditions? Can linkages be made between these representations and current public perceptions about such performances? What expectations about hypnosis and stage hypnosis might volunteer performers bring to the volunteer experience? What perceptions do stage hypnotists believe that their volunteers bring to their performances?

Finally, after compiling a working list of perceptions and beliefs that people might hold about hypnosis, I began to wonder whether such ideas could affect what happens on stage. I asked questions such as: What role, if any, could prior perceptions about hypnosis and stage hypnosis play in volunteers’ experiences of their performances? Can linkages be made between
volunteers’ expectations and their onstage experiences? Do common public perceptions about stage hypnosis affect current performance practice? What insights can stage hypnotists provide about the influence of public perception on their practice? Does an understanding of what people expect influence the ways in which stage hypnotists create their shows?

Research Methodologies and Principle Sources of Data

In his book *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, Harry F. Wolcott identifies three main categories of fieldwork techniques commonly used in qualitative research: *participant-observation*, *interviewing*, and *archival research* (46). Because the types of research activities that are associated with each of these techniques can be so broad, and in order to free himself “from stereotypes associated with terms already so familiar,” Wolcott reassigns a new set of labels to these techniques: *experiencing*, *inquiring*, and *examining* (46). While he acknowledges that his new terms “are not likely to dislodge three such well-established ones, they do call attention to what one is expected to *do* to accomplish each of them” (46, italics in original).

Mindful of the clarity of purpose granted by Wolcott’s new terminology, I have employed all three of these qualitative fieldwork techniques in various ways in order to investigate stage hypnosis performance and pursue my research questions.

Prior to engaging in research with human subjects, I completed a training course and passed an examination at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) for researchers who use human subjects. My study, including all recruitment procedures and materials, interview questions, and consent documents, was approved by the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) before research subjects were recruited (see Appendices A through H for HSRB materials).

*Archival Research/Examining*

In *Techniques of Close Reading*, Barry Brummett states that at its most general, close
reading is “the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meaning” (3), where meaning refers to “the thoughts, feelings, and associations that are suggested by words, images, objects, actions, and messages” (6). Much of my textual analysis for this project entailed examining historical, literary, and dramatic works in an attempt to understand the ways in which hypnosis has been perceived and depicted throughout its history. Toward this end, I engaged Brummett’s ideas about close reading as a tool for identifying rhetorical tropes (75), clarifying a text’s implied claims (101-2), discovering taken-for-granted assumptions (102-3), scrutinizing accepted standards of proof (103-4), and identifying implied hierarchies and power structures (104-5). I also applied this method of textual analysis to training manuals written by stage hypnotists, in order to discover whether the rhetorical tropes and assumptions found in those historical, literary, and dramatic works are identified and/or utilized in contemporary stage hypnosis practice.

Interviewing/Enquiring

I engaged in personal interviews with stage hypnotists and volunteer performers who have participated in stage hypnosis shows, in order to better understand their ideas about this type of performance. Specifically, I conducted the type of interview identified by Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkman in *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, as a “semi-structured life world interview” (3). This type of interview is defined as one “with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (3). The semi-structured life world interview aligns well with my project, because I am interested in understanding each interviewee’s perspectives and reflections on his or her experience with stage hypnosis.

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1 I have chosen to use the terms “interview subject” and “interviewee” interchangeably throughout this project.
The semi-structured life world interview is inspired, in part, by phenomenology, and thus is a mode of inquiry focused on how subjects experience life world phenomena (Kvale and Brinkman 14). Although a detailed history and exploration of phenomenology is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to clarify how phenomenological theory has influenced my research. Generally, phenomenology in qualitative inquiry points to an attempt to understand phenomena from the subjects’ own perspectives, with the assumption that the most important reality is the one that subjects perceive to be so. My interest in stage hypnosis as it is perceived and experienced aligns well with phenomenology’s focus on experienced meanings.

Because neither published research nor public opinion has yet settled questions about the nature and function of hypnosis, I have found the concept of the phenomenological reduction to be particularly useful. According to Kvale and Brinkman, a phenomenological reduction calls for “a suspension of judgment as to the existence or nonexistence of the content of an experience. The reduction can be pictured as a ‘bracketing,’ an attempt to place the commonsense and scientific foreknowledge about the phenomenon within parentheses in order to arrive at an unprejudiced description of the essence of the phenomenon” (27). Thus, as I spoke with stage hypnotists and volunteer performers, I came to their insights with the intention of understanding their experienced reality of stage hypnosis. Although interviewees’ statements about the nature of hypnosis and the experience of stage hypnosis performance sometimes contradict one another or current scientific models of hypnosis or brain function, my intention has been to understand the complexity of their lived experiences, rather than to evaluate the content of those experiences.

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2 To trace major early movements in phenomenological thought, see Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*, Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. 


Interview Questions

Interview questions were carefully devised in order to provide interviewees with an opportunity to expand and reflect on their experiences with stage hypnosis. While some short-answer questions were necessary (“Can you give me an idea of how many times you’ve attended stage hypnosis shows?”), these were followed with open-ended questions that allow subjects to describe experiences, give examples, and explain motivations (“What made you go back after the first time?”).

I applied the concept of the phenomenological reduction as I composed interview questions, in an attempt to lessen the influence that my wording of questions might have on interviewees’ answers. Thus, for example, I did not directly ask volunteer performers whether they became hypnotized during their performances. Rather, I asked, “Do you think all of the volunteers who were performing with you were hypnotized?” Then I followed up with “How could you tell?” This structure allowed subjects to describe their performance experiences and compare and contrast their experiences with what they witnessed from other performers. In these conversations, interviewees often report very complex and nuanced interpretations of their experiences with hypnosis: some are not even sure if they were “really hypnotized.” If I had asked directly whether they were hypnotized, I might have missed much of the complexity in their reflections.

Structurally, I employed a traditional funnel-shaped questioning technique, whereby opening questions are simple and broad (“How did you become interested in performing stage hypnosis?”) whereas later questions narrow toward the focus of the study (“What kinds of assumptions about hypnosis do you think your audience members bring with them to your performances?”). This design allowed subjects to acclimate to the interview process and become
comfortable with me as an interviewer before more complex questions were posed.

**Interview Subjects**

I recruited stage hypnotists for interviews by contacting them via email, social networking websites, and links on their promotional websites (see Appendix D for a sample recruitment letter). I recruited volunteer performers by posting fliers on campus at BGSU on kiosks and general purpose bulletin boards which are available for student use (Appendix G). (This was a particularly effective recruitment method, because BGSU has hosted several stage hypnosis performances in recent years.) Additionally, I posted these recruitment fliers on online bulletin boards. Finally, some volunteer performers contacted me after word-of-mouth contact with other interviewees.

In total, I interviewed six stage hypnotists and twelve volunteer performers. The stage hypnotist population includes four men and two women. Their stage hypnosis experience ranges from a stand-up comedienne who has added stage hypnosis to her repertoire in the past two years to a full-time touring hypnotist who is contemplating retirement after forty years. The volunteer performer population includes six men and six women. Their performance experiences are diverse, representing a wide range of venues (nightclubs, state fairs, school events, and an instructional video), personal reactions to their participation (positive, negative, uncertain), and performance outcomes (participating fully in the performance, participating only partially, being dismissed from the stage by the hypnotist during the performance).

Additionally, I was contacted by ten other potential subjects who did not go on to participate in the study. Among volunteer performers, two withdrew over scheduling conflicts, one decided not to participate after requesting initial information, one had experienced hypnosis outside the context of performance, and three did not meet the approved HSRB criteria for my
interview population because they were under the age of eighteen. Among stage hypnotists, three initially agreed to participate and then later withdrew.

Interview Procedures

After interviewees contacted me, interviews were scheduled at times and locations of mutual convenience. Most interviews were conducted in person, although in two cases, distance necessitated that I conduct telephone interviews. In one instance, a subject completed the interview questions via email because a recent hospitalization greatly limited his mobility. In-person interview locations varied greatly, and included campus conference rooms, classrooms, and dining halls, as well as off-campus restaurants, comedy clubs, and coffee shops.

Each interview began with a briefing, in which the terms and procedures of the interview were explained to the interviewee. Subjects were given time to read the HSRB consent document (Appendix C and Appendix F) and to ask questions about the document as well as about the larger research project. After subjects indicated all questions were answered to their satisfaction, they were asked to sign a copy of the consent document, and given a copy to keep for later reference. In addition to consenting to the interview, the document allowed subjects to choose whether interviews would be recorded and whether their names could be used in my research. Stage hypnotists were given the additional option of allowing their legal names and/or their stage names to be used. Only one interviewee did not consent to recording and one requested that he be referred to by his stage name rather than his legal name. One stage hypnotist requested that neither his stage name nor his legal name be used, and thus I refer to him as Stage Hypnotist I throughout this document.

In keeping with the format of the semi-structured life world interview, I began each interview with a series of prepared questions (Appendix E and Appendix H), and then followed
up on the interviewee's answers with requests for clarification or elaboration whenever necessary. Additionally, rather than remaining inflexibly bound to the order of the prepared questions, the format of the semi-structured life world interview allowed me to skip a question the interviewee had already addressed in a previous answer, or to ask questions out of sequence if the interviewee’s answer to one question naturally led into another question elsewhere on my list. However, in keeping with my HSRB protocols, I did not pose questions on completely new or unrelated topics during the interview process.

I allowed a short period of time at the end of each interview for debriefing and reflection. After explaining that I had asked all of my prepared questions, I asked subjects if they had anything else they would like to add, or anything they would like to clarify or revisit from earlier in the interview. I then asked if subjects had any questions, reminded them that my contact information was available on the paperwork I gave them, and encouraged them to contact me if they wished to ask questions or share additional thoughts with me at a later time.

**Principles for Editing Interview Responses**

From a linguistic perspective, transcription functions as an attempt to translate from one narrative mode (oral discourse) into another (written discourse). From a social perspective, transcription functions as an attempt to capture the constant mutability of human interaction—words, tonal changes, gestures, facial expressions, silences—in a fixed report. Transcripts can only approximate but never duplicate the original conversational interactions, and thus Kvale and Brinkman call transcripts “impoverished, decontextualized renderings of live interview conversations” (178). Because “there is no true, objective transformation from the oral to the written mode,” Kvale and Brinkman suggest that transcription choices should be informed by the research context. They note that verbatim transcription is often necessary for sociolinguistic and
conversation analysis, and may also be relevant to psychological interpretations of interview responses (186, 280). To their examples, I might add that verbatim transcription can be important in the creation of ethnographic performances.

In other research contexts, however, Kvale and Brinkman suggest that verbatim transcription may not be the best choice. Presenting conversations in a literary style, for example, can sometimes better facilitate communication of meaning. Furthermore, because of the inherent differences between oral and written discourse, they explain that oral speech transcribed verbatim may incorrectly make speakers appear “incoherent and confused” or even unintelligent (187). Thus, interview subjects may be embarrassed or offended to see their responses transcribed verbatim and specific persons or groups may be stigmatized by the publication of verbatim transcripts (187). To avoid such problems, Kvale and Brinkman recommend that “spontaneous oral speech should in most cases in the final report be rendered into a readable written textual form” (280). They caution, however, that when responses are presented in edited form, the researcher should include a list of the principles and signs used for editing (281).

My transcribing and reporting decisions are informed by these ethical and practical guidelines suggested by Kvale and Brinkman. I have chosen not to attempt a strictly verbatim report of interview responses. Instead, I report responses with minor editing. My transcription choices foreground my desire to remain as faithful as possible to the interviewee’s original intent as well as to facilitate comprehension for the reader. The following list reflects my transcription and editing choices:

1. Whenever feasible, I quote interviewees without editing their words.
2. I occasionally omit some of the disfluencies of spontaneous oral speech, such as mispronunciations, extraneous interjections, and repetitions. (While disfluencies often
pass without notice in conversation, when they are removed from their conversational context and transcribed, disfluencies can inadvertently alter a reader’s interpretation of the speaker’s meaning. They can make a speaker appear, for example, hesitant or indecisive.)

3. I reproduce speech disfluencies if their omission would seem to substantially alter the meaning, context, or tone of the interviewee’s answer (if the speaker was, for example, hesitant or indecisive).

4. For the purposes of consistency and readability, in those instances when speech disfluencies are omitted, two or fewer words or interjections (“um,” “you know”) are omitted without additional notation, whereas an ellipsis ( . . . ) indicates an omission of three or more words from transcribed quotations.

5. An em dash (—) represents a significant pause or break made by the speaker within the spoken response.

6. Italics indicate that a word or phrase was given special emphasis by the speaker.

7. Square brackets indicate that the enclosed word or phrase did not originally appear in the quotation. (The enclosed word or phrase may add supplementary information to the quotation, or substitute for a word or phrase that would identify a source who requested confidentiality.)

For transparency, I will provide an example of my editing choices. An interviewee described his reasons for volunteering for a performance this way:

I’ve always been, like, really, really fascinated with, like, hypnosis. And I know it really is just like suggestion; there’s no magic to it. You can’t make somebody do something they wouldn’t already do. But still, the idea of like hypnosis as, as like
even like a life tool, you know? Helping people to quit smoking, stuff like that, I found so interesting. And I’d always wanted to be hypnotized, um, and so I thought I would be a prime candidate because I was, you know, so open to it.

After applying the above editing principles, this quotation might read:

I’ve always been really, really fascinated with hypnosis. And I know [hypnosis] really is just like suggestion; there’s no magic to it. You can’t make somebody do something they wouldn’t already do. But still—the idea of hypnosis as, even like a life tool, you know? Helping people to quit smoking, stuff like that, I found so interesting. And I’d always wanted to be hypnotized, so I thought I would be a prime candidate because I was so open to it. (Toney)

*Participant-Observation/Experiencing*

In *Apparitions of Difference: Essays on the Vocation of Reflexive Anthropology*, Richard Neill Hadder asserts that, “Participant-observation may be the only professional practice that seeks to immerse people fully within the flow of everyday life while at the same time compelling them to remain conceptually unsettled” (10). Participant-observation demands a moment-to-moment negotiation of the roles of participant and observer, and necessitates a rejection of artificial notions of researcher objectivity. This need for simultaneous focus on both engagement and critical detachment has led me to use the hyphenated form of the term: *participant-observation*. As Wolcott explains, “Sometimes the words are hyphenated to emphasize the connection between two activities that might otherwise seem not only dissimilar but antithetical. And there is tension between them, an insurmountable tension for anyone locked into the notion that only a detached and uninvolved observer is capable of rendering an acceptable description of human social behavior” (44, *Ethnography*). Throughout my research, I have attempted to
embrace this tension and resist the temptation to imagine myself as an uninvolved observer, because the tension itself can be a generative source of new knowledge. As Hadder notes, “For the ethnographer, the hyphen in participant-observation marks a freedom to modulate between the two modalities of experience, and it is this modulation that generates knowledge across cultural horizons” (20).

For this project, I utilized participant-observation at twelve stage hypnosis performances by nine hypnotists in order to detail current performance practices. At eleven of these shows, I was an audience-participant-observer. In “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” Dwight Conquergood explains that participant-observation “privileges the body as a site of knowing” (180), and as such, I attempted to engage physically, emotionally, and intellectually at each performance. For example, during the early stages of each show I took part in whole-audience activities led by the hypnotists, such as “tests” designed to determine suggestibility and to arouse interest in volunteering for the performance. In one instance, a hypnotist/magician invited me on stage to assist with a magic trick before he began the hypnosis portion of his show (Night). My observations were documented through field notes and, for five of the performances, I was able to purchase DVD recordings made available by the hypnotists.

At the twelfth performance I attended, I literalized Conquergood’s notion of “fieldwork as performance” (190) and volunteered to take part in a stage hypnosis show. As a volunteer performer-participant-observer, I first took part in whole-audience activities and then went on to become one of eight audience members who agreed to be hypnotized onstage. I made extensive field notes, both before and after the performance, and my experiences as a performer are documented in chapter 5.

Conquergood’s ideas about fieldwork, ethnography, and performance build on concepts explored by Victor Turner in works such as The Anthropology of Performance.
My understanding of current performance practices was also supplemented with information gleaned from training manuals written by stage hypnotists, as well as from performance videos that both hypnotists and volunteer performers make available on the internet.

Limitations of the Study

Because hypnosis is such an ephemeral, tentative, and contingent phenomenon, and questions about the nature and function of hypnosis remain unsettled, I do not attempt to make claims about the existence of hypnosis as an objectively real phenomenon, or about its nature or its effects on the brain. Instead, I explore the experienced reality of stage hypnosis by people who have participated in and performed it. While a more generalizable, quantitative study might provide additional insights, my more narrow focus on experienced meanings seems especially well suited to the study of this contested and subjective experiential phenomenon.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, I present situated and contingent examples and counter-examples of ideas, perceptions, and experiences expressed by my specific interview population. Given the small sample size and non-randomized selection process, my aim is not to make statistical claims about the nature of hypnosis and/or stage hypnosis performance more generally. For example, although I provide details about the proportion of my interviewees who report experiencing specific phenomena, these proportions cannot be extrapolated or generalized to other populations. Instead, such examples provide insight into the kinds of ideas, perceptions, and experiences people have in relation to stage hypnosis and help verify the existence of such possibilities in a contemporary population.

Specialized Terms and Concepts

Animal Magnetism/Mesmerism:

In lay usage, *mesmerism* and *mesmerized* are often used interchangeably with *hypnotism*
and hypnotized. More correctly, mesmerism and mesmerized refer to practices based in the theories of “animal magnetism” associated with Franz Anton Mesmer that were most popular between approximately 1778 and the mid-1850s (Gauld xv). While certain reported results are similar to those of hypnosis, such as increased suggestibility and pain relief, magnetism/mesmerism was initially believed to operate through a mysterious magnetic force acting on an equally mysterious magnetic fluid, and the method used to initiate the process was primarily a physical one: the magnetist moved his or her hands over the body of the patient, either touching the skin or hovering just above it, in order to restore and balance the movement of the magnetic fluid (Gauld 11, 257).

For my purposes, animal magnetism and magnetist will refer specifically to those theories and practitioners involving magnetic fluid and/or magnetic force and employing physical “passes” as a primary component of the procedure. Unless otherwise noted, magnetism and/or mesmerism will imply practices employed between approximately 1778 and the mid-1850s.

Hypnosis:

In 1994 the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Division of Psychological Hypnosis released an official definition, calling hypnosis “a procedure during which a health professional or researcher suggests that a patient or subject experience changes in sensations, perceptions, thoughts, or behavior” (Kirsch 143). Among other concerns, defining hypnosis as the “procedure” performed, not the phenomenological experience of the subject, and limiting this

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4 Although theoretical explanations differ, mesmerism shares many qualities with current forms of complementary and alternative “energy medicine.” A document prepared by the United States National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health identifies acupuncture, healing touch, light therapy, magnet therapy, qi gong, and Reiki (2-4) as current practices in which practitioners attempt to manipulate energy fields to affect health.
procedure to that which is performed by a “health professional or researcher” caused considerable debate among APA members. This debate led to the inclusion of eighteen pages of commentary, both supporting and opposing aspects of the definition in the same 1994 issue of *Contemporary Hypnosis* in which the definition was published.

Since this attempt by the APA to define hypnosis, arguments about its nature and definition have actually become more, rather than less, contentious. Significant attention has been paid to the so-called state/non-state debate: whether or not hypnosis is in fact an altered state of consciousness (ASC), or nothing more than an effort to please the hypnotist or a natural form of extreme concentration. For those supporting the state view, neurophysiological changes associated with hypnosis have often been interpreted as evidence of an ASC. For those supporting non-state views, neurophysiological changes are considered irrelevant, because all subjective experiences are assumed to have physiological substrates. If hypnosis involves an ASC, this should lead to objectively measurable and replicable changes in brain function that cannot be attributed to ordinary psychological mechanisms such as role-playing or selective attention. At the very least, an ASC should lead to changes in behavior and/or physiology that cannot be faked or simulated by non-hypnotized control subjects. To date, researchers have applied electroencephalograph (EEG), functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), positron emission tomography (PET), and optical tracking in an attempt to find incontrovertible physiological markers of hypnosis. The results of such studies, while not necessarily conclusive, are intriguing.5

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5 Some of the most promising recent research involves the neurobiology of so-called *pure hypnosis*, measuring changes “brought about by the hypnotic induction as such, without any additional tasks or suggestions given to the subjects” (Andrew Fingelkurts et al. 1453). Subjects’ brain activity is measured before, during, and after a hypnotic induction, as well as while performing suggested tasks and while resting between tasks. This type of research can help
In order to avoid entangling myself in such debates over the nature and function of hypnosis, I will use a modified form of the APA’s definition in this study, recognizing hypnosis simply as “a procedure which is intended to cause changes in sensations, perceptions, thoughts, or behavior.” Additionally, *hypnotism* will refer to those practices, beginning approximately in the 1850s, that rely primarily on verbal suggestion rather than the physical passes associated with mesmerism. (Although James Braid introduced the term *hypnosis* in the 1840s, it did not move into popular usage until the 1850s (Pintar and Lynn 44).)

Stage Hypnosis:

*Stage hypnosis* will refer to those performances in which a performer identifies him or herself as a hypnotist and creates a performance that he or she marks as including hypnosis. The term *stage* refers only to the performed component, and does not imply that such performances must take place in a traditional theatrical setting. This specific use of the term ensures that questions about the nature of hypnosis as a phenomenon or about whether or not participants were “really” hypnotized will not cloud the identification of performances that rightly belong within this genre.

Stage Hypnotist:

This term will refer to the person who both identifies him- or herself as a hypnotist and creates a performance that includes hypnosis as a component. The term *stage* refers only to the performed component, and does not imply that such performances must take place in a separate results attributable to hypnosis alone from those that might be influenced by the assigned task, by the processing of verbal information or verbal commands, or by some combination of these factors. A few such studies (see Alexander Fingelkurts et al., Andrew Fingelkurts et al., and McGeown et al. for examples) suggest evidence of changes in brain state specific to hypnosis. More recently, Kallio et al. published results of an optical tracking study in which hypnosis produced large and objective changes in both automatic and volitional eye movements which non-hypnotized controls could not replicate. However, the authors concede that their findings need to be replicated on a larger scale.
traditional theatrical setting.

Literature Review

The online *Worldwide Stage Hypnosis and Hypnotist Directory* lists over four hundred hypnotists working in thirteen countries. I doubt that this directory is inclusive of all working stage hypnotists, because the list was compiled by a single hypnotist, Joe DeVito, in response to the many requests he received for performer referrals (n. pag.). DeVito relies on hypnotists’ self-reporting to update the directory, and thus it is likely that some performers’ names do not appear on it. However, even such an unscientific accounting makes it clear that hundreds of performers are creating hypnosis-based shows. Despite such a large number of performers in such a wide variety of locales, venues, and styles, stage hypnosis is a little-examined genre in performance studies. I have found no articles analyzing current stage hypnosis practice as performance and only a few which address its historical practice or cultural significance. Nearly all literature on this topic is from a psychological perspective, and focuses on the potential impact on participants, the authenticity of the procedure(s) used, and/or the ethics of its use for entertainment purposes. Because stage hypnosis is rarely studied as performance, little performance-centered research exists within which I may situate my ideas. However, such diverse fields as literature, history, neuroscience, psychology, and cultural studies have provided a foundation for my examination.

Because the character of Svengali serves as a touchstone throughout most of my investigation, I frequently refer to the novels and plays in which he appears. Although I examine these materials in much more detail in chapter 2, I will provide an introduction to them here. George du Maurier’s 1894 novel *Trilby* introduced the world to the fictional mesmerist, Svengali. First serialized in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1894, *Trilby* was a “phenomenal bestseller” (Pintar and
Within a year of the novel’s publication, Paul Potter adapted it into a melodrama which began a successful New York run, and Herbert Beerbohm Tree secured the rights from Potter to produce the play in England. Because of Trilby’s popularity, both as a novel and as a play, the story may have helped to implant long-lasting ideas about hypnosis and performance in the public imagination. The seeds of still-pervasive ideas can be found here, such as hypnosis as mind control, hypnosis as a tool for seducing young women, complete hypnotic amnesia, the greater susceptibility of the weak-willed and/or morally suspect, and the hypnotist as exotic but dangerous Other.

Several nonfiction books and articles also provide insight into the ways in which perceptions of hypnosis contributed to the development of public attitudes toward stage hypnosis. In Hypnosis: A Brief History, Judith Pintar and Steven Jay Lynn explore the complex history of hypnosis through an examination of popular ideas and assumptions about the condition. In particular, they trace three main threads throughout the book: assumptions that have been made about the hypnotic relation between hypnotist and subject, shifting beliefs about the nature of hypnosis, and concerns about the power of hypnosis over memory and identity (xi). Of particular interest for my project, Pintar and Lynn use characters and events in the novel Trilby to inform and illustrate key issues throughout the book. Although I had already begun my exploration of the influence of Svengali on public perceptions regarding hypnosis, Pintar and Lynn’s work linking the Svengali archetype to public perception provided a more concrete framework in which to situate my ideas.

Alan Gauld provides an exhaustively researched history of hypnosis and related phenomena in A History of Hypnotism. Gauld draws from a wide array of sources, including published books and articles, medical journals, newspaper reports, advertisements and flyers,
personal letters and diary entries. He follows both hostile and friendly reactions from the medical establishments of the various regions under discussion, such as protracted pamphlet wars between physicians denouncing or praising specific treatments or practitioners. Most importantly for my research, Gauld’s sources provide details about the public performance of hypnosis, as well as attitudes toward hypnosis, throughout the periods he covers. It is sometimes possible to track attitudinal shifts in the claims of efficacy from hypnotists, warnings of danger from medical establishments, testimonials from patients, and admonitions from religious authorities.

In their respective research, Fred Nadis and Robert Genter position hypnosis and stage hypnosis within the larger cultural framework of modernity. In *Wonder Shows*, Nadis provides a historical study of performers, including hypnotists, whose performances played on the public’s fascination with science and technology. Nadis argues that in the Modern era, such performances expressed public tensions over scientific advancement. On the one hand, scientific discoveries could be positive, with the potential to fulfill public desires and solve problems. On the other, they could be negative, with the potential to facilitate destruction. He suggests that most of the performers were not simply charlatans, but that their performances as well as their magical “cure-alls” and elixirs fused the fascination with modern technology and the craving for the sacred and the sublime. The performers “offered an antidote to the alienation and dehumanization that accompanied the mechanistic philosophy” (9). Nadis continues his exploration of this theme in “Of Horses, Planks, and Window Sleepers: Stage Hypnotism Meets Reform, 1836-1920.” In this article, Nadis argues that changes in stage hypnosis performance practices as well as audience reaction to such performances during the years in question reflected societal tensions related to modernization.

In “‘Hypnotizzy’ in the Cold War: The American Fascination with Hypnotism in the
1950s,” Genter explores the circumstances that led to a vogue for hypnosis following World War II, which *LIFE* magazine described as a “hypnotizzy” (155). Genter carefully tracks public attitudes toward hypnosis, including both its therapeutic and entertainment uses. The “hypnotizzy” began when hypnotherapy was promoted for returning World War II veterans with psychiatric problems, and the craze was fed by high-profile media coverage of a few cases of hypnotic past-life regression. However, almost as quickly as its popularity rose, old fears about the presumed dangers of hypnosis were reignited, and bans on many uses of hypnosis were proposed. Nadis’s and Genter’s works have served as models for me in my examination of the linkages between public perceptions of hypnosis and its practice.

The guidebooks that stage hypnotists write for other aspiring stage hypnotists provide a wealth of information about the ways in which they understand their performances. In these guidebooks, they often offer personal theories about the nature of hypnosis as well as ideas about the dangers and opportunities that hypnosis provides for crafting performances. I have examined books such as Jonathon Chase’s *Deeper and Deeper: Secrets of Stage Hypnosis*, John Cressman’s *Zero to Stage Hypnotist in 30 Days*, Michael Johns and Richard K. Nongard’s *The Little Black Book of Stage Hypnosis Secrets*, Professor Leonidas’s *Secrets of Stage Hypnotism*, Ormond McGill’s *New Encyclopedia of Stage Hypnotism*, McGill and Tom Silver’s *The How-To Book of Hypnotism*, Geoffrey Ronning’s *The Ronning Guide to Modern Stage Hypnosis*, and Jonathan Royle’s *Confessions of a Hypnotist*. These books include tips on performing hypnotic inductions, tests for determining hypnotic susceptibility and depth, ideas for crafting a successful performance, and advice about volunteer selection, safety, technical requirements, and negotiating with agents and venues. They also provide descriptions of many ideas for skits and routines for the beginning hypnotist to incorporate into his or her act. Ronning’s book has proven
particularly useful due to the inclusion of over 100 pages of material by “guest experts” at the end. Ronning is the founder of The Stage Hypnosis Center, a training school for stage hypnotists outside Phoenix, Arizona, and presumably, these contributions serve to market Ronning’s training school, because many of the “guest experts” are stage hypnotists who trained with him. For my purposes, however, the anecdotes and career advice contributed by other stage hypnotists have proven useful not only for the ways in which the hypnotists discuss their craft, but also as a resource for identifying other working hypnotists.

Finally, I have examined research in neuroscience, psychology, and psychiatry in order to understand current scientific notions of hypnosis and stage hypnosis, as well as to help contextualize the hypnotic experiences of my interviewees. Although my research does not attempt to make any truth claims about hypnosis or stage hypnosis as a neurological or psychological construct, understanding competing viewpoints and positions regarding these matters has been invaluable. I have drawn on the work of many researchers; however, two of the articles I found most useful are Sakari Kallio and Antti Revonsuo’s “Hypnotic Phenomena and Altered States of Consciousness: A Multilevel Framework of Description and Explanation” and William B Meeker and Theodore X. Barber’s “Toward an Explanation of Stage Hypnotism.” These articles represent attempts to explain certain phenomena associated with hypnosis and stage hypnosis, respectively, using markedly different approaches.

Heavily grounded in the philosophy of science, Kallio and Revonsuo’s article proposes a theoretical framework within which to formulate empirically testable hypotheses about the nature of hypnosis. In order to devise this framework, the authors first summarize many of the most common positions held by current researchers about the nature of hypnosis. Then they logically parse through the competing theories, pointing out logical, theoretical, and/or practical
inconsistencies in each of these positions. Finally, they conclude that many of the ongoing debates about hypnosis cannot be resolved under the current terms, primarily due to the lack of generally agreed-upon definitions for hypnosis, for an ASC, and even for a “normal” state of consciousness. Kallio and Revonsuo argue that until the parties involved can agree to the terms of the debate, they will remain mired in semantic disagreements.

Kallio and Revonsuo next offer a potential solution to the problems they have identified. The authors propose a multilevel framework, in which they recommend that a full explanation of hypnosis should contain constitutive, etiological, and contextual levels, and that the phenomenological level, represented by “changes in subjective conscious experience experienced by the [hypnotized] subject” should form the core explanandum (138-39). Then, they apply this framework to recent hypnosis research and conclude that an ASC is not required to explain the majority of phenomena associated with hypnosis. However, an ASC is required to account for the “small subset of hypnotic phenomena that imaginative suggestibility cannot explain” (141). They further argue that those hypnotic phenomena that they associate with an ASC are rare, and thus, ASC is probably restricted to virtuoso subjects. This leads the authors to conclude that genuine hypnotic response is probably like other unusual conditions in the history of psychology, such as synesthesia and lucid dreaming. Due to their rarity, such conditions have been difficult for the scientific community to study and accept, but, once identified and accepted, become useful in the study of related phenomena (141).

Although I find Kallio and Revonsuo’s conclusions fascinating because of their recommendations and implications for future research, their work has been most helpful to me in providing an accessible summation of current scientific opinion, as well as clear explanations of the various competing positions. If their conclusions regarding virtuoso subjects are borne out by
further research, they might help explain observations I have made about stage hypnosis performers: In many shows I have seen, some volunteers seem able to engage much more fully than others with the suggested activities. Perhaps many people can experience the lower-level phenomena traditionally associated with hypnosis with or without being hypnotized, but only a select few virtuosos can experience the more extreme phenomena, resulting in qualitatively different performances.

While Kallio and Revonsuo’s article is written by researchers who ultimately decide that hypnosis is a legitimate, albeit rare, phenomenon, Meeker and Barber’s article provides a much more skeptical analysis. Rather than attempting to define and analyze hypnosis more generally, however, Meeker and Barber examine stage hypnosis specifically.\(^6\) The article is devoted to explaining stage hypnosis through principles “which do not utilize the concept of ‘hypnotic state’ or ‘trance’” (61). Using observations of stage hypnosis performances, publications by stage hypnotists, and the authors’ personal experience training in stage hypnosis, they conclude that there are four basic principles and four secondary principles which underlie stage hypnosis performances. The four basic principles include the high base rate of “waking” suggestibility, selective screening for highly responsive volunteers, the heightened suggestibility produced by telling volunteers that they will undergo hypnosis, and the unique expectancy characteristics of the stage setting (61). The four secondary principles, used selectively by some stage hypnotists, include the “stage whisper” technique, whereby the hypnotist whispers privately to volunteers, instructing them how to respond; the “failure to challenge” technique, which misleads the audience to believe that volunteers are having highly unusual experiences by stating that they are

\(^6\) Although Meeker and Barber make no claims about the existence of hypnosis as an objectively real phenomenon, their frequent assertions that “real” hypnosis is not required to achieve most stage hypnosis phenomena suggests that they accept the possibility that “real” hypnosis exists.
without ever actually asking the volunteers for confirmation; using trained assistants or “plants”
to carry out difficult performance tasks; and other “tricks” used to elicit unusual behaviors, such
as applying pressure to the arterial baroreceptors in the carotid arteries (61). Meeker and Barber
conclude that stage hypnotists rely on these eight principles to generate the majority of volunteer
responses in stage hypnosis performances, and thus that a genuine hypnotic experience is
unnecessary for such responses. They assert that “Although laymen seem to believe that the
stage performer is a highly effective hypnotist who places his [subjects] in a hypnotic trance, a
more valid conception is that the stage performer is an actor playing the part of a hypnotist” (70).

Meeker and Barber’s article has proven invaluable to me as a tool while watching stage
hypnosis performances. In my attempt to determine the structure and conventions of
contemporary stage hypnosis practice, I have been able to examine the inclusion of such
techniques in performances and consider the function(s) that they might serve. Additionally, their
research has helped me to understand the prevalence of a common belief about stage hypnosis:
the use of “plants” in the audience. Meeker and Barber note that the use of plants or other kinds
of trained subjects was once common in stage hypnosis performance, but the practice appears to
have markedly declined in the latter half of the twentieth century (66). They propose that the
need to perform at private clubs where only members are permitted, as well as the necessity of
performing multiple shows at the same venue make this kind of “cheating” extremely unusual in
modern hypnosis shows (66). Because of the skeptical tone taken in the rest of their article, I feel
confident in the veracity of one of their few positive conclusions. While I have found their
research useful, I do have one concern about the approach that Meeker and Barber have taken.
They have shown a myriad of ways in which stage hypnosis performances can be created
without “the concept of ‘hypnotic state’ or trance” (61). However, I am not certain that by
showing that the effects can be achieved through other means, they have also necessarily proven that they must be.

Chapter Breakdown

To explore my research questions, I first track representations of stage hypnosis in the literary and dramatic traditions that may have helped to shape public perceptions of such performances. Then, I document contemporary stage hypnosis techniques and conventions. Next, I examine how such performances are perceived by volunteer performers as well as the hypnotists themselves. Finally, I search for links between perception, performance experience, and performance practice.

In order to explore the potential origins of current public perceptions of hypnosis in general and stage hypnosis in particular, in chapter 2 I examine the historical narratives, personal mythologies, and fictional characters that may have helped shape these perceptions. If, as Pintar and Lynn suggest, “Centuries-old assumptions about the hypnotic relation and the nature of hypnosis survive today to varying degrees in popular belief and practice, despite being widely discredited by researchers who reject them as myths” (2), clues to current public perception and performance practices may be found in the techniques, practices, and personalities which generated those centuries-old assumptions. Du Maurier’s Svengali serves as a touchstone throughout the chapter, as I consider the ways in which Svengali both reflected then-popular ideas about the hypnotic condition, and also constituted the character archetype for future generations.

Chapter 3 provides a broad overview of some of the most common contemporary stage hypnosis performance practices, incorporating examples from performances I have attended, interviews with stage hypnotists and volunteer performers, and stage hypnosis guidebooks.
Because performance practices vary, it is not possible to provide a description that is applicable to all performers and all performances. However, I define and describe some of the most common stage hypnosis performance conventions, including the Pre-Talk, Pre-Tests, Call for Volunteers, Induction Procedure(s), Final Volunteer Selection, and Termination of Hypnosis. Additionally, I report on the kinds of training, performance preparation, and logistical planning employed by many contemporary stage hypnotists.

In chapter 4, I first examine the performance experiences of twelve stage hypnosis volunteers, who discuss their reasons for volunteering, their previous exposure to ideas about hypnosis, details of their performances, and their personal feelings about their participation. Next, I trace some common assumptions and impressions about hypnosis that run through these interviews. Finally, I examine the ways in which these volunteers’ prior expectations about stage hypnosis may have had an impact on their performance experiences, and consider whether their experiences can provide insights into the contemporary practice of stage hypnosis. Throughout the chapter, I also include information gleaned from my interviews with stage hypnotists as well as studies by hypnosis researchers, in order to contextualize the volunteers’ experiences.

Chapter 5 is an exploration of my stage hypnosis volunteer experience. It is a chronicle of my preparation for participating in a stage hypnosis performance, my moment-to-moment thoughts and impressions while participating, and my later reflection on and analysis of the experience. As I reflect on the experience, I wrestle with questions of perception—my own and those of the audience—and explore the ways in which participating has changed my understanding of my interviewees’ reported experiences. I examine the ways in which moving from the relatively safe position of audience-participant-observer to the far more unstable position of performer-participant-observer verified some of my conclusions and challenged
others, and also deepened and complicated my research, perhaps ultimately providing me with more questions than answers about the contemporary practice of stage hypnosis.

In chapter 6, I first summarize and synthesize the ideas developed in the preceding chapters and review my research findings. Then, I examine how stage hypnosis fits alongside other forms of popular entertainment, and propose some reasons for the genre’s enduring popularity. Finally, I offer some avenues for future research on this topic which are suggested by my work.
CHAPTER II.

HYPNOSIS AND PERFORMANCE:

THE INTERPLAY OF HISTORY, FICTION, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

“He’s a rum ‘un, ain’t he?” said Trilby. “He reminds me of a big hungry spider, and makes me feel like a fly! But he’s cured my pain! he’s cured my pain! Ah! you don’t know what my pain is when it comes!”

“I wouldn’t have much to do with him, all the same!” said the Laird. “I’d sooner have any pain than have it cured in that unnatural way, and by such a man as that! He’s a bad fellow, Svengali—I’m sure of it! He mesmerized you; that’s what it is—mesmerism! I’ve often heard of it but never seen it done before. They get you into their power, and make you do any blessed thing they please—lie, murder, steal—anything! and kill yourself into the bargain when they’ve done with you! It’s just too terrible to think of!” (George du Maurier, Trilby 72)

Svengali, the all-powerful mesmerist introduced in George du Maurier’s 1894 novel, Trilby, is described in the above quote as both a healer and a predator. Although his mesmeric cure is effective, it is “unnatural” and dangerous. Trilby’s friend warns her that a mesmerist’s power over his subject is so complete that the subject can be led to theft, murder, and even suicide. In this chapter, I examine the concerns and assumptions about mesmerism and hypnosis reflected in Trilby, and trace those concerns through numerous other sources.

Although this study focuses primarily on contemporary performance practices, I first examine the ways in which historical narratives, personal mythologies, and fictional characters
may have helped shape popular perceptions of hypnosis and stage hypnosis. If, as Judith Pintar and Stephen Jay Lynn suggest in *Hypnosis: A Brief History*, “Centuries-old assumptions about the hypnotic relation and the nature of hypnosis survive today to varying degrees in popular belief and practice, despite being widely discredited by researchers who reject them as myths” (2), clues to current public perception and performance practices might be found in the techniques, practices, and personalities which generated those centuries-old assumptions. Du Maurier’s Svengali serves as a touchstone throughout this chapter, as I consider the ways in which Svengali both reflected then-popular ideas about the hypnotic condition, and also constituted the character archetype for future generations.

While a comprehensive history of hypnosis is not within the scope of my project, I focus here on a few specific events and public personalities (including Franz Anton Mesmer; Amand-Marie-Jaques de Chastenet, the Marquis de Puységur; and Jose-Custodio de Faria) that are most relevant to my exploration of stage hypnosis, because they may have helped shape popular perceptions of hypnosis.¹ I direct particular attention to the development, repetition, and reinforcement of cultural narratives through historical and contemporary sources, which may provide insight into public perceptions about hypnosis and stage hypnosis. As a result of this delimited focus, other events and personalities in the history of hypnosis and stage hypnosis are necessarily omitted from my discussion.

Some historical accounts of the development of hypnotic practice rely heavily on anecdotal reports, the veracity of which has been seriously questioned in recent decades. Thus, the value in such narratives for my purposes lies not necessarily in their historical accuracy, but in their potential to communicate information about cultural attitudes. In *Performance and

¹ For more information regarding the history of mesmerism, hypnotism, and related phenomena, see Binet and Féré, Edmonston, Gauld, Pattie, Pintar and Lynn, Shor, etc.
Identity in the Classical World, Anne Duncan explains her decision to include anecdotes in her analysis of antitheatrical anxieties in ancient Greek and Roman society, saying that “even if some anecdotes are entirely fictional, they offer evidence of what the writer thought his audience would believe to be possible” (18). I have approached my historical and literary exploration of hypnosis and related practices in much the same way, as a means to discover what historiographic evidence can reveal about what these writers thought their audiences “would believe to be possible.” Thus, the repetition of particular anecdotes, descriptions, and tropes through decades or even centuries may fund consideration of pervasive attitudes.

Trilby: Cause and Effect

George Louis Palmella Busson du Maurier’s 1894 novel, Trilby, was certainly not the first work to fictionalize mesmerism or hypnosis. In 1841 Honoré de Balzac linked Mesmer’s theory of animal magnetism with Christianity as well as with mediums, séances, and other occult practices in Ursule Mirouet. Alexandre Dumas introduced animal magnetism into his novels, such as Memoirs of a Physician: An Historical Romance in 1879. According to Alan Gauld in A History of Hypnotism, Dumas even dabbled in the practice himself (171). The father of Henry James’s heroine in his 1886 novel The Bostonians is a seedy magnetizer who is constantly likened to a vampire in the narrative. In later published writings, both James and du Maurier credit Trilby’s origins to a conversation between the two authors in the late 1880s, when du Maurier was known primarily as an illustrator and cartoonist and James had already published The Bostonians. In an 1895 interview with Robert H. Sherard, du Maurier explains that “James

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2 Du Maurier’s surname appears in several forms throughout published sources: as a single word or separated into two, and with the particule “du” capitalized or not. I have chosen to use “du Maurier” because it seems to most closely reflect the author and illustrator’s handwritten signature, which can be found on many of his illustrations. However, when quoting from sources, I have retained the capitalization and spelling that appears in the original.
said that he had great difficulty in finding plots for his stories. ‘Plots!’ I exclaimed, ‘I am full of plots;’ and I went on to tell him the plot of Trilby. ‘But you ought to write that story,’ cried James. ‘I can’t write,’ I said, ‘I have never written’” (399). Du Maurier suggested James should write the story, but James refused, calling it “too valuable a present,” and insisted du Maurier write it himself (399). Du Maurier’s resulting novel introduced the world to Svengali, the archetypal all-powerful mesmerist/hypnotist who exercises complete control over his unwitting performer.3 Under Svengali’s spell, despite her natural tone-deafness, and without her knowledge or consent, the titular heroine, Trilby O’Ferrall, becomes a celebrated singer. However, she has no memory of her vocal training or of her singing career during the hours when Svengali allows her to wake from the trance. After he dies, she loses her ability to perform as well as all memory of having done so. Without Svengali, Trilby slowly weakens and dies as well.

In “George du Maurier’s Trilby Whipped Up a Worldwide Storm,” Avis Berman notes that “Josef von Sternberg was accused of being Marlene Dietrich’s Svengali, and the same was said about Diaghilev’s association with Nijinsky. Everyone knows that to call someone a ‘Svengali’ is to label that person a sinister being who uses his or her power to dominate others” (110). It seems ironic that of all the characters in the novel, Svengali would be the one with such lasting resonance that his name has entered into popular usage.4 Svengali, after all, is a

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3 Given the novel’s setting, Svengali should be a mesmerist rather than a hypnotist. Although the novel was released in 1894 when hypnosis was ascendant, du Maurier set the action in the 1850s when mesmerism still held sway. As I will discuss later in the chapter, Svengali’s techniques as well as du Maurier’s language reflect a conflation of the two practices which may have contributed to the character’s lasting impact.

4 To be fair, Trilby’s name also lives on, although its usage is arguably less common. The small town of Trilby, Florida changed its name from Macon in 1896 in the fictional Trilby’s honor (“History of Pasco County”). Additionally, a style of hat used in Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1895 stage adaptation of the novel quickly became known as a “Trilby hat” (Berman n. pag.). It is
secondary character in a sprawling, eight-part novel whose illustrated editions can stretch to nearly 450 pages. Much of the plot follows the exploits of three English friends in bohemian Paris, all of whom become smitten with Trilby, a charming, self-possessed artist’s model with “astonishingly beautiful feet, such as one only sees in pictures and statues,” who supports herself and her younger brother without blush or apology by posing “for the altogether” (17). Although Svengali is unscrupulous and unpleasant, it seems a stretch even to label him the novel’s villain. He takes advantage of opportunities (and people) when they are presented to him, but rarely plays an actively antagonistic role. Even when he mesmerizes Trilby, it is first with her permission, to ease her chronic pain. 5

Although Svengali plays a secondary role in the novel’s plot, he provides a colorful character study. Du Maurier seems to leave the specifics of Svengali’s Austro-Hungarian origins deliberately obscure. The novel is set in the 1850’s, a decade prior to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, but du Maurier, writing in 1894, treats much of Central and Eastern Europe as a vast, mysteriously exotic block. Svengali is described as a “German Pole” (30) whose mother was a Polish singer (248). He studied in Germany, Italy, and France (56), receives supplies “from his own people in Austria” (54) and speaks “fluent French with a German accent and humorous German twists and idioms” (12). However, he plays “czardas, gypsy dances, similar in shape to a fedora but with a narrower brim. Both the town and the hat have retained the name “Trilby” to the present day.

5 Two recent articles with distinctly different theses also argue indirectly that Svengali may not serve as an active villain. In “Just a Singing Machine,” Fiona Coll argues that Trilby’s “tragic end” is usually attributed to Svengali’s manipulations, but that in fact Trilby’s susceptibility to Svengali’s machinations is symptomatic of a lifelong process of dehumanization rather than a causative factor. Conversely, Hilary Grimes argues in “Power in Flux” that an examination of Victorian mesmerism manuals and hypnosis handbooks reveals that animal magnetism is a shared force, and that mesmerism represents a dynamic exchange of power and blurring of identities between mesmerist and subject. Thus, both Trilby and Svengali participate in the power exchange, and neither can live when their link is broken.
Hungarian love plaints, [and] things little known out of Eastern Europe” (13-14). When Trilby receives a portrait of Svengali after his death, he is dressed “in the military uniform of his own Hungarian band” and the portrait has been shipped from “some remote province in eastern Russia—out of the mysterious East! The poisonous East” (415-16). As if to further obfuscate Svengali’s background, the novel’s narrator points out that the portrait was taken by a Viennese photographer and that Svengali customarily wore this Hungarian military uniform when conducting musicians. However, when he came to London and Paris, he switched to “ordinary evening dress” (415). Perhaps the military uniform was more of a costume than a reflection of his personal background or accomplishments. Even his famous moniker may be a stage name: one character in the novel claims that Svengali’s real name is Adler (248).

Svengali is a gifted musician and talented swordsman (du Maurier 28, 30), but otherwise he is almost without redeeming qualities. Even his musical abilities are inextricably tied to his negative traits:

He had but one virtue—his love of his art; or, rather, his love of himself as a master of his art—the master; for he despised, or affected to despise all other musicians, living or dead—even those whose work he interpreted so divinely, and pitied them for not hearing Svengali give utterance to their music, which of course they could not utter themselves.

“*Ils safent tous un peu toucher du biâno, mais pas grand’chose!*” (56)

[“They all know how to play the piano a bit, but it’s nothing special!”] (Denisoff 311)

Svengali is impertinent, conceited, condescending, derisive, petty, jealous, and vindictive. Du Maurier complicates Svengali’s malevolence and his unseemly personality in unsettling ways by
linking them with his Jewish heritage. Despite the obscurity surrounding his origins, Svengali’s religion is made quite plain. Regular reminders of Svengali’s shortcomings are accompanied by offhanded anti-Semitic comments, such as the way he “leered and ogled, and flashed his bold, black, beady Jew’s eyes” (60). While *Trilby* is a work that is clearly of its time, such descriptions can nevertheless be discomforting to read.

First serialized in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1894, *Trilby* was a phenomenal bestseller, both in Great Britain and in the United States. In “*Trilby*: Fads, Photographers, and ‘Over-Perfect Feet,’” Emily Jenkins notes that *Harper’s* reported a circulation increase of 100,000 by the publication of the second serialized installment (228). Six thousand five hundred copies of the manuscript were initially ordered in book form, but orders were so great that the first edition eventually totaled 90,000 (Jenkins 228). In *Popular Fiction in England, 1914-1918*, Harold Orel claims as many as half a million copies of *Trilby* were sold by 1900 (5-6).

It is a testament to the overwhelming popularity of du Maurier’s 1894 novel that within a year of its publication, Paul Potter had already adapted it into a melodrama for the now-defunct Garden Theatre, which operated from 1809 to 1925 in New York. In adapting the novel, Potter seems to have decided that the episodes involving Svengali exercising his power over Trilby provided the most potential for dramatic action. The play refocuses the plot, minimizes the novel’s focus on the three English friends, and dramatizes almost exclusively the events relating to Svengali. Befitting the generic conventions of melodrama, Svengali took on a much larger and more actively villainous role in the action. Then, still in 1895, Herbert Beerbohm Tree bought the rights from Potter to produce the play in England and adapted it as a starring vehicle for himself (Taylor 201). Tree further expanded the role of Svengali by adding lines and business from du Maurier’s novel that Potter had not originally included in the play, as well as wholly
The changes made by Potter and Tree both make Svengali’s use of mesmerism much more explicit than in the novel. Although du Maurier provides clues, he allows the cause of Trilby’s transformation to remain open to speculation until the last pages. In the play, however, Svengali openly discusses his plans and frequently performs mesmeric “passes” on Trilby in order to gain her compliance. While the casual anti-Semitism of the novel is still present, it is somewhat less explicit. However my assessment here is complicated both by the differences between textual adaptations, as well as my inability to know how broadly the character might have been played. For example, in Potter’s play, Svengali is described merely as “out of the mysterious East” (204), but Tree adds a scene in which Svengali speaks a somewhat paraphrased version of the Jewish morning and evening prayer in Hebrew, more clearly linking the antagonist with Judaism. Additionally, a scene added by Tree which does not appear in the novel or in Potter’s adaptation, during which Svengali suffers a heart attack, could be read as quite sympathetic to the character. However, in an excerpt from a review of Tree’s performance provided in an endnote, the reviewer describes his “cynical amusement” at “this most absurd scene” (294). This remark might suggest either that the scene was played for comedy or that audience sympathy was so against the character by this point that the scene could not regain it.

Because of the immense popularity of the novel and its subsequent adaptations, some of the ideas about hypnosis/mesmerism that du Maurier presented may have contributed to long-lasting perceptions of hypnosis and performance in the public imagination. However, I do not

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6 Editor George Taylor has published an edition of *Trilby* which notes differences between Potter’s original play and Tree’s later versions. Taylor compiled these notes from Tree’s manuscripts, which are housed in the Herbert Beerbohm Tree Archive at the University of Bristol: Theatre Collection in Bristol, UK. The Archive holds multiple copies of *Trilby*, including promptbooks (actor’s sides), full scripts, and one copy of Potter’s original text with Tree’s handwritten changes and additions.
imagine that du Maurier invented such notions for his novel. Rather, I think it is likely that he both reflected and reinforced existing ideas, much as he both reflected and reinforced the taken-for-granted anti-Semitism present around him. In fact, Pintar and Lynn assert that,

One reason for *Trilby*’s phenomenal success may be that Du Maurier was able to crystallize a central mythology that had developed over a century, despite medical and scientific arguments that directly contradicted its central assertions. Du Maurier conflated mesmerism with hypnosis, so that the cultural assumptions that were tied up with the earlier technique and practice were transferred to the hypnotic relation as well, regardless of the fact that practitioners of hypnosis who were working at the time the novel was written took particular pains to distinguish their practices from those associated with mesmerism. (9)

This central mythology, which conflated assumptions about mesmerism and hypnosis and assumed qualities of both practices, included both positive and negative notions. In the hypnotic relationship modeled by Svengali and Trilby, hypnosis is presented as:

1. a tool for pain relief and healing.
2. a means to produce and/or release extraordinary abilities and talents.
3. a potential cause of unusual changes in personality and identity.
4. a potential instrument of coercion, either during hypnosis or through post-hypnotic suggestions which can be activated at a later time.
5. a condition that is more easily induced in weak-willed people.
6. a condition that is followed by complete amnesia regarding behaviors and events that occurred during hypnosis.

Furthermore, in the central mythology offered by the novel, the hypnotist is presented as an
extraordinarily powerful (male) figure who can:

1. hypnotize even unwilling and/or unwitting people, often with only a word or touch.
2. use hypnosis to deprive people of all agency or volition, to seduce young women, and/or to otherwise convince people to violate personal ethical or moral codes.
3. access dangerous and/or otherworldly powers that may be inaccessible to others in society through his special status as an exotic cultural outsider.

In the sections that follow, I trace the development of various aspects of this mythology—both before and after *Trilby*—through the intersection and interaction of historical narratives, personal mythologies, and fictional characters.

**Hypnotic and Suggestive Phenomena**

Most historical accounts of hypnosis trace hypnotic phenomena to ritual trance and healing practices that extend back into human prehistory. In a survey of major events in hypnosis history, Ronald E. Shor states that “the most diverse cultures have discovered how to use hypnotic and suggestive phenomena with immense pragmatic effectiveness for faith healing and for magico-religious and other purposes” (16). Such phenomena have coexisted alongside other healing practices and spiritual activities up to the present day in much of the world. Pintar and Lynn note that “The ritual induction of trance states for spiritual and physical healing remains a central feature in Western and non-Western religious practices” (12).

A more specific examination of how earlier practices might be linked with those of the present is complicated, however, by the values and interpretive schemas applied by some chroniclers of hypnotic phenomena. Some early historians of hypnosis discounted cultural and procedural differences and assumed that most examples of trance phenomena were necessarily analogous and interchangeable, both with one another and with modern hypnosis, in order to
confirm that hypnosis is a natural and ubiquitous human condition. For example, in published histories of hypnotism between 1891 and 1948, Hippolyte Bernheim, J. Milne Bramwell, Albert Moll, and Lewis R. Wolberg all identified the earliest examples of hypnotic inductions in certain ancient Hindu practices.\(^7\) Although the practices in question are presumed to date from between the fourth and second millennia BCE, all four accounts use then-present-day examples, such as the cataleptic feats of Indian fakirs and yogis, as “proof” of ancient Hindu practice. In *The Induction of Hypnosis*, William E. Edmonston cites numerous claims which have been made for early examples of hypnotic phenomena in texts from ancient China, India, Egypt, and throughout much of the Mediterranean region (2-25). Such claims, made primarily by western European writers, seem to reflect both a desire for a satisfying origin story as well as a fascination with the imagined accomplishments of a remote and inaccessible culture.

Among hypnosis researchers and historians seeking evidence of analogous practices in ancient texts, the Egyptian *Papyrus Ebers* has received widespread attention as perhaps the earliest extant evidence of hypnosis practice. This text was written circa 1500 BCE but is believed to describe medical remedies and prescriptions in use as early as 3000 BCE. Edmonston uses a set of stringent criteria for linking past and present practice in order to reject most origin claims for the text (7-11), but he acknowledges two passages which may represent the earliest known descriptions of the use of mesmeric-like passes to control pain (11-13). Thus, the earliest extant references to such phenomena may be connected to healing and pain relief.

Mesmerism

Hypnosis as it is commonly understood today traces its lineage to the eighteenth-century physician, Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), his theory of animal magnetism, and the array of

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\(^7\) See Bernheim’s *New Studies in Hypnotism*, Bramwell’s *Hypnotism: Its History, Practice and Theory*, Moll’s *Hypnotism*, and Wolberg’s *Medical Hypnosis*. 
healing techniques that would come to bear his name: mesmerism. When Pintar and Lynne say that the character of Svengali “crystallize[d] a central mythology that had developed over a century” (9), they would seem to be referring to ideas whose origins can be traced to Mesmer and his contemporaries more than a century before. Although others learned, practiced, and eventually altered Mesmer’s techniques, his biography, personality, and personal mythology loom large in any cultural exploration of hypnosis, both in his own time and in the intervening centuries.

_**Franz Anton Mesmer and Animal Magnetism**_

Born in Iznang, Swabia in what is now southwestern Germany, Mesmer first studied theology and then law before finally receiving a medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1766 (Pintar and Lynn 12). His dissertation, _Dissertatio physico-medica de planetarum influxu_, used Newtonian physics to argue that just as the moon exerts tidal forces on the earth, heavenly bodies can also exert tidal forces on bodily fluids, and thus affect human health and the course of various diseases (Gauld 1, Pintar and Lynn 12). By present standards, such conflation of large- and small-scale phenomena seems questionable at best, but Mesmer’s ideas were fairly consistent with those of many of his contemporaries. In fact, Mesmer’s arguments were so unoriginal that much of his dissertation was plagiarized from a 60-year-old treatise by English physician Richard Mead, _De imperio solis ac lunae in corpora humana et morbis inde oriundis_.

Despite its lack of novelty, Mesmer’s manuscript shows that he was already examining the interaction of physical forces and the body in the disease process at the inception of his career.

Mesmer experimented with his early theories regarding physical forces and the body in

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8 Frank A. Pattie published the first comprehensive textual analysis of the two documents in 1956, titled “Mesmer's Medical Dissertation and Its Debt to Mead's De Imperio Solis ac Lunae,” which fully examines the similarities.
order to find treatments for his patients, and soon came to believe he had discovered a physical force with important medical applications. After a patient experienced pain relief through the application of magnets, Mesmer surmised that, just as minerals can be magnetized, animal tissue can be magnetized; hence he called this force “animal magnetism” (Gauld 3). Before long, he abandoned the use of the magnet, substituting the downward “passes” of his hands over the patient’s body with which his name is still linked. He came to see that the “animal magnetism” resided in himself, and acted to revive the impaired circulation (the “tides”) of the patient’s own magnetic fluid, restoring his nervous system to “harmony” with the universe. (Gauld 3)

While certain reported results are similar to those of hypnosis, such as increased suggestibility and pain relief, Mesmer’s technique (first called magnetizing and later known as mesmerism) was initially believed to operate through a mysterious magnetic force acting on an equally mysterious magnetic fluid. Mesmer and his associates asserted that the fluid resided in all living things, and the force could be made to act within and between living things, and even through inanimate objects (Gauld 11). The method used to initiate the process was primarily a physical one: the magnetist performed “passes,” moving his or her hands over the body of the patient, either touching the skin or hovering just above it (Gauld 257), in order to correct fluidic imbalance. This restoration was achieved by provoking a “crisis” event in the patient, which might consist of a sudden worsening of symptoms, extreme agitation, and/or convulsions, and often concluded with a violent convulsive seizure (Shor 20). This “crisis” signaled that the malady had reached its peak and equilibrium could now begin to be restored.

Just as Mesmer’s dissertation was not entirely comprised of original material, his eventual therapeutic successes were not necessarily based in new or original techniques. Shor
argues that Mesmer’s therapy combined ancient healing practices associated with the laying on of hands with “a disguised version of medieval demonic exorcism,” and that Mesmer’s theory was “a combination of ancient astrological concepts, medieval mysticism, and seventeenth-century vitalism” (20). Shor’s larger point is well-taken: Mesmer’s success was not due to the originality or even accuracy of his theories. Instead, Mesmer was successful partly because he employed all of the personal attention and mystical ceremony commonly associated with faith healers, which generated a high expectation of cure in his patients. Unlike mystical healers, though, Mesmer provided scientific-sounding explanations for his treatments, and Shor argues that Mesmer’s Enlightenment audience embraced such “theoretical pseudology” as a rational alternative to religious dogma (20). His techniques also provided a welcome alternative to the bleeding and purges prescribed by orthodox medicine at the time (21). Ironically, by providing (incorrect) explanations of his techniques that seemed consistent with Enlightenment values, Mesmer probably increased his patients’ faith in his techniques and thereby increased the chances that their conditions would improve.

Although Shor’s comparison of Mesmer’s techniques with those used by exorcists may be apt, Mesmer would probably have blanched at the correlation. Gauld asserts that Mesmer “repudiated all mysticisms and occultisms,” (4) and Mesmer assisted in discrediting the spiritual claims of at least one exorcist, although his participation seems to have been as much an exercise in self-promotion as in scientific inquiry. When a commission appointed by Prince-Elector Max Joseph of Bavaria asked Mesmer to assist with an investigation of country priest and exorcist, Johann Joseph Gassner, Mesmer demonstrated that he could replicate all of Gassner’s results without spiritual intervention (Pintar and Lynn 16). In a rhetorically and politically astute maneuver, rather than denouncing Gassner as a fraud, Mesmer acknowledged that exorcists were
often exceptional healers, but claimed their successes provided further proof of his theories. Mesmer contended exorcists such as Gassner possessed an abundance of animal magnetism, which they used intuitively to benefit the afflicted, and insisted such exorcists simply misattributed their abilities to supernatural forces (Pintar and Lynn 16). Thus, Mesmer’s lasting contribution may not have been in the invention of wholly new methods, but in his insistence that the therapeutic effects he observed had a scientific, rather than a mystical explanation. Additionally, he began a relentless campaign of public promotion, both of his therapeutic successes and of his theoretical explanations. Increasingly, then, his cures became public performances, which further increased public awareness of his techniques.

Eager to publicize his work, Mesmer often invited witnesses to observe his healing practices. In 1774, he achieved modest public acclaim after curing a 27-year-old woman, Franzl Oesterline, of a persistent convulsive disorder. The resulting publicity led to his induction into the Bavarian Academy of Science in 1775 (Pintar and Lynn 14). Mesmer parlayed this honor into a public demonstration tour of Hungary, Switzerland, and Bavaria (Gauld 3). He followed a path that Pintar and Lynn refer to as “the European ‘healing circuit,’” because tours by traveling physicians, exorcists, and faith healers were well-established in the region (15). Throughout the tour, Mesmer demonstrated techniques that “induced convulsions, sleepiness, muteness, with a touch or even a gesture” (Pintar and Lynn 14), and even successfully predicted the time at which the Hungarian baron, Horecsky de Horka, would experience a “crisis” (Pintar and Lynn 15).

Mesmer, Maria-Theresa Paradis, and Svengali

Mesmer expected such successful public demonstrations would secure acceptance for his theories from the medical and scientific community, but when he returned to Vienna at the end of the tour, he faced growing skepticism from his peers. His fruitless attempt to treat a blind
concert pianist in 1777 greatly worsened his reputation, and culminated in a professional
disgrace that drove him from Vienna. These events would prove significant not only to
Mesmer’s career, but also to future depictions of his therapeutic techniques. As in the fictional
*Trilby,* this case features a vulnerable young woman with an innate talent for performance whose
friends and family members question the personal and professional motives of the much older
magnetist who appears to exercise undue influence over her life. Furthermore, published reports
of a Paris concert given by Mesmer’s patient, Maria-Theresa Paradis in 1784, seven years after
Mesmer attempted to treat her, bear striking parallels to a concert scene in du Maurier’s 1894
novel, and it seems likely that this case could have provided inspiration both for the scene, and
for certain aspects of the Svengali archetype.

Paradis was an 18-year-old piano virtuoso who had been blind since early childhood
without clear medical cause (Gauld 3, Pintar and Lynn 17). Prior to contacting Mesmer, her
parents had already procured the services of the most highly regarded medical experts in Vienna.
In *Mesmer and Animal Magnetism,* Frank A. Pattie reports that these physicians provided
Paradis with treatments such as plasters and leeches applied to her shaved head, electric shocks
to her eyes, purgatives, diuretics, and repeated bleedings (57-8). When such treatments proved
ineffective, physicians pronounced her blindness incurable. Mesmer thought otherwise, and
wrote extensively about the case in *Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism* in 1779.
Never one to shy away from publicity (or controversy), a French article from the period
regarding Paradis’s treatment even notes that Mesmer called her previous medical treatment
“unsatisfactory” and that the use of electricity “appeared to disturb him” (“The Case of Miss
Paradis” 72).

With Paradis, Mesmer attempted a treatment course similar to the one he had found
successful with Oesterline. Thus, when Paradis began to show improvement, he moved her into his home to provide her with more frequent care, alongside two other young women who were receiving similar treatments (Mesmer 59). Mesmer claimed that Paradis made marked progress, to the delight of her parents. As her eyesight improved, Mesmer began providing public demonstrations of her improving condition. He writes, “Crowds flocked to my house to make sure for themselves, and each one, after putting the patient to some kind of test, withdrew greatly astonished, saying the most flattering things to me” (59). It is unfortunate that Paradis did not publish an account of her treatment or of her thoughts regarding these public performances.

When one of the physicians who had earlier declared Paradis incurable, identified only as Mr. Barth, arrived to test Mesmer’s claims, however, he published a report stating that Paradis was still blind (Mesmer 60). Mesmer countered that Barth was motivated by professional envy, which must have clouded his medical judgment, and that Barth had made an “obvious” error: when Paradis did not know or confused the names of objects shown to her, Barth asserted that this was proof of her inability to see, whereas Mesmer asserted it was proof only that Paradis had been blind since childhood and thus could not always identify visual images (Mesmer 60; Pattie, Mesmer 61). Whatever the truth of Paradis’s eyesight, Barth’s public disparagement seems to have begun a chain reaction of increased public scrutiny of Mesmer’s work, a worsening of Paradis’s condition, and increasingly defensive responses from Mesmer.

During her course of treatment, Paradis’s musical ability began to suffer, which led her

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9 Evidence exists to support Mesmer’s claims, both that Paradis made initial improvement and that her parents approved of his methods. George J. Bloch includes “The Case of Miss Paradis,” as an appendix to Mesmer’s Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism. In this French newspaper article, Paradis’s father both recounts the details of her recovery and expresses his gratitude to Mesmer for his daughter’s improvement (71-6). In his Dissertation, Mesmer also provides lists of physicians and public officials that he claims bore witness to Paradis’s improvement (59-64).
parents to refuse further treatment and demand that she return home. Pintar and Lynn speculate that her family may have been warned by Mesmer’s professional detractors that his treatments were ineffective, or they simply may have been suspicious of the close relationship between the 42-year-old Mesmer and their 18-year-old daughter (16). Mesmer, however, charged that her parents were motivated by greed, fearing they would lose the income generated from the novelty of a blind pianist as well as the annual government pension Paradis received for her disability, if his treatments were successful and Paradis were no longer blind (Mesmer 60; Pattie, *Mesmer* 61). Mesmer’s description of the scene wherein the young woman’s parents came to retrieve her would not seem out of place in any melodrama: according to Mesmer, Paradis refused to return home with her parents, Paradis’s father burst into Mesmer’s home brandishing a sword, Paradis was “so overcome that she went into a fit,” and her mother, enraged at Paradis’s refusal to leave, “flung her in a fury headfirst against the wall” (61). Mesmer noted that the effect on Paradis was both immediate and dramatic: the improvement she had previously experienced in her vision disappeared and “all the troubles of that unfortunate girl recommenced” (61).

Pintar and Lynn report that Mesmer’s critics responded gleefully to his failure with Paradis. They insisted that Mesmer had publicized false claims for self-promotion and that the young woman’s vision had never shown any initial improvement (18). Whatever the actions and motivations of the individuals involved, the outcome can be independently verified: when she left his care, Paradis was (still or again) a very publicly blind concert pianist. Before her death at age sixty-five, she expanded her career, becoming well-known as a singer, harpsichordist, and organist, and conducting a music school for young ladies in Vienna (Pattie, “A Mesmer-Paradis” 29). Mesmer, however, was rejected by the scientific and medical establishments in Vienna (Pintar and Lynn 18). He abandoned his medical practice—and his wife—and left Vienna,
eventually ending up in Paris.

Many details of this episode, documented in Mesmer’s own writings, bear striking parallels to the Svengali archetype. A much-older, male, magnetist exercises extraordinary influence over a young female performer, and their relationship seems to raise suspicions in those closest to her that he could be using his coercive powers to keep her with him. Oft-repeated reports of a later meeting between Mesmer and Paradis reveal even more similarities with du Maurier’s creation. In his article “A Mesmer-Paradis Myth Dispelled,” Frank A. Pattie explains that many writers and biographers (including himself) have reported that Mesmer attended a Paris concert given by Paradis on Good Friday in 1784—seven years after he attempted to treat her—which served as a humiliating public demonstration of his professional incompetence. As the story goes, Mesmer became the focus of the audience’s attention during the performance rather than Paradis, because the young pianist on stage was obviously still blind despite Mesmer’s well-publicized treatments. Psychiatrist and medical historian Henri F. Ellenberger provides one example of the story’s repetition in his 1970 book The Discovery of the Unconscious. Ellenberger attributes the tale to a French literary newsletter published by Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm in 1784, stating, “Grimm reported that ‘all eyes turned toward Mesmer, who had been unwise enough to come to the concert. He was well aware of being the center of attention and suffered one of the worst humiliations of his life’” (67).

Pattie has traced this story to its source, a French newspaper article written by André Delrieu in 1838, fifty-four years after the concert, which was later quoted in a history of animal magnetism published in 1860 as well as two biographies of Mesmer in the 1930s. The first of the two biographies quotes the Delrieu article verbatim but mistakenly attributes it to the 1784 work by Grimm mentioned previously, and the second biography cites the first. Delrieu’s article,
meanwhile, appears to be a mix of fact and fiction. In addition to the tale about Mesmer, the article contains detailed descriptions of the reactions of another purported audience member, composer Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck, despite the fact that Gluck is known to have left Paris in ill health, never to return, after the poor reception of his *Echo et Narcisse* five years before the Paradis concert took place (30). Contemporary reports, both by Mesmer regarding his time in Paris, and by other writers regarding Paradis’s concerts, make no mention of Mesmer’s attendance (30). Thus, Pattie concludes that the story about Mesmer is most likely apocryphal.

Regardless of the tale’s veracity, this moment of onstage/offstage performance is ghosted in du Maurier’s *Trilby*. At the height of Trilby’s fame, Svengali (now calling himself her husband) arranges for her to perform a series of concerts. Her three English friends have not seen her for five years and they cannot believe that “La Svengali,” the renowned singer could be the same tone-deaf young woman with whom they all fell in love years ago. Furthermore, they remember how she feared and detested Svengali, and cannot imagine that she would now be his wife. Thus, they go to see her perform, first in Paris and then again in London. Svengali is so unsettled at meeting his former rivals for Trilby’s affection in Paris that he instigates a minor altercation, spitting at one man and bloodying his nose and challenging another to a duel. When his challenge is accepted, however, Svengali does not follow through (347-51). The men meet again in London, at what will prove to be Trilby’s final performance. Svengali enters the center box with his usual flourish just before the performance begins, in order to guide Trilby through her performance. When he catches sight of his three rivals seated in the theatre, he glares at them with an expression “so terrible with wonder, rage, and fear that they were quite appalled” (361). Overcome with emotion, and with this awful expression frozen on his face, Svengali dies of a heart attack but remains rigidly seated in his theatre box. At first, the audience’s attention is
directed toward Trilby’s entrance to the stage, and no one notices what has transpired in the box. Trilby, however, is unable to perform now that Svengali has died and she is no longer under his spell. She does not even know where she is or why she is on a stage. Growing restless, audience members call out requests for songs they have heard “La Svengali” perform at previous concerts. Bewildered, she tries to oblige, but her virtuosic talent is gone: she is completely tone-deaf. The audience responds to Trilby’s inept singing with “shouts of laughter, hoots, hisses, cat-calls, cock-crows” (364). Then, the audience turns its attention to Svengali, still seated in his box. Everyone in the theatre is “now staring at Svengali, and his wife was forgotten” (365). Before they realize he is dead, the audience includes Svengali in their scorn. “Derisively,” they begin to chant “Svengali! Svengali! Svengali!” (365). He has taken every opportunity to promote himself as the teacher and trainer of La Svengali, and his protégée has proven to be a disappointment.

When viewed in light of the apocryphal tale about Mesmer, this moment seems to carry a double-connotation. Svengali dies “smiling a ghastly, sardonic smile, a rictus of hate and triumphant revenge—as if he were saying—‘I’ve got the laugh of you all this time!’” (365, italics in original). While his death is written outwardly as Svengali’s final retort to those who had refused to acknowledge his talents, it also echoes the tale of Mesmer’s theatrical humiliation before those who had discounted his theories. Svengali died a literal death when confronted with the gaze of his detractors, just as Mesmer is reputed to have died a professional death. In both cases, the young women entrusted to their care failed to “perform” the proof of the men’s techniques, both literally and figuratively.

Mesmer in Paris: Performance and Perception

After the professional disgrace he suffered over the Paradis case, Mesmer left Vienna and relocated to Paris within a year. By 1780 he was treating more patients in Paris than he could
handle individually, as many as two-hundred in a typical day (Pintar and Lynn 19). He turned, once again, to a very public, and performative, style of treatment to solve this problem: Mesmer invented the *baquet* in order to treat large numbers of people at once.\(^{10}\) The *baquet* consisted of a large tub filled with bottles of water that Mesmer had “magnetized,” as well as ground glass and iron filings to facilitate the conductive movement of the animal magnetism (Gauld 5, Pintar and Lynn 19-20, Edmonston 53). Groups of patients placed the afflicted areas of their bodies against iron rods which protruded from the tub. In order to promote circulation of the magnetic fluid, group members might link with one another by touching knees, holding hands, and/or holding on to a communal length of rope or cord. When treating large numbers of patients, Mesmer included additional rings of patients outside of those directly in contact with the tub. Then, lengths of rope or cord might be used to link these outer group members to the tub (Edmonston 53). Mesmer and his assistants moved through the rooms, waiting for signs that a patient was experiencing a crisis: when someone began to laugh, cry, yawn, sleep, faint, or exhibit convulsions (Gauld 5), he or she would be escorted into the *chambre des crises*, a special room in which the crisis could be monitored (Pintar and Lynn 20).

While Mesmer wrote extensively about his theories and treatment regimens (as well as his professional rivalries), first-hand descriptions of his clinic are more difficult to find. Additionally, due to Mesmer’s endless cycle of personal and professional squabbles, such descriptions often come in the context of ridicule or satire and are rarely trustworthy. As cultural artifacts, however, they provide interesting insight into the development of public perception, both of Mesmer and of his practices. Pattie devotes a chapter of his book on Mesmer to the

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\(^{10}\) Pattie explains that the French word *baquet*, which translates simply as *tub*, is usually left untranslated in English-language discussions of Mesmer’s equipment, because the word *tub* “lacks dignity” (*Mesmer* 70).
satirical pamphlets and plays that circulated in France in the 1780s, and rightly points out that
several descriptive passages from these works were later cited as factual descriptions of Mesmer
and his work. Further, Pattie notes that such passages appear only sporadically in the mid-1800s,
but then appear with “monotonous regularity” in twentieth century writings, especially in
English, by writers “who copied from each other” (Mesmer 190). Thus, while such descriptions
probably do not provide an accurate account, they provide evidence of public ideas about
Mesmer and his techniques. The repetition of these descriptions through the intervening
centuries would suggest that they reflect pervasive and widely-held attitudes.

Although descriptions of Mesmer’s clinic vary somewhat in detail, they suggest a cross
between a carnival fun-house, a séance, and a bordello. The spacious rooms of his Paris clinic
were “darkened to a ‘twilight’ intensity” (Edmonston 53). The walls were adorned with
numerous mirrors (to reflect the animal magnetism) and decorated with astrological symbols,
while the floors were covered by luxurious carpets (Gauld 5). Harpsichord or harmonium music
played in the background (Edmonston 53). Not to be overshadowed by the mise-en-scène,
descriptions of Mesmer suggest that he made the most vivid impression of all, “moving among
the company . . . in his lilac suit, occasionally directing a dose of animal magnetism at a patient
by means of a metal wand or of his singularly potent index finger” (Gauld 5). Pintar and Lynn
describe Mesmer wearing a “velvet cape,” and playing “ethereal music on his glass harmonica”
(20).

While Mesmer wrote of his use of a glass harmonica during treatment, Pattie has traced
references to his unusual apparel to a satirical pamphlet published in 1784: Mesmer is described
“in a coat of lilac or purple, on which the most brilliant flowers have been painted in
needlework” (qtd. in Pattie, Mesmer 190). Pattie notes that a second reference to Mesmer
appearing in a lilac coat does not appear until 1841 and that all subsequent accounts seem to be repetitions of these early anecdotes (190). Examples of this repetition can be found in 1887 from French psychologists Alfred Binet (best known as the inventor of the first usable intelligence test) and Charles Féré, who identify Mesmer’s habitual dress as “a coat of lilac silk” (10) and in 1986 from Edmonston, who identifies Mesmer’s costume as a “violet robe made of embroidered silk” (54).

I find the repetition of this anecdotal description interesting for three reasons. First, although floral needlework and embroidered silk are less common in twentieth or twenty-first century Western male fashion, Pattie astutely notes that “There was nothing extraordinary, in the years before the French Revolution, about a lilac coat (habit) worn by a wealthy man” (190). Whether or not the descriptions of Mesmer’s clothing are accurate, such clothing would not necessarily have been noteworthy in Mesmer’s time, and thus would not have merited the attention paid to it by later writers. Perhaps these later writers were drawn to such descriptions of now-démodé clothing, because they bolster reports of Mesmer’s tendency toward eccentricity. Second, the occasional description of Mesmer wearing a velvet cape is noteworthy. While none of his contemporaries described Mesmer wearing such a cape, the fictional Svengali wears “a large velveteen cloak, with a big metal clasp at the collar” (12). Perhaps such descriptions of Mesmer represent a conflation by later writers of the historical person with the fictional character. Third, while the image of the lilac coat is striking, it does not seem to be the satirical target of the pamphlet in which it is found. Rather, the pamphleteer mocks Mesmer’s overly friendly behavior toward his female patients. In the pamphlet, Mesmer is described treating a patient while she experiences a crisis, as “his arms softly enfolding her, sustain her in her spasm, and his tender burning eye expresses his desire to comfort her” (qtd. in Pattie, Mesmer 190).
Thus, while the pamphlet seems to be the source of the oft-repeated sartorial descriptions of Mesmer, in the repetition, this anecdote became about Mesmer’s appearance, rather than about contemporary concerns with Mesmer’s intentions toward his female patients.

This is not the only contemporary reference to Mesmer’s questionably close relationship with his female patients. A poem attributed to F. A. Doppet, *La Mesmériade, ou le triomphe du magnétisme, poème en trois chants, dédié à la lune* (“The Mesmériade,” or the Triumph of Magnetism, a Poem in Three Verses, Dedicated to the Moon”), remarked on the astounding powers of Mesmer’s potent index finger, which he used like a wand, pointing it at people in order to direct a dose of animal magnetism at them:

*Le magnétisme alors de l’amour fait la fête.*

*C'est-là que mon héros charmant, magnétisant,*

*Sous un verrou fermé dissipe un feu naissant;*

*Il fait trouver l'endroit pour fixer la cruelle;*

*Jamais son heureux doigt ne trouve une rebelle.* (qtd. in Gauld 18)

Roughly translated, Doppet suggests that Mesmer is successful in creating “a celebration of love” with his “delighted finger,” because his female patient is a captive audience who wants to feel his fire (Connick n. pag.).

Regardless of discrepancies in reported details, the fact that Pattie has enough material to devote an entire chapter to satirical plays and pamphlets about Mesmer, most of which appeared in 1784 alone, suggests that the doctor and his work must have captured the public imagination, for good or for ill. In these plays and pamphlets Mesmer is accused, usually in jest, of killing a

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11 The French suffix “-iade” implies a celebration. Thus the “Mesmériade” of the satirical title might be literally translated “Celebration of Mesmer.”

12 I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Rob Connick, for his skillful translation of the often-archaic French I encountered throughout this project.
distinguished scholar (190), neglecting his patients (191), leaving most patient care in the hands of his students who had thus paid Mesmer for the privilege of doing his job (191), causing a woman to miscarry (193), etc. One satire makes extensive use of double entendre to depict the magnetizing procedure, describing the way in which patients held the long, iron rods, and then rubbed themselves with the magnetic fluid which accumulated within them (192). While these plays, pamphlets, and poems cannot reveal details of the historical Mesmer, they speak volumes about the early discourse regarding Mesmer and his therapeutic techniques. Mesmer is variously suspected of wielding extraordinarily dangerous and even lethal powers or of focusing his persuasive powers on obtaining sexual favors or swindling his students. As Gauld remarks about Mesmer: “No wonder critics wrote him off as a charlatan” (5).

As Gauld implies, it would be easy to dismiss Mesmer as a swindler, preying on the sick and distressed with promises of cures delivered via a tub of water, dim lighting, and mood music. However, Gauld argues that Mesmer seems to have been less motivated by money than by the recognition of those he would claim as his peers. The annual expenses for his clinic have been projected at 20,000 livres, but he is estimated to have taken in nearly 8,000 livres per month in earnings (5). If Mesmer were truly motivated by greed alone, he could have quietly continued to treat the scores of patients who arrived at his Parisian clinic daily. Instead, he insisted on recognition, “not just by the masses, but by establishment science and medicine—as the discoverer of a new physical force or principle with practical applications of benefit to all humanity” (Gauld 5). In his quest for official recognition in Paris, he approached the Royal Academy of Sciences, and then he appealed to the Royal Society of Medicine and to the arch-nemesis of those institutions, the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris. He finally gained the sympathy of the Queen, Marie-Antoinette, and attempted to exploit her good will to
force official recognition from her government ministers, thus circumventing the scientific and medical establishments that continued to reject him (Gauld 6). To his dismay, this attempt did not endear Mesmer to those establishments.

After fighting fruitlessly for official recognition of his theories throughout the latter decades of the eighteenth century, Mesmer retired to a home on Lake Constance, very near the village in Iznang, Swabia where he had been born. He secluded himself so completely that many of his former students and disciples who carried on his work were unaware that the namesake of the array of healing practices and techniques which had now come to be called *mesmerism* was still alive. He continued to practice privately until his death in 1815 (Pintar and Lynn 22).

*Amand-Marie-Jaques de Chastenet, the Marquis de Puységur*

Even before Mesmer’s death, the practices associated with his name had begun to change. One of Mesmer’s students, Amand-Marie-Jaques de Chastenet, the Marquis de Puységur began practicing mesmerism at his family’s estate. The case of a young peasant, Victor Race, inspired Puységur to make practical as well as theoretical changes to Mesmer’s ideas. When treated, Race did not experience a traditional mesmeric crisis. Rather, he appeared to fall asleep but he continued to speak. When Race became agitated, Puységur calmed him by first suggesting that he hear a pleasant song and then that he dance to that song in his chair (Pintar and Lynn 23-4, Puységur qtd. in Gauld 41). Following this episode of what Puységur labeled “magnetic somnambulism” or “magnetic sleep,” Race recovered from his fever and remembered nothing of his treatment. This new phenomenon of somnambulism, along with increased suggestibility and post-trance amnesia, would come to replace the crisis as the test of a successful magnetic induction (Pintar and Lynn 23-4). Because Mesmer had stressed the crisis as an essential means to prove the existence of the condition, the procedures that carried his name would soon bear
little resemblance to those he championed.

Of significance to this project, Pintar and Lynn suggest that many current beliefs about hypnosis “have their source not in Mesmer’s style of mesmerism, but in the mesmerism practiced by Puységur” (24). Although they credit the repetition of stories about “Mesmer’s flamboyant performance, his purple velvet cape, the ethereal tones of the glass harmonica, his apparent ability to mesmerize with a touch or even the point of a finger” as likely inspirations for the personal qualities of du Maurier’s Svengali, they argue that the magnetic condition depicted by du Maurier more closely reflects the ideas of Puységur (24-7). (To Pintar and Lynn’s list of likely inspirations for the personal qualities of Svengali, I would add Mesmer’s reported personal and professional rivalries and his bitter quest for professional recognition.) Moreover, Pintar and Lynn suggest that these ideas, promoted by Puységur and depicted by du Maurier, have changed little in the public imagination in the intervening centuries.

Mesmer insisted that the magnetic fluid was real, and that he healed patients through a skillful manipulation of a physical force. He discounted the possibility that the imagination of the patient might be involved in the healing process. Puységur, on the other hand, seems to have accepted Mesmer’s view of the magnetic fluid, but found arguments over its existence irrelevant (Gauld 47). Instead, he acknowledged that a rapport with his patients was necessary for healing, and that this rapport required “a conscious sacrifice of their will to his” (Pintar and Lynn 25). He discounted the importance of the crisis, and instead promoted magnetic somnambulism, a condition of sleeping-while-waking, as well as increased suggestibility and post-trance amnesia, as the hallmarks of the mesmeric condition.

Additionally, it was Puységur who discovered (and/or publicized) the apparent power of mesmerism to affect memory and identity. Race, and eventually other of Puységur’s patients,
spoke and behaved differently while mesmerized. They seemed to use an altered vocabulary, tone, and mannerisms, and some even behaved as though they were of a different social class (Pintar and Lynn 26). Trilby manifests just such unusual changes in personality and identity in du Maurier’s novel. After her death, Svengali’s violinist describes Trilby’s dissociation, saying that “There were two Trilbys” (440). The Trilby they knew could not sing a single note in tune, “But all at once—pr-r-rout! presto! *augenblick*! . . . with one wave of his hand over her—with one look of his eye—with a word—Svengali could turn her into the other Trilby, *his* Trilby—and make her do whatever he liked . . . you might have run a red-hot needle into her and she would not have felt it” (441, italics and ellipses in original). Many of Puységur’s mesmerized patients displayed supernatural or near-supernatural abilities. They diagnosed illnesses in themselves and others without medical training, prescribed conventional and unconventional treatments, and seemed to demonstrate telepathy and clairvoyance (Gauld 41). In a breathtakingly self-aware performance, when Puységur took his star attraction, Victor Race, to Paris in 1785 for public demonstrations, Race became ill and somnambulistically diagnosed his illness as a result of being put on display by Puységur (Pintar and Lynn 26-7).

Many of Puységur’s more gifted somnambules even seemed to respond to his unspoken commands, as though an act of mental will was sufficient to communicate his intention (Gauld 48). In the novel, Gecko attributes the same ability to Trilby, saying that after Svengali mesmerized her, she was able to “think his thoughts and wish his wishes” (441). One of Puységur’s somnambules, identified only as Madeleine, became well known for her ability not only to respond to Puységur’s unspoken commands, but to transfer her rapport from Puységur to other individuals in attendance who volunteered to participate. These volunteers would silently select some object, indicating it through touch or glance, and a heavily-blindfolded Madeleine
would then go to the chosen object and touch it or pick it up (Gauld 48). Puységur complained that the due to the publicity surrounding such demonstrations, his house “soon became a public place, to which people resorted in the frame of mind they would have brought to a show by a tumbler” (qtd. in Gauld 48). Puységur was initially accused of either assisting Madeleine or being duped by her, but public criticism waned after she successfully demonstrated her abilities in strangers’ homes and before important public figures (Gauld 48-9).

Like Mesmer before him, with increased publicity Puységur soon had more patients than he could treat. Also like Mesmer, Puységur developed a very public, and performative, treatment style to accommodate the overflow of patients: he magnetized a tree, tied cords to it, and had his patients sit on benches around it and hold onto the cords (Gauld 41, Pintar and Lynn 27). A tax collector who visited Puységur’s estate in June 1784 describes the method by which Puységur awakened his somnambules this way, “It is sufficient for him to touch their eyes; or else he says to them: Go and embrace the tree” (qtd. in Gauld 42). The comedic potential of the tax collector, the mesmerist, and the tree-huggers is almost too rich to resist, but the cures that Puységur provided in this way seem to have been taken seriously by those around him. An elm tree that Puységur had used for magnetic treatments was still renowned for its healing powers a century after his death. When the tree finally fell in a storm in 1940, local residents gathered to collect the pieces (Pintar and Lynn 28).

*Fluidists and Animists*

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, as attempts to prove the existence of the fluid proved fruitless, practitioners split into “fluidists” who still insisted on the reality of a physical fluid, and “animists,” whose explanations were more psychological in origin (Pintar and Lynn 31). Later attempts to link hypnosis and magnetism/mesmerism have rightly pointed out
that it is likely the magnetists/mesmerists were also speaking to patients while performing the “passes.” Thus, although the magnetists/mesmerists believed the passes were the cause of the observed effects, they may have been inadvertently using verbal suggestions, and the physical passes might have been irrelevant to the procedure (Gauld 14).

One influential animist, Jose-Custodio de Faria, began performing public demonstrations in Paris in 1815 before audiences of thousands. An ordained Catholic priest, Faria was born in the Indian state of Goa. He was of Indo-Portuguese ancestry and claimed to be of Brahmin caste, and he capitalized on what would have then been regarded as his exotic ancestry in his performances (Pintar and Lynn 31). During these demonstrations, he attempted to place his entire audience in a somnambulistic state by shouting “Sleep!” If he did not succeed on the first try, he simply shouted the command again, louder. This technique was apparently so successful that he was often accused of sorcery (Pintar and Lynn 31). Significantly, Faria never claimed to have any special powers and he rejected the presence of a magnetic fluid. Instead, he promoted the idea that the belief, expectations, and will power of the subject were the keys to his success. If the subject believed in magnetism, expected the magnetizer to have special powers, and believed that an object had been magnetized, then the magnetist would have power over that subject (Pintar and Lynn 31-2).

Thus, early in the nineteenth century, and decades before James Braid introduced the term “hypnosis” in the 1840s (Pintar and Lynn 44), the groundwork for the central mythology regarding mesmerism had been laid. All that remained was for du Maurier to conflate assumptions about mesmerism and hypnosis in his phenomenally popular novel and its subsequent adaptations. These cultural assumptions about mesmerism (and mesmerists) were then “transferred to the hypnotic relation as well, regardless of the fact that practitioners of
hypnosis who were working at the time the novel was written took particular pains to distinguish
their practices from those associated with mesmerism” (Pintar and Lynn 9). Later depictions of
the hypnotic relation would continue to reflect these ideas, which I will now revisit. In the
hypnotic relationship modeled by Svengali and Trilby, hypnosis is presented as:

1. a tool for pain relief and healing.
2. a means to produce and/or release extraordinary abilities and talents.
3. a potential cause of unusual changes in personality and identity.
4. a potential instrument of coercion, either during hypnosis or through post-hypnotic
   suggestions which can be activated at a later time.
5. a condition that is more easily induced in weak-willed people.
6. a condition that is followed by complete amnesia regarding behaviors and events that
   occurred during hypnosis.

Furthermore, in the central mythology offered by the novel, the hypnotist is presented as an
extraordinarily powerful (male) figure who can:

1. hypnotize even unwilling and/or unwitting people, often with only a word or touch.
2. use hypnosis to deprive people of all agency or volition, to seduce young women, and/or
to otherwise convince people to violate personal ethical or moral codes.
3. access dangerous and/or otherworldly powers that may be inaccessible to others in
   society through his special status as an exotic cultural outsider.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I trace expressions of various aspects of this mythology
through more recent popular sources.

Contemporary Expressions of Centuries-Old Assumptions

As Pintar and Lynn assert, “Centuries-old assumptions about the hypnotic relation and
the nature of hypnosis survive today to varying degrees in popular belief and practice” (2). It is possible to find the same assumptions about hypnosis and stage hypnosis that I have traced through historical narratives, personal mythologies, and fictional characters in a myriad of more recent popular sources, including film, television, and digital media. Although I cannot determine causality, the similarity of the recent assumptions to the earlier ones suggests a connection. A complete analysis of all sources is beyond the scope of this project, but I present a representative sampling in order to examine the persistence of such cultural attitudes. I will also continue this discussion of contemporary expressions of assumptions about hypnosis in later chapters, as I discuss the results of interviews with stage hypnotists and audience volunteers.

*Mid-Twentieth-Century Perceptions of Hypnosis*

Following World War II, notions about hypnosis as a means to release extraordinary abilities and/or to produce unusual changes in personality and identity surged in the public imagination. In “‘Hypnotizzy’ in the Cold War: The American Fascination with Hypnotism in the 1950s,” Robert Genter explores the circumstances that led to a vogue for hypnosis which *LIFE* magazine described as a “hypnotizzy” (155). When *The Search for Bridey Murphy* was published in 1956, a fad for hypnotic age-regression and past-life regression was born. The book was about a Colorado woman who reported that hypnosis had allowed her to remember details of a past life as a nineteenth-century Irish woman named Bridey Murphy. When the story was published, “swarms of journalists, historians, and genealogists” were impelled to search for biographical information on Murphy, whose existence was never confirmed (Genter 154).

Ideas about hypnosis as a tool for pain relief and healing were bolstered by the need to treat returning veterans. Government officials were aware that the treatment of World War I veterans with psychiatric problems had cost the United States approximately one billion dollars,
so when similar combat-related difficulties presented during World War II, the professional status of hypnosis changed dramatically. Psychologists considered hypnosis an invaluable time-saver, because it could be used to more quickly achieve therapeutic breakthroughs and thus save money by shortening the period of treatment (157). According to Genter, a population that had grown accustomed to discussing American soldiers’ psychological state during the war turned its attention to the mental health of the population at large at war’s end. In 1958, the American Medical Association recognized hypnosis as a valuable aid in medical practice, and hypnosis was soon touted as a surgical anesthetic as well as a cure for phobias, bed-wetting, warts, stomach ulcers, and masturbation (159). As medical and therapeutic hypnotism grew in popularity, amateur “parlor hypnotism,” hypnosis-themed television shows, and live hypnosis performances also flourished (160). Hypnosis was touted as a self-help technique for everything from ending sexual frigidity to improving memory to improving athletic performance (160-61).

Despite the newfound popularity of hypnosis, the Cold War would reignite old fears about its dangers as a potential instrument of coercion and a means to deprive people of all agency or volition. When American prisoners of war returned from North Korea in 1963, the nation discovered that twenty-one soldiers had chosen to remain in North Korea and many others had collaborated with their captors, signing false confessions and accusing the American military of atrocities. “Brainwashing” and “programming” were soon linked to hypnotism. Suddenly, what had been viewed as a benign self-help tool was a national security risk. In books and journal articles, psychologists debated whether people could be convinced to commit acts under hypnosis that they wouldn’t ordinarily consider. Novels and popular films, such as *The Manchurian Candidate*, depicted unwitting people committing crimes due to post-hypnotic suggestion. Soon, the potential influence of hypnosis on unwitting people was linked to
advertising in books such as *The Rape of the Mind*. Madison Avenue was accused of using hypnosis on the population at large to promote mass-consumption (163). Bans on many uses of hypnosis were proposed, and some physicians called for an end to televised hypnosis programs, pointing to a BBC study purporting that unwitting viewers could be hypnotized while watching hypnosis on television (164).

**Late-Twentieth- and Early-Twenty-First-Century Perceptions of Hypnosis**

The concerns that were raised about hypnosis in the mid-twentieth century persisted and expanded in media depictions of hypnotic phenomena in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Hypnosis was featured in films, television, and other entertainments. Websites such as *IMDb* and *TV Tropes: Television Tropes and Idioms* provide vast databases of films, television programs, and other media content, and a search of such websites for “hypnosis” turns up hundreds of entries. *IMDb*, for example, contains information about more than 2 million movies and television programs (“What is IMDb?”), and a plot keyword search for “hypnosis” provided information about 182 films and television episodes with plotlines that feature hypnosis (“Most Popular Titles”). *TV Tropes* is an even more wide-ranging user-generated catalog of popular plot devices, storylines, and thematic content, originally devised as a repository for tropes found in television shows. Now, however, the website also includes advertising; animated and live action films; board, card, online, and video games; comic books and graphic novels; literature; music; blogs, new media, and social networking; news; sports; stand-up comedy; theatre; theme parks; visual arts; toys; and many other media (“Media”). A keyword search for “hypnosis” provided 3,410 hits (“Search Results—TV Tropes”) on the site.

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13 While a literary trope usually implies a recurring example of figurative language in a work, the website *TV Tropes* appears to be using the more general definition of “a common or overused theme or device” (“Trope”).
The *TV Tropes* page “Mind Manipulation: a.k.a. Mind Control,” is devoted to “Methods that allow characters to control, read, or manipulate, the minds of other people, the things you can do with them, and what happens next” (n. pag.). This page lists fifty-nine popular tropes, each with its own name, page link, explanation, and examples from multiple genres. Often, these “Mind Manipulation” tropes reference hypnosis directly, and many align well with the assumptions I have traced throughout this chapter. Because the content is user-generated, I have found the website to be a valuable resource in considering popular notions regarding hypnosis and hypnotic phenomenon. The sheer number of entries suggests that our media and entertainment frequently reflect taken-for-granted assumptions regarding hypnosis. The examples that follow are taken both from user-suggested examples on the website as well as my research.

By far, the most frequently expressed ideas on the *TV Tropes* website address issues of power and control. Concerns that the hypnotic relationship is an extremely powerful but unbalanced one, with all of the power concentrated in the hands of the hypnotist, is an idea that reappears frequently. Thus many of the entries reference the notion that an unwilling and/or unwitting person can be hypnotized, that hypnosis can deprive people of all agency or volition, and that post-hypnotic suggestions could be used to alter future behavior. Most of these entries also assume that hypnosis can radically alter personality and identity with or without a person’s knowledge or consent, and that post-hypnotic amnesia can make the cause of such alterations difficult to trace.

Concerns that a hypnotist could hypnotize without knowledge or consent lead to tropes in which a special quality, ability, or tool is used as a plot device for this purpose. Thus, *TV Tropes* includes many entries in which the hypnotist might simply have a “Compelling Voice” or
“Hypnotic Eyes,” or the hypnotist may have learned a skill, such as the “Jedi Mind Trick.” This last entry is, of course, named for the impressive ability displayed by Jedi Knights throughout the *Stars Wars* saga to change a person’s mind through a technique which seems to involve waving a hand, contradicting whatever that person just said, and staring meaningfully into his or her eyes. This ability is introduced as a tool used by the forces of good in the 1977 film, *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*. Obi-Wan Kenobi helps Luke Skywalker avoid detection in this now-iconic scene:

**STORMTROOPER.** *(To Skywalker)* Let me see your identification.

**OBI-WAN KENOBI.** *(With a wave of his hand)* You don’t need to see his identification.

**STORMTROOPER.** We don’t need to see his identification.

**OBI-WAN KENOBI.** These aren’t the droids you’re looking for.

**STORMTROOPER.** These aren’t the droids we’re looking for.

**OBI-WAN KENOBI.** He can go about his business.

**STORMTROOPER.** You can go about your business.

**OBI-WAN KENOBI.** Move along.

**STORMTROOPER.** Move along. Move along.

Once they are safely out of harm’s way, Luke admits that he doesn’t understand how they were able to get past the Stormtroopers. Kenobi explains that “The Force can have a strong influence on the weak-minded,” thus also reinforcing the notion that weak-willed people are more open to mental manipulation (*Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*).

*TV Tropes* also includes many entries for plots in which a hypnotist without such a special quality or ability might hypnotize without knowledge or consent. These plotlines lead to
entries wherein the hypnotist employs a more overt “Mind-Control Device” such as a “Hypno Ray” (a gadget) or “Hypno Trinket” (wearable item) in order to induce hypnosis. With access to a large audience, through media broadcasts, for example, a powerful hypnotist could even induce “Mass Hypnosis.” Although these tropes refer primarily to works of fiction, I received an amusing email advertisement for a real-world “Hypno Trinket.” Alongside “Bodacious New Belly Rings” and “Enticing Eyebrow Rings,” the body jewelry and accessories website BodyCandy.com offers ear plugs\(^{14}\) called “Hypnotic Spinner Plugs.” The “Hypnotic Spinner Plug” is a flat disk with a black and white spiral design mounted on ball bearings so that the disk can spin freely in its stainless steel setting. It is available in eight sizes, ranging from eight millimeters (about one-third of an inch) to twenty-five millimeters (about one inch) in diameter.

The promotional email boasts:

> Look into my ears... You will be hip to the scene with these mesmerizing plugs.

> Put admirers into a hypnotic trance. Talk slowly in a soothing voice. “Take a deep breath and as you let it out, close your eyes and begin to feel yourself relaxing.”

> They will melt like butter on a hot summer day and then follow your every command. As always, play nice and practice safe hypnotism. (BodyCandy, ellipsis in original)

While the ad is clearly meant to be tongue-in-cheek, its message would be ineffective without a common understanding of the underlying premise: that a hypnotist might be able to use some tool or device to induce “a hypnotic trance” that would cause the hypnotized person to follow the hypnotist’s “every command.”

Although concerns that an unwilling and/or unwitting person can be hypnotized are

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\(^{14}\) Among those dedicated to body modification, *ear plugs* refer to wide earrings that are worn in large holes in the ear lobes.
sometimes portrayed seriously, they are also a favorite subject for comedy. For example, *TV Tropes* might categorize a character as “More Hypnotizable than He Thinks” when that character is hypnotized despite initial protestations that he (or she) will not be susceptible to hypnosis.

Then, “If the character snaps out of hypnosis, expect him or her to say something along the lines of, ‘See? I told you I can't be hypnotized!’” (“More Hypnotizable than He Thinks”). Examples of “Mind-Control Devices,” especially, seem inclined toward comedy. In the 1990s *Warner Brothers* animated series *Pinky and the Brain*, for example, each week a genetically engineered, super-intelligent lab mouse called the Brain hatches a new (and ultimately futile) plan to “try to take over the world!” In the first season alone, at least four episodes (“Das Mouse,” “Pinky and the Fog,” “TV or Not TV,” and “A Pinky and the Brain Christmas”) included plans employing “Mind-Control Devices” as well as “Mass Hypnosis.”

The notion that hypnosis can be used to deprive people of all agency or volition is reflected in nearly all of the “Mind Manipulation” entries on *TV Tropes*. A person might simply be “Brainwashed,” into doing the hypnotist’s bidding. Of course, “The Svengali” might control and exploit a student or disciple for personal gain. More malevolently, a hypnotist who forces someone to engage in irrelevant or embarrassing activities simply to demonstrate his or her power is covered by the entry, “Playing with Puppets.” Fears that hypnosis could be used to seduce young women are reflected in the entry, “Hypnotize the Princess” (wherein “the Princess” refers to any central female character). Darkest of all, the fancifully named entry, “This Is Not a Floor” references Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, and refers to a situation in which a hypnotist creates an illusion or hallucination in someone’s mind in order to do harm. The entry is named for the many plots featuring villainous hypnotists who convince their victims to step over ledges, cliffs, open mine shafts, etc. In a 2008 episode of the television show *CSI: Crime Scene*
*Investigation*, for example, a woman jumped off the balcony of a high-rise apartment building because she had been hypnotized to believe she was jumping into the ocean (“The Happy Place”).

The fear that one’s agency could be removed through post-hypnotic suggestion is reflected in entries such as the relatively benign “Hypno Fool,” as well as the more sinister “Manchurian Agent.” A “Hypno Fool” finds him- or herself unknowingly responding to post-hypnotic commands, either after being hypnotized for another reason or after accepting suggestions intended for someone else. Such suggestions are frequently embarrassing in nature, and may lead to dangerous activities. “Almost invariably, the character originally bragged that he or she couldn't be hypnotized, which only compounds their (sic) later embarrassment” (“Hypno Fool”). “Manchurian Agent,” named for Richard Condon’s 1959 novel, *The Manchurian Candidate*, about an ex-prisoner of war who returns home programmed to kill a presidential candidate, also refers to a person who responds to a post-hypnotic suggestion. However, the suggestion is usually criminal and/or murderous, rather than embarrassing or comically dangerous. In either case, such suggestions are usually activated by a “Trigger Phrase.” The cue may come in the form of an actual word or phrase, or it “can be practically anything,” such as an image, a sound, or a piece or music (“Trigger Phrase”). In the comedic 2001 film *Zoolander*, for example, clueless male model Derek Zoolander is given a post-hypnotic suggestion to kill the Malaysian Prime Minister when he hears the song “Relax,” a 1980s hit by British pop group Frankie Goes to Hollywood.

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When George du Maurier introduced Svengali to the world in his 1894 novel, *Trilby*, a cultural icon was born. Du Maurier’s depiction of the all-powerful mesmerist seems to draw
inspiration from the life of animal magnetist, Franz Anton Mesmer, and his successors. Svengali both reflected then-popular ideas about the hypnotic condition, and also constituted the character archetype for future generations. The same assumptions about hypnosis and stage hypnosis expressed in *Trilby* appear in a myriad of more recent popular sources, including film, television, and digital media.

The shadow cast by the Svengali archetype can be found even in the pseudonyms used by contemporary stage hypnotists. Alongside fancifully named hypnotists such as Asklepion, Frankie Zzzzz, Morpheus, and Simon Sez, the *Worldwide Stage Hypnosis and Hypnotist Directory* lists many performers whose names are a nod to Mesmer, including Anton, Robert Mesmer, Mike Mesmer, Mike Mezmer, Messmer, and Dr. Mez. Additionally, Dr. Mez is one of sixteen hypnotists whose stage names include “Dr.” or “Doc.” While their names are often humorous or tongue-in-cheek, the tradition of learning and healing represented by the historical Mesmer may be the inspiration for such names as Dr. Chaos, Doc Strange, and Dr. Trance. Of course, the fictional Svengali remains a cultural presence with the word “Svengali” entering the lexicon as a figure with questionable intentions who exerts undue influence over others. While Svengali is not referenced in the *Worldwide Stage Hypnosis and Hypnotist Directory*, his name is still linked to the practice of stage hypnosis. For example, the 1998 stage hypnosis guidebook, *Fun with Hypnosis: The Complete How-To Guide*, was published under the name Professor Svengali. The influence of du Maurier’s fictional creation, and the historical figures which provided his inspiration, looms large, not only in the cultural imagination, but also in the contemporary performance of stage hypnosis. Thus, in the next chapter I will examine the contemporary performance of stage hypnosis, and identify some of the most common performance conventions and practices.
When it comes to hypnosis people want magic. To make the most effective hypnosis session there are two things you must accomplish: a) tell them why hypnosis is NOT magical and that the hypnosis process . . . demands their full cooperation, and b) provide them with an experience that seems magical. (Dantalion Jones, Mind Control Hypnosis 32, italics in original)

Although stage hypnosis draws on centuries-old practices, contemporary performers have adapted the genre for the twenty-first century. Performances often feature elaborate light shows, projection screens, and professionally recorded soundtracks. In addition to their use of technology, contemporary stage hypnotists capitalize on the variety of performance venues currently available, and can often be found working comedy clubs, cruise ships, casinos, and college campuses. Many performers also offer private bookings for parties, schools, or corporate team-building activities. In order to provide entertainment appropriate for such diverse audiences, they often tailor their performances and advertise to target demographics. Some hypnotists, for example, offer performance content options, such as “family friendly” performances or “XXX” shows, and some hypnotists offer performances for specific audiences, such as fair and festival crowds or high school students.

With such diversity of venues, audiences, and styles, contemporary performance practices necessarily vary. Thus, it is not possible to provide a description that is applicable to all performers and all performances. However, many broad performance conventions are observable
both in live performances and in guidebooks written by stage hypnotists about their craft. While individual hypnotists may accentuate, omit, or reorder some elements, most contemporary stage hypnosis performances incorporate:

1. Pre-Show and Introduction of the Hypnotist
2. Pre-Talk and Pre-Tests
3. Call for Volunteers
4. Induction Procedure(s)
5. Final Volunteer Selection
6. Routines Performed by the Volunteers
7. Termination of Hypnosis and Conclusion of the Performance

In this chapter, I discuss each of these elements in turn in order to provide a broad overview of some of the most common contemporary stage hypnosis performance practices, incorporating examples from performances I have attended, interviews with stage hypnotists and volunteer performers, and stage hypnosis guidebooks.

Pre-Show and Introduction of the Hypnotist

In *Deeper and Deeper: Secrets of Stage Hypnosis*, Jonathan Chase explains that to a large degree, stage hypnosis works because the audience wants it to work and believes that it can work. Therefore a great deal of the stage hypnotist’s job is to present him- or herself to the audience as a competent and capable hypnotist. Chase counsels, “Set the scene properly and a quarter of the work in selling yourself is done” (43). Thus, at stage hypnosis performances, great attention is often paid to those elements the audience will see and hear as they wait for the performance to begin. For example, in order to insure that Chase’s introductions are consistent and set the desired tone for his performances, Chase uses a professionally recorded introduction
created by a voice-over artist, underscored by original music that was composed for this purpose (43). He notes that while some performers might see a professionally recorded introduction and original music as unnecessary expenses, the value of such elements is far higher than their cost, because of the impact that they can have on audiences.

As the audience enters the performance venue, it is common to find the stage or performance area set up with only a row or rows of empty chairs. Chase recommends that even when a venue has traditional stage draperies available, a hypnotist should “never have the curtains shut as the house fills” (42). He explains that although seeing “the curtains opening on a huge set for a musical production is very dramatic,” the audience for a hypnosis show should see only a bare stage with a row of empty chairs waiting for them. This serves to “raise emotional expectation in those who have virtually already decided to come up on stage,” and the “psychological impact of this helps tremendously” (42). In most cases, the number of chairs appears to be determined in part by the size of the stage or performance area as well as the size of the audience from which the volunteers will be drawn. In *The Ronning Guide to Modern Stage Hypnosis*, Geoffrey Ronning recommends between twelve and twenty chairs (178) and this recommendation reflects the average set-up at performances I have attended.

In many venues, such as comedy clubs, it is common to find background music playing as the audience gathers, either provided by the hypnotist or by the venue. Whether or not music has been used earlier, most contemporary stage hypnosis performances incorporate music as the hypnotist is introduced to the audience and enters the performance area. Such music is often referred to as “intro and play-on music,” because it serves as the audience’s introduction to the hypnotist and plays as he or she comes onto the stage. This music may be specific to the performer, as in two performances I saw by The Sandman in October 2011: he entered
accompanied by Metallica’s 1991 heavy metal track “Enter Sandman.” More often, intro and play-on music is simply designed to highlight the performer’s entrance and reflects the performer’s overall style or tone. For example, I attended a 2010 college campus show by Dale K that resembled a rock concert with large projection screens and an audience of hundreds of screaming undergraduates. Reflecting this rock-concert feel, K entered to a loud, percussion-heavy, instrumental track from Blue Man Group’s 2001 album Audio. In Confessions of a Hypnotist, Jonathan Royle says that he often enters to “(Simply) The Best” by Tina Turner in order to reinforce that titular notion for his audiences (51). The sentiment expressed in the song’s title reflects his performance style, which he describes as “confident and authoritative,” as well as “in charge” (51).

Pre-Talk and Pre-Tests

Once the stage hypnotist enters the performance area, the pre-talk portion of a typical performance begins. The principal function of the pre-talk is to generate volunteers for the performance. In The Little Black Book of Stage Hypnosis Secrets, Michael Johns and Richard K. Nongard call the pre-talk the most important part of the show, because “From the moment you walk on the stage, you have just a short amount of time to make the people trust you, make them like you, and get them on stage” (33). They explain that without a good pre-talk, a hypnotist’s other skills are irrelevant, “because no one will bother to go up on stage to be hypnotized” (33). In Zero to Stage Hypnotist in 30 Days, John Cressman explains that many people do not volunteer for stage hypnosis due to fear. Therefore, this portion of the performance serves to “build rapport [with the audience], let them know what to expect, and alleviate any fears” (55). Johns and Nongard conclude that audience members’ fears are often based in myths and misconceptions about the nature of hypnosis and/or concerns about what they might be asked to
do once they are on stage (34-5).

During the pre-talk, stage hypnotists commonly address such concerns directly, by providing information about hypnosis, dispelling myths, and reassuring audience members that hypnosis is natural and safe. Johns and Nongard recommend reassuring the audience that hypnosis does not give the hypnotist total control over anyone and that no one can get “stuck” in hypnosis (34). In addition to these two reassurances, Cressman suggests telling audience members that they cannot be forced to violate their core values or tell personal secrets under hypnosis (56). During a 2009 performance I attended, stage hypnotist, Flip Orley delivered this information in the guise of a half-hour stand-up comedy routine. For example, he reassured the audience that hypnosis is not mind control with a few jokes about his three divorces: even if hypnosis could be used for mind control, his divorces are proof that, obviously, “it wears off.” In a 2011 show advertised as appropriate for mature audiences only, The Sandman reassured the crowd that despite the adult nature of the show, there were three things they would not see. First, he would not make anyone remove clothing, because “This is a comedy club, not where your Mom works.” Second, he could not make people do things they do not want to do, because if he could get people to do anything he wanted, he would be making a fortune as a porn star. Third, he would not make anyone act like an animal. He explained that there were people from Michigan in the crowd and “we don’t want to get them excited.”

In addition to establishing trust and rapport with the audience so that people will feel comfortable volunteering, the pre-talk also serves to help the hypnotist preselect the most desirable performers, by encouraging those audience members to volunteer who are most likely to follow suggestions and discouraging those who are least likely. For example, during his pre-talk, Orley created a sense of personal responsibility for the evening’s entertainment on the part
of potential volunteers by repeating that without active and willing volunteers he had no show, and that no one in the audience would have a good time. Hypnotists may also include remarks that place responsibility for an individual’s response to hypnosis squarely on the individual, rather than on the hypnotist. For example, in a 2010 performance, I saw Anthony Potmesil inform the audience that “only smart people can be hypnotized,” and therefore he did not want any volunteers from Indiana, and “no NASCAR fans.” Several times, Orley reiterated phrases such as “If you’re just here to prove I can’t hypnotize you, you know what? You’re right!” and “If you don’t want to have a good time tonight, don’t come up here. If you’re drunk, don’t come up here. If you’re an asshole, don’t come up here!” Thus, the pre-talk often encourages only those who are eager, willing, and able to play along to volunteer for the performance.

Because the pre-talk segment is the only portion of a stage hypnosis performance during which the hypnotist is alone on stage for an extended period of time, it is often during the pre-talk that stage hypnotists attempt to personalize their shows and set themselves apart from other performers. In his manual, Ronning advises that “any skill or talent you have can be incorporated into your show. Can you juggle? Yodel? Tap dance? Speak French? Use it” (167). When I discussed the pre-talk in an interview with a hypnotist who requested anonymity, whom I will hereafter refer to as Stage Hypnotist I, he explained that he enjoys personalizing this portion of his routine, and makes extensive use of his background as a stand-up comedian. He notes, “Your performance is unique because of what you write, how you do it, and how you perform it. I have always taken the position that I’m a comic and my hook is a lot of my show is doing comedic hypnosis” (Stage Hypnotist I).

The pre-talk portion of the show may last only a few minutes, but for those performers with special skills, it can last much longer. For example, hypnotist Michael Night is also a
magician, and he divided a 2009 performance I saw into nearly equal halves. First, he performed a traditional magic show and then followed this with a stage hypnosis show. Michael Brody, who is also a hypnotherapist, invited me to attend an October 2011 event in which he combined a lecture and demonstration about hypnosis for a high school psychology class with a stage hypnosis performance. Thus, his pre-talk included an extended discussion about the nature and uses of hypnosis, before he invited students from the class to participate in the show. When a performer does not choose to highlight special skills in this way, the pre-talk segment in shows I have attended usually lasts about ten minutes. Chase advises hypnotists to keep the pre-talk “short and succinct.” He adds, “Personally I would not drag this out for more than ten minutes but aim for three or four” (49). He reasons that the audience has paid to see the volunteers perform, and thus there is little point in extending the portion of the show that does not include them.

Frequently, the pre-talk portion of a show incorporates elements of audience participation, often referred to as pre-tests. Pre-tests can further the process of making audience members comfortable with hypnosis and hypnotic phenomena and encouraging the most willing to volunteer for the show. Ronning calls such pre-tests “an ideal ice breaker, especially among audiences where you might expect some hesitancy.” He explains that using one or two “helps grab the audience’s attention and put them at ease and makes the volunteer process go more smoothly” (44). During pre-tests, audience members are given an opportunity to follow the hypnotist’s suggestions from the relative safety of their seats before they are asked to volunteer for the performance.

In addition to making audience members more comfortable with hypnotic phenomena in general, most pre-tests incorporate elements of hypnotic suggestion. In their article “Executive
Control without Conscious Awareness: The Cold Control Theory of Hypnosis” psychologists Zoltán Dienes and Josef Perner explain that hypnotic suggestions can be roughly divided into three categories: simple motor suggestions, challenge suggestions, and cognitive suggestions (299). Simple motor suggestions incorporate bodily movements, often of the extremities, and as an example, Dienes and Perner mention, “Your arm is becoming so heavy it is falling” (299). Challenge suggestions involve a two-step process in which a suggestion is given and then the subject is challenged to resist or overcome the suggestion. Dienes and Perner use the example, “Try to bend your arm,” as a challenge suggestion after the subject is given an initial suggestion for arm rigidity (299). Cognitive suggestions include imagery, amnesia, and hallucinations. Of these three categories, pre-tests I have seen live as well as those described in stage hypnosis manuals frequently incorporate simple motor suggestions and challenge suggestions. A few common examples include:

1. “Light Hand, Heavy Hand”—Incorporating a simple motor suggestion, audience members are asked to close their eyes, place their arms out straight in front of them palms down, and visualize a helium balloon pulling one arm up and a heavy weight pulling the other arm down. After the visualization, some audience members will find their arms have moved several inches apart, with the “light” hand higher in the air than the “heavy” hand. In fact, when I attended performances by Will Power in July and August of 2009, I responded to this pre-test at both shows. I did not feel any change in the relative heights of my arms while my eyes remained closed, and only realized that I had responded to the suggestion after I opened them. My hands were approximately six inches apart when I opened my eyes at the first performance, and approximately four inches apart at the second performance. (I found these results
particularly interesting, because I responded to the suggestions despite the fact that I was familiar with this pre-test and had already researched such phenomena.)

2. “Magnetic Fingertips”—Audience members are asked to clasp their hands, interlace their fingers, extend their index fingers upward, and separate them an inch or two. Then they are told to imagine their palms are glued together and tiny magnets are attached to their index fingertips, pulling them toward each other. When their index fingers touch, audience members are instructed to allow their hands to drop back into their laps. As both Ronning and Chase explain, this pre-test has little to do with the power of suggestion, although some hypnotists choose to frame it as such: the constriction caused by squeezing the palms together and holding the fingers extended will naturally bring the fingertips together whether or not a simple motor suggestion is given (Ronning 46, Chase 64). Ronning says he prefers to use this pre-test as an opportunity to explain that the result is a natural phenomenon, just as hypnosis is a natural phenomenon, and audience members can respond as easily to hypnosis as they did to the pre-test (46). Chase uses it to weed out people who are “just not interested,” because, unless he or she has nerve or tendon damage, this pre-test should work for any volunteer who actively participates (64).

3. “Hand Lock”—With their eyes closed and arms outstretched in front of them, audience members are asked to clasp their hands, interlace their fingers, and squeeze tightly. The hypnotist repeats several times that they will be physically unable to unclasp their hands until such time as they are told that they can by the hypnotist. Then a challenge suggestion is issued, to try to unclasp their hands. As Chase explains, this test works both through suggestion as well as through physical means.
With the arms held outstretched and rigid and the hands tightly squeezed together, lactic acid builds up in the arms and blood flow to the fingers decreases (56-7). Thus, at the same time that the hypnotist tells audience members that they will be unable to unclasp their hands, they find that their arm muscles have become rigid and sensation and dexterity in their fingers has decreased. If the hypnotist is successful, those audience members will attribute the physical sensations they experience to the power of the hypnotist’s suggestions, thereby improving the chances that they will choose to volunteer and actively participate in the show.

Pre-tests are often presented by the hypnotist as a demonstration of the power of suggestion, so that audience members can see that the evening’s activities will be easy, safe, and fun. Sometimes, however, pre-tests are used in a more literal way, to identify those audience members who are most responsive to suggestion and then invite them to participate in the performance. In these cases, the pre-test segment becomes a part of the call for volunteers. Both Chase and Royle note that after they lead audience members through the “Hand Lock” test, those whose hands remain stuck together are invited to come up on stage (Chase 61, Royle 51). In a May 2011 performance I attended, Michael Brody asked any audience members who wanted to volunteer for the performance to stand and participate in “Light Hand, Heavy Hand.” As he led them through the visualization, he announced that anyone he tapped on the shoulder could come up and be in the show. Then, he walked through the crowd and tapped those audience members whose hands moved furthest apart. Brody did not inform the audience of his criteria for being chosen, and because they were asked to participate in this pre-test with their eyes closed, audience members should not have been aware of the responses of those who were chosen. Thus, this pre-test may have distinguished those audience members most open to suggestion. It is also
possible, however, that some audience members knew Brody would choose participants whose hands moved furthest apart, either because they had seen such performances before or because they opened their eyes to see who Brody was choosing, and adjusted their responses accordingly in order to be chosen.

**Call for Volunteers**

After the pre-talk and any pre-tests the hypnotist has chosen to include, a typical stage hypnosis performance segues into a call for volunteers. Depending on the performer, this may consist of a straightforward request for anyone interested in participating in the show to come forward, such as the way that The Sandman gestured to eight empty chairs on the stage and asked for four male and four female volunteers to come up and fill them during back-to-back performances I attended in 2011. The call for volunteers may be more complex, however, if the hypnotist is involved in the initial selection process. Dale K, for example, announced to the hundreds of screaming college students in his audience that if they wanted to participate in the show they should raise their hands. By my quick count, over one hundred audience members responded, and K traversed the crowd, hand-selecting the most eager, vocal, demonstrative volunteers. Audience members quickly recognized K’s selection criteria, and began to respond accordingly: those who wanted to participate shouted, waved their arms, and jumped up and down in order to attract K’s attention and be selected. In this way, by the time K selected his volunteers, the crowd had reached a near-frenzy of excitement and anticipation for the performance.

Some researchers have raised concerns regarding the use of pre-tests prior to calling for volunteers. In “Impact of Stage Hypnosis,” Lennis G. Echterling and David A. Emmerling argue that the potential risks of stage hypnosis outweigh any potential entertainment value, primarily
due to the use of pre-tests. Echterling and Emmerling claim that during pre-tests, “a certain percentage of the audience will go into trance very quickly and will then respond to commands to go on stage to be subjects. Obviously, these methods of selecting the best hypnotic subjects do not allow people to give their informed consent to participate” (153). While data regarding high-responding individuals is often contradictory, and thus seems less “obvious” than Echterling and Emmerling would suggest, their concerns may be valid nonetheless. One of the volunteer performers I interviewed, Wade Niederkohr, performed for hypnotist Michael Brody three times, in 2006, 2007, and 2008 but has no memory of his participation. Niederkohr’s last memory at each of the three performances is of participating in the “Magnetic Fingertips” pre-test. After that pre-test, his knowledge of his performance activities is based solely on viewing recordings afterward, which he says he watched “as if it was somebody else.” He does not recall being selected as a performer, walking up to the performance area, or participating in the show. In the case of these three performances (as well as two subsequent performances by Brody that I attended), Brody took precautions to ensure his volunteers’ consent: he asked only those audience members who wanted to be in the performance to participate in the pre-tests. Thus, Brody could reasonably assume that anyone who responded to the pre-tests already wanted to participate. However, some stage hypnotists invite everyone in the audience to try the pre-tests, and even to follow along with the induction procedure(s), whether or not they wish to volunteer as performers. Among the participants I have interviewed, Niederkohr’s response is extreme and unusual, but my sample size is far too small to make any broad assumptions about suggestibility. Arguably, however, if even a small percentage of audience members are as suggestive as Niederkohr, it may be reasonable to propose that Echterling and Emmerling are justified in their concerns about the use of pre-tests.
Induction Procedure(s)

Once the volunteer participants have been assembled in the performance area, the hypnotist can proceed to the induction procedure(s). According to the American Psychological Association’s 1994 description of hypnosis, “The hypnotic context is usually established by an induction procedure. Although there are many different hypnotic inductions, most include suggestions for relaxation, calmness, and well-being. Instructions to think about pleasant experiences are also commonly included” (Kirsh 143). The APA’s amended 2004 description states only that, “The hypnotic induction is an extended initial suggestion for using one’s imagination,” while relaxation and well-being are noted as potential, but not necessary, components (Executive Committee n. pag.). Stage hypnosis induction scripts frequently include elements of both of these APA descriptions.

Both in performance and in training manuals, relaxation is the most commonly addressed of the APA-described elements. Ronning explains the importance of relaxation to the induction process by stating, “First you work on physical relaxation and then you work on mental relaxation. This technique allows the participants to go into the trance state more quickly and easily” (106). A sample induction script from Ormond McGill’s *New Encyclopedia of Stage Hypnotism* includes a progressive relaxation exercise: “So start now by thinking of relaxing the muscles of your scalp. Relax the muscles of your head and face. Now let your thoughts move on down and relax the muscles of your shoulders. . . ” (336). This process of muscular release continues throughout the body to the feet. In his October 2011 performance, Michael Brody utilized a rapid induction technique, rather than a slower, progressive relaxation technique such as the one by McGill above. During a rapid induction, a hypnotist makes a quick gesture or brief physical contact with a volunteer, which is intended to induce hypnosis immediately. In
performance it can be quite dramatic, with volunteers instantly falling into what looks like a deep sleep. Despite using the much quicker procedure, Brody still emphasized the importance of relaxation to the process, explaining to volunteers that rapid induction “feels like going down a roller-coaster into relaxation.”

Stage hypnotists also frequently promote the calmness and sense of well-being described by the APA during their inductions, often through careful direction of their volunteers’ attention. To accomplish this, the hypnotist encourages volunteers to focus only on the directions given by the hypnotist, while disregarding other, potentially distracting, stimuli. Removing the volunteers’ focus from the audience and placing it on the hypnotist in this way may serve to help amateur performers feel more comfortable on stage and less self-conscious. This technique was demonstrated in a July 2009 performance I saw by Will Power, who informed his volunteers that any audience noise they might hear, such as applause, laughter, or even wait-staff dropping a tray of glasses, would cause them to relax and descend deeper into hypnosis. Similarly, Orley gave the hypnotic suggestion that although his volunteers would be able to hear laughter and applause, they would not be upset by this or respond to it, and that it would only serve to relax them more deeply. In his manual, Ronning refers to this technique as “Incorporation,” and recommends that if there is a disturbance in the venue, the hypnotist should say something like, “and any loud sounds you hear will only drop you deeper” (82). In this way, the hypnotist can filter out distractions, thereby keeping the volunteers’ attention focused on the hypnotist, on the stage, and on the suggestions, resulting in the potential for alleviating stage fright in inexperienced performers.

Stage hypnotists also promote calmness and a sense of well-being through positive reinforcement. Often, hypnotists attempt to use suggestion as a means to remove the volunteers’
doubts and fear of failure or embarrassment, and then to replace these with the belief that they can and will succeed as performers. McGill’s inductions include lines such as, “your mental processes are becoming intensified, becoming acute. . . . You will find that you can easily accomplish every demonstration, and follow perfectly every suggestion that I give you” (343). Ronning also recommends continuous confidence-building during a show, by advising: “fill your subjects with positive suggestions and good feelings. The more confident people feel, the better they will perform” (133). On his website, Dale K explains that people naturally experience stage fright, but that through hypnosis, he can remove those feelings, stating, “If I tell a volunteer that when I snap my fingers he\(^1\) will become the world’s greatest opera singer, that’s exactly what he will believe. Free of any stage fright and full of his own confidence, he will sing loud and proud. Using hypnosis he becomes so relaxed and comfortable in front of the audience that for him it’s as if he is singing at home alone in the shower” (n. pag.). If successful, by the time the stage hypnotist has completed the induction, he or she has created a calm, relaxed, focused group of performers who believe that they will be able to perform, because they have been told that hypnosis will free them to do so.

In addition to the ethical concerns regarding informed consent after pre-tests that I detailed above, Echterling and Emmerling also raise questions about induction procedure(s) in stage hypnosis. They note that a single hypnotist can rarely monitor every member of a large audience, and claim that during a performance they attended, “dozens of people were in trance. In fact, several members of the audience responded to virtually every hypnotic command, regardless of whether it was directed towards the audience or a person on the stage” (153).

\(^1\) Throughout this dissertation, I have opted for gender-inclusive language (i.e., “he or she,” and “himself or herself”) whenever appropriate. However, when quoting from sources, I have reproduced instances of gender-exclusive language as they appear in the original, without additional comment.
Again, I find the authors’ claims may somewhat overstate the situation, but I cannot discount their concerns completely. At stage hypnosis performances, I have frequently observed hypnotists employ strategies to assure that only the volunteer performers on stage will become hypnotized. Dale K, for example, announced unequivocally during his pre-talk that “This method will not work on anyone in the audience. If you see anyone sleeping next to you in the audience, they are really sleeping. Wake them up and remind them the show is up here!” This kind of announcement is probably intended to serve as a pre-emptive suggestion for any highly suggestible audience members, as well as a warning to anyone who might simply want to play along during the show. For K, at least, it seemed effective: while the audience was much too large for me to see every member, I did not notice any audience members responding to suggestions during that performance.

Alternatively, some hypnotists do invite audience members to “follow along” with the induction if they wish, and then only address the issue of audience members responding to suggestions if it arises. One of the volunteer performers that I interviewed, Chad Paben, chose not to go up on stage during the call for volunteers but to attend to the induction from his seat in the audience when he attended performances by both Orley and Night, with decidedly different outcomes. Paben explains that he was motivated to attend to the inductions out of a certain curiosity about the process as well as a desire for relaxation, but that he had no plans to volunteer for the performances. He notes, “In both instances I was trying to become hypnotized or be induced. I kind of wanted to go through the process but not necessarily be on stage with that pressure and that, like, attention.” Paben reports that after following along with each induction, he experienced a feeling of deep relaxation and began responding to suggestions the hypnotist

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2 I was fortunate to be in the audience at both of these performances, and to witness the events Paben describes.
gave to the volunteers. At the first performance, when Orley noticed Paben responding to his suggestions from his seat in the audience, Orley came out into the house and asked Paben directly if he wished to participate in the show. Paben groggily shook his head to indicate that he did not wish to perform. In answer to Paben’s negative response, Orley released Paben from hypnosis, explaining that Paben could now enjoy watching the rest of the performance. At the second performance, however, Night did not offer Paben such an option. As Paben describes it, “I actually did not volunteer to be in the show, necessarily, but I did end up in the show.” Instead, Night approached Paben in the audience and informed him that he was in the wrong seat. Then, Night guided Paben to a seat on the stage, explaining that Paben would be more comfortable there. Paben’s experiences might seem to justify Echterling and Emmerling’s concern’s both about audience members responding to suggestions as well as their concerns about a lack of informed consent. Paben, however, is quick to clarify that he did choose to participate in Night’s performance. Although he did not initially intend to participate in either performance, and although Night told him to move to the stage rather than offering him a choice to do so, Paben asserts that he was aware of what each of the two hypnotists were asking of him, and that he made a conscious decision in the moment to participate in Night’s performance, just as he had made a conscious decision not to participate in Orley’s show. While he has no regrets about his participation, Paben acknowledges that he found Night’s methods somewhat ethically questionable.

Final Volunteer Selection

Although most contemporary stage hypnosis shows utilize audience volunteers as performers, the final decision regarding which of the volunteers will ultimately perform in the show is left to the hypnotist. Volunteers may be dismissed from the stage at any point during a
performance, but dismissal is most commonly observed immediately following the induction procedure(s). Any volunteers the hypnotist deems unsuitable for the performance are asked to return to their seats. In performances I have attended, this process is frequently explained to the audience as an attempt to determine which volunteers can be hypnotized most quickly, easily, and deeply, in order to create the most entertaining performance. Thus, any volunteers who do not seem to be following the hypnotist’s suggestions by the end of the induction are usually dismissed, as are any volunteers who do not seem to be engaged, enthusiastic, and/or taking the process seriously. Among the live performances I have attended, only one performer, The Sandman, did not dismiss any volunteers from the stage. (While hypnotists are responsible for most dismissals and The Sandman chose not to dismiss anyone, I have occasionally seen volunteers dismiss themselves. At the second of the two performances I attended by The Sandman, one volunteer who had not seemed particularly engaged all along simply did not return to the stage after an activity wherein the volunteers were sent out into the audience to dance. I have also seen volunteers articulate to the hypnotist that they do not believe themselves to be hypnotized and no longer wish to participate.)

Because volunteer performers create the largest portion of each show, the dismissal of unsuitable volunteers can be crucial to the success of the performance. Chase cautions stage hypnotists to “be observant and pick your final subjects carefully as the whole show depends on them” (68). Therefore, although the process is usually framed for the audience as an attempt to determine which volunteers can be hypnotized most quickly, easily, and deeply, other important factors are also considered. Stage hypnotists frequently recommend that volunteers who appear to have consumed alcohol or other drugs should be dismissed, either because such substances may impede the induction process, or because intoxicated volunteers may behave erratically,
injure themselves or others, or even vomit onstage. I witnessed an example of this sort of dismissal at a July 2009 performance by Will Power. During the initial deep breathing and relaxation portion of Power’s induction, a female volunteer seemed to be having trouble remaining upright in her chair. After a short interaction that was not audible to the audience, Power escorted her off stage and back to her table. My assumption at the time, based on both the woman’s physical unsteadiness and the empty glasses and celebratory mood at the table to which she returned, was that Power dismissed her due to a concern over excess alcohol consumption. In addition to alcohol or other drugs, Chase recommends dismissing volunteers who appear frightened, because fear can also cause unpredictable behavior. Therefore, Chase advises hypnotists to “trust your instincts,” and err on the side of caution (68), implying that it is better to dismiss a volunteer who might have been able to participate than to include one who may become a danger to self or others.

In addition to removing any volunteers who are deemed unsuitable for the performance, I believe that the final volunteer selection process serves an additional function within the context of the performance. Releasing some volunteers from the stage can serve as a warning to the remaining volunteers that only the most compliant, most engaged, and most entertaining volunteers will be permitted to remain on stage, which can thus encourage their compliance. Ronning discusses this function quite bluntly in his book, saying, “Even if you have all of your volunteers out like a light, I still recommend you ‘slaughter’ one of them and send them back to the audience. You will maximize your leverage over the others and command more respect” (193). In order to result in greater compliance from the remaining volunteers, dismissal would have to be viewed by those volunteers as a negative outcome, and remaining on stage would

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3 For examples of such recommendations, see Chase 68, McGill 291, and Ronning 209-13.
have to be viewed as a positive outcome. In my interviews with volunteer performers, several interviewees confirmed that this was the case while during their performances. David McKinley, for example, explains that he felt enormous motivation to remain on stage, because, “You’re rewarded. The longer you’re on stage, the better job that you’re doing, and the audience applauds you.” Conversely, he says that when other volunteers were dismissed, this seemed like “a punishment.” As other volunteers were released, McKinley became more determined to avoid this “punishment.” Therefore, their dismissal motivated his desire to comply with the hypnotist’s suggestions in order to remain on stage throughout the performance (Personal interview).

As an audience member, I have observed the dismissal process many times, and I have been struck by how much it resembles the culling of actors in large auditions. Chase argues that “Everyone can be hypnotised given [sufficient] time, some take longer than others but I have yet to meet the person who can’t be hypnotised” (11). If Chase is right, and everyone can be hypnotized eventually, perhaps determining which volunteers most quickly respond to the hypnotist’s suggestions and releasing the others is similar to the process of assessing whether or not actors can take direction in an audition. Those volunteers who are quickly released to their seats might be able to achieve hypnosis eventually, just as actors unresponsive to direction might eventually become more responsive. However, both groups would require additional effort from the hypnotist or director in order to achieve the desired outcome. Thus, both hypnotists and directors might simply choose to work with those performers they deem initially to be the most responsive.

In an interesting side note, I have become quite adept at predicting which volunteers will be dismissed during hypnosis shows, but I am not at all certain that this is because I have developed the ability to tell who is “really hypnotized.” I have begun to wonder whether, after
years of working with actors, I am simply reading the same cues that I would in an audition in order to quickly separate those who are most likely to perform well from those I can let go. Surely an experienced hypnotist, who must take performers from a pool of volunteers and assess them rapidly, would have learned to pick up on what I assume are the same cues. Ronning would seem to support this idea when he asks, “They are hypnotized—but do they have talent?” and cautions would-be stage hypnotists to “Remember, just because they are hypnotized does not mean they are going to be funny” (129).

Activities Performed by the Volunteers

After any unsuitable volunteers have been dismissed, the longest segment of a contemporary stage hypnosis show begins. The performance activities in which the volunteers participate are variously referred to as “bits” (Johns and Nongard 115), “demonstrations” (Jones 111), “experiments” (McGill 341, Silver and McGill 152), “routines” (Chase 117, Ronning 121, Svengali 48), “sketches” (Royle 221), and “skits” (Cressman 59, Johns and Nongard 115, Ronning 147). Such activities may utilize single volunteers, selected groups of volunteers, or all of the volunteers at once, and may even involve members of the audience.

While the language, subject matter, and tone of stage hypnosis performances may vary in accordance with different venues and audience demographics, most performance activities are rooted in basic hypnotic phenomena. Behavioral neuroscientist Arne Dietrich notes that hypnotized subjects report or exhibit “analgesia, vivid images, hallucinations in all sense modalities, amnesia, timelessness, detachment from the self, and a willingness to accept distortions of logic and reality” (244). Such hypnotic phenomena are necessarily internal and experiential. Thus, in order to craft performances based on internal phenomena, stage hypnotists must select performance activities that capitalize on their volunteers’ visible, external reactions
to their internal experiences. Often, these activities are designed to elicit comedic external responses. Although stage hypnosis shows may consist of any combination of activities, of the three categories of hypnotic suggestions identified by Dienes and Perner and detailed earlier in this chapter—simple motor suggestions, challenge suggestions, and cognitive suggestions (299)—performance activities often incorporate cognitive suggestions, and tend to draw on the following hypnotic responses:

1. vivid imagery
2. positive and negative sensory hallucinations
3. amnesia
4. acceptance of distortions in logic and reality

Some activities may be based on only one of these phenomena, but many draw on a combination of two or more. Because audience members see only the outward response to the phenomena, it is rarely possible to say with any certainty how or why an individual volunteer is responding to a given activity. One volunteer may experience a sensory hallucination, for example, while another experiences vivid imagery. A third volunteer could very well experience neither of these phenomena, but simply perform as if he or she were. Despite their different internal experiences, the performances given by all three volunteers could appear quite similar. Thus, I limit my discussion to the ways in which stage hypnosis performance activities are designed to utilize basic hypnotic phenomena, but I do not wish to imply that the effect of such activities on individual volunteers can be understood with any certainty.

Activities involving the first category, vivid imagery, are common early in a stage hypnosis performance, immediately after the induction procedure(s). During such activities, the hypnotist asks volunteers to imagine and respond to a scenario as if it were happening, and
provides additional details and suggestions regarding that scenario throughout the routine. These activities are often performed by all of the volunteers together, seated, and with their eyes closed. Ronning suggests opening with such a routine because “individuals are not highlighted and there is no pressure.” Therefore, the volunteers can “relax,” and “build their confidence,” while the audience “shower[s] them with applause to get them fired up into the show” (123). In a 2010 performance, Dale K followed his induction with such an activity. K told his volunteers they had each won a red Ferrari, and were about to drive it for the first time. K gave the volunteers time to respond to the news that they had won this vehicle, and most expressed shock and delight, both verbally and physically, by jumping up and down, clapping, etc. Then K explained that they needed to put on “lots of safety equipment” before they could drive such a powerful car. After the volunteers were sufficiently prepared, with a selection of seat belts, driving goggles, roll cages, helmets, etc., K continued to enrich the details of the visualization. As they pantomimed driving the car, they were told that they were passing some friends on the sidewalk, and then a “hot person.” Each volunteer responded individually to these suggestions by, for example, waving, calling out a greeting, reveling in friends’ reactions to the new sports car, checking his or her appearance in the rear-view mirror, and openly flirting with the attractive bystander. Kristina Jones volunteered for a 2011 performance with K and participated in this activity. During an interview, she reenacted her response when K told the volunteers they should see how fast the powerful sports car could go. She pantomimed holding the steering wheel with her arms out in front of her, and pressing down on the accelerator with her right foot. Then, she explained, “I flipped back in my chair.” She demonstrated how the force of the imagined acceleration forced her backward against her chair, lifted the front legs of the chair from the ground, and shouted “Vroooom!” (Personal interview).
Activities based on the second category of hypnotic response, hallucination, go beyond suggestions that volunteers imagine and respond to a scenario as if it were happening. Instead the hypnotist suggests that volunteers will have an altered or novel sensory experience that is at odds with their incoming sensory stimuli. A positive hallucination is the perception of sensory stimuli which is not present in one’s environment, and a negative hallucination is the failure to perceive sensory stimuli which is present in one’s environment. A common suggestion based on a negative hallucination is that the volunteers will see the hypnotist, members of the audience, or even themselves partially unclothed or nude. Because audience members cannot see the volunteers’ internal responses, the entertainment comes from observing and comparing their outward responses. When Orley suggested to a group of mostly female volunteers that the back of his pants were missing during a 2009 performance, their responses ranged from shock to glee to embarrassment at having been caught looking at a man’s bottom by a roomful of people. One very pale young woman blushed so visibly her cheeks were nearly purple. Due to the internal nature of such cognitive responses, however, it was impossible to determine whether her blush was caused by seeing the suggested hallucination, by embarrassment that the audience might think she were seeing such a thing, or by any number of other potential factors.

In an October 2011 performance, Michael Brody wove a series of suggestions for positive hallucinations into a narrative to create an extended performance activity. Brody told his volunteers they won a trip around the world, beginning with a bus tour through the Alps. Brody began the tour by describing the beautiful Alpine surroundings, and then suggested that the bus’s heater had broken and the temperature was rapidly dropping. He provided constant updates on the ever-dropping temperature, and the volunteers began to shiver, rub and blow on their hands, and huddle together to keep warm. Then, when Brody suggested that the heater had finally been
fixed and the temperature was climbing, the volunteers began to visibly relax and untangle themselves from their neighbors. Next, Brody suggested that the heater was now stuck on, the bus was getting hotter, and they were beginning to sweat. As Brody updated the volunteers on the now-increasing temperature, they began to fan themselves and remove extra layers of clothing. Then, Brody suggested that their hot, sweaty feet were beginning to itch, and the volunteers removed their shoes and scratched their feet. Finally, in an absurd coda, Brody suggested that now that their shoes were off, each volunteer could hear his or her favorite song and smell his or her favorite smell coming from the shoes. Some volunteers gleefully buried their noses in their shoes and inhaled while others held their shoes up to their ears and hummed, sang, and/or nodded to the beat. Within this extended narrative, Brody incorporated suggestions for positive visual, somatosensory, auditory, and olfactory hallucinations.

Activities involving the third category of hypnotic response, amnesia, often include suggestions for volunteers to forget basic information, such as names, numbers, or even the reason they are on stage. Interviewee R. Nicole Hurtsellers participated in an amnesia activity during a relatively unusual hypnosis performance. Rather than performing for a live audience, her performance was taped and used to create a demonstration video for hypnotherapists. (Because the purpose of the video was to demonstrate different induction techniques, after each induction Hurtsellers was given suggestions for performance activities in order to gauge that induction’s effectiveness.) Her account of the confusion that results from forgetting basic information is evocative:

He made me forget the number seven, somehow, and I wish I knew exactly what

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4 While touch is often referred to as one of the five traditional senses, the somatosensory system contains receptors that sense and respond not only to touch, but pain, temperature, and body position, as well.
he said or did to make me think that. It just, like, slipped from my vocabulary, from the idea of existence, and then he had me count my fingers . . . [She demonstrates, counting each of her fingers aloud, but omits the number seven. By skipping directly from six to eight, she ends her count with eleven fingers.] And I stopped, and I was like, “OK. That was funny. Let’s try that again.” And I just, I couldn’t get to ten. [She counts her fingers again.] Five, six, eight, nine. I just didn’t understand how, suddenly, I had eleven fingers. It wasn’t coming together for me. (Personal interview)

In a May 2011 performance, Brody told a volunteer named Kaylee that she would forget her name. When Brody asked Kaylee her name a moment later, she looked utterly bewildered and began to look around as if she was looking for her name in the space around her head, but she could not answer the question. Then, Brody explained that whenever he tapped Kaylee on the forehead she would immediately say her name aloud, but that she would still not remember it after saying it. Here is a small excerpt from the exchanges that followed:

BRODY: What’s your name?

KAYLEE: What?

BRODY: What’s your name, Kaylee?

KAYLEE: Huh?

(Brody taps Kaylee on the forehead.)

KAYLEE: Kaylee!

BRODY: What did you say?

KAYLEE: What?

BRODY: Just now—what did you say?
KAYLEE: I don’t know.

(Brody taps Kaylee on the forehead.)

KAYLEE: Kaylee!

BRODY: What’s your name, Kaylee?

KAYLEE: What?

Before concluding this amnesia activity, Brody brought one of Kaylee’s friends on stage from the audience and suggested that Kaylee would forget (and, when tapped, remember) her friend’s name as well. It looked like a hypnotic version of the old “Who’s on First?” routine.

Many performance activities also incorporate suggestions from the third category of hypnotic response, acceptance of distortions in logic and reality, either alone or in combination with other types of suggestions. For the audience, much of the humor in these suggestions comes from watching the volunteers’ unquestioning acceptance of situations which seem patently absurd. When she volunteered for Dale K, interviewee Jones participated in such an activity. She was told that she and another female volunteer were labor and delivery nurses and that their patient was ready to deliver. Their “patient” in this scenario was a male volunteer, who went through all of the motions of delivering an infant. While she sees the humor in such a situation now, Jones said she was surprised at the time when audience members laughed during the performance and came up afterward to tell her how funny it was. She explains that she had not been trying to create a comedic performance, but rather, “I guess I would just listen to everything he said . . . I didn’t feel like I was being that funny but other people said I was really funny.”

Without question, the activities that stage hypnosis volunteers are asked to perform could be executed by trained performers without any reference to or need for hypnosis. After all, behaving “as if” a given scenario were true is a starting point for many actors as they craft
performances, and actors regularly use vivid imagery and incorporate distortions in logic in reality while playing roles. To name just a few examples, actors are frequently asked to “see” fantastic creatures whose presence will be created by computers long after a scene is filmed, to imagine that another actor holding a plastic gun is a dangerous murderer who is threatening their lives, and to play out deeply private moments of emotional upheaval in front of an audience that may include hundreds of people. Even without well-trained performers, throughout my career as an acting teacher and director I have often been able to help inexperienced actors deliver powerful and convincing performances, when given enough rehearsal time. What I find fascinating about the activities performed by volunteers during stage hypnosis shows, however, is that the performers are (presumably) neither well-trained nor rehearsed. Despite this lack of preparation, volunteer performers often give deeply committed and convincing performances. For example, one of my interviewees reveals that she wept openly during a performance when a hypnotist told her she hit a dog with her car (Talbott). At a performance by hypnotist Mike Brody that I attended, Brody told volunteers that when he approached them he would look like their favorite celebrities. When Brody asked a young woman who he was, she seemed awestruck and almost unable to speak. Giggling, stammering, and blushing, she replied, “Justin Bieber.” When Brody asked her what she liked most about him, she squealed, “Your hair!” Brody, then, had a great deal of fun doing takes to the audience and rubbing his head to point out that his thinning hair looked nothing like Bieber’s famous coif (Brody, Whiteford High School). There is something truly fascinating about the ways in which stage hypnosis performances can sometimes blur the lines between “make believe” and “make belief.”

Termination of Hypnosis and Conclusion of the Performance

During the final portion of a stage hypnosis performance, the hypnotist performs
procedures designed to terminate hypnosis in the volunteers and end the show. Chase calls this portion of the show “without any doubt whatsoever—THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE WHOLE SHOW . . . not the least because your reputation can be completely destroyed by not tidying up properly” (102, capitalization and ellipsis in original). Chase’s point is not that volunteers may leave the venue under the influence of hypnosis, but that people believe this can happen. Thus, they could attribute anything that happens after a show to hypnosis, if the hypnotist did not perform procedures designed to terminate hypnosis. For example, automobile accidents and medical emergencies occur every day. Thus, it is statistically likely that over the course of a hypnotist’s career, a volunteer might coincidentally be involved in an automobile accident or medical emergency after participating in a performance. While such an occurrence might be completely unrelated to hypnosis or to participating in the show, people are much more likely to blame hypnosis for an accident than the vagaries of chance or their own poor driving. Therefore, Chase advises, “Always clean up,” to safeguard against blame for such unfortunate incidents (103).

The termination process is often simple, with the hypnotist informing the volunteers that when he or she counts to three they will awaken. Sometimes post-hypnotic suggestions are included. A post-hypnotic suggestion is a suggestion given by the hypnotist that is expected to take effect at some future time. While many stage hypnotists simply suggest that their volunteers will feel refreshed and energized or that they will sleep better, some incorporate post-hypnotics into the performance itself. While volunteering for performances with hypnotist Dale K, interviewees McKinley and Jones both report responding to the post-hypnotic suggestion that as long as they were in the performance venue, whenever an audience member came up to shake their hands and congratulate them on their performances, they would shout “Yee-Haw!” like a
cowboy. Both volunteers expressed surprise and amusement at their own behavior, and McKinley notes that because he stopped and whooped every time someone congratulated him, “it took me forever to get out of the building!” (Personal interviews).

The terminology used during this portion of a stage hypnosis performance is often complex and contradictory, with regard to hypnosis. Although hypnosis is not sleep, hypnotists frequently use terms such as “wake up” and “awaken” to describe the termination of hypnosis. This semantic shorthand would seem to be primarily for the benefit of volunteers and audience members, who often assume that hypnosis is akin to sleep. Such terminology is so pervasive that even those volunteers who do not think of hypnosis as akin to sleep seem to have difficulty finding other ways to describe the process. After having volunteered in 2009, Paben had a difficult time discussing the end of the performance during our interview. He explained that he felt “awakened” was not the right word, because he knew that he had not been asleep, and therefore he could not “awaken.” However, “awakened” seemed as though it might describe his experience anyway, because he did not recall leaving the stage or returning to his table. After much deliberation, Paben finally declared, “I became aware of myself back at my table.”

After the hypnotist requests a round of applause for the volunteers and sends them all back to their seats in the audience, most contemporary stage hypnosis shows end with an exercise in capitalism. Hypnotists often greet exiting audience members and make products available for sale. Merchandizing, frequently referred to as “BOR,” because the products have traditionally been sold at the “back of the room,” provides an opportunity for stage hypnotists to make additional money after performances. (While such products are often still sold at the “back of the room,” they are just as often made available online.) Stage hypnotists sell a wide variety of products, including performance DVDs, smoking cessation and weight loss CDs, and performer-
specific items. For example, Orley offers “I Slept with Flip Orley” and “Flip Orley: Sleep Has Never Been So Funny” t-shirts on his website (“Flip Store”).

Additional Preparation and Planning

While the aspects of the performance that can be seen by the audience are often quite complex, stage hypnosis performance also requires considerable behind-the-scenes preparation, planning, and technical expertise. When asked in an interview what might surprise people about her job, stage hypnotist Pattie Freeman replied, “People think it’s easy. They think you just go there, show up, and that’s it.” She and other stage hypnotists countered this perceived misconception with discussions of the work that goes into creating their performances. Before becoming a successful stage hypnotist, aspiring performers must practice and perfect the skills of a hypnotist as well as the skills of a stage performer. Because hypnotists tour frequently, they must develop technical expertise and familiarity with a wide variety of equipment. Finally, as independent contractors, they must become adept at marketing, advertising, publicizing, booking, and billing for performances.

Most of the hypnotists I interviewed report that they undertook some sort of hypnosis training or preparation, although there was little uniformity in their processes. This variety makes sense, because most states require little or no certification for stage hypnotists or for hypnotherapists. Thus, aspiring stage hypnotists often seek voluntary certification from a number of unconnected organizations whose certification requirements vary widely, from weekend seminars to hundreds of hours of clinical training. Freeman, for example, has a degree in psychology, and also undertook additional training to become a Certified Hypnotherapist.

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5 Colorado, Connecticut, and Washington are the only states that require mandatory licensure or registration to practice hypnosis. California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, Texas, and Utah do not have mandatory licensure or registration, but do lay out some specific regulations for the practice of hypnotism (“Summary of State Laws”).
(C.Ht.) and Master Clinical Hypnotherapist (MCH). She then received further training from the National Guild of Hypnotists to become a Certified Instructor (CI) of hypnosis (Telephone interview). Also a C.Ht., Night received instruction from the American Council of Hypnotist Examiners, which requires 200 hours of training for certification. (“American Council”). Brody, on the other hand, became a C.Ht. after only 60 hours of training. As a C.Ht., Brody could provide treatment for smoking, weight loss, anxiety, and stress relief. He then went on to receive 30 additional hours of training to become an MCH. As such, he explained that he can now also provide treatment for phobias and past-life transgression (overcoming trauma from a past life), among other disorders (Personal interview).

Among the hypnotists I interviewed who had received less formal training, Stage Hypnotist I majored in psychology with the intention of becoming a clinical hypnotist, but his stage hypnosis career blossomed before he completed his studies or received a degree (Telephone interview). He advertises no certification or licensure on his website or promotional materials; although this does not necessarily guarantee that he does not possess such credentials. The Sandman reported going to an unidentified training school for only four days before having an “epiphany” about the nature of hypnosis and leaving the program to devote himself to performing hypnosis full time (Personal interview). He, too, advertises no certification or licensure on his website (Sandman, “Bio”). Stand-up comedian and hypnotist Meghan O. Koesters has even less formal training. She decided to add hypnosis to her comedy act after seeing a hypnosis show, and before her first hypnosis performance she prepared very little. She explained, “I looked up a few things online, but it wasn’t something that I really went out of my way to kind of look into until after I did a performance at a birthday party at a friend’s house.”

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6 In order to maintain the anonymity requested by this performer, I have intentionally omitted citation of his website and promotional materials.
During this first performance, a volunteer whom Koesters later discovered had ingested illegal drugs before volunteering, became disoriented and upset by his own reactions under hypnosis and responded violently. This prompted Koesters to undertake more research about hypnosis before she used it in performance again (Personal interview).

In addition to learning the skills of a hypnotist, aspiring stage hypnotists must also hone their skills as stage performers. To be successful, Ronning advises, “Once you step on the stage, you had better be, first and foremost, a performer” (153). He goes on to advise, “A poorly skilled hypnotist, with good theatrical skills, will always outperform the most knowledgeable hypnotist with limited dramatic skills” (154). Several of the hypnotists I interviewed came to hypnosis after working in other areas of live performance. Brody was first a puppeteer. Koesters and Stage Hypnotist I began as stand-up comics. Night was, and still is, a practicing magician. The Sandman reported that he was already an “entertainer” before becoming a stage hypnotist, but did not provide specifics about what field(s) of entertainment he had pursued.

Of the six hypnotists I interviewed, only Freeman had no performance experience prior to becoming a stage hypnotist. Instead, she had been a therapeutic hypnotist for several years when her children’s school approached her and requested that she provide entertainment for an event. She then developed her performance skills as she received additional bookings. One specific aspect of performance that Freeman discussed is the flexibility needed to adapt to the unplanned and unpredictable responses of audience volunteers. She explained that although each of her shows might only include 25 to 30 skits, she prepares and memorizes between 60 and 80 routines so that she can improvise based on changing circumstances during performance. At some performances, she might have only a few volunteers while at others she may have dozens, and at one show she may end up with only female volunteers while at another she may end up with only
males. Thus, she explained that she relies on intuition, developed over years of performing, to guide her in making adjustments during performances whenever necessary.

Like stand-up comics, contemporary stage hypnotists do not usually travel with a production team. Thus, they need to develop technical expertise and familiarity with a wide variety of equipment. Ronning advises that although many venues will provide sound and lighting assistance, it is advisable to bring additional sound equipment as a backup and to use a remote system that is self-controlled from the stage, if possible (178). The fewer variables left to others, the better. Freeman, who works with the same sound technician for every show, described the complex process of choosing and recording music and other sound cues appropriate to each routine, venue, and audience, and coordinating the placement and timing of those cues in the show with her sound technician. Additionally, many stage hypnotists record their performances and make those recordings available for purchase, which requires knowledge of both recording and duplication equipment. Cressman includes an entire chapter on sound equipment and video recording in his guide for aspiring stage hypnotists (111-18), as well as information about audio recording, sound mixing, and even merchandise labeling (125-35).

Finally, while the most successful performers may have marketing assistance, most stage hypnotists must familiarize themselves with advertising, publicity, booking, and billing. Royle advises aspiring stage hypnotists that they will spend “99% of [their] time on sales, marketing, and publicity” (199). Royle (198-220, 372-422), Ronning (225-44), and Cressman (67-89, 125-36) each devote two full chapters of their guidebooks to such details. Each of these books includes information such as how to set up and maintain a website, how to advertise to specific markets, how to design promotional materials like business cards, demo DVDs, and press releases, and how to secure an agent.
To become successful, stage hypnotists must devote large amounts of time and resources to preparation, planning, and technical details. The rewards, however, can be considerable. Stage Hypnotist I explains that he booked his first stage hypnosis performance in response to a dare from his roommate. He had been performing stand-up comedy for several years and convinced a local comedy club to let him try a hypnosis show, which was successful and quickly led to other bookings. He had been making about $10 a night doing stand-up, but he could immediately command $500 a night for stage hypnosis (Telephone interview). Stage Hypnotist I began his career several decades ago, and thus it is likely that performers receive even higher compensation today. During a 2010 performance that I attended, Anthony Potmesil told his audience that he makes at least $1,000 an hour for his shows. Although his claim seemed intended to impress the audience, and thus its veracity might be questioned, it is probably not far off. Stage hypnotists’ contracts include not only an up-front fee, but frequently also include reimbursement for travel expenses, lodging, and meals. Hypnotist Steve Meade includes a list of tips for hiring a good stage hypnotist on his website, and states that readers should expect to pay from $800 to $7,500 per show, with the median cost at about $2,500 (Meade). To promote his stage hypnosis training program, Michael C. Anthony asserts that although some markets pay more than others, high school shows currently pay $1,500-$2,500, and corporate performances can pay as much as $7,500 (“F.A.Q.”).

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Despite the diversity of venues, audiences, and styles available to contemporary stage hypnotists, the basic structure of their performances is often quite similar. A hypnotist warms up the crowd with a pre-talk and/or pre-tests, invites volunteers to the stage, performs one or more hypnotic inductions, releases any volunteers who might not be suitable for the performance, and
then leads the remaining volunteers through a series of activities. After these performance activities, the hypnotist releases the volunteers from hypnosis and dismisses them to return to their seats in the audience. Although such shows are built around the concept of hypnosis, an entertaining stage persona and the ability to develop trust and rapport with audience members add volunteers may be more important. Stage Hypnotist I remarked of stage hypnosis performances, “I think hypnosis is real. I think hypnosis is fairly unimportant” (Telephone interview). He went on to explain:

We’re all trying to sway those around us and get them to come to our point of view and to see things our way... Hypnosis is a form of communication that strives to do that also, but in a more effective way. But the fact that it’s hypnosis, it kind of doesn’t matter. Most hypnotists that I’ve seen try to sell themselves as having this unique power that they control people. The fact of the matter is, a hypnotist has no more power than anybody else. If they’re good at what they do, they’re good at what they do because they’re good communicators. There’s nothing wrong with that. That’s a powerful thing to be able to do.

Whether or not stage hypnosis performances utilize some persuasive power more mysterious than effective communication, audiences seem drawn to them and I have been surprised by their widespread popularity. In the performances I have attended, stage hypnotists have had little difficulty drawing large crowds and finding volunteer performers. Whether the shows were in high school gymnasiums, upscale clubs, or dive bars, the houses were full of people waiting to laugh at what their friends onstage might do next. When asked why people are drawn to his shows, Brody responded succinctly, “Because they want to see the impossible.”
We can begin by stating that the first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body, the main source of sound and movement. Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive. Then he will be able to practice theatrical forms in which by stages he frees himself from his condition of spectator and takes on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, is changed from witness into protagonist. (Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 125-6)

I can vaguely remember certain parts of it, exactly, but it was kind of like I went through everything in a fog. It’s not like I was *actively* like, “OK, this is what I’m doing right now. This is what I’m gonna do next . . .” It was just like, he told me to do it. I didn’t think about it. I just went straight through it, and there are parts I don’t remember. (Chelsea Talbott, Personal interview)

Unlike Boal’s vision of an actor who “ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, is changed from witness into protagonist” (126), participants in stage hypnosis performances can be viewed as both object and subject simultaneously. As Talbott’s comment, above, suggests, audience members may move from the spectator position when they volunteer for a show, but their performances are then shaped, moment-by-moment, by the hypnotist for whom they
perform. Volunteer performer David McKinley tries to parse through the complexities of the volunteer’s role, saying,

It didn’t feel like I was performing on stage. I guess in the technical sense I was, but I didn’t think of it as me being an actor and [the hypnotist] has me on stage and he’s the director telling me what to do. That’s not how I saw it. . . . I was a volunteer for his show. It was his show. He was the performer and I was just someone onstage. I think a lot of it was the title. He didn’t call us an actor, like, “I need some actors on stage.” He said, “I need volunteers.” I was just sort of a helper, and he was the star of the show. (Personal interview)¹

Despite the volunteer’s unstable position, many people enjoy the volunteer experience. For example, in “Transient Positive and Negative Experiences Accompanying Stage Hypnosis,” Helen J. Crawford, et al., report that 86.4% of the volunteer performers they surveyed found “some or all of their experiences to be positive and enjoyable” (665).

To further my understanding of stage hypnosis and of the relationship between public perceptions of stage hypnosis and the ways in which it is practiced, I interviewed twelve volunteer performers who self-selected by contacting me after they saw fliers or internet posts about my research. These interviewees discuss their expectations about hypnosis and stage hypnosis prior to attending performances, how those expectations compare to performances they witnessed and/or performances in which they participated, and their subjective assessments of

¹ This chapter serves to analyze and synthesize information gleaned in interviews with volunteer participants and stage hypnotists. To avoid redundancy, only the first reference to information provided by each interviewee will receive parenthetical citation (i.e., Personal interview). It should be assumed that all subsequent quotes, data, and information attributed to that interviewee were provided during the same cited interview unless otherwise noted.
their participation. Additionally, I interviewed six stage hypnotists about their craft. Given my focus in this dissertation on how perceptions influence stage hypnosis, I was particularly interested in the hypnotists’ thoughts about what volunteers and audience members expect stage hypnosis to be like, and whether the hypnotists feel their shows align with these expectations.

In this chapter, I first examine the performance experiences of the twelve volunteer performers, who discuss their reasons for volunteering, their previous exposure to ideas about hypnosis, details of their performances, and their personal feelings about their participation. Some of these case studies examine individual interviewees’ experiences, while others compare and contrast the experiences of two interviewees when such comparisons can provide unique insights. Next, I trace some common assumptions and impressions about hypnosis that run through these interviews. Finally, I examine the ways in which these volunteers’ prior expectations about stage hypnosis may have impacted their performance experiences, and consider whether their experiences can provide insights into the contemporary practice of stage hypnosis. Throughout the chapter, I also include information gleaned from my interviews with stage hypnotists as well as studies by hypnosis researchers, in order to provide context to the volunteers’ experiences.

Because of the small sample size and non-randomized selection process, my findings cannot be used to make statistical claims about the nature of stage hypnosis performance in the larger population. However, although their volunteer experiences were diverse, many of the interviewees express similar ideas about hypnosis. Additionally, many of the expectations and assumptions about hypnosis that stage hypnotists report align well with those expressed by the volunteers. Thus, the repetition of such similar ideas and concerns across these two populations

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2 After completing these interviews, I volunteered to participate in a stage hypnosis show. I provide a separate discussion and analysis of my participation experience in chapter 5.
gives me an opportunity to verify the existence of such notions in a contemporary volunteer population, and to continue to explore the manifestations of such ideas.

“I Really Felt Like I Truly Was”

Of the twelve volunteer performers, five are certain they became hypnotized during their volunteer experiences: Jerry Barnett, R. Nicole Hurtsellers, Kristina Jones, Wade Niederkohr, and Chad Paben. Although the performance experiences of these five interviewees varied, they share one significant commonality: none seem to question whether their internal, subjective experiences of hypnosis could have been misinterpreted. Jones’s response was both typical and straightforward: although she suspects that a few of her fellow volunteers might not have been hypnotized, she states simply, “I really felt like I truly was” (Personal interview).

Kristina Jones

Jones is a freshman at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). She is open, friendly, and quick to laugh. While many of my interviewees report enjoying their participation, Jones is the only one who has nothing negative whatsoever to say about stage hypnosis: she seems to have enjoyed every aspect of the experience. Jones took part in stage hypnosis during orientation week at BGSU in August of 2011. Although she does not remember the hypnotist’s name, I believe it was Dale K. As I noted earlier, K has performed during orientation week at BGSU for the past several years, and a BGSU-sponsored Facebook page reports that he performed there on Saturday, August 20, 2011 (BGSU Student Enrollment Communication Center). Before her performance, Jones had no prior experience with hypnosis, aside from a vague image of a swinging pocket watch she thinks she may have seen on television. She was inspired to participate when friends who had seen another performance by the same hypnotist told her about the volunteers’ “crazy” behavior, and she thought their descriptions of the show sounded like
During the performance, Jones participated in a routine that I described in chapter 3, in which she was driving a car, as well as one in which she and another volunteer portrayed nurses who had to deliver a baby. For added comedic effect, the expectant mother was played by a male volunteer. Jones finds it particularly amusing that at one point in the show she snatched another volunteer’s hat from his head and put it on, and says that whenever she saw this young man on campus in the ensuing months, they laughed together about the incident. In fact, Jones often sees her fellow volunteer performers on campus, and says she is surprised by how sharply she recalls each of their faces.

While Jones feels certain she was hypnotized during the performance, she suspects one of her fellow volunteers was not hypnotized because the young woman kept “getting up and running around.” Jones says that the energetic woman’s behavior “stood out” from the other volunteers, and that this woman seemed to be “pretending.” Whether or not she was hypnotized, the woman eventually became “one of the main focal points of the whole act.” Thus, Jones is unsure whether her assessment of the woman was accurate, or whether the hypnotist simply selected the most enthusiastic performer for individual routines despite the fact that she might not have been hypnotized. Jones says she finds the idea that the woman might have been pretending to be “kinda weird,” because Jones cannot imagine herself behaving so outlandishly “just for a stage [performance].”

At the end of the show, the hypnotist suggested the volunteers would remember nothing about their participation until they stepped out of the performance venue, at which time they would suddenly remember everything they had done. Jones reports that it “worked just like that,” and that “it just kinda like hit me, like, what just happened? Like, now I remember everything . . .
. exactly how he said it was supposed to work.” She compares the experience of remembering her amusing behavior while under hypnosis to waking up in the morning after a night of drinking too much alcohol: while she remembers her actions, she is amused by them and feels slightly removed from the events.

Jones was surprised when people approached her after the show to tell her she was funny. She thinks that some of the other performers were funny, but says, “I didn’t really think I was doing anything.” Rather than trying to create an intentionally comedic performance, she just complied with the hypnotist’s suggestions. She explains, “I guess I would just listen to everything he said . . . I didn’t feel like I was being that funny but other people said I was really funny.” She notes that the show seemed like so much fun she wishes she could have seen it, and says, “I was excited that I did it, because it was, like, one of the coolest experiences I’ve ever had.”

Jerry Barnett and Wade Niederkohr

Although their experiences were not identical, the similarities between Barnett’s and Niederkohr’s participation in stage hypnosis are significant: both entered their participation with the belief that stage hypnosis is faked, both found their beliefs challenged when they experienced a deep hypnosis during the shows for which they volunteered, and both have little or no memory of their performances. Because they were left with post-hypnotic amnesia, they were able to provide details of their participation only because they watched video recordings of the shows afterward. Upon viewing those tapes, both young men felt embarrassed by some of the things they had done during their performances, but both report that their experiences with stage hypnosis were more positive than negative, overall.

Barnett is a 21-year-old junior at BGSU who is undecided about his course of study. Prior
to his participation in stage hypnosis, he experienced therapeutic hypnosis to treat mental health concerns. Although he found hypnosis to be a useful therapeutic tool, he was quite skeptical of stage performances that incorporate hypnosis, saying, “I thought it was fake going into it. Like, I thought it was completely staged, completely unreal. I believed in hypnosis, having done therapeutic, but, you know, I just never thought the shows, you know the stuff people say, I never thought it was real” (Personal interview). Despite his skepticism, he volunteered for stage hypnotist Marc Savard while on a family vacation to Las Vegas in 2010. Barnett did not initially want to volunteer for the show, but says that his parents “nudged” him to do it, because they thought it would be fun for the three of them to volunteer together as a family. Ultimately, Barnett was the only one to complete the performance: his father volunteered but was released from the stage early in the show, while his mother was unable to participate because Savard would not permit anyone who had consumed alcohol to volunteer.

Barnett describes Savard’s show as “half hypnosis, half stand-up” comedy. During the performance, Barnett was prompted to answer a number of questions and reveal personal information, much of it sexual in nature. He describes these questions as “Stuff that would embarrass us if we knew what we were actually saying. Oh yeah, it was awful.” For example, his parents found it “absolutely hilarious” when Barnett complied with a suggestion to leave the stage, stand by their table in the audience, and provide them with a detailed account of his first consensual sexual experience. Although his parents already knew about this experience, they were both embarrassed and amused to find their table illuminated by a spotlight for this very public retelling of the events.

When Barnett compares his experiences with stage and therapeutic hypnosis, he finds them similar but not identical. His initial skepticism about the authenticity of stage hypnosis was
challenged when he felt many of the same sensations on stage that he experienced during therapeutic hypnosis. These similarities have led him to conclude that stage hypnosis can produce a genuine hypnotic experience. He attributes the differences he felt to the purpose for which he was hypnotized, rather than any fundamental difference in the hypnotic procedure itself. Barnett sought therapeutic hypnosis in order to work through a traumatic experience, and he explains that in this context, hypnosis provided him with such vivid recall that he felt as though he were reliving the events he visualized. He describes this vivid recall as “quite frightening, because it really felt like it was happening again.” (Although this process was difficult, Barnett ultimately found therapeutic hypnosis to be useful and effective.) Alternatively, he calls stage hypnosis a “comedy version” of the same process. Although his memory is extremely fragmented, he says stage hypnosis felt like an “alternate reality version of it, like I was living out a movie.” Ironically, while he felt as though the events he was prompted to recall in therapeutic hypnosis were really happening to him, the comedic activities he performed on stage felt illusory. He describes stage hypnosis as “more like I was watching myself doing it and imagining myself doing it than [that] it was really, actually happening.”

Like Barnett, Niederkohr does not remember performing, although Niederkohr’s amnesia is more extensive than Barnett’s. With his football player’s build, Niederkohr’s size might be intimidating were it not for his easy-going manner and wide grin. A soft-spoken 22-year-old, Niederkohr is a nursing student at Owens Community College. He volunteered for stage hypnotist Michael Brody three times, and watched a fourth performance from the audience. (Brody is often hired to perform for after-Prom celebrations at the high school Niederkohr attended. Thus, Niederkohr had many opportunities to attend Brody’s shows.). Niederkohr’s last memory at each of the three performances is of a selection test wherein Brody asked audience
members who wished to participate in the show to close their eyes and visualize their fingers getting closer together. From friends’ reports, Niederkohr knows that he was called up to the stage after he responded strongly to this selection test at each of the three shows. His amnesia is so complete, however, that even when he viewed performance recordings, his memory was not spurred by observing his actions (Personal interview).

Niederkohr admits that before participating, he thought hypnosis in general was “ridiculous.” He had heard about the use of hypnosis to lose weight and stop smoking, but he “didn’t believe any of it,” did not think it could be effective, and thought all hypnosis was a “stage act.” Ironically, even after Niederkohr’s first experience with stage hypnosis, he remained skeptical of its veracity. When he saw therapeutic hypnosis presented on the television show *Maury*, hosted by Maury Povich, he assumed that he was watching an actor “faking it.”

Niederkohr attributes his continued skepticism about hypnosis to the fact that he has no memory of his hypnotic experience. Only after he participated in stage hypnosis a second and third time and saw recordings of his performances did he begin to accept that hypnosis, both stage and therapeutic, might be a real phenomenon.

Because Niederkohr volunteered for three hypnosis shows, he participated in a wide variety of activities and routines. Although he cannot remember doing these things, when he watched the performance recordings, he found some of the routines particularly amusing. Once, for example, Brody convinced Niederkohr that he found Brody incredibly attractive and then later horrifically ugly. Niederkohr laughs as he describes watching himself on the video flexing his muscles and puffing out his chest in response to perceiving such an attractive person, and

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3 Based on Niederkohr’s description of the show, I believe he was referring to an episode of *Maury* entitled, “I'm Terrified of Gum, Crabs and Balloons!” that aired 24 October 2007. During the episode, hypnotist The Incredible Boris Cherniak attempts to relieve extreme phobias.
then later recoiling when Brody became ugly before his eyes. Niederkohr also ran out into the audience and draped his body over an audience member, because he had been told that he was a seat belt and that he should find someone in the audience to protect. Perhaps Niederkohr’s favorite routine is one in which he repeatedly sprayed himself in the face with a squirt gun. His objective was to try to squirt Brody whenever he turned his back. However, Brody handed the gun to Niederkohr backward, with the nozzle facing toward Niederkohr. Thus, every time Niederkohr tried to spray Brody, he ended up spraying himself. At one point, Brody asked Niederkohr why his face was wet, and, apparently unable to connect the water on his face to the squirt gun in his hand, Niederkohr replied that the roof must be leaking.

Because he does not remember walking to the stage to join the performances, Niederkohr describes the conclusion of each show as “disorienting.” He became aware that he was on stage in front of a large audience, but he did not know what he was doing there or how he got there. Like Barnett, Niederkohr’s memory loss makes him feel somewhat removed from the images when he watches recordings of his performances. Niederkohr describes the experience of seeing himself performing as “kind of awkward at first, because that’s you and you don’t know what happened.” He recalls laughing and watching the videos “as if it was somebody else. It was funny.” In fact, Niederkohr responded so strongly to hypnosis that memory loss was not the only unusual phenomenon he experienced: his hypnotic response persisted even after the performances ended. After one show, he found himself still responding to a suggestion well into the following day. During that show, he had been told that a wad of toilet tissue was a million dollars in cash, and he hid the tissue in his pants to protect it from anyone who might try to steal it. Even the next day, while he recognized that the tissue was not money, he felt an overwhelming urge to protect and keep it without knowing why. Niederkohr wonders whether
the intensity of his hypnotic response could be connected to other medical conditions: he suffers from narcolepsy, and after his twelfth concussion in high school he had to give up plans to play collegiate football.

Both Barnett and Niederkohr enjoyed their performance experiences, although both were embarrassed by some of the racier activities in which they participated. Niederkohr, for example, became embarrassed while watching himself perform in a sexually suggestive routine with a platonic female friend, because he is normally quite reserved. He thinks that his uncharacteristic behavior is proof that he was hypnotized, saying, “There’s no way you could do that if you were of a conscious mind.” Despite their embarrassment, both interviewees have no reservations about volunteering for stage hypnosis again. In fact, Niederkohr tried to volunteer for Brody a fourth time. Brody, however, discouraged him, saying they should let someone else have a turn. Barnett “definitely enjoyed” participating, despite his embarrassment, saying, “After watching the video and realizing what I was, you know, I wouldn’t say being forced, but what was done with me, I’m definitely embarrassed. But I would do it again. It was fun.” However, Barnett notes that the next time he attends such a performance, he probably will not volunteer, simply because he would like to watch the show.

While many aspects of Barnett’s and Niederkohr’s volunteer experiences were similar, their reactions afterward differed somewhat. Niederkohr is completely comfortable with his post-hypnotic amnesia, and it does not affect his willingness to become hypnotized again. He acknowledges that a more “high-strung” person might be uncomfortable not remembering the experience, but said he is not bothered because he’s “pretty laid-back.” Furthermore, he thinks that even without the video documentation of his participation to substitute for his memory, he would not have hesitated to volunteered again. Barnett, on the other hand, finds his lack of
memory somewhat troubling. Because he experienced amnesia after both therapeutic and stage hypnosis sessions, watching the performance recording afforded him the first opportunity to see how he behaves under hypnosis. Unlike his stage performance, which he can watch on video, he notes that the only record of his therapy sessions is the one recounted to him by the therapist. Barnett feels uneasy about the fact that he has no way to verify his therapist’s account, saying, “I don’t get a tape of my therapy sessions . . . I don’t know exactly what I said.” He knows that he was convinced to behave outlandishly on stage under hypnosis, and thus he worries about what he might be convinced to do in a therapeutic setting. He explains that “it almost, kind, of, frightens me” to think about the power that an unscrupulous person could exercise over him, and that he has chosen not to undergo therapeutic hypnosis again since he participated in stage hypnosis.  

\[ R. \text{ Nicole Hurtsellers} \]

Hurtsellers is 24 years old, and the grace and poise with which she holds herself bears witness to her many years of classical dance training. About four years prior to our interview, she participated in a hypnosis-based performance which was the focus of a training video that her hypnotherapist intended to use in a presentation at upcoming hypnosis conferences. Hurtsellers believes that the purpose of the video was to demonstrate various induction techniques, and that the intended audience for the video was other hypnotherapists (Personal interview). Although her performance experience is atypical, it provides many interesting points of comparison with more traditional stage hypnosis performances.

Prior to making the hypnosis video, Hurtsellers had extensive exposure to hypnosis as

\[ 4 \text{ Prior to ending our interview session, I made certain that although Barnett now eschews therapeutic hypnosis he is still receiving appropriate mental health care for the issues which originally impelled him to seek therapy. He assured me that he continues to receive treatment from a conventional therapist.} \]
well as other complementary and alternative treatment methods. Her father is the owner and head instructor of a martial arts school, and he has always stressed the importance of the mind-body connection. When Hurtsellers was ten or eleven years old, her father began studying to become a licensed hypnotist, and he practiced the techniques he was learning on family members. Thus, when she needed mental health care as an adult, she felt comfortable with hypnosis, having already experienced it many times at home. Hurtsellers prefers more holistic approaches to healthcare over pharmaceutical intervention, and this “no pills, no powder policy” means that she found hypnotherapy preferable to more conventional treatment methods, such as antidepressants. In addition to her first-hand experience with hypnosis, prior to participating in a performance Hurtsellers recalls encountering hypnosis in various media and entertainment, including advertisements promoting hypnosis performances as well as depictions of hypnosis in children’s literature and television programs. In elementary school, she read the *Wayside School* series of children’s books by Louis Sachar, which features a school counselor who hypnotizes students with a swinging pickle on a chain, and she thinks she may have seen another image of a swinging object associated with hypnosis on a television sit-com. Although she is uncertain, she thinks the program may have been an episode of *Seinfeld*. The episode’s plot involves a stage hypnotist who convinces a woman that napkins are dollar bills, after which the woman enthusiastically collects napkins from audience members.\(^5\) Hurtsellers also recalls seeing hypnosis presented as a potential mind control device on episodes of the animated series, *Pinky and the Brain*.\(^6\)

Despite her extensive media exposure and first-hand experience with hypnosis,

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\(^5\) I am unable to identify such an episode of *Seinfeld*, which suggests that Hurtsellers may remember this plot point from another show.

\(^6\) As I noted earlier, hypnosis is a frequent plot device in *Pinky and the Brain*, and thus I am unable to identify a specific episode.
Hurtsellers has not and will not attend a live, hypnosis-based performance. Her experiences with therapeutic hypnosis have shown her that she is extremely responsive to hypnotic induction, and thus she worries that she would inadvertently become hypnotized at a stage performance. She quips, “I don’t want to bawk like a chicken every time I hear the word ‘pickle’ for the rest of my life.” She relates this with a laugh, but her concern is sincere, and reflects an expectation about stage hypnosis performances that many of the hypnotists I interviewed identify as a common misperception. Explaining why some people are hesitant to volunteer for her shows, hypnotist Pattie Freeman says, “The first thing they’ll always say is, ‘she’ll have me bark like a dog or quack like a chicken.’ I hear that every time, and I say, ‘you know what, they went out with that years ago!’” (Telephone interview). Similarly, hypnotist Michael Night notes that “Some people also feel like the hypnotist will control their mind and make them cluck like a chicken. I cannot say I have ever seen a hypnotist make anyone cluck” (Personal interview). Stage Hypnotist I, however, counters Freeman’s and Night’s assertion that hypnotists rarely make their volunteers behave like animals, and insists that this is common practice. He says the expectation that hypnotists will ask their volunteers to impersonate animals is quite pervasive, explaining, “Everybody knows peanut butter goes with jelly and everybody knows that hypnotists make people bark like a dog. . . . There’s not a club I’ve ever worked where, when I say I’ll be asking for volunteers [someone asks], ‘are you going to make someone squeal like a pig or quack like a duck?’” (Telephone interview). He goes on to explain that, although he does not include such routines in his shows, this idea is pervasive precisely because many other hypnotists do.

Hurtsellers had been seeing her hypnotherapist for mental health concerns two to three times per week for about a year when he asked her to take part in the training video. During her recorded performance, the hypnotherapist performed multiple hypnosis inductions with
Hurtsellers. Each induction was followed by depth testing activities to demonstrate the effectiveness of the induction, after which she was awakened in preparation for the next induction. For the depth-testing activities, Hurtsellers explains that “he would just have me do simple things, just stand up, touch your toes, sit down, turn your head this direction, just, like, simple directions. And I guess, I mean, now that I say that, it sounds like anybody could have watched that video and been, like, ‘She’s faking it. Duh. She’s just doing whatever he tells her to do.’” Apparently realizing for the first time that her performance might not have provided inarguable proof of the success of her therapist’s techniques, she laughs and wonders, “How do you prove that someone is hypnotized? Now I don’t know. (Long pause as she sips her coffee.) The more that I think about it, the more I’m like, anybody could have just thought, like, ‘Oh, you found this dumb broad to just make a fool of herself on a video camera. . . .’ Maybe they didn’t think I was hypnotized. Dammit!”

Hurtsellers finds it difficult to remember details about the activities she performed on the video, and equates her post-hypnosis memory trouble with a similar difficulty remembering dreams upon awakening. Despite her hazy memory, she clearly remembers being made to forget the number seven, after which she repeatedly counted her fingers. As I detailed in chapter 3, with the number seven inaccessible to her, she skipped it while counting and kept coming up with a total of eleven fingers. The kinds of activities Hurtsellers describes, including motor suggestions and amnesia, are common in stage hypnosis shows, but Hurtsellers was unfamiliar with them because she had never seen hypnosis in performance. She says she found such activities tedious, and explains that she had “never done something so pointless” in any of her therapeutic sessions. She speculates that since she is a particularly responsive hypnotic subject, perhaps her therapist had never felt the need to pursue depth-testing activities with her in their earlier sessions.
Because their goal was therapeutic, they simply proceeded directly to therapeutic explorations after each induction.

Counterintuitively, Hurtsellers found the performance “kind of exhausting,” despite the fact that she was seated or lying down most of the time. She attributes her exhaustion to the repetition of hypnosis induction followed by being awakened. For her, this felt like being repeatedly roused from a deep sleep. In contrast, she found her therapeutic sessions relaxing, despite the fact that they were sometimes quite physical as well as emotionally taxing. (During her hypnotherapy sessions, she often reenacted traumatic events from her past in order to confront and process those events.) Despite the physical toll, she enjoyed her participation and she is open to the prospect of working with her hypnotherapist in this way again. In fact, when he contacted her a few years later to ask if she would perform in live demonstrations he was scheduled to give at several international conferences, she was disappointed when scheduling issues prevented her from participating.

Chad Paben

Paben is a twenty-six-year-old student at Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio, majoring in Ecotourism and Adventure Travel. His academic program combines biological sciences and natural history with resource and business management, wilderness skills, and hospitality tourism. Paben’s decision to participate in stage hypnosis seems to have been motivated by the same scientific curiosity and love of adventure that informs his career path. He refers to his participation as an “experiment,” and laughs as he jokingly proclaims, “I did it for science!” (Personal interview).

Prior to volunteering for stage hypnosis, Paben had significant exposure to hypnosis in general as well as to stage hypnosis specifically. He reports seeing movie depictions of hypnosis
as well as billboard advertisements for hypnotherapy designed to assist with weight loss and smoking cessation. He also watched YouTube clips of stage hypnosis performances and attended two such shows before his volunteer experience. Like Barnett and Niederkohr, before he participated, Paben had little faith in the veracity of stage hypnosis. He says, “I kinda thought it was all, not necessarily a hoax, but, like, it was just people performing.” He even wondered whether some interaction between the hypnotist and the audience during the call for volunteers might influence the volunteers to comply.

Paben participated in the third performance he attended, which featured stage hypnotist Michael Night, on New Year’s Eve, 2009. Paben chose not to go up on stage during the call for volunteers at any of the three stage hypnosis performances he attended, including Night’s show in which he ultimately participated. Instead, Paben attended to each hypnotist’s induction from his seat in the audience. At one of these three shows he did not respond to the induction, but at the other two he experienced a feeling of deep relaxation and began responding to suggestions the hypnotist gave to the volunteers. As I detailed in chapter 3, one hypnotist gave Paben a choice about whether or not he wanted to come in stage and participate in the show, while the other simply informed Paben that he was in the wrong seat and guided him onto the stage.

Although he did not experience post-hypnotic amnesia, Paben finds it difficult to recall specific details of his performance. He surmises that his incomplete memory may be due to some quality of hypnosis itself, as well as to the fact that the performance was several years ago. Additionally, he attended other hypnosis shows both before and after the one in which he participated. Thus, the many performances he has attended have begun to bleed together in his mind, and he has some difficulty distinguishing which events occurred at which shows.

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7 I was fortunate to be present at this show, and thus I saw Paben’s performance.
However, watching a recording of his performance prompted his memory and he is able to recall some activities, such as singing and dancing to The Village People’s “YMCA.” Paben says that under hypnosis, he focused only on the hypnotist’s instructions. He was dimly aware of other things around him, such as movement and laughter, but he was not attentive to them, explaining, “I wouldn’t say I was in a normal area of thought.” Like Jones, he was surprised when people approached him to compliment his performance afterward. Although he had some previous onstage experience in college and community theatre productions, he was so intently focused on the hypnotist that he had not intentionally tried to create an entertaining performance. Thus, when people complimented his performance, he recalls “not really knowing what that meant.”

Paben enjoyed his volunteer experience primarily because he found it “incredibly relaxing.” He notes that he is often tense and he has trouble focusing. Conversely, while hypnotized, he enjoyed a sensation of deep relaxation and mental focus, saying, “My mind wasn’t on anything. It was not wandering. It was just focused on what was being done at hand. I didn’t really have any worries.” Paben even tried to use the induction techniques later on his own to relax or fall asleep, but he was unsuccessful. He considers the physical and cognitive changes he experienced to be “experimental proof” that hypnosis is real. Initially skeptical of stage hypnosis in particular, he says his participation “legitimized” the phenomenon for him. After his performance, Paben began telling friends about stage hypnosis and recommending that they attend performances. He eventually took some friends to a show, but was disappointed by the poor quality of the performance. However, he reassured his friends that although this performer was bad, stage hypnosis as a whole was real. Paben says that if he had the chance to participate in another performance, he might or might not, depending on his mood. He feels he has satisfied his curiosity about whether or not he can be hypnotized, saying, “I don’t think doing it again will
prove or disprove that theory.”

“It Didn’t Work on Me”

Four interviewees were certain they had not become hypnotized: Rebecca Blossom, Carrissa Burns, Matthew Nicosia, and Casey Toney. Whether they performed in a show from start to finish or were dismissed from the stage by the hypnotist, and whether they found the performance enjoyable or uncomfortable, all four express some version of Nicosia’s conclusion about his experience with hypnosis: “It didn’t work on me” (Personal interview).

Rebecca Blossom and Carissa Burns

Blossom and Burns share remarkable similarities in their lives as well as their volunteer performance experiences. Both accomplished musicians, the two nineteen-year-olds were members of the All-Ohio State Fair Band (AOSFB) when they were in high school. While at the fair to perform with the band, both interviewees volunteered for stage hypnotist Ron Diamond, who is a regular fair performer. Neither young woman believes she became hypnotized while participating, both of them enjoyed their volunteer experiences so much that they subsequently volunteered for Diamond again, and both of them returned after their volunteer experiences to watch additional shows from the audience.8

For nearly three weeks each summer, the AOSFB performs as many as ninety-five concerts at the Ohio State Fair (“All-Ohio State Fair Band”). Comprised of two-hundred musicians from high schools throughout Ohio, when AOSFB members are not performing they are free to enjoy the fair’s attractions. Diamond, too, is a regular performer at the fair, and each year he performs at least two hypnosis shows per day. Most band members attend multiple

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8 Although Blossom and Burns were members of the AOSFB together, they shared only a passing acquaintance with one another and did not coordinate their volunteer experiences or discuss them later.
performances and many volunteer to participate in Diamond’s shows. (Unlike some other fair entertainments, Diamond’s shows are free. Thus, they provide an attractive entertainment option for the teenaged musicians.) Blossom describes participating in Diamond’s show as a “rite of passage” for band members who often attend the fair each summer throughout high school. Returning band members initiate newcomers by challenging them to brave the House of Horrors (a haunted house attraction) and to volunteer for Diamond’s show. Band members are on hand in the audience to cheer when one of their own leaves the stage after his or her first performance with Diamond, and those who choose not to volunteer are labeled “chicken” (Blossom, Personal interview).

Blossom, who volunteered for two of Diamond’s shows in July of 2009, is an exuberant mass of contradictions: with her infections laugh, enthusiastic gum-chewing, and petite stature, she looks too young to be an Air Force enlistee. The traditional diamond engagement ring on her left hand contrasts sharply with her prominent nasal septum piercing and the piles of bracelets on her wrists (which appear to include several braided friendship bracelets and some colorful elastic hair ties). Like Blossom, Burns has a ready laugh and a colorful collection of bracelets. She attends BGSU where she is a technical theatre major, and she describes herself as someone who really likes to entertain people and make them laugh (Personal interview). During the 2009 and 2010 fair seasons, Burns volunteered for Diamond a total of five times. Her sister, brother, and father also volunteered for Diamond, with mixed results: while Burns and her siblings were able to participate in the shows, her father was dismissed from the stage early in the performance.

In an unusual departure from the style of most stage hypnotists with whom I am familiar, both interviewees report that Diamond presents his hypnosis show as “fake” to the volunteers but “real” to the audience. Burns explains that Diamond made it clear to the volunteers that hypnosis
was not expected during the performance. Instead, he openly discussed their participation as “an act” and as “pretend” when he spoke off-mike to the volunteers, but as soon as he turned back to the audience and spoke into the mike, he presented his show as “real” hypnosis. Blossom elaborates on how Diamond’s approach differed from her expectations, saying, “I figured it would be a lot more (in a sing-song voice, as though chanting an incantation) ‘You are being hypnotized,’ and he was just like (with enthusiasm, like a coach or motivational speaker), ‘Make it believable guys!’”

Prior to her performance experience, Blossom recalls little exposure to hypnosis. She had heard of hypnosis as a tool to stop smoking or drinking, and she remembers watching an episode of the children’s cartoon Rugrats in which someone was hypnotized to behave like a duck. Of the character’s compliance under hypnosis, she says, “That’s basically my understanding of [hypnosis]. If you’re really under the spell, like with the watch and stuff (pantomimes swinging a pocket watch), and they tell you to do something, you do it.” Although many of Blossom’s friends had already volunteered for Diamond, none would tell her anything about the experience and insisted that she had to try it for herself. In contrast, Burns felt as though she knew what to expect from hypnosis before she volunteered, both because she had written a report on hypnosis for a high school class, and because some of her band friends were willing to reveal a bit more information about Diamond’s shows than Blossom’s friends had been.

Because of their musical experience, both young women are comfortable on stage, and both thought it would be fun to participate. Curiosity was a primary source of their motivation to volunteer for Diamond. Blossom explains, “I really wanted to see if [the hypnotist] could take my mind from me. That’s never happened to me before. That would be a crazy, new experience.”

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9 Based on her description, I believe Blossom was referring to a 1993 episode of Rugrats entitled, “Chuckie's First Haircut/Cool Hand Angelica.”
Similarly, Burns wanted to see if hypnosis would “work” for her, and she was “really hoping it would.” Burns’s interest was piqued by stories about friends who volunteered but were dismissed from the stage. She thought she could perform well enough to remain on stage, and she wanted to find out. Burns also notes that she volunteered because she did not have “anything better to do” with her free time at the fair.

Both Blossom and Burns recall participating in many of the same activities during their performances, including falling asleep when Diamond snapped his fingers and seeing Diamond in his bathing suit. In order to ensure that fair performances were family friendly, Diamond insisted that the volunteers would find the sight of him in his bathing suit revolting. As Blossom notes, “None of us were allowed to be OK with it.” Both young women found the routine that served as the finale for each of Diamond’s shows to be particularly memorable. During this routine, Diamond manipulated the limbs of a sock monkey while the volunteers imitated the monkey’s movements, waving their arms, kicking, spinning in circles, and dancing, all to the tune of “Day-O (The Banana Boat Song).” Blossom particularly enjoyed the fact that this activity gave her “an excuse to dance like an idiot.” After the monkey routine, both Blossom and Burns report that they (and their fellow volunteers) pretended to awaken and acted as though they did not know what had happened during the show.

In addition to the activities that both interviewees recall, Burns also remembers taking part in a bit during which volunteers portrayed secret agents and one in which they spoke to one another in an improvised “alien” language. Laughing, she describes participating in this scenario with her sister, who had also volunteered for the show. She says the two “got into this all-out fight in this random language!” They also milked “cows,” which were actually their chairs, and Burns found this last activity especially well-suited to the fair venue, with its emphasis on
livestock. The fair environment, however, is also a reason she thinks hypnosis might not have been possible for the volunteers even if Diamond had not presented his show as fake: Burns assumes that the noise and activity of the fairground would be too distracting for most people to become hypnotized.

Although Burns is certain she was not hypnotized during any of her five volunteer experiences, she noticed a few minor changes in herself that she assumed could be associated with hypnosis. For example, she noticed a sense of relaxation and a slight lowering of her inhibitions. However, she speculates that she might have been less inhibited simply because she was performing in front of an audience. She explains, “I love being on stage. I love being in front of people. I love having an excuse to act a little bit weirder . . . and people being able to laugh at me for it, and having stories to tell about it later, and being able to laugh at myself up there doing it.” She describes feeling a certain freedom in the fact that audience members probably would not know that she was not hypnotized, and thus they might attribute any unusual behavior she exhibited to hypnosis. Blossom, too, describes enjoying the opportunity to fool the audience in this way, saying, “It makes you feel like, ‘Ah, I know something they don’t. I’m making them think I am [hypnotized].’” Of this deception, Blossom goes on to explain, “It’s kind of exhilarating. I felt like I was duping people, you know? Ha! Gotcha!”

Diamond dismissed volunteers from the stage if they were seen laughing or otherwise not focusing all of their attention on him. After her participation, Blossom enjoyed watching Diamond’s subsequent shows to see which volunteers (especially her fellow band members) would be caught laughing and be dismissed, and which of them could remain undetected by Diamond. Band members sometimes even engaged in such sport while they were on stage performing. Blossom reports that volunteers would often look out into the audience and catch
their friends’ eyes when they were supposed to be “sleeping.” If volunteers began to giggle when
Diamond was coming near them, their friends in the audience would try to signal to warn them
of his approach, so that they would not be caught laughing. When Diamond released such
volunteers from the stage, he explained to the audience that those volunteers “didn’t fully
believe” in hypnosis, and therefore they did not become hypnotized. I find it fascinating that, to
the audience, Diamond blamed the volunteers’ dismissals on their lack of “belief” in hypnosis,
when he had presented the performance to the volunteers as inauthentic from the beginning.

Both interviewees report that although Diamond seemed to openly acknowledge that the
hypnosis in his show was “pretend,” volunteers regularly asserted that they had been hypnotized
anyway. Both young women express skepticism about such claims, and Blossom was
particularly skeptical when two of her friends behaved strangely after their performances and
then attributed their odd behavior to hypnosis. She reasons that their uncharacteristic behavior
might actually be proof that they had not been hypnotized. At the end of each performance,
Diamond told volunteers that they would be released from hypnosis. Thus, Blossom assumes that
anyone who had really been hypnotized would have accepted his suggestion when he told them
the hypnosis was over. Because her friends did not accept this final suggestion, Blossom
concludes that they must not have been hypnotized, saying bluntly, “I think they were just lying
for attention.”

Both young women enjoyed their participation experiences. Burns is particularly pleased
that she achieved her goal and was not dismissed from the stage at any of the performances for
which she volunteered. After her first performance, Blossom’s fellow musicians asked her about
the experience. She told them performing had been fun, but that the show was “fake as Hell.” At
that point, many of her friends admitted to her that they had not become hypnotized when they
participated either. Blossom acknowledges she is “a little disappointed” she did not get to experience hypnosis during her performances, saying, “It still was a new experience, and it was fun, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t have done with my friend holding a watch in front of my face and saying, ‘Oh, you’re sleepy. I’m gonna make you do crazy stuff.’” Burns, too, was initially disappointed at not becoming hypnotized; however, she has since changed her mind. Burns is no longer sure that she would even want to experience hypnosis if she were to volunteer for another show. She says she found participating in the shows to be so enjoyable that she would not want to risk being unable to remember it afterwards.

Despite their initial disappointment at discovering they would not be hypnotized, both young women enjoyed the process so much that they returned to Diamond’s shows repeatedly. Blossom volunteered for Diamond a second time and then returned to watch additional performances from the audience, estimating that she eventually saw between fifteen and twenty shows. Burns, too, returned to Diamond’s shows, but she preferred to volunteer more often than watch. She thinks she volunteered for a total of five shows, but allows that it may have been six, and she watched one additional performance from the audience.

Matthew Nicosia and Casey Toney

Like Blossom and Burns, Nicosia and Toney both feel certain they were not hypnotized during the performances for which they volunteered. Unlike Blossom and Burns, however, Nicosia and Toney did not particularly enjoy their participation experiences. Nicosia never wanted to volunteer for stage hypnosis in the first place, and did so only at the request of a friend. He was therefore both embarrassed and more than a little relieved when he was dismissed from the stage by the hypnotist early in the performance. In contrast, Toney volunteered eagerly and remained on stage throughout the performance, but he found the experience so unnerving
that he would have preferred to have been dismissed.

Nicosia is pursuing a PhD in theatre at BGSU. He volunteered for a stage hypnosis show several years ago during a First Night New Year’s celebration in Saratoga, New York. His prior exposure to hypnosis was limited to knowing a few people who had used it as a means to quit smoking, and seeing some unspecified depictions on television and film. To explain how he ended up volunteering for a show he did not want to be a part of, he says, “When they asked for volunteers, I didn’t want to, but my best friend insisted that I volunteer with her because she didn’t want to go up there alone.” He expected the performance to be “a total waste of an hour,” and he assumed that stage hypnosis was “a total sham.”

Nicosia’s volunteer experience was very brief. After several audience members, including Nicosia and his friend, responded to the hypnotist’s call for volunteers and were seated on stage, they were asked to count backward from fifty and imagine they were riding down an escalator. After this activity, Nicosia felt relaxed, but nothing more. Then, the volunteers were asked to count back up to fifty while slowly raising one arm. At this point, the hypnotist released Nicosia from the stage. Nicosia speculates that he may have been “booted off the stage” so early in the show because he raised his arm more quickly than the other volunteers. He explains, “I think [the hypnotist] could tell who was just lifting their arm for the sake of it, just to, kind of, go along with things, versus the people who were really going into that total relaxed state, almost.” Instead, Nicosia says he was “just kind of lifting my arm because [the hypnotist] told me to lift my arm.” Stage hypnotist Pattie Freeman seems to support Nicosia’s idea when she says that she prefers not to work with volunteers who have been pushed to get on stage by someone else. Freeman explains that when people volunteer because others pushed them to go up, they are less likely to become hypnotized (Telephone interview). Hypnotist Michael Brody raises another
issue that could have contributed to Nicosia’s early dismissal: his resistance to the process. Brody explains that he does not want to work with volunteers who are unwilling, and that he looks for signs of resistance in his volunteers’ body language. Brody then releases those volunteers who seem resistant (Personal interview). Thus, Nicosia’s reluctance to volunteer and his resistance to the process may have prompted the hypnotist to release him from the stage.

Nicosia estimates that his entire volunteer experience may have lasted only five minutes. Because of his early dismissal from the show, Nicosia describes his participation in terms of failure. He says that being told to return to his seat made him feel like “the bad kid” who “got sent back to the corner.” Although he was relieved to be finished with an activity in which he was not eager to participate, Nicosia was also embarrassed to have been judged unworthy in front of a room full of people. In order to justify his dismissal, he indulged in a bit of sour grapes, saying, “you start to think, ‘Well, maybe I’m just too intellectual, so this doesn’t work on me,’ you know? ‘They’re all weak-minded, susceptible to the powers of someone else, a complete stranger.’” Laughing, he admits that to counter his embarrassment, he reassured himself, “I’m just better than the rest of them. It doesn’t work on me because I have this power to resist.”

After he was dismissed, Nicosia returned to the audience to watch his friend, who remained on stage for the duration of the performance. He was surprised to find that the show was “fun to watch,” because he went into it with such low expectations. While he acknowledges that it was entertaining, he says he did not find the show particularly innovative, calling the performance “pretty much everything I expected.” The performance was similar to depictions Nicosia had seen on television and in films, and the routines were “the typical things that you’ve heard of people doing.” For example, just as he expected, the hypnotist suggested that the
volunteers would see themselves and audience members without clothing, and that they should act like animals. (Nicosia’s experience seems to support Stage Hypnotist I’s claim that people expect stage hypnotists to make their volunteers act like animals precisely because this is such a common routine.)

Because Nicosia went into his volunteer experience suspecting that stage hypnosis was “a total sham,” he initially felt that not becoming hypnotized was simply proof of his suspicions. He says, “Part of me was like, ‘See, I told you it couldn’t work.’” His skepticism was challenged, however, by the fact that the friend with whom he volunteered believed she had been hypnotized. Nicosia was particularly impressed to see his friend display uncharacteristic behavior during the performance, saying that she had a “different personality” and “different responses” from those he would expect from his long-time friend. Even her mannerisms and body posture changed, and she reported having no memory of what she had done on stage. Although Nicosia had no reason to doubt his friend’s account, he admits that he was a bit leery at the time, and doubt creeps in as he talks about it now, years later. Reporting on his friend’s experience with hypnosis, Nicosia corrects himself mid-sentence, saying, “it actually worked, it apparently worked on my friend.” Despite some lingering uncertainty, he is now more open to the possibility that hypnosis “could be real,” after watching his friend perform, and talking about the experience with her afterward.

Unlike Nicosia, Toney volunteered enthusiastically for a performance, but despite his initial enthusiasm, Toney did not enjoy the experience any more than Nicosia did. A twenty-two year-old Theatre and Film major at BGSU, Toney seems to be in constant motion. Even if one body part settles into stillness, another immediately leaps into action to replace it. His mind, too, seems equally kinetic, jumping from one topic to another at a frenetic pace, and he wonders if his dynamic personality may have contributed to his negative experience with hypnosis: he could
not quiet his mind enough to focus on the process (Personal interview).

Before his volunteer experience, Toney briefly studied hypnosis in a psychology class and he knew that some people use it as a tool to stop smoking. He had seen a television performance of stage hypnosis, as well as an earlier performance by the same hypnotist for whom he eventually volunteered: Dale K. Toney tried to volunteer for K at a BGSU campus performance in 2007, but he was not chosen as a performer. Thus, he watched the show from the audience. When K returned to BGSU in 2008, Toney was determined to be selected. Rather than simply calling for volunteers to come to the stage, K asks audience members to signal him if they want to participate, and then he moves through the crowd selecting the most vocal and enthusiastic volunteers. Remembering this from the previous performance, Toney “went nuts,” taking off his jacket and swinging it over his head in order to ensure that he would be selected.

Early in the show, K released volunteers from the stage that he deemed to be “un-hypnotized.” Although Toney was not released, he soon began to believe that he was nonetheless not hypnotized. Uncertain what to do, Toney continued with the performance in order to avoid the embarrassment of quitting in the middle of the show. However, he was consumed with anxiety at the thought that he might be found out as an imposter. As each minute passed, he felt that it would be more embarrassing if he had to leave the stage, because people would wonder why he had stayed so long if he knew he was not hypnotized. Thus, the rest of the show became a calculated attempt to devise performance strategies that would allow him to avoid embarrassment. He tried to comply with every suggestion, so that he would appear to be hypnotized, but he tried not to comply too well because the most animated performers were singled out for individual skits. Toney reasoned that if he were singled out for a solo performance, the increased attention would place him at increased risk of detection. A trained
actor, Toney knew he should be able to improvise well enough to get through such a routine, but he feared that because he was not hypnotized, he would not be able to remember the complex sequences of words and actions that he would be asked to execute. Then, if he could not remember the instructions, the audience would see him “screwing up,” and realize he was not hypnotized. He acknowledges, “It’s weird . . . I felt, like, more embarrassed if people realized I wasn’t hypnotized than [by] any of the wacky stuff I would be doing.” Toney acknowledges that as an actor, he has “no fear of embarrassment” and he will “do anything for a laugh,” and that thus, it is incongruous that a fear of embarrassment consumed him throughout the performance.

Toney did not enjoy his participation due to the anxiety he experienced. He calls the performance a “pretty negative experience,” and notes that throughout the show he wanted to stand up and say, “You know what, I’m just gonna seat myself.” He remembers wishing that he would have watched the show again, instead of volunteering, and he says, “I like to think, had I really been hypnotized . . . I would have enjoyed it. I don’t know if I even would have enjoyed it then. I just wouldn’t have, like, thought about it. And I guess that would’ve been better, because, like, I was up there the whole time thinking.” Toney suspects that his inability to quiet his mind not only interfered with his enjoyment of the performance, but also probably kept him from becoming hypnotized in the first place. Stage hypnotist Meghan O. Koesters supports Toney’s notion, explaining that in her experience, volunteers need to silence their inner monologues in order to focus on the hypnotist’s words. She quips, “It’s almost like if they have ADD it wouldn’t work” (Personal interview).

Toney did not immediately reveal to his companions that he had not been hypnotized during the show. He explains, “They were so into it and they were so entertained” that he did not want to “let them down.” Eventually, he confided in a few people, but he did not discuss it with
most of his friends because he “felt so bad” about the deception. Toney seems to feel that because he was not hypnotized, his performance would have been viewed as somehow inauthentic, and his concern seems to have been well-placed, because the few friends he did tell were disappointed to learn he had not been hypnotized. This question of authenticity comes up frequently in discussions of stage hypnosis, and Toney’s experience raises the possibility that part of the contract that stage hypnosis as a performance phenomenon forges with the audience includes a claim of authenticity. Toney, an experienced actor, was embarrassed at the thought that he might be caught pretending during his performance. Because the issue of authenticity is raised repeatedly throughout my interviews and readings, I will revisit it in future chapters.

Due to his negative experience, Toney wondered afterward whether other volunteers might have been acting from the same social pressures he felt, and even whether all hypnosis might be a similar attempt by subjects to “play along,” and/or to avoid embarrassment. Finally, however, he decided that even if stage hypnosis might lend itself to a higher degree of playacting, this is probably less of a concern in therapeutic hypnosis, because, “certainly nobody is, like, quitting smoking because they’re afraid people will think they’re not hypnotized.” Although his participation initially made him question the possibility of hypnosis as a real phenomenon, he says that he simply “can’t just throw it out.” Toney seems willing to accept that he did not become hypnotized because, as he says, he was “doing it wrong.” I find it interesting that he seems never to have considered the possibility that he had been doing it right, and that hypnosis was the phenomenon he experienced. Although he admits he is not sure what hypnosis should feel like, he assumes his anxiety is proof that he was not hypnotized.

“I Think It Was Real. I Really Don’t Know”

Three interviewees were left with varying degrees of uncertainty and confusion about
their hypnosis experiences, because those experiences did not align with their prior expectations for hypnosis: David McKinley, Chelsea Talbott, and Staci Thomson. While each of the three eventually came to individual conclusions about the nature of their participation, like the quote from Talbott above, they were all left with lingering questions about whether their hypnosis experiences had been “real.”

David McKinley

Originally from Chicago, McKinley is a soft-spoken, thoughtful, eighteen-year-old majoring in film at BGSU. He volunteered for a stage hypnosis show at BGSU in August of 2011. McKinley did not immediately remember the name of the hypnotist, but when I mentioned that Dale K had been scheduled to perform on campus that year, McKinley said that the name “sounds right.”¹⁰ McKinley thinks that he became hypnotized during the show, but his experience of hypnosis was not at all what he expected. This discrepancy between his expectations and his experience left him with mixed feelings about his participation, and the questions it raised led him to read and learn more about hypnosis afterward.

Prior to volunteering, McKinley recalls a brief discussion of hypnosis in a psychology class in the context of “Freud and all that other mumbo jumbo.” He had never seen a live hypnosis show, but he had seen televised hypnosis performances. McKinley also saw several films that depict hypnosis as a tool to uncover repressed memories about alien abduction, and he mentions the 2009 film, *The Fourth Kind*, as particularly memorable. In this film, a psychologist in Alaska uses hypnosis to uncover traumatic repressed memories among a group of abductees. The movie attributes a series of real-life disappearances in Alaska to alien abduction, and it

¹⁰ Jones also performed for Dale K in August of 2011. However, I cannot be certain whether McKinley and Jones performed together, because K often books more than one show during his campus visits.
achieved a degree of infamy due to its documentary structure and promotion. According to IMDb, the film's producers actively attempted to deceive moviegoers through such tactics as creating websites for an *Alaska Psychiatry Journal* and *Alaska News Archive* that contain references to the film’s fictional psychologist, Abigail Tyler. These websites, however, were “outed as hoaxes when it was discovered they were registered a month before the film's release and the purported author of one of the archived news articles stated she had never written it” ("The Fourth Kind: Trivia"). The movie’s subject matter and fictitious interviews have sparked protest from families of missing persons in Alaska for trivializing their loss, particularly because the film’s end credits do not include any acknowledgement that the events and characters are fictitious ("The Fourth Kind: Trivia"). Although McKinley recognizes that these “alien flicks” present a fictional depiction of hypnosis, he admits that he “used to be really into” such films, and that the films helped shape his conception of hypnosis as “putting people to sleep and making them do things.”

Curiosity about hypnosis was McKinley’s main motivation for volunteering. However, when he saw so many other people in the venue who were eager to be in the show, he felt even more incentive to volunteer, explaining, “It was almost like everyone wanted to be on stage; so as a result, I wanted to be on stage. It was almost like a peer pressure.” When K called for volunteers, McKinley stood on his chair so that K would see his enthusiasm and select him for the show. Because so many others wanted to participate but were not chosen, when McKinley was selected he felt “lucky.” During the show, McKinley recalls performing in several routines, including one in which he drove a car. In a particularly complex scenario, one volunteer was assigned the role of an extraterrestrial who speaks in an unknown, alien language, and another volunteer was an astronaut who could translate the extraterrestrial’s words into English.
McKinley, then, was told that he was a sign language interpreter and that there were several deaf audience members. McKinley had to improvise signs to interpret the astronaut’s translations of the alien language for those deaf audience members.

McKinley experienced the performance as an ongoing contest to avoid being released from the stage. As I mentioned in chapter 3, while watching his fellow volunteers return to their seats in the audience, McKinley thought being dismissed “almost seemed like a punishment, like, ‘You don’t get to be on stage anymore. Sit down.’” As other volunteers were dismissed, he became more determined to remain on stage throughout the performance, and he began to view his continued participation as a sign of his success. Before he volunteered, McKinley thought hypnosis was “sort of like mind control.” He was, therefore, surprised to discover that under hypnosis he was completely aware of everything that happened and that he was not forced to do anything he did not want to do. He explains, “I didn’t feel like I didn’t have control. I just felt that I wanted to listen to him. But if he told me to murder someone onstage, I felt like I wouldn’t have done that. I still felt that I was there, and that I was in my body, and that I was in control and making my own decisions, even if they weren’t what I would normally do.” McKinley was surprised and more than a little disconcerted to find that for him, hypnosis did not take away his sense of volition, but instead created an overwhelming desire to comply with the hypnotist’s suggestions. He considers himself “a little bit of a control freak,” and therefore his strong desire for compliance caused him to feel foolish after the performance. He wondered, “What got into me? Why would I do this?” He did not, however, feel foolish about any of the comedic activities he was asked to perform during the show. Instead, he says,

it was more like, I felt bad about being obedient to what this guy was telling me to do. I felt bad about listening to him. I don’t think that I would have felt bad if I
would’ve acted a fool on my own, because at least it was my decision and I decided to do that. But it was more, none of it was my idea, and that the audience was laughing at me, and I didn’t have control over it because he was the funny one.

McKinley recognizes that some of his statements seem inconsistent, because he did experience a sense of control over his actions throughout the performance. What he could not control, however, was his desire to comply with whatever the hypnotist asked him to do. Rather than a loss of volition, McKinley explains that for him, hypnosis created a situation wherein he did not want to disappoint the audience or the hypnotist. While this compulsion was not what McKinley anticipated, stage hypnotist Pattie Freeman notes that reactions like McKinley’s are not unusual among her volunteers. As an example, Freeman says, “I had one girl say, ‘I really didn’t want to do this, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to get up and do it. I had no idea why I even did that. I knew I was doing it, but I couldn’t stop myself.’”

In his struggle to describe his experience, McKinley sometimes appears to contradict himself about the nature of hypnosis. He sometimes refers to hypnosis in terms of “peer pressure,” and sometimes seems to suggest that the behavior of hypnotized people is simply a response to social pressure. However, equally frequently, he reports surprise at his own behavior under hypnosis and reaffirms his belief that he did become hypnotized during the show. Therefore, I presume he is not suggesting that he believes the phenomena associated with hypnosis are simply a result of peer pressure, but that peer pressure contributes to creating and maintaining the condition of hypnosis. This idea is strengthened by McKinley’s statement, “I don’t feel like I would’ve been hypnotized if there wasn’t an audience.”

After an initial period of self-doubt, during which McKinley questioned his “foolish”
behavior, he reevaluated his experience, and he now feels much more positively about his participation. Because his performance was on his college campus, he received a great deal of positive feedback in the ensuing weeks from other students who saw and recognized him. This allowed him to meet new people and make friends during his first semester, and allayed any concerns about how his ready compliance might have been perceived by others.

*Chelsea Talbott*

A twenty-year-old Spanish major at BGSU, Talbott volunteered for stage hypnosis in the summer of 2010 while she was working as a camp counselor in the Poconos. The camp enrolls children between the ages of seven and fifteen, and during the performance, the adult counselors were invited to volunteer while the young campers watched. Talbott recalls that the eight and nine year old girls in her group urged her to volunteer, shouting, “Chelsea, you have to do it! You have to go up on the stage! It’s so exciting!” She found it hard to refuse her twenty-five eager campers, and eventually assented to volunteer.

Prior to the show for which she volunteered, Talbott was quite familiar with stage hypnosis. She had seen two prior stage hypnosis shows, one while attending a different summer camp, and another by Dale K during orientation week at BGSU. She admits that she responded skeptically to those shows, saying, “I thought it was completely fake, one hundred percent . . . He must pay them or something.” Laughing, she suggests that she waited until the third performance to volunteer because the audience for the first two performances consisted of people her own age, while the audience for the third show was children, and “it’s easier to make a fool [of yourself] in front of little kids than it is in front of your peers.” By the time she attended the third performance, she was intensely curious about hypnosis, and says she was “trying to figure out the trick of what goes on. Like, is it real or is it not real? How does it work?”
She noticed many similarities between the three hypnotists she saw in performance, including that they all “make people do silly things.” During the performance, Talbott recalls routines in which the volunteers watched television and responded to things the hypnotist said they were seeing on screen, and imitated pop stars such as Justin Bieber and Ke$ha. One memorable skit, during which the volunteers drove cars, culminated in an emotionally wrenching scenario: as I discussed in chapter 3, the volunteers were told that they had hit a dog while driving. Talbott reports that she and many other volunteers started to cry in response to this scenario, and that her young campers were especially impressed by her “real tears” when they discussed her performance afterward.

When the performance was over, Talbott became aware that her leg “hurt really, really bad,” but she did not know why. She had experienced no leg pain prior to participating and did not remember suffering an acute injury. She had only a vague sense that while under hypnosis she may have felt “a numb awareness-ish, that my leg hurt.” Audience members explained her discomfort: during the performance another volunteer fell on her leg and bent it backward. (She was able to verify that this occurred when she watched a recording of the performance later.) Even after hearing about and seeing a recording of the incident, she did not recall it occurring. In addition to her leg pain, Talbott was also surprised to find that she was drenched in sweat and incredibly thirsty. She understood why some of the volunteers who had been singing and dancing during the performance would be hot and sweaty. However, she could not explain her own condition because her participation had been limited to seated activities in an air-conditioned venue. Although she was not on duty as a camp counselor for the rest of the evening, she was so exhausted after the performance that she went immediately back to her cabin and went to bed, an unusual occurrence on a free night.
Although Talbott thinks she was hypnotized during the performance, she expresses some lingering doubts about the experience. When she left the stage, her campers “ambushed” her and peppered her with questions about the performance, asking, “What’s going on? Was that real? What did you do? Why did you do that in front of people?” Talbott explains that her response to these questions was, “I think it was real. I really don’t know. It’s kind of hard to explain what happened.” Talbott’s confusion came from the fact that she had not experienced some of the things she assumed a hypnotized person should experience, such as involuntariness and a lack of awareness. Because her experience differed from her expectations for hypnosis, she concluded that hypnotic response might exist on a spectrum of intensity or depth and that she had not been as deeply hypnotized as some of the other volunteers. She notes that she had some difficulty focusing during the induction procedure, and she wonders whether she would have become more deeply hypnotized if she had been more attentive.

Despite concluding that she was hypnotized during the show, Talbott still feels the need to defend the validity of her experience while at the same time questioning its content, saying,

Because I didn’t fake, you know, I wasn’t up there faking, like, “OK, I don’t want to do this but I’m going to.” It was just like, he told me to do it, I didn’t think about it, I just went straight through it. And there are parts—I think because of how excited everything was—there are parts that I don’t remember. I mean I can’t say, because I don’t know if I was really in a deep hypnosis, or if it was the combination of the adrenaline and just everything happening so fast or what. But if you don’t know, you can’t say that it’s fake.

However complex Talbott’s experience with hypnosis, she says that it has “definitely” changed her mind: she no longer thinks stage hypnosis is “completely fake, one hundred percent.”
Of my twelve interviewees, Thomson remains the most conflicted about her hypnosis experience. An eighteen-year-old business major at BGSU, she is still unable to decide whether she experienced hypnosis more than a year after she volunteered for a performance. In high school, Thomson served on the entertainment planning committee for her school’s After-Prom celebration. After considering other forms of entertainment and reviewing YouTube videos and performance photos of stage hypnosis, the committee hired a stage hypnotist for the event. Then, at After-Prom, Thomson volunteered to be in the show because she “wanted to know what it felt like to be hypnotized” (Personal interview). Although she had seen a number of performance videos, Thomson had never attended a live hypnosis show prior to the one at which she volunteered. Her only other exposure to hypnosis was a DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) presentation at her high school in which a woman described using hypnotherapy to quit smoking, and subsequently fainted when she tried to smoke a few days later. Thomson says she approached her participation with curiosity, “like an experiment.”

Thomson spent much of our interview questioning, rethinking, and second-guessing nearly every aspect of her participation. Her uncertainty began early in the show, with the hypnotist’s volunteer selection process. He went through a long elimination process in order to dismiss any volunteers who were not hypnotized. Although unsure about the hypnotist’s methods, Thomson linked his dismissal of volunteers not simply with the absence of hypnosis, but rather with a fraudulent attempt to simulate hypnosis, saying, “He, like, took people out, I guess, if they were faking or whatever. I don’t know.” By the end of this elimination process, Thomson had not yet experienced certain sensations that she assumed were markers of hypnosis, such as a lack of volition, lack of self-awareness, and amnesia. Thus, she worried that she was
not hypnotized. The fact that she had not been dismissed from the stage, however, implied to her that the hypnotist must think she was hypnotized. Because she had already labeled those who were released from the stage as “fakers,” she began to question whether that label should apply to her as well. Although she thought the hypnotist seemed adept at determining which volunteers were not hypnotized, the discrepancy between her inner experience and her expectations has prompted her to speculate that she might even possess some previously unrecognized performance ability that helped her to remain on stage when others were sent back to their seats, saying, “Maybe I was a good actress.”

Because Thomson assumed that she should not be aware of her actions under hypnosis or remember them afterward, her concern about the authenticity of her experience intensified throughout the performance. She explains, “I felt like I remembered the whole entire time, so maybe I’m a faker. I really don’t know.” She was so focused on her inner experience, which did not match her expectations, that she says, “I don’t even know if I was, like, actually hypnotized. I think the whole time, I was trying really hard to, like, feel everything, and I don’t even know if I was just acting or just like—I may have just acted the whole thing.” Her confusion only deepened as she found herself experiencing some, but not all, of the effects she assumed hypnosis should produce. For example, during some parts of the performance, she experienced a sensation that her head was so heavy she could not lift it, and parts of the show are quite hazy in her memory. This has led her to question whether such altered sensations and fragmented memories might confirm that she was hypnotized after all.

During the performance Thomson complied with all of the hypnotist’s suggestions, but she still wrestles with the difference between choosing to comply and complying because one is hypnotized. She gives an example of this difficulty that arose very early in the performance.
When the hypnotist asked volunteers to participate in a hand-raise test, Thomson assumed that if she were hypnotized she would find her hand moving of its own accord. However, if she had to make a conscious choice to lift her hand, she would know she was not hypnotized. Thomson was troubled to discover, then, that her internal experience was not so easy to differentiate. Although her hand did rise as the hypnotist suggested it would, she could not be certain of the reason for this movement, saying, “I may or may not have just been, like, ‘Oh look, my hand’s raising!’ to try and stay up there because I wanted to be hypnotized.” Unable to decide if she was complying with suggestions because she was hypnotized, or because she simply wanted to be hypnotized, Thomson continued to scrutinize her responses throughout the performance. Because she did not experience the lack of control and lack of self-awareness she thought a hypnotized person should feel, she was especially perplexed about the implications of her unquestioning compliance with the hypnotist’s suggestions. She considers, “I don’t even know. Was I technically hypnotized, or was I just acting? I kind of feel like I was hypnotized if I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing because [the hypnotist] told me to. That’s what was supposed to be happening.” Whatever her internal experience, she complied with every suggestion, immediately and without hesitation. Thus, she feels as though her behavior was, in fact, controlled by the hypnotist, even if it was not in the way she anticipated.

Thomson surmises that her expectations for the hypnotic experience may have been partly to blame for her contradictory responses. She was extremely excited to try hypnosis, and thus she wanted to remember every detail of her participation afterward. However, she believed that people cannot remember what they do under hypnosis, and thus a clear memory would serve as proof that she had not been hypnotized. These incompatible ideas led to confusion and anxiety, and she explains that while she was on stage, “The whole time I wanted to remember
everything. Like, that was my goal. I wanted to remember. But at the same time, when I actually was remembering, I was like, ‘I don’t wanna remember this!’” She even felt jealous of other volunteers who did not remember their participation, because she assumed their amnesia was proof that they had a “full” hypnosis experience, and she had somehow missed out on it. Thomson seems amused by her feelings, and acknowledges that they are illogical, because she spent the whole performance trying to be attentive in order to remember the experience, but then she was upset when she did. Laughing, she allows that she would not have been happy either way. Despite her confusion, she says she would volunteer again if the opportunity presented itself, calling her participation a “neat experience.”

Common Assumptions and Expectations

Some of my interviewees volunteered enthusiastically, some volunteered after initial resistance, and at least one does not remember volunteering at all. Some were confident they had been hypnotized, some were certain they had not been hypnotized, and some were unsure how to gauge their experiences. Some found volunteering pleasurable and exciting, while others found it disconcerting, uncomfortable, or even stressful. Despite their disparate experiences, many report strikingly similar ideas about hypnosis in general, including:

1. Hypnosis represents an alteration to or departure from “normal” consciousness, cognition, and/or perception.
2. The presence or absence of the hypnotic condition can be gauged internally by the subject.
3. The presence or absence of the hypnotic condition can be gauged externally by the hypnotist and/or by other observers.
4. The hypnotist and/or the hypnotic subject can contribute to the success or failure of a
In addition, many of the concerns and attitudes regarding hypnosis in general and stage hypnosis in particular that I traced through historical sources and works of literature and drama in chapter 1 are further developed, repeated, and reinforced in these interviews. Thus, many of the same ideas and (mis)perceptions about hypnosis presented in satirical plays and pamphlets about Mesmer in the 1780s, attributed to Svengali in the 1890s, and offered in legal arguments in the 1990s are expressed by contemporary stage hypnosis participants. Throughout these sources, hypnosis is presented as:

1. a tool for pain relief and healing.

2. a means to produce and/or release extraordinary abilities and talents.

3. a potential cause of unusual changes in personality and identity.

4. a potential instrument of coercion, either during hypnosis or through post-hypnotic suggestions which can be activated at a later time.

5. a condition that is more easily induced in weak-willed people.

6. a condition that is followed by complete amnesia regarding behaviors and events that occurred during hypnosis.

Furthermore, the hypnotist is presented as an extraordinarily powerful (male)11 figure who can:

7. hypnotize even unwilling and/or unwitting people, often with only a word or touch.

8. use hypnosis to deprive people of all agency or volition, to seduce young women, and/or

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11 Aligning with such cultural attitudes, all of the hypnotists for whom my interviewees volunteered were male, and this gender imbalance appears to be representative of trends in the profession as a whole. Of the four hundred hypnotists listed in the online Worldwide Stage Hypnosis and Hypnotist Directory, only ten identify themselves by traditionally feminine stage names (such as Melissa Barnes and Mary Elizabeth Raines). An additional few dozen use names which are not necessarily identified with any gender (such as Braxton, Raven, and The Unknown Hypnotist). The rest use traditionally masculine names.
to otherwise convince people to violate personal ethical or moral codes.

9. access dangerous and/or otherworldly powers that may be inaccessible to others in society through his special status as an exotic cultural outsider.

In the following pages, I examine the presence and prevalence of each of these ideas among my interviewees.

*Altered Consciousness, Cognition, and/or Perception*

Several interviewees indicate an understanding of hypnosis as an alteration to or departure from “normal” consciousness, cognition, and/or perception. Further, they often describe the changes they associate with hypnosis as a distinct mental state with a discrete beginning and ending, usually represented by a hypnotic induction and termination performed by a hypnotist. Both Hurtsellers and Nicosia refer to hypnosis as a distinct “state” several times. Part of the reason Nicosia feels certain he was not hypnotized is that he expected but never felt any changes in consciousness, cognition, and/or perception. He explains that for him to accept the reality of hypnosis, the experience would have to be somehow different from relaxation or willpower. Although he felt relaxed, he says, “I guess I felt like I should have been going into this, kind of a state. I don’t know.” Nicosia did not experience any changes that he found to be experientially different from those he associates with progressive relaxation exercises. Thus, during the performance, he believed the induction procedure had been ineffective for him. Conversely, Jones did experience changes in consciousness, cognition, and/or perception, and this change helped confirm for her that she was indeed hypnotized. Further, she felt a sort of ebb and flow in the intensity of her altered mental state throughout the performance, and she interpreted this variation as an indicator of the depth of her hypnosis. She uses phrases like “in the zone,” and “in the mood,” to describe being deeply hypnotized, but she explains that this
feeling would fade after awhile and then the hypnotist would give suggestions that helped the volunteers refocus and achieve a deeper level of experience once again.

Whether or not they specifically discuss hypnosis as an alteration to or departure from “normal” consciousness, cognition, and/or perception, nearly all of the interviewees describe hypnosis as something that can “work” or “not work,” and something that can be “real” or “faked.” Their use of such language would seem to indicate that the interviewees expect hypnosis to cause specific and perceptible change at the experiential level. Blossom provides an example of the complex ways in which the interviewees think about the changes they expect from hypnosis. During her volunteer experience, the hypnotist asked audience members to stare at a spinning spiral. When he instructed them to look at his head after staring at the spiral, his head appeared to shrink or grow larger, depending on the direction in which the spiral had been spinning. The hypnotist implied that this optical illusion was somehow hypnotic in nature, and encouraged audience members who saw the expansion and contraction of his head to volunteer for the show because they were already proven to be good hypnotic subjects. Blossom saw the effect and volunteered. Out of curiosity, Blossom and her sister later found such a spinning spiral online and successfully recreated the perceptual changes at home. The young women decided that the effect must be unrelated to hypnosis, because they were fairly certain they could not have been hypnotized by their computer. Like most of my interviewees, these young women held a conception of hypnosis as a distinct and special condition which follows an induction by a hypnotist. Its effects, therefore, could not be the result of a computer interaction.

In their discussions, many interviewees reveal assumptions about other special cognitive properties of hypnosis as well. Blossom, Burns, and Hurtsellers, for example, express that hypnosis directly engages the subconscious mind. Similarly, Burns states that she knew from
research for a school paper that during hypnosis, the “subconscious or unconscious mind came to the surface,” and that hypnotized people can experience hallucinations. In a semantically interesting difference, Barnett and Niederkohr, the two interviewees who experienced post-hypnotic amnesia, describe hypnosis as a lack of consciousness rather than as a pathway to the subconscious. Barnett explains that he was “kind of unconscious” while under hypnosis, while Niederkohr describes himself as not being “of a conscious mind.” Although the word unconscious can mean sleep or a sleep-like state, I believe both Barnett’s and Niederkohr’s statements imply that they experienced hypnosis, at least in part, as a lack of conscious awareness of their actions.

Although most interviewees do not use the term altered state of consciousness (ASC) explicitly, their descriptions of how they believe hypnosis should or could operate seem to align well with the idea that hypnosis is somehow different from ordinary cognitive processes. In their article “Hypnotic Phenomena and Altered States of Consciousness,” Sakari Kallio and Antti Revonsuo address the difficulties in providing a clear definition of an ASC. They note that arguments over the necessity of an ASC have led to difficulties and disagreements among researchers over the definition of hypnosis itself, because “there is no generally accepted definition for the concept of ASC either, not to mention the lack of a good definition for a normal state of consciousness” (112). Some “states” of consciousness are clearly different and objectively measurable: sleep, for example, is different from waking. At lower thresholds, however, differences are more difficult to parse. Does daydreaming represent a different state of consciousness from attentiveness? How is lucid dreaming different from more typical REM sleep? While the question of an ASC is far from settled among hypnosis researchers, if hypnosis involves an ASC, it would presumably result in the kind of subtle changes represented by the
latter examples. My interviewees, however, often seem to suggest that they expect the changes caused by hypnosis to be much more definitive.

*Internally Gauged*

Hypnosis researchers often point out that the differences in subjective interpretation of events between people leads to difficulty in determining whether a hypnotic induction has been successful. For example, Kallio and Revonsuo explain that,

> Since the inter-individual differences in reacting to a hypnotic induction are huge, it cannot be taken for granted that a person is “in hypnosis” if they have received a hypnotic induction. Neither is it possible to ask a person if they felt being in hypnosis . . . since it would be impossible to know what the criteria for being in hypnosis . . . would be. A subject may answer “yes” when asked about feeling hypnotized after a hypnotic induction because their hands were feeling heavy and their eyes tired while another subject would interpret the identical feelings as being due to relaxing. So even identical feelings could be interpreted differently.

(134-35)

Despite such reported difficulties, many interviewees express assumptions that hypnosis is a condition whose presence or absence can be gauged internally by the subject.

Among the five interviewees who are certain they were hypnotized, none seem to question whether their internal, subjective experiences of hypnosis might have been misinterpreted. The four interviewees who do not believe they experienced hypnosis during their performances also frequently base their assessments on subjective, internal cues. Throughout their interviews, they often note that they did not “feel” hypnotized, despite admissions that they had not been hypnotized previously, and thus do not know what hypnosis “should” feel like.
Nicosia, for example, says that the hypnotic induction had “zero effect on me whatsoever,” and that he was not “feeling anything different.” Toney explains that although he is certain he was not hypnotized, “I have no idea what real hypnosis is even, you know, meant to feel like.” Toney speculates that the anxiety he experienced during his performance might have been alleviated if the hypnotist had reassured the volunteers that hypnosis would not feel different or special. Thus, Toney would have been freed from the worry that he was not feeling the appropriate changes.

Several hypnotists that I have seen in performance have made such reassurances part of their pre-talk, and in his book *Confessions of a Hypnotist*, Jonathan Royle explains that it is important to reassure volunteers that “there is no such thing as a ‘Hypnotised’ feeling and this is because each person experiences everything that happens during the course of their (sic) life differently” (42). However, Toney feels that such reassurances could have been detrimental to the performance in which he participated, saying, “I think it would have hurt [the hypnotist’s] show, because I think, very much, he wants to sell the mystique that hypnosis is something separate. And the way I look at it, if it’s not something separate, then hypnosis isn’t really anything at all. It’s not even a thing. It’s just a lie that people are willing to, like, kinda propagate, I guess.” Thus, Toney seems to imply that without perceptible internal changes, hypnosis as a phenomenon cannot be verified, and that part of the entertainment value of the show comes from the notion that the hypnotist has the ability to induce a mysterious, exotic condition in his volunteers. If the hypnotist admits that hypnosis does not feel different from ordinary, every-day experience, then, as Toney asserts, “hypnosis isn’t really anything at all.” Without the mystique of hypnosis, the audience would simply be watching a group of people on stage enacting various humorous scenarios, and that, somehow, is insufficient.

Subjective internal assessments played a large role in creating uncertainty for those three
interviewees who express varying degrees of confusion about their hypnotic experiences. Talbott, for example, feels sure she was hypnotized, but when she compares her responses and behavior to that of her fellow volunteers, she speculates that hypnotic response might exist on a spectrum of intensity or depth, with other volunteers being more or less deeply hypnotized than she was. Her varied internal response leads her to believe that her experience probably fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, and she says, “There were certain things I would just do no questions asked . . . It was almost like I wasn’t thinking about it; it was just happening. But there would be other things where I’d think, ‘I’m about to do this.’” Talbott’s experience aligns well with current hypnosis research. A loss of volition has often been considered a hallmark of hypnotic response by researchers, and “experienced automaticity is often used as a criterion for ‘real hypnotic’ responding” (Kallio and Revonsuo 120). However, newer research has shown that the experience of involuntary or automatic action in response to suggestions may not necessarily be such a clear-cut marker, because even the most highly-hypnotizable subjects (as measured on a susceptibility scale) report that some of their responses feel voluntary under hypnosis while others do not (Kallio and Revonsuo 121).

McKinley’s uncertainty regarding his participation comes not from perceived differences with other volunteers, but from the ways in which his internal experience of hypnosis differed from his expectations. Before he volunteered, McKinley thought hypnosis was “sort of like mind control.” Thus, he was surprised and more than a little disconcerted to find that for him, hypnosis did not take away his sense of volition, but instead created an overwhelming desire to comply with the hypnotist’s suggestions. McKinley’s response to hypnosis, however, sounds much like a component of hypnotic response that is usually termed rapport. In “New Paradigms of Hypnosis Research,” Graham A. Jamieson and Harutomo Hasegawa explain rapport this way: “Hypnotized
persons are required to cooperate but not to comply, in the literal sense, with the hypnotist’s suggestions. This instills a particular motivation to adopt a mental framework consistent with the suggestions of the hypnotist” (134). As in this description of rapport, McKinley experienced hypnosis as a high level of motivation to cooperate with the hypnotist. However, because his experience of strong rapport did not align with his initial expectations for hypnosis, he experienced some negative feelings about his participation.

Thomson’s assumption that hypnosis “feels like” something led her to analyze her internal responses, both during the performance and afterward. Because she found herself experiencing some, but not all, of the effects she assumed hypnosis should produce, such as lack of volition, lack of self-awareness, and amnesia, she is unable to decide whether she experienced hypnosis or not. Although she acknowledges that she had no prior experience with hypnosis on which to base her expectations, she still assumes that she was the source of the problem and not her expectations, saying, “I’ve never been hypnotized any other way, so I don’t know, like, what’s supposed to happen, or if I did it wrong.”

*Externally Gauged*

Most of the interviewees also express the assumption that the presence or absence of the hypnotic condition can be gauged externally by observers. Some interviewees report a personal ability to discern who was hypnotized and who was “faking” while watching their fellow performers onstage, recordings of the performances in which they participated, or other hypnosis performances they attended as audience members. Their evaluations were based, overwhelmingly, on the same, few, external cues: the volunteers’ levels of observed attentiveness and the ways in which they responded to the hypnotist’s suggestions. Furthermore, many interviewees report that other observers could also make such determinations, most
commonly the hypnotist.

Among interview subjects who feel they were able to discern “true” hypnosis from “fake,” the most commonly cited trait of volunteers who were assumed not to be hypnotized is attentiveness to their surroundings. Even more specifically, if volunteers were aware enough of their surroundings to respond to anything other than the hypnotist’s suggestions, such as laughing at other volunteers’ comedic performances, they were usually judged not to be hypnotized. Niederkohr, for example, asserts that when he watched recordings of his performances afterward, he knew that some of his fellow volunteers were “obviously faking it,” because they laughed or smiled at funny performances and/or responded to audience reactions. Conversely, Niederkohr judged those volunteers who remained “straight-faced” or “blank-faced” to be hypnotized, and explains that such volunteers were completely unresponsive to anything but the hypnotist.

Niederkohr has no memory of the three shows in which he participated, and thus he cannot compare his external assessment of his fellow volunteers with information drawn from his own experience. Paben, however, has a clearer memory of his hypnotic experiences, and his ideas about the external assessment of hypnosis align well with Niederkohr’s. Although he acknowledges that hypnosis might affect each person differently, Paben’s prior experiences shape the way he assesses the reactions of his fellow volunteers. Paben explains that under hypnosis, he focused only on the hypnotist’s instructions. He was dimly aware of other things around him, such as movement and laughter, but he was not attentive to them. Because he found himself inattentive to his surroundings while hypnotized, when he later attended other performances as an audience member, he assumed that those volunteers who remained attentive and responsive to what was happening around them were probably not hypnotized.
Talbott expands on the ideas of Niederkohr and Paben. She feels that she can assess not only the presence or absence of hypnosis in her fellow volunteers, but also its depth, based on attentiveness. After viewing a recording of the performance in which she participated, she believed some volunteers to be more deeply hypnotized than she was, while others were less so, because “some people seemed to be really in the zone, like in the moment,” but others were opening their eyes and looking around “while they were supposed to be sleeping.” Additionally, she notes that some people were laughing during the performance, which she interprets as proof that they were either not hypnotized, or less deeply hypnotized than she.

In addition to focus and attentiveness, many interviewees report that the presence or absence of hypnosis can be determined externally by the ways in which volunteers respond to the hypnotist’s suggestions. Interestingly, some interviewees state that “fakers” can be identified by their unusually enthusiastic and/or intentionally comedic responses to suggestions, while others claim that it is the less enthusiastic or less effusive performers who are faking.

Many interviewees seem to equate overly-enthusiastic performances with faking, especially if such enthusiasm is linked with an awareness of or attentiveness to audience response. Nicosia explains that after he was released from the stage, he watched the rest of the performance and felt that he could tell which of the remaining volunteers were not hypnotized. He says these volunteers were “acting a little too over-the-top, maybe trying to get a reaction from the audience.” Of the volunteers Nicosia believes were hypnotized, in contrast, he states, “I don’t think they were really playing to anybody.” Similarly, as I noted earlier, Jones suspects one female volunteer was not hypnotized because the young woman kept “getting up and running around.” Jones says that the energetic woman’s behavior “stood out” from the other volunteers and that she seemed to be “pretending.”
Niederkohr asserts that “There are some people that are very genuinely hypnotized and there are some that aren’t. Some people try very hard to play the part of being hypnotized.” Niederkohr describes “playing the part” as trying as hard as possible to be funny and taking suggestions to the extreme, and he proposes that someone might do this in order to entertain the audience or to get attention. As an example, he notes that during his performances, several people repeatedly fell out of their chairs as though they were in a stupor, even after the hypnotist gave them the suggestions that they should remain upright and stay in their chairs.\(^{12}\) Ironically, by “trying too hard” to act hypnotized, Niederkohr feels that they gave themselves away as fakers. He reasons that if they had truly been hypnotized they would have accepted the hypnotist’s suggestions to remain upright. In contrast, the performances that Niederkohr most values are those in which volunteers seem to carry out suggestions naturally, rather than those in which volunteers seem to be trying to get laughs. He describes a sense of disappointment in watching performers that he does not think are hypnotized, even when their performances are admittedly funny. If he judges them to be faking, he seems to experience the performances as somehow lacking, not only in authenticity, but also in entertainment value. Conversely, he finds the performances of volunteers he deems to be hypnotized “hilarious,” even if what they are doing is not inherently comedic.

In contrast, a few interviewees presume that less enthusiastic or effusive performers are not hypnotized. McKinley, for example, states that he thought a few of his fellow volunteers

\(^{12}\) Although I did not see Niederkohr’s performances, I saw two other shows by the same hypnotist, Mike Brody. At one of these performances, volunteers repeatedly fell out of their chairs just as Niederkohr describes. Brody warned the volunteers they would be dismissed if they continued, saying “If you can’t stay in your chairs, you can’t focus, and if you can’t focus, you can’t be in my show” (Brody, Whiteford High School). Despite many such warnings, several volunteers persisted in falling over. My assumption at the time was that this behavior garnered attention from the audience early in the show and so was reinforced.
were not hypnotized because “their behavior was more normal than everyone else’s.” When those volunteers later seemed uncomfortable on stage, the hypnotist sent them back to their seats, which McKinley interprets as confirmation of his doubts. Similarly, Toney refers to such unenthusiastic volunteers as “filler.” He conjectures that those volunteers who were “just kind of there,” and who performed in group routines but were “certainly not the featured [performers], or anything like that” were probably not hypnotized. Instead, Toney thinks they were probably “just kind of playing along” in much the same way that he was during his performance. Thus, for McKinley and Toney, lack of enthusiasm seems to indicate the absence of hypnosis.

Many interviewees discuss the hypnotist’s ability to determine the absence or presence of hypnosis in volunteers. In fact, some interviewees are so confident in the hypnotist’s abilities that they accept the hypnotist’s dismissal or retention of volunteers as proof of the absence or presence of hypnosis, respectively, in those volunteers and even, in a few cases, in themselves. Jones, McKinley, Nicosia, Niederkohr, and Talbott all assume that some of their fellow volunteers were not hypnotized at least in part because the hypnotist asked them to leave the stage. Jones marvels at the hypnotist’s ability to sense that she was hypnotized and other volunteers were not. Nicosia reports that the combination of his own internal self-assessment and the fact that the hypnotist dismissed him from the stage led him to the conclusion that he had not been hypnotized. Thomson was not dismissed from the stage although she thought she was not hypnotized, which led her to worry that she might inadvertently be “faking” hypnosis and thereby fooling the hypnotist, and eventually to question nearly every aspect of her volunteer experience. However, Thomson does not question one of the basic assumptions fueling her sense of disorientation: that the hypnotist can make an external assessment of the presence or absence of hypnosis. This idea must seem to her self-evident, since she is willing to consider the
possibility that she might have been faking hypnosis without intending to do so rather than to question the validity of her assumptions.

Unlike Thomson, Burns is not at all confused about her hypnotic experience, but she, too, seems to struggle through some cognitive dissonance about the hypnotist’s ability to gauge hypnosis externally. Burns is certain she did not experience hypnosis during any of the five shows for which she volunteered. She believes that one primary reason she did not become hypnotized is that the hypnotist made it clear to the volunteers that hypnosis was not expected during the performances. Throughout these shows, Burns participated in group performance activities, but was never featured in an individual routine. She confesses her disappointment at not being chosen for an individual activity, and suggests a number of possible reasons the hypnotist might have excluded her, ranging from the potential difficulty in making her way to the front of the stage from the back row of seats to her lack of natural “flamboyance.” Somewhat incongruously, however, she also proposes that perhaps the hypnotist did not choose to feature her in an individual performance because he could tell she was not hypnotized. Thus, Burns still assumes that the hypnotist could gauge the presence or absence of hypnosis externally, and that he might have deemed hypnotized volunteers to be more desirable performers, despite the fact that the structure of his show actually encouraged the volunteers to playact.

_Influence on Success or Failure_

Many interviewees also express assumptions that the hypnotist and/or the hypnotic subject can contribute to the success or failure of a hypnotic session. Most commonly, the hypnotist’s contribution is judged to be primarily procedural. Thus, interviewees note that a hypnotist might fail to hypnotize his or her subjects due to inexperience, an overall lack of skill, or problems with the induction procedure. Conversely, the hypnotic subject’s contribution is
often attributed to psychological factors. Interviewees report that volunteers might be more likely to be hypnotized if they want very much to be so and less likely if they do not believe in hypnosis as a legitimate phenomenon, for example.

Among interviewees who accept that the hypnotist can contribute to the success or failure of a hypnotic session, Talbott mentions the importance of the behavior and demeanor of the hypnotist toward the volunteers. She explains that the hypnotist’s personality can affect the volunteers’ mood, and that she thinks in order to become hypnotized, “you have to be comfortable with the personality of the hypnotist.” Her comfort level was increased during her participation by both the hypnotist’s congenial demeanor and the fact that the show was for children so she could be certain she would not be asked to perform explicit or inappropriate material. If the hypnotist’s behavior had been inappropriate, or had made Talbott uneasy, however, she is certain she would not have been able to become hypnotized, explaining that “If it was, like, some creepy man who’s telling me to do these things, I definitely wouldn’t have.”

Although Talbott does not use the term *rapport*, her description of the ways in which a hypnotist’s personality can affect the hypnotic process seems to reflect this concept.

Both Toney and Paben note that the skill level of the hypnotist can contribute to the success or failure of a hypnotic session. Toney’s thoughts are influenced by his two unsuccessful induction attempts, and Paben’s are shaped by comparing his two successful attempts with one unsuccessful attempt. Before Toney participated in a hypnosis performance, a graduate student visited his psychology class and attempted to hypnotize all of the students in the lecture hall. Toney presumes that no one in the class became hypnotized, because the hypnotist “wasn’t really good at it.” He speculates that this lack of skill was due to lack of experience, noting that the graduate student had probably attempted the induction as part of a research project and was thus
unlikely to be a practicing hypnotist.

Paben actively tried to become hypnotized from his seat in the audience during three hypnosis shows by following along with the hypnotists’ induction procedures. He explains that the inductions at each of the three shows were not identical, and that only two of those hypnotists succeeded in hypnotizing him. Furthermore, he notes that the show at which he did not become hypnotized had been disappointing for him as an audience member as well. He found the hypnotist to be lackluster as an onstage performer, and the routines performed by the volunteers to be less engaging than those at other shows. Although Paben acknowledges that he has no way to be certain whether this hypnotist successfully induced other people, he speculates that, like him, they may not have responded to the induction. Thus, he reasons that the hypnotist’s lack of skill may have led not only to unsuccessful attempts at hypnosis, but also to a less entertaining performance.

While some interviewees express that the hypnotist can contribute to the success or failure of a hypnotic session, even more report that the hypnotic subject can do so. Paben, Talbott, and Toney, for example, think that wanting to be hypnotized and being open to the process makes it more likely to occur. Conversely, Jones, Nicosia and Toney all raise the possibility that the hypnotic subject can impede the process through resistance, skepticism, and/or a lack of belief in hypnosis. Jones mentions that before they attended the show together, her friends told her that the process “wouldn’t work” on someone who did not want to be hypnotized. Nicosia notes that some of his friends accused him of actively trying to avoid becoming hypnotized during a performance in which he was dismissed from the stage. However, he thinks his contribution may have been more complex. He explains, “I think the friends thought that I was too much of a skeptic: that I blocked it out, that I resisted. And I think there
was a resistance . . . to letting it happen . . . but there was also the fact that I just didn’t believe it could happen.” Stage Hypnotist I asserts that he would much prefer a volunteer who is uncertain whether he or she can be hypnotized over one who is uncooperative or resistant, explaining, 

If someone says “I don’t think I can be hypnotized,” I don’t really care. If someone says, “I don’t know if I believe in hypnosis,” I don’t really care. What I do care about is when someone says “I’m going to get up on stage to prove you can’t hypnotize me,” because that’s different. There’s a big difference in my mind between saying “I don’t know if I can be hypnotized” or “I don’t know if I believe in hypnosis” versus “I’m not going to cooperate with you.” Those are very, very different things.” (Telephone interview)

This hypnotist believes that uncertainty about hypnosis does not necessarily interfere with the hypnotic process, but that open resistance almost guarantees that a volunteer will not become hypnotized.

Toney says that when he went into his volunteer experience, he knew, “if you’re resistant [to hypnosis], it’s not gonna happen.” This belief that resistance to hypnosis will impede hypnosis seems to have been either introduced or reinforced by the graduate student who previously attempted to hypnotize Toney in a psychology class. Toney states unequivocally that “I value how powerful the mind is, and what the mind can do if you let it,” and therefore, during his performance experience, he was haunted by the possibility that his mind might interfere with the hypnotic process. He explains the problem with an analogy about times when, as a child, he wondered whether God was real and then immediately worried that God would be angry with him for such questioning: similarly, any time Toney questioned the reality of hypnotic phenomena or worried that he might not be able to fully participate in the hypnotic experience,
he became more anxious that this questioning constituted resistance and would thus exclude him from the experience.

Pain Relief and Healing

Many interviewees were familiar with some therapeutic uses of hypnosis prior to their volunteer experiences. Only two, Barnett and Hurtsellers, made use of therapeutic hypnosis before taking part in hypnosis performances, and both report mental health concerns as the primary reason for seeking such treatment. Several volunteers were familiar with hypnosis as a tool to lose weight and/or stop smoking, including Nicosia, Niederkohr, Paben, Thomson, and Toney. In addition to smoking cessation, Blossom had heard of hypnosis as a tool to stop drinking. None of the interviewees express awareness of the most common use of therapeutic hypnosis throughout history: pain relief. Talbott, however, inadvertently discovered the analgesic potential of hypnosis during her participation. When another participant fell on her leg, she did not experience any pain until the show was over.

Although many interviewees were familiar with therapeutic hypnosis prior to performing, they were not all equally accepting of its effectiveness or veracity. Barnett and Hurtsellers, who experienced therapeutic hypnosis, both report that it was an effective treatment for their respective mental health concerns. Hurtsellers, in fact, is enthusiastic in her support of therapeutic hypnosis. She comments that although not everyone chooses hypnotherapy over more conventional mental health treatments, “they probably should, because it’s so effective.” Other interviewees, however, were more skeptical about therapeutic hypnosis before they volunteered for stage hypnosis. Nicosia, for example, says he remained unconvinced, “even though in the past I’ve known people who have used hypnosis as a means to quit smoking and things like that, and they’ve sworn by it and said after going through the process they’ve never
picked up a cigarette since then.” Despite these testimonials, Nicosia suspects that hypnosis had little or nothing to do with their ability to quit smoking. Rather, he attributes their successes to personal resolve and willpower.

Extraordinary Abilities and Talents

Several interviewees seem to assume that a hypnotized subject might have access to abilities and talents that he or she would not otherwise. In particular, many suggest that hypnosis creates intense focus or concentration, enhances the ability to filter distractions, and/or enhances memory. Those interviewees who do not believe they became hypnotized are more likely to report such ideas, and also to report that the absence of extraordinary abilities and talents helped convince them they were not hypnotized.

Blossom and Burns both report that they expected hypnosis to confer some sort of hyper-concentration or hyper-focus, but neither felt such phenomena. Blossom expected to experience a focus on the hypnotist and a diminished awareness of the audience. Thus, she assumes that her awareness of specific audience members, such as times when she looked out and observed them laughing, is proof she was not hypnotized. Burns reports that she found it very helpful when the hypnotist cued the volunteers off-mike, because it allowed her to prepare for each upcoming activity even though she was not hypnotized. She assumes any volunteers who might actually have been hypnotized would not necessarily have needed such extensive preparatory remarks. She even speculates that hypnotized volunteers might not hear or notice off-mike remarks while in the “sleep state,” and thus such remarks were intended to help only to those volunteers who were not hypnotized. Her comments seem to indicate that she assumes volunteers who are “really” hypnotized would need no additional preparation and could simply perform suggestions on cue, whereas “pretenders” might need more prompting. (Her comments also seem to imply
that hypnosis confers a kind of selective focus, wherein the subject can focus intently on instructions from the hypnotist, but also disregard any remarks not intended for him or her.)

Toney, too, expected hypnosis to convey intense concentration and enhanced memory. This expectation led him to assume that those volunteers who responded immediately to suggestions were really hypnotized. He says that such volunteers were “too aware” of the responses they needed to make to be faking hypnosis. Conversely, because he did not believe he was hypnotized, Toney did not want to be featured in an individual skit. He feared that because he was not hypnotized, he would not be able to remember the complex sequences of words and actions that he would be asked to execute in such a skit, and this would cause him embarrassment. His comments suggest that he assumes hypnosis would have increased his attention or memory, thereby allowing him to remember the hypnotist’s instructions more easily.

Unusual Changes in Personality and Identity

Several interviewees discuss alterations in personality and identity as an expected result of hypnosis. Burns, for example, presumes hypnosis would be like a “less severe strain of drunkenness,” in which one is “mentally drunk but not physically drunk.” In this way, a hypnotized person would be physically stable and in control, but his or her inhibitions would be lessened. Toney, too, expects that lowered inhibitions would result from hypnosis.

Many of the interviewees’ ideas about changes in personality and identity concern unusual or uncharacteristic behavior. Both Blossom and Jones mention “crazy” behavior in association with hypnosis. Jones was inspired to volunteer for a performance after her friends told her about the “crazy” behavior exhibited by volunteers during another performance. Because she believes she has a “creative mind,” she thought hypnosis would allow her to “do something crazy and it would be fun.” Blossom mentions that some of her fellow volunteers used their
participation as an excuse to “act all crazy” the rest of the night. Her comment implies that she (and perhaps those fellow volunteers as well) assume that such “crazy” behavior could accompany hypnosis.

Unusual behavior is one of the indicators Niederkohr used to decide whether volunteers were really hypnotized in performance videos. When a volunteer performed suggestions that were particularly out of character, Niederkohr saw this uncharacteristic behavior as proof that the volunteer was hypnotized. Thomson expresses a similar sentiment when she describes a particularly funny and creative routine involving aliens that some of her friends performed. The girls chosen for the skit were not known as natural performers at their school. Additionally, one of the girls was Thomson’s close friend, and Thomson explains that under normal circumstances, “Marissa’s not funny.” The girls’ uncharacteristic behavior confirmed for Thomson that they must have been hypnotized. Nicosia was also impressed by the uncharacteristic behavior of a friend. He explains that, under hypnosis, “it seemed like she had a different personality from what she had when she went up there, almost, different responses than she would have had when we’re around each other.” During the performance, Nicosia used such personality changes to help him decide which volunteers were hypnotized. While some of those he thinks were faking seemed to be “acting a little too over-the-top,” he describes hypnotized volunteers this way: “I don’t know if I want to say genuine responses, but it seemed like it was a different—they seemed to have a different personality at that point, almost. I don’t know. It just seemed different.”

Post-Hypnotic Suggestions

Only Burns and Hurtsellers discuss post-hypnotic suggestions at any length, but their thoughts are noteworthy. Although Burns thought the hypnotist for whom she performed had been open about the fact that his show was fake, some of Burns’ fellow volunteers reported
becoming hypnotized. A few such volunteers were close friends, so Burns took the opportunity to question them about their experiences. She explained that through her questioning, she was looking for signs that her friends had experienced amnesia, hallucinations, and a response to post-hypnotic suggestions. Satisfied that her friends had not experienced any of these phenomena, she treated their claims of hypnosis with skepticism. Thus, her comments suggest that she accepts a response to post-hypnotic suggestions as inherent to the hypnotic condition.

Additionally, when Burns saw a few other volunteers displaying unusual or uncharacteristic behavior after their performances, she concluded that had been genuinely hypnotized. She saw changes in one volunteer’s social interactions and cognitive functioning, saying that the young woman seemed “really weirdly out of it” after her performance. Another, normally reserved, young woman injured herself while running wildly through the fairgrounds, and then had no memory of the injury or of her unrestrained behavior the next morning. Burns’s use of these examples and her lack of skepticism regarding the young women’s claims would seem to imply an assumption on Burns’ part that unusual post-hypnotic behavior is proof of a hypnotic experience.

Hurtsellers’ assumption that stage hypnosis can leave people with permanent post-hypnotic suggestions has informed her decision not to attend live hypnosis shows. Although she discusses the possibility that she might “bawk like a chicken every time I hear the word ‘pickle’ for the rest of my life” with humor, her comment clearly indicates an assumption that post-hypnotic suggestions are a potential result of hypnosis.

*Weak-Willed People Are More Susceptible*

Only one interviewee entertains the notion that weak-willed people might be more susceptible to hypnosis than others. As I described earlier, Nicosia did not experience hypnosis
and was released from the stage by the hypnotist after only a short time. To ease his embarrassment at being dismissed, he told himself the remaining volunteers became hypnotized because they were “weak-minded,” whereas he did not become hypnotized because he had the “power to resist” the hypnotist.

Post-Hypnotic Amnesia

Post-hypnotic amnesia is a common expectation among interviewees. Burns, for example mentions that although she was initially disappointed at not becoming hypnotized, she is no longer sure she would even want to experience hypnosis during a performance, because participating in the show was so much fun that she would not want to risk being unable to remember it. Rather than complete amnesia, Burns says she assumes one’s memory after hypnosis is fragmented and unclear, “more like how you remember your dreams.”

Before her participation, Thomson assumed that post-hypnotic amnesia is a hallmark of hypnosis. Thus, when she remembered her performance experience afterward it added to her concern about whether she could have been hypnotized. Nicosia also expresses an expectation of post-hypnotic amnesia. His friend insisted she had become hypnotized, but Nicosia briefly suspected she was only claiming amnesia as “proof” that she had been hypnotized. In order to worry that his friend was making a false claim of amnesia to prove her successful hypnosis, Nicosia must assume either that amnesia results from a successful hypnosis experience, or at the very least that he thinks his friend believes it does. Barnett and Niederkohr also discuss amnesia as an expected outcome of hypnosis, but their expectations result from their personal experiences with post-hypnotic amnesia. Neither mentions whether he already assumed post-hypnotic amnesia would occur before having his first hypnotic experience.

While several volunteers associate amnesia with hypnosis, most hypnosis investigators,
such as Leslie M. Cooper, assert that “hypnotic amnesia is seldom manifest unless it is suggested, explicitly or implicitly, by the hypnotist and/or expected by the subject” (309). Thus amnesia is likely if the hypnotist tells subjects they will not remember the experience, or if the subjects expect that they will not remember it. In the twentieth century, several studies have reported high expectations of amnesia following hypnosis among the general public. In 1941, for instance, 64% of respondents answered “No” to the question, “Will people remember what took place under hypnosis?” In 1961, 74% agreed with the statement, “People usually forget what happened during the trance as soon as they wake up from it.” In 1969, 59% agreed that if they were to be hypnotized, they would not remember what happened afterwards (Cooper 321). Despite reported expectations for hypnotic amnesia as high as 74%, studies of hypnotized subjects rarely report instances of spontaneous amnesia above 20%, or of suggested amnesia above 35%. Most, studies, in fact, report lower numbers (Cooper 321). Thus, an individual’s expectations regarding amnesia may have little effect on whether he or she experiences it. A study in which subjects were asked before being hypnotized to fill out a questionnaire about which items on a hypnotic susceptibility test they thought they would pass under hypnosis seems to corroborate this idea. There was no correlation between the subjects’ expectations regarding amnesia and their level of recall afterward (Cooper 321).

*Susceptibility of the Unwilling and/or Unwitting*

Only Hurtsellers addresses the notion that unwilling and/or unwitting people could become hypnotized. However, her concern seems rooted in her extraordinarily susceptible response to hypnosis, rather than in any worries that a hypnotist might intentionally exploit unwilling or unwitting people. Because she worries that she might inadvertently become hypnotized at a show, she will not attend hypnosis performances. According to stage hypnotist
Pattie Freeman, this concern may reflect a genuine problem at stage hypnosis performances. Freeman describes counseling a young man for test anxiety who was so highly susceptible to hypnosis that he could not attend hypnosis shows without becoming hypnotized inadvertently. Freeman advised him to step outside during the induction procedure portion of the show, and then to return when the induction was over to watch the rest of the performance. However, even this precaution was not sufficient. The next time he attended a performance, he left the venue and returned after the induction, but he still “went under again” the next time the hypnotist snapped his fingers. At that point Freeman counseled the man not to attend hypnosis shows if he did not want to be put in that situation again (Telephone interview).

Lack of Agency or Volition

Many interviewees associate a lack of agency or a loss of volition with hypnosis. Some even seem to think that a hypnotized person’s sense of involuntariness should be so complete as to be accompanied by a lack of awareness of one’s own actions. Barnett, Blossom, McKinley, and Toney report expecting a lack of awareness before they volunteered, with McKinley explaining that he expected such lack of awareness would be “sort of like mind control.” Similarly, one of the reasons Burns says she knew she had not been hypnotized is that she was “completely conscious, completely making active choices” throughout her volunteer experience. Nicosia, too, reports that he knew he was not hypnotized because after the induction procedure he “wasn’t feeling manipulated.” In an interview, stage hypnotist Meghan O. Koesters asserts that such beliefs are common, saying, “They think it’s almost like a sort of mind control. Like, they think it’s taking control of the entire mind and not just one section. So they believe it’s completely taking away someone’s willpower. You take away their will. You take away their freedom. They essentially become like zombies. And naturally that’s not the case. . . .”
Blossom also assumes that because she did not have a sense of being controlled during her volunteer experience, she was not hypnotized. She explains that she chose to volunteer because, “I really wanted to see if they could take my mind from me. That’s never happened to me before. That would be a crazy, new experience.” Because Thomson assumes that a hypnotized person should experience involuntariness and she did not, she continues to wonder whether she was hypnotized. Talbott did not experience a feeling of involuntariness, which caused her to conclude that her level of hypnosis was simply less deep than that of some others on the stage. When Talbott tried to assure her eight and nine year-old campers that she thought her experience had been “real,” even though it was difficult to describe, her campers were skeptical, arguing, “But you did everything. You knew you were doing it all.” This would suggest that they, too, assume that a lack of awareness and a feeling of involuntariness should accompany hypnosis.

Interestingly, Blossom seems to suggest that lack of agency in hypnotized subjects should be absolute when she speculates that the outlandish, post-show behavior of a few volunteers is proof that they could not have been hypnotized. Blossom reasons that if they had been hypnotized, they would have accepted the hypnotist’s suggestion to wake up at the end of the show and thus their post-show behavior should have been completely normal. Because they did not readily accept the hypnotist’s suggestion, Blossom assumes their “crazy” behavior must have been voluntary and necessarily gave them away as fakes.

Research suggests that the belief that hypnosis leads to a lack of agency or a loss of volition can have an impact on the volunteer experience. A 1992 study by Crawford, et al., shows that the same volunteers who displayed the most compliance with the hypnotist’s suggestions were also the most likely to report that they believe hypnosis leads to a lack of
volition. The authors conclude that, “Response expectancy can be an important determinant of experience and behavior. False expectations and beliefs about hypnosis and the hypnotist, coupled with perceived experiences of involuntariness in response to suggestions that are misattributed to the hypnotist’s power over them, may have led the participants to believe they had lost control” (666). Despite the prevalence of such ideas, Irving Kirsch notes in “Defining Hypnosis” that, “Although it is still a widely held opinion among lay people, the idea that hypnotic subjects are automata has been rejected by scholars familiar with research in the field” (161). Perhaps if some of my interviewees had known that involuntariness was not an indisputable marker of hypnosis, their volunteer experiences might have been different.

Dangerous and/or Otherworldly Powers

Few interviewees openly express concern that a hypnotist might possess dangerous and/or otherworldly powers, although a few seem to imply such an idea. The fact that Hurtsellers will not volunteer for stage hypnosis due to her concern that she might be left with permanent post-hypnotic suggestions indicates some concern that hypnosis can be dangerous. Barnett mentions that the hypnotist for whom he volunteered did not want to “risk” anyone coming out of hypnosis spontaneously, and thus released them all at the same time. Barnett’s comment suggests that he believes such an event could pose a risk. Jones also seems to express a concern that hypnosis might be dangerous, because she takes pains to compliment the hypnotist’s extensive safety precautions, and appears to equate these precautions with experience and professionalism.

Several interviewees also reveal a familiarity with the notion that a hypnotist could possess “powers” through their unprompted denials that they might believe such a thing. Toney, for example, reiterated at least three times during his interview that he did not believe hypnosis
involved “magic,” making statements such as, “The way I kind of imagined [hypnosis] was, like, by no means any kind of magic or anything like that but perhaps a lack of awareness and inhibition.”

Potential Sources for and Effects of Expectations and Assumptions

Many of the concerns and attitudes regarding hypnosis in general and stage hypnosis in particular that I traced through historical sources and works of literature and drama in chapter 1 are reiterated by these twelve interviewees who volunteered to perform in contemporary stage hypnosis performances. The prevalence of such beliefs about hypnosis among the general public is also mentioned frequently by stage hypnotists and hypnosis researchers. Although such a small sample size does not allow for claims about the larger population, the repetition of these ideas throughout time, across many sources, and by many people would seem to suggest that they have great staying power, despite research to the contrary. To conclude this chapter, I reflect on the sources of my interviewees’ prior expectations about stage hypnosis and examine the ways in which such expectations may have had an impact on their performance experiences.

All of the interviewees had some familiarity with hypnosis and/or stage hypnosis prior to their volunteer experience, but none had participated in any in-depth study or research. Only three interviewees, Paben, Barnett, and Hurtsellers, had been hypnotized before their volunteer experiences. Two, Blossom and Jones, received information from friends who had seen the hypnotist’s prior performances, and three, Paben, Talbott, and Toney watched live hypnosis performances before volunteering. Only Burns, McKinley, and Toney report any formal study of hypnosis before volunteering, and even that was limited to writing a two-page school report for Burns and listening to a psychology lecture for McKinley and Toney. Much as earlier assumptions about hypnosis could be traced through literature and other media, these
interviewees overwhelmingly report that various media provided them with most of their exposure to ideas about hypnosis before they volunteered. Media exposure came from several sources, including billboard advertisements for hypnotherapy, radio advertisements promoting hypnosis performances, YouTube videos of stage hypnosis performances, and depictions in books, television programs, and films.

Interestingly, even interview subjects who initially claim they had no prior exposure to or expectations for hypnosis before they participated, often later reveal a familiarity with media depictions of hypnosis. Nicosia, for example could not recall any prior exposure to stage hypnosis when asked directly, although he said he thought he might have seen something on television. Despite this lack of a specific memory, he later asserted that he found the performance to be “pretty much everything I expected,” and that it was similar to things he had seen on television, movies, and “the typical things that you’ve heard of people doing.” Stage hypnotist Michael Brody substantiates this trend, reporting that although his volunteers often initially claim that they do not know anything about hypnosis, once he begins the process they reveal many preconceived ideas. Brody also concurs that most people’s ideas about hypnosis come from media, especially movies and television (Personal interview). Thus, just as previous generations were exposed to ideas about hypnosis through media, such as literature, satirical plays and pamphlets, and newspaper articles, these contemporary interviewees report exposure to many of the same ideas through their available media.

Interestingly, the prior assumptions and expectations held by my interviewees did not necessarily seem to affect their hypnosis experiences in any significant way. For example, five of the twelve interviewees report that before they volunteered they thought stage hypnosis was “fake,” “a sham,” or some result of persuasion or collusion between the hypnotist and the
volunteers. Of these five interviewees, three are certain they became hypnotized, one is certain he was not hypnotized, and one thinks she was hypnotized, but because the experience did not meet her expectations she has some lingering doubts. Thus, the assumption that stage hypnosis is not “real” did not seem to influence whether these interviewees felt hypnotized during their performances. Although these findings cannot provide statistical generalizations about the population as a whole, because they provide at least one counter-example, they do show that belief in stage hypnosis is not a necessary prerequisite for feeling that one has become hypnotized.

The interviewees’ eagerness to volunteer and their level of desire to become hypnotized also did not seem to have a consistent effect on their hypnotic experiences. Eight interviewees report that they volunteered eagerly and looked forward to experiencing hypnosis. Of those eight, three felt that they became hypnotized during their performances, three were certain they had not become hypnotized, and two experienced varying levels of uncertainty about their hypnotic experience. Of the three who were initially hesitant to volunteer but were eventually convinced, in whole or in part, by friends or family members, one is certain he was hypnotized, one is certain he was not, and one is fairly certain she was hypnotized but continues to struggle with some doubts about the experience. Thus, the level of desire each interviewee felt about being hypnotized also did not seem to influence whether they felt hypnotized during their performances. Again, because of the presence of at least one counter-example, I can conclude that a desire to become hypnotized is not a necessary prerequisite for feeling that one has become hypnotized, and that initial resistance to becoming hypnotized does not preclude the possibility of feeling that one has become hypnotized.

Although the interviewees preconceptions about stage hypnosis and their willingness to
participate in it did not seem to have an appreciable effect on whether or not they became hypnotized, there is another area wherein such preconceived ideas about hypnosis did seem to have an impact on their experiences. When interview subjects’ experiences did not match their expectations for hypnosis, disappointment, confusion, and/or discomfort often resulted. All four of the interviewees who are certain they did not become hypnotized cite a failure to experience certain hypnotic phenomena as part of their criteria for deciding they were not hypnotized. Blossom and Burns, for example, both expected to experience a loss of volition and a loss of control over their actions but they did not. When they retained control over their actions, both assumed that this was proof they were not hypnotized. Although they enjoyed their participation, both express disappointment that they did not become hypnotized.

The three interviewees who experienced some degree of uncertainty or confusion over their hypnotic experiences reveal that much of their discomfort stemmed from the fact that their experiences of hypnosis did not align with their expectations for hypnosis. McKinley expected a loss of volition, but instead experienced rapport, which resulted in a deep desire to comply with the hypnotist’s suggestions. This overwhelming need to comply initially left McKinley feeling embarrassed and ashamed about his performance experience. When Talbott did not experience a sense of involuntariness as she expected she would, she concluded that she must not be as deeply hypnotized as some of the other volunteers. Furthermore, she decided she must not have become deeply hypnotized because she had some difficulty focusing during the induction procedure, and thus she was left wondering whether she might have had a more intense or full experience if she had been able to be more focused. Thomson, the most conflicted of the three, compared her expectations for hypnosis to her moment-to-moment sensations and determined that she must not be hypnotized because she was not experiencing most of the phenomena she expected. She was
so disoriented by the variance between her expectations and her experience that she even began to wonder whether she was inadvertently and unwittingly faking hypnosis in order to remain in the show.

Stage Hypnotist I confirms that he believes many misperceptions about hypnosis come from media depictions, and that sometimes such misperceptions can affect his volunteers’ performance experiences. He explains, “... it really looks in the media, like [hypnotized] people lose their willpower, they’re completely controlled and the hypnotist can make them do anything.” Instead of a lack of awareness or volition, he explains,

> With hypnosis, because you’re aware the entire time, you know exactly what you’re doing the whole time. And you don’t feel hypnotized, so you can be deeply, deeply, deeply hypnotized and I can suggest something, and if it’s something you don’t understand you’re not going to do it, and if it’s something you find objectionable you don’t have to do it, and the fact is that hypnotized people do not lose their willpower, they don’t lose their morals or ethics, they don’t lose the ability to decide right from wrong, and I have no control. It’s a very, very cooperative thing. And I think that genuinely surprises people.”

(Telephone interview)

Stage Hypnotist I asserts that people are so surprised by the difference between the reality of hypnosis and media representations that even deeply hypnotized volunteers will occasionally stop performing partway through the show and tell him, “I don’t think it’s working.” When he asks the volunteer why he or she does not believe he or she is hypnotized, the volunteer inevitably replies, “Because I know what’s going on.”

In order to lessen the impact of volunteers’ preconceived ideas about hypnosis on their
performance experiences, Stage Hypnotist I explains that during his pre-talk he tells the audience, “I have no special powers. This is completely cooperative. If you don’t want to be hypnotized, it’s not going to work. Once you’re hypnotized . . . you won’t feel hypnotized, because people genuinely don’t feel hypnotized, not in the sense of what you’ve seen on TV or in the movies. This may surprise you, but even deeply hypnotized, you’re completely aware.” While Toney speculates that such reassurances from a hypnotist would lessen the show’s entertainment value, Stage Hypnotist I finds that the opposite is true: when his volunteers feel relaxed and comfortable with the procedure, they enjoy participating and the audience enjoys watching. This is why he takes pains to dispel misconceptions about hypnosis and to create a performance that is fun for the participants. He says, “. . . every time that I write a bit, I want to write a bit where the volunteers leave the stage going, ‘That was a really cool experience. I’m glad I did it. And where the audience is laughing during the show, but as they’re laughing, they’re not pointing and laughing, they’re laughing and thinking, ‘God, that looks like really a lot of fun. I wish that I’d volunteered.’”
CHAPTER V.

OBSERVER, PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER, PARTICIPANT

It’s hard to experience it without experiencing it. (Jerry Barnett, Personal interview)

Throughout my interviews with volunteer performers, interviewees struggled to describe their performance experiences. As they reflected, they often highlighted the difficulty of providing a substantive description of an experience they found to be so insubstantial. Some compared stage hypnosis to dreaming (Hurtsellers, Paben), intoxication (Jones), or anesthesia (Niederkohr). One simply called the experience “a blur” (Barnett). Another reflected that “it almost feels like something I kind of just made up. The whole experience—I mean, I know I was definitely in the show—but it doesn’t really feel like it was real or anything tangible” (McKinley). Four interviewees expressed surprise at their own actions when watching recordings of their performances or hearing friends describe what they had done (Barnett, Niederkohr, Paben, Talbott). As they tried to find ways to describe such ephemeral performance experiences, their statements frequently began with “It’s almost like . . .” and “It’s kind of like. . . .” This chapter documents my attempt to discover what stage hypnosis is like. It is a chronicle of my preparation for participating in a stage hypnosis performance, my moment-to-moment thoughts and impressions while participating, and my analysis of the experience.

Preparation

Leaving later than I planned, I dash out the door and into my car. I am probably more nervous than the situation warrants. I start the ignition and complete my usual check-list. Ticket?
Check. Quarters in case I have to park at a meter? Check. Notebook and pen? Half-check. I turn off the car and run back into the house for a pen. Tonight, as usual, I will probably be the only person in the club who is discretely taking notes under the table. Also as usual, I will try to position my small notebook and pen out of sight, so that I can record my impressions without attracting attention. Despite the otherwise familiar routine I do not expect this night to proceed as usual, because after three years of reading, writing, and interviewing, I am finally going to place myself squarely in the center of my research and move from audience-participant-observer to performer-participant-observer. I will volunteer to take part in a stage hypnosis performance.

Although I have attended many stage hypnosis shows, my preparation for this performance reveals that tonight is different. I have put a great deal of thought into my “costuming,” and prepared much as I might for a theatrical performance, with consideration for both practicality and appearance. As a busy graduate student, spouse, and parent, I rarely have time for more than a few minutes in front of the mirror each morning, but tonight I take extra time to apply make-up and style my hair. I have also devoted much time to contemplating my clothing options. My well-worn brown leather sandals have never let me down. They have a chunky, low heel and non-slip soles: cute and fun but also comfortable and safe. I am wearing jeans and a “special” top, in the hope that I will blend in with the Friday night comedy club crowd in the college town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. In the last decade, between the ages of thirty and forty, I have relished the transition wherein I am rarely mistaken for a student anymore on the campuses where I teach. Tonight, however, I dress to blend in with the very same campus crowd from which I usually try to distinguish myself.

The preparatory rituals I perform in the mirror are also decidedly unusual for me when attending a show. I bend and stretch to be sure my clothing allows for a full range of movement
without revealing something I would prefer to keep covered. I sit in a chair to assure myself that my top is long enough to cover anything my low-rise jeans might not. I march up and down the stairs in my sandals, to see if even this low heel might trip me should my inner klutz emerge. My ensemble passes every test. Almost as an afterthought, I grab a pair of long, dangling earrings. Although it is still 92° at 6:00 PM on this unseasonably warm May evening, I also throw a jacket over my arm, just in case.

   Just as I am about to dash out the door, my pre-launch inspection reveals an unanticipated problem: what will I do with my purse? When I volunteer to participate in the performance, I will have to leave my seat in the audience and go up onto the stage. Most people do not attend such performances alone, and thus they leave their belongings at their table or seat, to be attended by friends. I, however, will be attending the show alone. My decision to attend alone grew from larger questions about whether to participate in a performance at all. When I began this research several years before, I simply assumed that I would eventually volunteer. I accepted Erving Goffman’s assertion in “On Fieldwork” that the data collected through fieldwork is generated “by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals” (125). Furthermore, I expected to participate because I believed it would allow me to gain a deeper understanding of the genre and of the volunteer experience. As Lesa Lockford notes in Performing Femininity, “while bodily engagement may not be a precondition of good ethnography . . . bodily engagement may enable the ethnographer . . . to access some understanding that might not be readily grasped empathetically or imaginatively. Additionally, experience is the epistemological ground of ethnography and compels physical participation by the researcher” (64). I worried that if I did not participate, the lack of first-person experience would leave my research somehow
deficient, suspect, or lacking in integrity. Does a choice not to participate in an experience somehow call into question someone’s ability or right to analyze that experience? Probably not, but I ruminated over the implications anyway.

As my research progressed, however, and I studied stage hypnosis techniques and interviewed stage hypnotists and volunteer performers, I began to question whether participation was advisable or even possible for me. If I volunteered, would I filter my research through the lens of “what it was like for me” from that point on? Would participation somehow alter the way in which I heard, interpreted, or understood my interviewees’ experiences? Of course, I knew participation would change my perspective, but I could not decide whether that would be good or bad for my research. Furthermore, with years of research running through my mind, could I surrender myself to the experience of hypnosis, or would the performance simply become an exercise in identifying the various techniques I have studied? I even began to make aesthetic justifications for not participating. I have seen many stage hypnosis performances, and some hypnotists create shows that are well-prepared, polished, and wonderfully entertaining. Other performers, however, are less experienced or lack a natural stage presence, and thus appear uncomfortable, amateurish, or unprofessional. Some hypnotists treat their volunteers with respect and engage them as co-producers of the performance, while others seem to revel in embarrassing their volunteers to get a laugh. What if I end up volunteering for someone whose show is simply bad? However, when I interviewed a hypnotist whose show I thought I would appreciate, I argued with myself that I could not volunteer for him or her after the interview process, because the hypnotist’s knowledge that I was a researcher might cause him or her to alter the performance somehow.

I have finally concluded that my tendency to over-think is probably a hallmark of the
graduate student, and decided to, as the Nike slogan advises, “Just Do It.” I will volunteer for stage hypnosis in the hopes of gaining a more nuanced understanding of the performance experience. In *Local Knowledge*, Clifford Geertz acknowledges the conflict inherent in participant-observation between the desire to understand and the knowledge that one never can, when he speaks of “the passion to swim in their stream of experience, and the illusion afterward that one somehow has” (58). It seems unlikely that many others enter into the volunteer experience after years of research into the performance practices, neurology, psychology, and ethics of stage hypnosis as I have. However, my research has suggested that there is no such thing as a “typical” experience, because volunteers have vast differences in their familiarity with and expectations of hypnosis and stage hypnosis. Therefore, my work here is not to delineate the contours of some universal hypnosis experience. Instead, I have accepted the impossibility of universality and granted myself a measure of control over certain aspects of the experience. I am well aware of the incompatibility between my desire for control over my hypnotic experience and the need to relinquish control of my actions to the hypnotist in order to participate in the performance; however, I know myself well enough to know that if I feel powerless, I will never be comfortable enough to relax and fully surrender to the hypnotic process.

First, I have chosen the hypnotist for whom I will volunteer carefully. Because I know that I find hypnosis performances advertised as “erotic” or “X-rated” distasteful, I have selected a hypnotist who advertises “family friendly” shows at 8:00 PM and “adults only” shows at 10:30. Although I am hardly a prude, I have no interest in simulating fellatio on a beer bottle or providing an audience member with a lap-dance—bits I have seen numerous times in performance. By choosing the “family friendly” show by a performer who categorizes his content in this way, I am less likely to be asked to participate in such activities. Additionally, I
have chosen to volunteer for a hypnotist whose performances I have never attended. I came to this decision after one of my interview subjects, Casey Toney, described the difficulties that arose for him when he volunteered for stage hypnotist Dale K after seeing K’s show a year earlier. As I discuss in chapter 4, Toney’s familiarity with K’s routines led to a performance experience that left Toney riddled with anxiety. As he began to realize that the show in which he was participating was “one-hundred percent identical” to the one he had already seen, Toney found himself continually thinking about that previous performance, identifying each routine, and remembering how it had been performed. He became increasingly uncomfortable, and he attributes much of his discomfort to his familiarity with the material, saying, “That killed it for me, frankly, because I couldn’t focus on what was happening now, because it was like, ‘Oh, here’s the bit where he has the giant penis!’” He explains that “From that point it felt like just completely just playing along” (Toney). Because I assume that quieting my analytical mind will already be challenging, I have not even viewed performance videos posted online by the hypnotist for whom I will volunteer.

Next, I have created some loose principles to guide my participation:

1. I will try not to self-evaluate my mental state to decide if I am hypnotized. Instead, I will try to simply observe my thoughts, reactions, and sensations in as much detail as possible.

2. I will comply with any reasonable performance instructions given by the hypnotist to the best of my ability, whether or not I believe myself to be hypnotized.

3. I will not try to perform the role of a hypnotized person, whatever that might mean, or otherwise simulate trance-like behaviors.

4. I will not try to create any kind of comedic or structured performance over and above
what I am directly asked to do by the hypnotist. Instead, I will try to respond to suggested scenarios in the manner I think I might respond if I found myself in the same scenario in life.

Some might argue that a premeditated decision to comply with hypnotic suggestions whether or not I believe myself to be hypnotized is disingenuous. However, I am comfortable with this decision for several reasons. First, experts do not agree on what hypnosis is, whether it has any effect, or what that effect might be. Additionally, I have never been hypnotized before. Thus, I have no way to evaluate the level of my own response and I have no prior experience against which to compare it. Finally, many hypnosis manuals suggest that some volunteers who do not become hypnotized may nonetheless prove to be active and compliant performers. Because creating an enjoyable performance for the audience is the hypnotist’s primary responsibility, they recommend that engaged and entertaining performers should be kept on the stage even if the hypnotist suspects that they are not hypnotized.¹

1 For examples of this sort of advice, see Johns and Nongard 54, McGill 294, Royle 52.

I have also spent a great deal of time thinking about the parameters of my performance. Hypnotists usually explain to their audiences that they will release volunteers from the stage who cannot achieve hypnosis quickly. I have already seen a dozen such performances and I doubt that I will gain much new research information if I am unable to participate. However, I know it is possible that I may volunteer for this performance only to find that I am not susceptible to suggestion or at least unable to be hypnotized under stage conditions. Thus, it might be tempting to try to “fake” hypnosis in order to remain onstage. With many years of acting experience, I suppose I could convincingly perform the role of a “hypnotized person,” but I doubt such a performance would be useful to my research. After all, I am not volunteering for stage hypnosis.

¹
in order to engage in an acting exercise. I am trying to learn more about what it is like to participate in such a performance.

In much the same way that I will not try to “act hypnotized,” I will not try to create any other structured or premeditated performance. I will not try to be funny or plan out my participation ahead of time. I have seen enough hypnosis shows that I could easily borrow from performances I particularly enjoyed, or perform in a way that I know was well-received by other audiences. However, I doubt that many other volunteers approach their participation in this way. While such a performance might be entertaining for the audience, it would not help me to understand more about the volunteer experience. For all of these reasons, I have decided simply to follow all (reasonable) instructions as naturally as possible under the circumstances. Regardless of how I may feel internally, I will allow the hypnotist to determine whether I remain onstage. I will follow instructions and try not to think too much about the rest.

Perhaps my most difficult decision was that of attending the performance alone, and it springs from the desire to create the most hospitable conditions for me to quiet my mind. As an actor, I know that I often give my least favorite performances when close friends and family are in attendance. The knowledge that I am being watched, somehow, differently than the rest of the cast, by audience members with a special interest in my performance, alters my process in subtle ways that I rarely understand, or enjoy. Thus, I have chosen to volunteer for a stage hypnosis performance that I will attend alone, in a city an hour’s drive from my home where I have few contacts and no close friends. I recognize that there might be great benefit in having someone along to document the experience and fill in details that I may miss while I am engaged in the performance. Additionally, family and friends are concerned that I should have someone along as a sort of chaperone while I undergo a hypnotic induction, in case I respond unpredictably to
the procedure. However, I know if I am going to have any chance of letting go enough to fully experience this type of performance, I must go alone. This has created my current dilemma: what will I do with my purse? In another situation, I might stuff my pockets with the most essential items and leave my bag at home. Tonight, however, I need a place to stash my notebook. I quickly remove anything from my purse that I cannot replace and concede that if it is stolen while I am onstage, the only things I will really miss are my phone, my car keys, and the notebook. I cross my fingers and hope to be seated next to someone trustworthy.

With road construction and difficulty finding a parking space, a drive that should take only an hour stretches to an hour-and-a-half. Finally in Ann Arbor, I feel a bit silly making the long walk to the club with my suede jacket slung over my arm. It is still in the low eighties, and everyone around me is wearing shorts, tank tops, sundresses, and sandals. When I enter the venue, however, I am immensely grateful for the jacket: the basement club is almost unbearably cold. After the bright, sunlit streets above, the room appears at first to be completely dark.

Pre-Show and Introduction of the Hypnotist

As my eyes adjust to the gloom I see that the venue is a typical comedy club in many ways. A small stage with a microphone occupies one side of the space. Rows of chairs and tables face the stage, and a bar runs along the wall opposite the entrance. An usher directs me to my seat and points out the location of the ladies room. I recognize my table as the one I selected when I purchased my tickets online weeks before: in the second row, close enough to get to the stage easily during the call for volunteers, but back far enough to conceal my note-taking. What I could not have anticipated from the ground plan online is that the seat I chose is directly under an overhead house light. As I open my notebook and begin scribbling down details about the club’s interior, it shines on me like a spotlight and I feel enormously conspicuous. I slide the notebook
back into my purse and contemplate how I will document the event without drawing attention to myself. Luckily, each table contains a suggestion card with which patrons can vote on the expansion of the club’s snack menu. I begin writing notes in the blanks on the comment card, hoping it seems as though I have strong feelings about corn dogs versus chicken wings.

On the stage is a row of eight metal folding chairs, their legs duct-taped together so that they cannot shift or separate during the performance. The stage’s permanent backdrop is a mural of a city skyline. The club’s name, Ann Arbor Comedy Showcase, is prominently featured in the mural’s star-studded sky. The menu is long on drinks and short on anything else. Two pages of specialty cocktails, a complete inventory of the bar’s liquor offerings, and a handful of beer and wine options contrast with the “Snacks” list, which includes popcorn, pretzels, peanuts, and candy bars. No wonder the host encouraged us to fill out our comment cards and vote on expansions to their snack menu. My waitress recommends an unfamiliar beer called Magic Hat #9, and since tonight is about trying something new, I order it. I do not choose Magic Hat #9 based on her recommendation, however. I choose it because its name seems oddly appropriate for a leap into the unknown. I would like to say that I did something remarkably out of character, and drained my glass in search of liquid courage for the show, but alas, I did not. I sip my drink slowly, aware that I will need a clear head in order to fully participate in the upcoming performance (and that the hour-long show will not include a bathroom break). Despite my measured approach, my small glass is empty by the time the MC is introduced.

Darnell, our MC for the evening, takes the stage just after 8:00 PM and attempts to warm up the crowd. I never catch his last name, and after his lackluster performance I don’t imagine I ever will. He seems well-intentioned, but his jokes—about his non-threatening appearance, his romantic misadventures, and his love of video games—fall a bit flat. By 8:15, he has recognized
those celebrating birthdays, reminded us to tip our wait staff, encouraged us to volunteer for the upcoming performance, and (mis)introduced the hypnotist: “And now, give it up for Gary Conway! Uh, let’s hear it for Gary Conrad!” He exits the stage to polite applause.

Luckily for Darnell, Conrad has intro and play-on music which provides more of an introduction. While many hypnotists use upbeat or dramatic play-on music, Conrad’s reminds me a bit of elevator music. A male voice informs us that we are about to see “World Famous Comedian and Hypnotist Gary Conrad!” We are also told that Conrad has used hypnosis to assist the U.S. military and police investigations. This is the last of Conrad’s sound cues that will proceed as planned tonight, and later I suspect that this one may have gone smoothly only because Conrad was not yet onstage, and thus he was able to assist with the cue himself.

Pre-Talk and Pre-Tests

Conrad walks onto the stage, and seems decidedly out of place in the basement club. He is wearing a suit and tie and his thinning hair lies limply against his head. He looks as though he should be selling used cars or passing out pamphlets about the end-times, rather than grabbing the microphone. Conrad makes very few introductory remarks, and begins his pre-talk by asking how many audience members have never seen a hypnosis show. The amount of applause in response seems small, but I am unsure whether this is because many in the audience have previously seen hypnosis in performance, or because this is not a particularly effusive or participatory crowd. He follows by asking how many are planning to volunteer for the show tonight. The response seems even more subdued, with light applause scattered throughout the house. (To be fair, my own response is fairly measured, too. Sitting alone at my table, an enthusiastic shout seems out of place.)

Conrad acknowledges those who plan to volunteer, and then immediately launches into a
list of those people who should *not* volunteer. They include anyone who simply wants to prove to him that he or she cannot be hypnotized, anyone who came with a jealous spouse or significant other, and anyone “on medication,” especially if it is “self-prescribed.” As he speaks, I realize that his voice is unusual, but I cannot decide whether he has a slight accent or a speech impediment. Throughout the night, I will return to this question, but I never reach a satisfactory conclusion. His voice sounds like someone who grew up deep in Cajun country, but moved away many years before. Thus, the flavor remains, creeping in unexpectedly, even though a recognizable accent was lost long ago. Unlike most other stage hypnotists I have seen, Conrad says almost nothing to reassure audience members about the nature of hypnosis or to dispel common myths. He also includes no pre-tests or other audience participation during his short pre-talk. (His show will last only an hour and I later wonder whether Conrad moved so quickly due to time constraints: he booked two performances in a row that night.)

**Call for Volunteers**

With his opening remarks kept to a minimum, Conrad calls for volunteers. I stash my purse beneath my chair, hidden behind the folds of the tablecloth, and make my way up onto the stage. Although I do not rush, I am only the second person to seat myself in one of the eight chairs. I am relieved that I do not have to compete for a spot on the stage: at some larger shows I have attended, dozens of audience members vie for the coveted spots on stage and the hypnotist hand-selects only the most suggestible, the most enthusiastic, etc. In this small, dark club, however, I do not have to worry about being “chosen.” After six of us make our way to the stage, Conrad calls for two more men to fill the remaining chairs and even up the number of men and women. After some encouragement from friends both onstage and off, two more women fill the final spots. Because women, rather than men, have taken the last chairs, Conrad caustically
remarks that an inability to follow directions does not bode well for the rest of the performance. Then, he begins a final list of dos and don’ts. He explains the show will be extremely physical, and insists no one who is not in excellent physical condition should participate. He tells us that if we do not think we could run outside right now to play on the playground and swing on the monkey bars for an hour, we should leave the stage, because that is how much physical activity the show entails. He also suggests anyone who did not visit the bathroom before the show should leave, because there will be no bathroom break.

Despite his warnings, none of the volunteers leaves. Conrad then inspects each volunteer for chewing gum. When he reaches my chair, near the end of the line, he asks “Gum?” and opens his mouth and says “Ah.” After years of dental visits, I instinctively mimic his action to show that I have no gum, opening my mouth wide and saying “Ah.” Apparently I am the first to do so, because he turns to the audience and says suggestively, “I’ll have to remember that for later!” This line gets a big laugh, which surprises me: this moment does not feel like a performance and thus it seems odd to have the audience respond to it. Of course, I understand that anything placed in front of an audience is automatically a performance, but these preparatory activities do not feel like performance. I have taken a seat. I have been warned about the physical requirements of participation. I have been inspected for contraband. These “housekeeping” activities are so banal as to banish all thoughts of performing, and the bright lights make it impossible to see anyone beyond the first row.

Conrad asks for any personal effects like phones, keys, or jewelry that might cause injury, and makes a special point to warn us that long, dangling earring will probably be ripped out. He then walks across the stage collecting these items in a blender pitcher, which I assume he must have borrowed from the bar. One volunteer asks if she should remove her stiletto heels, and
Conrad answers in the affirmative. I take out my earrings, but he never comes over to collect them, so I eventually put them back in. Conrad then rearranges the volunteers, so that no one is seated next to someone he or she knows. To separate two friends who came to the show together, he says pointedly, “You can switch seats with the girl who won’t take out her earrings.” We swap seats, I hand Conrad my earrings, and we are ready to proceed. In retrospect, I’m fairly certain that this was a set-up, and that Conrad intentionally did not take my earrings when I removed them the first time. In the surprise of the moment I thought he did it to get a cheap laugh, but I have reevaluated my opinion based on what followed.

Induction Procedure(s)

After the volunteers are re-seated, Conrad explains to the audience that the music he is about to play contains “subliminal messages” to help the volunteers achieve hypnosis more quickly. He warns that audience members should keep an eye out because everyone in the club will be able to hear the music, and thus the messages could affect not only the volunteers but also the spectators. I am not certain why he claims to be using subliminal messages since I have always heard that such techniques are not effective, but I wonder if Conrad is simply trying to create such an expectation in his volunteers. Perhaps he reasons that it will be easier to hypnotize volunteers who believe that they are already under the influence of subliminal hypnotic messages. It is also possible that he believes that the music contains hypnotic messages. Earlier, I wondered why he chose play-on music that I thought sounded like elevator music. This choice would make sense if Conrad felt that the music’s function was more important than its aesthetic impact. Later, I discover that recent research by Friederike Schlaghecken and Martin Eimer suggests that subliminal messages can sometimes trigger actions and influence behavior, but only if a person already has the intention to engage in that action or behavior (466-67). Thus,
Conrad may be using such messages in conjunction with his volunteers’ prior intention to become hypnotized. Anthony G. Greenwald, et al. notes that subjects have also reported a positive therapeutic effect from subliminal messages, although the reported improvement seemed to be a perceived placebo effect because no actual improvement was measured in subsequent testing (121). Conrad, therefore, may be counting on a perceived placebo effect to intensify his volunteers’ belief in their own hypnotic susceptibility, whether or not the music contains subliminal messages. Of course, Conrad may simply be engaging in a bit of hyperbole in order to increase anticipation and dramatic impact for the audience.

After a few false starts, Conrad’s “subliminal” music plays. His explanations complete, Conrad turns his full attention to his volunteers. He begins to quicken the pace of his speech significantly. This rapid pace is common among stage hypnotists I have seen, but I realize that the more quickly he speaks, the less I can understand. His unusual speech is causing words to become garbled and distorted as he speeds up. I hear him say that he will be speaking quickly, but that we will be able to understand every word that he says. I am fairly certain that he is wrong.

Conrad asks us to start by inhaling deeply when he raises his arm and exhaling completely when he lowers it. I assume his induction technique will be similar to those in other shows I have seen, and therefore I expect that we will use slow, steady breaths. Instead, he raises and lowers his arm quickly, signaling us to breathe quickly and deeply. Over an extended period, such quick, deep breaths could lead to hyperventilation, but this does not become an issue because Conrad stops us repeatedly to chastise volunteers he feels are not following his directions adequately. He reiterates his instructions, mocks volunteers who do not quickly comply, and tells the audience that he already knows he is going to have to let three of the
volunteers go. Because the volunteers’ chairs form a straight line facing forward, we cannot easily see what other volunteers are doing. Thus, I don’t know whether Conrad has already noted that three of the eight volunteers are not as compliant as he would prefer, or whether this is a general warning intended to encourage compliance. However, within the next five minutes he will release three volunteers, as promised.

Several times, Conrad repeats that he is looking for volunteers who can follow simple, basic instructions, and that anyone who cannot follow such simple instructions will be sent back to his or her seat. The combination of Conrad’s assertion that he will be releasing three of the volunteers and his explanation that he will only use those volunteers who can follow simple commands, leads me to believe that although Conrad employs an unusually short pre-talk, he may in fact include later remarks and activities in his performance that serve the same purpose. For example, many other hypnotists I have seen appear to use longer pre-talks to build trust and rapport with potential volunteers. (Flip Orley’s pre-talk, for example, lasted nearly half an hour.) Conversely, Conrad’s opening remarks are limited to a few sentences. Rather than building trust and rapport early in the show, Conrad seems to encourage volunteer compliance later through social pressure and the natural desire to avoid embarrassment. Conrad’s repeated assertions that any volunteer who cannot follow simple instructions will be sent back to his or her seat carries the implication that volunteers who are released are somehow incompetent or unintelligent. To avoid the stigma of being released from the stage, volunteers must demonstrate compliance with Conrad’s instructions. As I reflected on the performance later, I began to think Conrad’s earlier bit with my earring served a similar purpose. Conrad “made an example” of a volunteer (me) who appeared to refuse compliance, thus providing a subtle warning to others on the stage that non-compliance will result in public derision.
After several rounds of quick, deep breaths, Conrad releases two volunteers. I recognize one of those released as a birthday celebrant who received a round of applause earlier in the evening. She was one of a trio of young and strikingly beautiful Asian women in short skirts and towering heels, huddled around a tiny table laden with rainbow-hued cocktails. After the two dismissed volunteers leave the stage, Conrad rearranges us in our chairs again, ostensibly to fill in the now-empty seats. Our heavy breathing and musical chairs comes to an end when Conrad employs a rapid induction technique.

In theory, during a rapid induction, once a volunteer has become receptive, a hypnotist performs some quick gesture or makes brief physical contact with the volunteer, which startles him or her into entering hypnosis instantly. Thus, a rapid induction eliminates the time required for slower inductions, such as progressive relaxation. In performances I have seen, the effect is quite dramatic, with volunteers instantly falling over into what looks like a deep sleep, although I have sometimes suspected that their responses were much too sudden and dramatic to be genuine. Regardless of the induction technique chosen by the hypnotist, one of my biggest concerns about volunteering has been whether all my research into hypnosis techniques and practice may leave me unable to be hypnotized. I worry that I will sit on the stage identifying each technique, rather than relaxing and allowing myself to participate in the experience. Thus, it is gratifying to find that the rapid induction takes me completely by surprise.

I am the second volunteer from the end on stage left, and there is one additional empty chair at the end of the row. Conrad explains that he will hypnotize us instantly and that we will fall into a deep sleep. Without a pause to let us process this information, Conrad steps up to the young man seated on the end next to me, makes some sort of leftward-sweeping gesture at his face, and he falls over onto the empty chair at the end of the row. I barely have time to register
the gasps and murmurs from the audience before Conrad steps in front of my chair and repeats the same maneuver. After years of research, I know what a rapid induction is. I understand how it is supposed to work. I have seen it used in many stage shows. However, when it happens to me it is so fast and so unexpected (despite the fact that I know exactly what to expect), that I fall over to the left as quickly as the first volunteer. In fact, I fall over onto the first volunteer, and successive volunteers follow suit like dominoes, forming a leftward-leaning line across the stage. (Although I cannot see other volunteers at this point, I know that those to my immediate left and right complied, and I assume that the others have as well, because no one is released from the stage at this point.)

I try to maintain my prior commitment not to self-evaluate, but I fail. I already know at this point in the performance that whatever hypnosis is supposed to be, I am not experiencing it. I cannot help noticing . . . that I do not notice anything different. Although I fell over during the rapid induction like the other volunteers, it was not due to hypnosis. I fell over because Conrad swept his hands so close to my face that I flinched away from him and landed on my neighbor. Lying there, I wonder whether some of the dramatic rapid inductions I’ve seen in performance were a result of similar reflex responses, rather than hypnosis. I recall a performance I attended in which all of the participants fell over during the rapid induction, but two volunteers then lifted their heads and told the hypnotist that they were not hypnotized (Brody, Evergreen High School). I wonder if they felt the way I am feeling right now. I also wonder why I am so sure that I am not hypnotized. I remind myself that I have never been hypnotized and thus I should have no basis for comparison. I also remind myself that Jonathan Royle asserts in his book, *Confessions of a Hypnotist*, that “there is no such thing as a ‘Hypnotised’ feeling” (42). My reminders, however, do not change the fact that I do not “feel” hypnotized. Although I do not think I am hypnotized, I
maintain my commitment to participate fully and comply with all reasonable suggestions. I continue to do what I am told, when I am told to do it—right up to the point when I am given a suggestion with which I have no intention of complying. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Final Volunteer Selection

Eyes closed and lying on our neighbors to the left, we receive our first real test. Conrad asks us to raise our right hands high in the air and make our arms as rigid as possible. He explains that he will test to see if our arms are rigid, and proceeds to try to bend each of our arms at the elbow. We are expected to resist his attempts and to keep our arms upright and straight. During the arm-rigidity test, Conrad releases the last of the three volunteers from the stage, leaving five to perform in the rest of the show. Although my eyes are closed, I assume that the released volunteer did not keep his or her arm rigid when Conrad attempted to bend it. I realize that my earlier concern that my years of research might occupy my mind during a performance is proving at least partially accurate: I am identifying Conrad’s techniques and comparing them to those of other performers I have seen. However, I realize that I also have an unexpected advantage: because I am familiar with the kinds of tests Conrad is employing, I know what behaviors he is hoping his volunteers will display. I momentarily worry that using my prior knowledge of the arm-rigidity test in order to demonstrate the “correct” response might break my rule about not pretending to be hypnotized, but then I realize that my prior knowledge is irrelevant since Conrad told us that our arms should remain rigid before he started. Thus, by keeping my arm straight, I am simply adhering to my commitment to follow all reasonable suggestions.

Activities Performed by the Volunteers

Once the final group of volunteers has been decided by the arm rigidity test, Conrad
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explains that the person to our left, on whom we are each already lying, is now a pillow. He instructs us to snuggle up to our pillows, fluffing them and readjusting them until they are just right. Of course, this sight elicits much laughter from the audience. Once we are closely snuggled with our “pillows,” Conrad asks us to begin patting them. At first, I think I may have heard him incorrectly, but he repeats the suggestion several times that we should pat our pillows in order to fluff them up. (Although I can’t say for certain what every volunteer was doing, I was in direct contact with those on my left and right and I can say that all three of us were patting as ordered, with the young man on the end snuggled up with and patting an empty chair seat.) Conrad orders us to pat faster, to pat slower, and then to pat with our heads as well. Just as I am certain I have misheard him, he says “That’s right! Bounce your head on your pillow!” Conrad leaves us in this position to turn and speak to the audience for awhile. I can only assume that a line of people lying on one another, arms around one another, patting each other, and bouncing their heads on each other’s abdomens must look ridiculous. He turns back to us periodically to remind us to “Keep patting that pillow!” or “Keep bouncing your heads!” (With his unusual speech, when he says this, it sounds like, “Geep bouncin’ yo ay-eds!”) I’m not entirely sure what he is talking to the audience about, but I begin to worry that I will not be able to continue with this repetitive motion for much longer. Although the motion is not strenuous, it is fast and we have been at it for quite awhile. I feel the muscles in my arms and neck beginning to ache. Then, Conrad tells us to pat faster with our right hands and slower with our left hands while we continue bouncing with our heads. I am pretty sure the task is impossible, but I give it a shot. It must be funny to watch, because the audience roars with laughter.

Finally, we are allowed to stop “bouncin’” our “ay-eds.” With our eyes still closed, we are told to snuggle up even closer to our “pillows,” but now Conrad tells the guy on my left to
grab the “pillow” on his right. The young man blindly gropes toward me and grabs me forcefully enough that I slide across my chair and somehow end up nearly underneath him. This might look like a romantic embrace, were it not for the fact that we continue the strange, repetitive patting. Conrad leaves us in this position for some time while he talks to the audience, and the sounds of their laughter escalate. I can only assume the humor comes from the sheer absurdity of the tangled bodies onstage, diligently patting one another as if to say, “there, there.” We are finally given a moment to rest when Conrad says “Sleep.” Each time we hear the “Sleep” command, we are supposed to stop whatever we are doing and collapse. Unfortunately, when I collapse, my head somehow slides behind the torso of the young man next to me and ends up wedged between his body and the back of his chair. I am quite certain that I will require a trip to the chiropractor in the near future.

Luckily, before my neck muscles begin to spasm, Conrad explains that on the count of three we will sit upright in our chairs. Once we sit up, Conrad suggests that the room is getting hotter and hotter. I think to myself that he is right: it is hot. We are under stage lights and we have just spent the better part of the last ten minutes patting and bouncing in a pile of bodies. Conrad then asks us to fan ourselves, more and more vigorously, in order to cool down, and I feel every one of my forty years as I try to maintain yet another repetitive physical action. In order to help us cool off, Conrad says he will give us cold drinks. He taps each of our outstretched hands to indicate that he has handed our “drinks” to us, and says that these are strong, alcoholic drinks, “unless alcohol is not appropriate for you.” In that case, our glasses are full of “happy juice.” We drink from these seemingly bottomless cups for quite awhile, while Conrad exhorts us to “Use your Adam’s apple to swallow that drink!” My inner acting teacher is annoyed, because any normal cup would have been drained long, long ago and I hate it when my
students fail to acknowledge such physical realities in their pantomimes. I find myself wondering how I should “use my Adam’s apple,” and more importantly, whether I even have one. I think I remember reading somewhere that both men and women have Adam’s apples, but that they are more prominent in men. Growing bored, I experiment with different ways to approximate swallowing the non-existent drink, trying to see if I feel any movement in my neck with my various techniques.

Then, Conrad “refills” our drink glasses, and explains that we now have fancy cocktails that need to be shaken. I approach this as a pantomime exercise and begin to gently swirl my “glass,” in order to keep from spilling its contents. With my eyes closed, I cannot see what the other volunteers are doing, but I hear Conrad shout, “Don’t worry about spilling it! Really give it a good shake!” I presume this is directed at me and begin to agitate the drink from side to side, shaking it vigorously. The audience roars with laughter as Conrad remarks about someone, “Looks like she’d be fun on a date.” I sneak a peek to the side through my upstage eye and see that some volunteers are shaking their drinks up and down, which makes the young woman to my right look like she is performing a sexual act. My quick glance tells me I am probably the only one using a side-to-side motion, and I adjust slightly. Given my concern for verisimilitude, I place my left hand over the “top” of the glass, and proceed as though I am holding a martini shaker. I feel a tiny sense of triumph at having done exactly what Conrad asked of me (shake my fancy drink), without actually doing what he wanted (simulate a hand job).

Once our drinks are sufficiently shaken, Conrad tells us to stir them, first with our fingers, and then with our noses. Some of the volunteers must have hesitated at the suggestion to stir with their noses, because Conrad exhorts, “Don’t think about whether it makes sense, just do it! Really get your nose in there!” Then Conrad tells us to stir our neighbor’s drinks, and I feel
him pushing my head slightly to the left. He must have pushed the young man on my left toward me, because we bump shoulders and grope blindly for each other’s open hands. I then feel Conrad push my head down toward my neighbor’s hand, and his face hits my hand a second later. While I have understood why some of the bits up to this point might be funny, I cannot imagine why the audience would find it amusing to see people with their faces pressed into one another’s hands. This image does not seem inherently funny, so perhaps their laughter comes from the nonsensical activity, or simply from watching people do what they are told to do, no matter how absurd.

After all of the patting, bouncing, fanning, shaking, and stirring, I am exhausted. Thus, I am happy to comply when Conrad insists that the high temperatures are now dropping, the room is growing frigid, and we should snuggle up with the person next to us. I am grateful for the chance to rest at last until Conrad insists that we are so cold that we are shivering, more and more vigorously. I guess I understand why he previously insisted that we must all be in peak physical condition in order to volunteer. Although I do not feel cold, I comply with Conrad’s suggestion and begin to shiver along with the other volunteers, rubbing my hands together and blowing on them for warmth. Conrad tells us several times to . . . do something. With his unusual speech, I never quite figure out what he is trying to get us to do, so I just continue to perform “cold” in a way that seems reasonable to me. I assume that I am not the only volunteer who does not comply, because Conrad seems to give up on whatever it was that he wanted. He explains that the temperature has returned to normal and gives the command to “Sleep.”

When next we sit up, we are driving cars. I am fairly comfortable with this scenario because it is ubiquitous in stage hypnosis routines and I have seen it performed many times. Even if I cannot understand every word of Conrad’s instructions, I have a fairly good idea what
he will ask us to do. I make a mental note not to repeatedly twist my imaginary steering wheel back and forth. I have seen many other volunteer performers pantomime “driving” in this way, and I always wonder whether those volunteers have ever actually driven a car. After we fasten our safety belts, Conrad tells us to put our hands high on the steering wheel and then makes fun of a volunteer who has apparently put his or her hands low on the wheel. Although I cannot see the offender through my still-closed lids, I am momentarily pleased that I must be doing it right, since I have not been mocked. Just as quickly, I am both amused and a little annoyed at my reaction: I do not like to think of myself as overly eager to please or overly concerned with others’ opinions of me.

As we drive our cars, Conrad tells us that we should wave to a friend we see by the side of the road. Unlike other performances I have seen, Conrad gives us very little detail about this friend: he does not tell us who it is, how we feel about him or her, or what we hope to achieve as we wave from our cars. (In many performances I have attended, volunteers are told that they see an attractive person with whom they carry on a flirtation, and the hypnotist gives volunteers specific instructions for each step of that flirtation.) With little to go on, I imagine that a friend is standing on the sidewalk off to the right. I wave and turn my body to the right as I drive past my stationary friend. As I twist backward in my seat to wave a final goodbye, I realize that if I were really driving, I would no longer be looking at the road. I snap back around forward, re-grab the wheel at ten and two like I was taught in driver’s ed, and adjust my imaginary steering wheel to get the car back into my lane.

It is at this moment that Conrad says we hear police sirens and see lights in the rear-view mirror. He repeatedly calls out a sound cue to the technician, which I presume should be a siren, but no cue plays. I move my head to look at the place where my mirror would be, and my
eyebrows naturally shoot up at the thought of seeing a patrol car there. Suddenly, my familiarity with this type of routine becomes a detriment, because I realize that every other time I have seen it performed the volunteers’ eyes were open. It is difficult to “see” friends on the side of the road and police cars in the mirror with one’s eyes closed. I begin to worry that Conrad may have told us to open our eyes some time ago and I missed it or didn’t understand him. Again, I sneak a look at my neighbor to the right, and I am relieved to find her eyes still closed as well.

When Conrad suggests that we should increase our speed to escape from the police, I realize that I have unconsciously begun to pantomime slowing down and putting on my turn signal: decades of pulling over for emergency vehicles and law enforcement must have instilled this habitual reaction. In response to the new suggestion, I press my right foot down onto my imaginary accelerator and grip the wheel tighter. Conrad calls out increasingly faster rates of speed, “eighty, eighty-five, ninety miles per hour.” He gives these suggestions jovially, as though we should enjoy “flying down the highway.” Although I often drive five or ten miles over the posted speed limit, I tend to feel very uncomfortable at speeds over eighty. Perhaps it is the remnants of a few unfortunate accidents in my reckless youth, but higher speeds leave me feeling out of control and vaguely queasy. Plus, many years of driving with a child in the backseat have made excessive speed feel like an irresponsible gamble. Thus, as Conrad suggests speeds I could never reach in my tiny Hyundai, my brow furrows. Just imagining speeds over one hundred is making me quite anxious. I feel myself wince and my expression must appear pained. The audience laughs, and I wonder if they are laughing at my discomfort or at something other volunteers are doing.

I am relieved when Conrad tells us we have escaped from the cops and we can “Sleep!” once again slumped over on our nearest neighbors. The next time we sit up, Conrad tells us we
will open our eyes on the count of three, explaining that once our eyes are open, we should look only at him unless we are told otherwise. He then gives us three cue phrases. When we hear the first phrase, we will smell a terrible odor and realize that Conrad is the source. When we hear the second phrase, we will smell a terrible odor coming from the person seated next to us. When we hear the third phrase, we will smell a terrible odor coming from ourselves, and we will need to make up some excuse for our stench. I repeat the cue phrases in my mind in order to ensure that I can remember which phrase should trigger which reaction, and hope that I have understood him correctly. While I review my assignment, I hear “One, Two, Three!” and sit up.

I open my eyes fully for the first time since the rapid induction early in the show and realize that my contact lenses have dried out because my eyes were closed for such a long time. The dryness is uncomfortable and I blink repeatedly, hoping to lubricate my lenses, without success. For me, dry eyes result in more than discomfort: because my contact lenses are specially designed to correct astigmatism, dry eyes can result in blurred vision. In brief, light does not come to a single focus point on my retina. Instead, multiple focus points occur, and all of them are nearsighted to different degrees. Different places on the surface of each contact lens correct my vision to different degrees, so that the resulting image is 20/20. The success of this optical wizardry, however, depends on the lenses’ ability to move and turn in my eyes, so that the appropriate area on each lens can settle over the right place on my irregularly shaped corneas. When my eyes are dry, my lenses cannot move, and thus my vision is not properly corrected. When I open my eyes, I can see contrasts of light and shadow and I can make out form and movement through my misaligned contacts, but I cannot distinguish details, features, or patterns.

I know that my glazed, unfocused eyes, dazed look, and repeated blinking are the result of my optical problem. It takes me awhile to realize, however, that to an observer unfamiliar with
my predicament, I must appear quite dazed. I do a quick self-observation: what must I look like from the audience? In order to understand Conrad’s instructions, I am forced to listen very carefully. The combination of his unusual speech and rapid pace requires intense concentration to ensure that I do not miss instructions or cues. Therefore, my normally expressive face is slack and expressionless much of the time. While I am reacting to a suggested scenario, I think that my face responds fairly normally, but in between cues, I sit listening so intently that my face is mask-like. Because I cannot see Conrad (or anything else) clearly, and because I must concentrate so hard to understand his instructions, I repeatedly find myself staring out straight ahead somewhere into the middle distance with my eyes unfocused. My arms are so exhausted from all of the patting, bouncing, fanning, shaking, and stirring, that when my shoulder-length hair falls across my face, I frequently do not bother to brush it away. After all, in a moment or two I will probably be slumped over my neighbor again. What difference does it make if a strand of hair falls in my face? I’m not sure what a hypnotized person is “supposed” to look like, but when my glazed eyes, blank expression, and seeming lack of concern for my disheveled appearance are combined with my ready compliance with Conrad’s suggestions, I must look quite a bit like stereotypical depictions of hypnosis from television and film.

While I ponder my appearance, I participate in a “bad smell” routine. After Conrad gives the cue phrase that indicates he is the source of the smell, he approaches individual volunteers to ask what is wrong. This is the first time we are specifically asked to speak during a routine. One volunteer asks him, “What is that awful smell?” One shouts enthusiastically, “Dude, what did you eat?” Another suggests that Conrad should pay more attention to his “personal hygiene.” These responses are met with chuckles from the audience. As he moves down the line toward me I reason that I am usually a fairly considerate person: I cannot imagine a situation in which I
would call attention to someone’s unfortunate hygiene issues. Thus, I perform a scenario that can best be described as “trying really hard to be polite about your body odor.” When Conrad asks me what is wrong, I reply in a pinched and pained voice, “Nothing. It’s fine,” while trying to move as far away from him as possible. He does a take to the audience, feigns surprise, and asks, “Really? Nothing?” “No,” I reply, while trying not to breathe. “It’s fine.” Conrad does another take to the audience, steps away, and I exhale. The audience roars with laughter. Apparently, I have made the right choice. I don’t know whether the audience’s enjoyment came from Conrad’s reactions or from my responses, but so far, simply responding naturally and performing each scenario exactly as I think I might respond to the same situation in life has worked out well. The audience has seemed less amused when volunteers have given large, overly-enthusiastic responses.

When Conrad begins issuing his next suggestions, I realize that we must be nearing the end of the show. He assigns each volunteer a cue word or phrase, such as “hypnosis,” or “comedy club,” that will trigger the volunteer to engage in a particular activity. In a moment, he will begin speaking to the audience, delivering a monologue that is peppered with the assigned cue phrases. If all goes well, as he speaks, the volunteers behind him will begin leaping out of their chairs and performing their assigned tasks on cue. When I have watched such routines from the audience, the result is almost like watching a conductor directing some sort of human orchestra. Because I am familiar with this style of performance, I know that this type of routine normally comes near the end of the show and builds toward a “grand finale.” I feel a momentary sense of relief at the realization that I have made it nearly all the way through the performance without being asked to do anything too ridiculous. In a few more minutes, I will regret my premature optimism.
Conrad tells a young man a few seats over that, upon hearing his trigger phrase, he will “dance like Pee-wee Herman.” He repeats the instructions several times and explains that the young man will hear music while he dances. Conrad shouts a disk and track number to the sound technician, who plays a cue. Apparently it is the wrong cue, because Conrad shouts “No!” and repeats the disk and track number. He apologizes to the audience and explains that they never did get this to work at either of last night’s performances. After the technician tries another track, which Conrad also dismisses as the wrong one, he tells the technician not to worry about the cue and says that the young man will dance without music. Conrad works his way down the line of volunteers, giving trigger phrases and activities to other volunteers, and then he approaches me. He says that the first time I hear the name of the rock band Kiss, I will think that I have just received “the biggest, most spine-tingling, toe-curling kiss” I have ever received from the person sitting to my right. During Conrad’s explanation, loud music blares from the speakers. I think I recognize “Tequila,” which was a hit single for The Champs in 1958, but is probably remembered more today from a featured scene in the film *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. Conrad laughs at the interruption, but his laugh contains an undercurrent of annoyance. He tells me to “Hold on a minute, honey,” and returns to the volunteer who will dance like Pee-wee Herman. He explains that this is the music that will play when he hears his trigger phrase, and he repeats the phrase several times. I suspect the repetition is for the sound technician, not the volunteer.

His explanation complete, Conrad returns to me and finishes explaining that the first time I hear “Kiss,” the amazing kiss will come from the person on my right, the second time from the person on my left, then back to my right, etc. Each successive kiss will be bigger, more passionate, and more “toe-curling” than the one before, and every one will be more intense than the most intense kiss I have ever received. Continuing the process that has worked for me up to
this point, I take a moment to think about what I might do if I received an unexpected, though pleasurable, kiss from a stranger and proceed accordingly. Conrad launches into a fairly banal monologue about how great it is to be performing “hypnosis” at such a fine “comedy club.” When he says the trigger phrase that should cue the Pee-Wee Herman music, another track plays initially, followed quickly by “Tequila.” He then tells the audience that the first time he heard this song he got into an argument with a friend about whether it was recorded by The Champs or by another band. As he is saying this sentence I realize where it is leading, and I can’t help thinking to myself that this is a patently absurd thing to say. Although I know that his patter is simply designed to work in the cues as efficiently as possible, I wonder whether his anecdotes should adhere to at least some standard of believability. No one would ever mistake this upbeat, poppy tune as the work of the fire-breathing, blood-spitting, Kabuki-painted members of . . . “Kiss!” I hear my cue.

I have to assume that a kiss from the young man to my right would come as quite a surprise. After all, I don’t know him and he looks to be at least fifteen years younger than I, near the age of most of my undergraduate students. My husband and I have been together for more than twenty years, but I don’t think I recall any sudden, passionate kisses from strange young men when I was single either. Yes, I’m sure I would be taken quite by surprise. Thus, I react with some combination of shock that the kiss has occurred at all, surprise that I have found the “toe-curling” kiss pleasurable, and dismay that nothing about this situation seems appropriate. Whatever it looks like, it goes over well with the laughing audience.

Conrad moves on to cue other volunteers, some for the second or third time. It is only after my first “Kiss!” that I notice the person on my left, from whom I am to imagine receiving the next kiss, is a woman. Throughout the performance, Conrad has repeatedly rearranged the
volunteers, moving people to different seats. At first, the moves seemed fairly straightforward. For example, he separated people who had come together and filled in empty chairs left by volunteers who had been released. Once, he said that he was moving a volunteer who was not performing well, in order to place her next to someone who was doing well, in the hopes that the underperformer would “learn something.” (The young woman was then moved to an empty chair next to me, but I have no idea whether I, or the person on her other side, was the volunteer from whom she was supposed to “learn something.”) I get the impression that later moves were more calculated, however, and intended to create specific effects during the performance. The most recent volunteer to be moved is the young woman to my left. I recognize her as one of the three birthday party girls, and I think she must have been the woman who asked Conrad whether she should remove her high heels at the beginning of the show. Her skirt is short and her bare legs end in bare feet. She was moved all the way across the stage from the far right to the far left just before this routine began with little explanation. I suspect that Conrad initiated this move to play on the titillation/shock that either I or audience members might feel at being kissed by this young woman.

Although I suppose Conrad was hoping for a somewhat different reaction to the next “Kiss,” I reason that I would probably find a romantic kiss from a strange woman just as surprising as one from a man, and respond similarly. Conrad continues cuing all five volunteers to perform their respective activities, and after my third or fourth cue, he asks me how I am feeling. I respond with “I’m just glad my husband’s not here,” which results in gales of laughter from the audience. My answer is only partly true, and probably not for the reasons audience members might assume, but it is a serviceable response. My husband and I were both actors when we met and are thus familiar with the conventions of onstage romantic encounters. We
have both performed romantic scenes with actors of both sexes throughout the twenty years we have known one another, and once we even shared multiple partners within the same show. Thus, nothing about this performance scenario would cause my husband alarm if he were in the audience. However, since I am trying to base my reactions in reality rather than presumed performance conventions, I assume that it would be quite awkward to receive repeated kisses from strangers in his presence. Additionally, my response is technically true: I am actually glad he is not here. After all, I have specifically arranged to attend this show alone because I do not wish to have my performance watched by people I know well.

At this point, Conrad begins to speak to me off the microphone. I have seen a few instances of the “off-mike” technique in performance, and I have read about its use in stage hypnosis training manuals, but if it is done well it is difficult to detect from the audience. When using this technique, the hypnotist directs most of his instructions to volunteers into the microphone, so that both volunteers and audience members can hear what the volunteers are asked to do. Occasionally, however, the hypnotist speaks to the volunteers while holding the microphone away from his or her mouth (off-mike). In this way, the audience cannot hear certain instructions given to the volunteers. The hypnotist can use this technique simply to encourage the volunteers, to heighten or intensify their performances, or even to create a comedic effect by giving the volunteers different or additional instructions from those that the audience has heard. One of my interview subjects, for example, reported that during her performance, the hypnotist encouraged volunteers off-mike to “be louder,” “make it big,” and “really go crazy” (Blossom).

I noticed Conrad speaking off-mike to other volunteers periodically throughout the performance, but up to this point he seemed to use the technique primarily to repeat suggestions he had already given. Thus, I interpreted his use of the off-mike technique as an attempt to re-cue
any volunteers who had not heard, not understood, or otherwise not complied with suggestions, without repeating himself in a way that would be audible to the audience. (I reason that it might be difficult to create the impression that volunteers are “under his spell” if Conrad has to repeat everything three of four times before they comply.) Now, however, Conrad’s off-mike suggestions change from mere repetition to intensification and new instructions. It is difficult to understand Conrad, but I think I hear him tell me to climb into the young man’s lap the next time I hear my cue. Because I am not certain I have understood him correctly, and because I do not think I would climb into a stranger’s lap in response to an unexpected kiss, I do not comply. Instead, I continue reacting the way I have been: surprised and confused, a bit alarmed and a bit titillated, etc. The initial suggestion was that each successive kiss would be more intense and pleasurable than the one before it, and so I allow my reactions to grow a bit each time, but I do not respond in a way that seems contrary to my nature or to the situation.

The audience, of course, has not heard the off-mike suggestion that I should climb into his lap, and thus does not know that I have not complied. They laugh at my slowly escalating responses and Conrad continues to cue other volunteers. Before my next cue, Conrad leans in close to me and repeats the suggestion that I should climb into the lap of the volunteer from whom I will soon be receiving an imagined kiss. This time it will be the young woman. Now, there can be no mistake: I have heard him correctly. Again, I do not comply. I do, however, continue to let my responses slowly escalate, and my reaction includes touching her long hair in a way that looks as though it might become a caress but ends up gently pushing her away.

Conrad plays on my use of physical contact by telling the young woman he will “protect” her from me by moving me to an empty seat at the end of the row. I am momentarily pleased that I have negotiated this act of non-compliance in a way that was not detrimental to the performance.
After all, the actor in me is hesitant to disrupt a performance unnecessarily: the show must go on. The audience, presumably, did not hear the instruction Conrad gave me off-mike, and thus does not know I did not comply. My reactions were reasonable for the instructions they heard, they responded with laughter, and the illusion was preserved for them.

Conrad moves me to the last chair on the left, with an empty chair between the young woman and myself on my right. I quickly realize that the next time I hear “Kiss,” the kiss should come from this empty chair, and I react accordingly, with surprise, confusion, and perhaps a bit of suspicion, as I look around for the source of the imagined embrace. Now seated at the far left edge of the foot-high stage, I am only a few feet from the front row of spectators. If we both stretched out our arms, I could probably touch the fingertips of the middle-aged man sitting at the nearest table. The next kiss should come from the left, and because I am now seated on the end, this means it must either come from no one or from an audience member. I know that it will be funny if I react as though I think the kiss comes from the gentleman at the nearest table, but I worry that this might break my rule about not intentionally making performance choices just to be funny. I also briefly wonder whether this is exactly the reaction Conrad was hoping for when he moved me to this seat. Finally, with only two viable choices, I decide not to worry about my guidelines or Conrad’s (possible) intentions. It makes more sense to assume I was kissed by a person than by empty space, and the performer in me cannot pass up the situation’s comedic potential. When I look at the gentleman with shock and suspicion, the audience roars with laughter. I notice out of the corner of my eye that he quickly grabs the hand of the woman seated with him. This strikes me as a very strange response, and I wonder whether it is an unconscious reflex of some kind, or an intentional action. Surely he has not reached for her hand for comfort, because being looked at from the stage does not seem inordinately threatening. I briefly wonder
whether he is uncomfortable with the kind of public attention that I directed at their table by singling him out, or whether he knows that his friend would be similarly uncomfortable. I resolve not to include him in my reactions in the future.

As it turns out, my resolution will not be necessary, because Conrad moves me once again. He then cues us to fall asleep on our neighbor to the left, and I find myself collapsed on the young woman in the short skirt, my hand inadvertently grasping her bare thigh. Thoughts flash through my mind. I wonder whether this skin-to-skin contact makes her uncomfortable. I wonder whether she is “really” hypnotized, and thus might not notice my hand on her bare flesh. I wonder why I think a hypnotized person might not notice a hand on her leg. What other preconceived ideas about hypnosis am I bringing to this experience and/or my research? I wonder whether I should surreptitiously move my hand, whether this movement would be visible to the audience, and how the audience would interpret such a movement. While I ponder these questions, Conrad gives a new set of suggestions. Given my familiarity with such performances, I recognize his suggestions as most likely the last of the show. As with the previous set of instructions, each volunteer receives a different trigger word or phrase intended to cue a different activity. These are more elaborate and more outlandish than the last, however, and will probably serve as the “Grand Finale” for the performance, just as a fireworks display ends with the longest, loudest, and largest explosions.

I receive my instructions after many other volunteers; therefore, I have time to listen to their suggestions, and to wonder what he has in store for me. Because Conrad has billed his 10:30 PM performances as “erotic,” I have chosen to participate in the 8:00 PM show for general audiences. A few of the bits up to this point may have veered into risqué territory if volunteers chose to take them that way, or if audience members chose to interpret them that way. I could
have responded much more ardently to the kiss scenario, for example. Conrad’s next set of
suggestions, however, become increasing less appropriate for a general audience. I do not know
if this is the performance he had planned from the beginning or whether he saw that the audience
seemed to be enjoying his more risqué material and adjusted his show accordingly.

First, Conrad tells one young man that on his cue he will jump up and shout “I want
nookie!” three times as loud as he can. Next, Conrad taps my shoulder and says, “When you hear
the word. . . .” Then, he stops, seems to change his mind, and turns to the audience. He tells them
he is going to come back to me in a minute and says, “Since she’s been doing such a great job so
far, she’s going to be my Lincoln Tunnel Girl.” I have no idea what this means, and I can only
wait in anticipation as he goes on to the other volunteers. Conrad instructs a young woman
farther down the line to grab the guy next to her, pull him over her lap, and spank him whenever
she hears her cue word. When this happens, the young man should respond enthusiastically, by
loudly declaring how much he enjoys being spanked and begging for more. Another young man
should run out into the audience and perform a seductive striptease. When Conrad asks the sound
technician to play the striptease music, of course, the speakers remain silent. I secretly hope that
my task will be as simple as jumping up and shouting about “nookie,” because I have no
intention of giving anyone a lap-dance.

I continue to wonder what a “Lincoln Tunnel Girl” might be. Because this performance is
taking place in Michigan, I briefly wonder whether I have heard of a Lincoln Tunnel in Detroit,
before realizing that I am probably thinking of Lincoln Park, a similarly-named suburb of
Detroit. Perhaps, I think, Lincoln Park has an eponymous tunnel. This thought prompts me to
wonder whatever happened to my Linkin Park CD. I really liked that CD and I have not seen it in
quite awhile. Perhaps, I think, it was stolen when my car was broken into years ago. My reverie
is interrupted when Conrad, again, taps my shoulder and repeats that I will be his “Lincoln Tunnel Girl.” He explains that on my cue, I will leap up and invite all the men in the audience to meet me at a hotel near the Lincoln Tunnel. I am a prostitute—and I was worried about being a stripper.

I wonder if, perhaps, others in the audience do not know where the Lincoln Tunnel is either, because Conrad does not seem to get the response from them that he desires. He then asks the audience for the name of a “bad neighborhood” nearby, but they respond with silence, so he sticks with the Lincoln Tunnel. I am amused at the thought of a designated “bad neighborhood” in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I’m sure there must be one somewhere amid the art galleries, ice cream shops, and boutiques featuring fair trade coffee, gourmet chocolates, and “Free Tibet” bumper stickers, but I cannot imagine where it might be. Conrad recites a list of prices that I should ask for my services: $100, $200, $300 for various sex acts. He explains that I should try to drum up business by “really shaking your stuff” for my prospective customers. Again, when he asks for the sound cue that should accompany this performance, no cue plays. I wonder, briefly, why he keeps trying to get the technician to play the cues at all. It seems like a lost cause.

Now, I have a decision to make. This scenario is degrading and offensive. Worst of all, as far as I am concerned, it’s not even very funny. I doubt that I would enjoy watching a woman prostitute herself if I were in the audience. I certainly would not find it amusing. I know that I will not be performing this scenario as Conrad suggested it, but I am still deeply conflicted. After all, I am an actor. I have played many characters in the past whose values, behaviors, and/or beliefs conflicted with my own. I have never had a problem seeing myself as separate from the characters I portray, and I pride myself on my willingness to try to understand and embody even characters I find abhorrent. But this performance feels different. It does not feel like I am being
asked to play a character. Most of the previous scenarios have required me to draw on personal experiences and reactions: drink a cocktail, drive a car, wave at a friend, etc. It was not a character driving that car, it was me. And now I have been asked to be a prostitute. Even if I wanted to encourage a sense of mental separation by creating a fictional prostitute character to play, there is not enough time to do so in the moments between receiving my instructions and hearing my trigger word. And besides, I don’t want to.

My internal conflict comes from another source as well. After decades as an actor and director, I find it difficult to imagine myself refusing to create an interesting performance for an audience. (Only later do I realize that everything I did on the stage was part of the performance, and thus the audience might have been quite entertained if I had, in fact, simply told Conrad exactly what I thought of him, his degrading suggestions, and his abilities as a hypnotist in general. The scene could have rivaled any seen on reality television.) But in the moment, as the performance continues around me and my fellow volunteers begin to respond to their cues, I cannot imagine ruining the show for the audience. After all, they have paid to see this performance. It is at this point, despite my years of research on stage hypnosis, that I first really grasp that I—and all of the other volunteer performers—have also paid to attend this show. At every stage hypnosis show, the volunteers essentially pay for the privilege of providing the evening’s entertainment. This thought, in part, is what assures me that I can do whatever I like onstage. I am a part-owner in this performance, and I should enjoy it as much as everyone in the audience.

I am lucky that my exalted status as the “Lincoln Tunnel Girl” means that Conrad saves my cue for last. As I review my options, I occasionally register an enthusiastic spanking off to my right along with shouts about “nookie,” and once, I catch a glimpse of a shirtless young man
out in the audience directly in front of me, presumably in the middle of a lap-dance. While my fellow volunteers are engaged, I try to decide how I will respond when it is my turn. I imagine numerous possible scenarios:

1. Compliance: I know that I will not enjoy prostituting myself, so full compliance with Conrad’s suggestion is out of the question.

2. Walk Away: I could simply stand up and walk off the stage. No one is stopping me. I briefly revel in the image of myself leaving the stage, walking down the aisle, and sweeping dramatically out of the club. My mysterious disappearance would be all anyone could talk about after the show. A quick reality check reveals, however, that in order to leave, I would first have to return to my table, pay my bar tab, and wait around until the performance ends to retrieve my earrings and jacket from Conrad. This would be neither mysterious nor dramatic.

3. Bathroom Break: I am vaguely aware that I need to use the restroom, so I consider leaving the stage and walking into the ladies room, which happens to be directly off stage left, and thus not far from where I am sitting. I saw a woman do this in performance once, when a hypnotist asked three female volunteers to dance like the “sluttiest strippers in town.” One volunteer simply walked off the stage and out of the room, saying something inaudible to the hypnotist as she passed. The hypnotist then explained to the audience that she “had to go potty” and continued the routine with the two remaining women (Power, 15 Jul. 2009). But if I leave the stage for the restroom, what then? Do I hide in the ladies room until the end of the show? Do I skulk quietly back to my seat? This is not an elegant solution either.

4. No Response/Sleep: I contemplate closing my eyes and simply not responding to my cue.
In my research on hypnosis I have read many times that a hypnotized person will not accept a suggestion that goes against his or her values, beliefs, morals, etc. Perhaps I could just squeeze my eyes shut, pretend to be asleep, and wait for the unpleasantness to pass. My eyes must have glazed over as I considered my choices, because at this moment Conrad approaches me, snaps his fingers in my face, and says, “Hey there! Wake up! It’s almost your turn.” Although I know the idea is ridiculous, for a guilty moment I think that Conrad has read my mind and that he knows what I was thinking. Feigning sleep seems less than ideal for several reasons. First, I now know that Conrad will attempt to awaken me and proceed with the performance. Second, the spectacle of Conrad attempting unsuccessfully to cue me and then attempting to awaken me and cue me again seems as though it would be more disruptive to the performance than simply walking off the stage. Finally, the participation parameters that I set for myself ahead of time include not creating structured performances and attempting to respond to suggestions as naturally as possible. If I were to fake sleep, I would then have to fake awakening. Presumably I would also have to fake confusion, disorientation upon awakening, etc.

This all seems like the opposite of responding naturally as well as a lot of work, and I am not sufficiently motivated to put on such an elaborate pretense.

After considering and rejecting all of these options at the speed of thought, I discover that in my distraction I have forgotten many of Conrad’s detailed instructions regarding my scenario. After a few panicked seconds I remember my cue word, I remember the dollar values I am to quote, and, of course, I remember the Lincoln Tunnel. Unfortunately, I have forgotten almost everything else. I do not even recall what sex acts are supposed to be connected to the dollar values. It is my confusion that provides me with the idea for my response.
My decision made, I do not have time to second-guess myself. Conrad approaches my chair, says my cue word, and snaps his fingers toward my face. He then steps downstage and holds the microphone up so that I can speak to the audience. Slowly, haltingly, and with some confusion, I tell the audience, “Um, something is for sale at the Lincoln Tunnel. I’m not really sure what it is, but it sounds really expensive. You should go there. I bet it’s great.” Gales of laughter erupt from the audience. Perhaps I am simply projecting my feelings onto the audience, but it seems as though they are as relieved as I am that they will not have to watch me prostitute myself. Conrad, however, does not give up so easily. He says, “Don’t you want to take a little walk and show everyone?” This prompts my memory and I understand that this is the part of the performance wherein I should be “really shaking [my] stuff.” Miraculously, music plays. I have no idea if this is the correct music cue, but it seems momentous nonetheless. Since I am currently “playing confused,” I respond to his request by saying, “OK?” and I simply walk down the length of the stage and return, blinking in the glare of the stage lights. Conrad asked me to “take a little walk,” and that is exactly what I did. He seems to realize that I am not going to play out the scenario he originally envisioned and tells me to return to my seat. I have no idea whether he knew that I was intentionally non-compliant, but based on an exchange we will have after the show, I suspect he did not know (or did not care).

I return to my seat onstage and Conrad cues my fellow volunteers several more times. I, however, am not cued again. Conrad asks the audience to give us another big round of applause and then I am relieved to hear him say that in a moment we will be awake. I have made it through this performance! Conrad explains that before he wakes us fully, he wants to leave us with something. I am momentarily concerned that he will try to use a post-hypnotic suggestion to continue our performance as we make our way offstage and back to our seats in the audience.
Instead, however, he initiates a quick, guided visualization for self-improvement. He asks us to imagine an ideal version of ourselves, and then to place that ideal version side-by-side with the version of ourselves that came to the show tonight. Conrad then suggests that when we awaken, we will be empowered to become much more like our ideal. He explains that if the ideal self is a non-smoker, the next time we light a cigarette it will taste awful, and each successive cigarette will taste worse than the one before it until we no longer wish to smoke. He describes the awful taste of each successive cigarette in great detail. I do not hear his other suggestions for self-improvement, because my mind wanders after the smoking-cessation suggestions. I tune out, not because I think I have no flaws that could use improving, but because I realize Conrad began the visualization so quickly that I did not have time to imagine an ideal against which to compare myself.

I wrack my brain to decide what aspect of myself I would like to improve through hypnotic suggestion in the few moments I have left onstage. Yes, I should quit smoking, but since I only have a few cigarettes a day, it seems a shame to waste this opportunity on a minor bad habit. Yes, I’d like to lose the ten pounds I have gained since I had surgery nine months earlier, but as usual my feminist desire for self-acceptance battles with my vanity and both of these lose out to the fact that I do not have enough time to engage in a philosophical debate with myself right now. Conrad is already asking us to compare the ideal with the original, imagine the ideal as our new reality, etc. He is almost finished with the visualization, so to avoid wasting any more time, I declare (internally), “I want to finish my dissertation!” This seems constructive. The visualization ends just as I finally make up my mind. Because it took me so long to decide what I wanted to “improve,” it feels more like wishing on a star than an attempt toward making real change in my life, but I figure, it can’t hurt, right?
Termination of Hypnosis and Conclusion of the Performance

As Conrad begins the termination of hypnosis, he informs us that on the count of three, we will remember everything we have done and everything that has happened throughout the show. For me, this moment is fascinating, because many hypnotists I have seen in performance choose to say exactly the opposite: they explain that the volunteers will not remember anything that they have said or done during the performance. As I detailed in chapter 4, this caused confusion for one volunteer performer I interviewed (Thomson). She remembered everything even though she thought she should not. Thus, she questioned whether she might never have been hypnotized at all. By suggesting that volunteers will remember the show, Conrad eliminates this potentially confusing outcome for his volunteers.

Aftermath

As I make my way off the stage, I see my jacket draped over an empty chair and pick it up. Conrad is returning the myriad keys, cell phones, and jewelry that fill the blender, and I am the last to approach him. He upends the blender over his hand, dumps out my earrings, and hands them to me, saying, “You were wonderful up there, honey. Really wonderful.” He puts a great deal of emphasis on “you,” as if to imply that something about me is special. I have an overwhelming urge to reply, “You weren’t,” but I only mutter “thanks,” and head for my table. Later I will return to this moment over and over in my mind, as I think of all the sparkling and witty replies I wish I had made.

Walking to my table, several audience members smile at me and several tell me I was “so great” or “so funny.” Unexpectedly, a few thank me. It takes me a moment to realize that they are thanking me for providing the evening’s entertainment. I am puzzled by this impulse to thank me, because I cannot think of many other types of performance after which I have thanked the
performers, or even wanted to do so. I frequently compliment actors or musicians after a performance, telling them how much I enjoyed it or pointing out specific elements I found exciting or inspiring, but I do not usually thank them. I suppose I assume that they have come to perform, their participation is not a favor to me, and therefore no thanks are necessary. Perhaps in the case of stage hypnosis, audience members realize that the performers are volunteers and without volunteers there would be no show. Of course, it is also possible that Conrad asked the audience to thank the volunteers when I was distracted and thinking about something else.

With my bill paid, I head for the restroom. Like every ladies’ room, this one is too small and a line has formed. While I wait, the two women ahead of me in line ask about the performance:

WOMAN 1. What was it like, being up there?
ME. Weird.

WOMAN 2. Do you remember everything?
ME. Yeah. I mean, I think so. (All laugh.)

WOMAN 1. You were one of the best ones, you and the guy in the blue shirt.

WOMAN 2. (nodding) Oh, yeah.

ME. Thanks.

WOMAN 2. Don’t you think so? Don’t you think he was funny?

ME. I don’t know. I mean, I couldn’t really see what anyone else was doing so I can’t really compare.

WOMAN 1 and WOMAN 2. (together, eyes wide) Really?

WOMAN 1. Why not?

ME. Well, we had our eyes closed a lot of the time, and even when they were open we
were all seated in a straight line facing forward, and the lights are really bright, so it’s hard to see anybody else.

Both women seem a little disappointed by my explanation, but I am not sure why. I wonder whether they were expecting me to say something revelatory about hypnosis. Perhaps they imagined that hypnosis causes such laser-focus that one’s surroundings fall away. I do not get a chance to find out, because two stalls are vacated and both women leave the line. I am already regretting that I did not have time to ask them more about what made the guy in blue shirt and me “the best ones.” This didn’t feel like my “best” performance at all. I simply followed directions. I intentionally avoided creating a purposefully comedic performance (most of the time). I spent the vast majority of the show staring blankly into space. If this qualifies me as one of “the best ones,” I have been working far too hard as a performer up to this point.

I climb the stairs out of the chilly basement club and note that it is now 9:40 PM. I quickly calculate that I must have spent about ten minutes in the club after I left the stage. Conrad took the stage at 8:15, and probably completed his pre-talk and had all his volunteers in place by 8:30. Therefore, I must have been on stage for about an hour. Although I have a long drive ahead of me, I sit in my car in the parking garage for half an hour furiously scribbling notes on a legal pad, trying to record every thought, feeling, and event. I don’t want to forget a single detail, lest it prove significant or useful later. Finally, tired but intellectually energized, I head home.

Reflection

In the weeks and months following the show, I have reflected on the insights about stage hypnosis that I gained by crossing the boundary from the relatively safe position of audience-participant-observer to the far more unstable position of performer-participant-observer. As I
mentioned early in this chapter, Geertz delineates the inherent conflict in participant-observation between the desire to understand another’s experience and the knowledge that one never can, calling this conflict “the passion to swim in their stream of experience, and the illusion afterward that one somehow has” (58). Volunteering for Conrad’s show has at least partially fulfilled my desire to “swim in their stream of experience.” I went, I volunteered, I performed. However, because I have spoken to so many volunteers with such diverse performance experiences, my singular experience has not necessarily produced in me “the illusion afterward” that I have shared in their experiences. Placing myself squarely in the center of my inquiry served to both deepen and complicate my research, helping me better understand my interviewees’ statements, challenging some of my assumptions, and perhaps ultimately providing me with more questions than answers about the contemporary practice of stage hypnosis.

I now understand how the majority of my interview subjects could feel certain about whether they had experienced hypnosis, even when they had never been hypnotized before and thus had nothing against which to compare their responses. When I entered into my performance experience, I was well aware of claims by both researchers and hypnotists that hypnosis does not “feel like” anything. Hypnosis researchers Sakari Kallio and Antti Revonsuo, for example, assert that one cannot “ask a person if they felt being in hypnosis . . . since it would be impossible to know what the criteria for being in hypnosis . . . would be” (134). I had never been hypnotized before, and thus I had no basis for comparison. As a result, I included this pledge in my loose guidelines for participation: “I will try not to self-evaluate my mental state to decide if I am hypnotized. Instead, I will try to simply observe my thoughts, reactions, and sensations in as much detail as possible.” However, only minutes into my volunteer experience, I had both self-evaluated my mental state and made a decision about whether I felt hypnotized. My conviction
that I was not hypnotized, however, was a direct result of keeping the second half of that pledge: to observe my thoughts, reactions, and sensations in as much detail as possible.

In any case, whether or not hypnosis should feel like something, the perception that it does feel like something influenced many of my interviewees’ self-assessments (as well as my own) about whether or not they became hypnotized. Hypnosis is a condition whose existence has no easily measurable or identifiable characteristics. Hypnotists would seem to be the most adept judges of whether or not someone is hypnotized, but many interviewees mention that hypnotists often did not dismiss volunteers that they thought were not hypnotized, sometimes including the interviewees themselves. With no other means of determining the presence or absence of hypnosis, my interviewees and I were necessarily forced to rely on a solipsistic epistemological position: we had only our internal thoughts and impressions to guide our decisions. Thus, without a perceptible, internal change, many of us determined that we were not hypnotized.

While my volunteer experience has helped me to understand my interviewees’ certainty that their internal impressions provided proof of the presence or absence of hypnosis, it has also challenged that position. Several interviewees report that their response to the hypnotists’ suggestions helped them determine that they were hypnotized. Kristina Jones, for example, reports that during her performance, the hypnotist suggested one hand would rise and the other would sink when she imagined holding a light object in one hand and a heavy object in the other. She cites her strong response to that suggestion as one of the ways both she and the hypnotist could tell that she was “feeling it” more than some other volunteers who were eventually dismissed. Now that I have participated in a show, however, I wonder whether any of my interview subjects might have interpreted potentially non-hypnotic responses as resulting from hypnosis. When Conrad said that we would feel hot, I most certainly did feel hot, but I do not
think it was because Conrad said I would. Instead, I was hot because the stage lights were putting off a lot of heat, and because we had been in continuous motion for a long time. I cannot help but wonder whether any of my interviewees were impressed by their responses to suggestions like this one, which are technically true, but probably not related to hypnosis.

On the other hand, the fact that a response can be created by something other than hypnosis does not rule out the possibility that it could be generated by hypnosis as well. In his book *Deeper and Deeper: Secrets of Stage Hypnosis*, Jonathan Chase recommends using routines in which volunteers imagine they are hot precisely because they are already hot. His reason for using such routines, however, is not to trick volunteers into believing they are hypnotized, but to use “the fact of their physical condition and surroundings” to enhance and deepen their imaginative experiences (97). Chase and many other hypnotists recommend the use of “compounding” during stage hypnosis shows. Compounding simply consists of repeating a suggestion several times so that volunteers have maximum opportunity to internalize it. While verbal repetition is the most common form of compounding, Chase argues that repeating a suggestion over and over is not the only way to achieve the desired effect. Instead, he writes, “When hypnotised, most people experience a slight rise in body temperature, couple this with the stage lights and they are going to feel warm anyway, use this to compound your suggestion rather than repetition” (97, punctuation as in original). Chase’s advice parallels the approach taken during my on-stage experience with Conrad, although of course I cannot be sure of Conrad’s intent. I find it interesting to speculate, however, about the result of compounded suggestions, whatever the hypnotist’s intent might be. Could volunteers interpret their responses to such suggestions as evidence that they are hypnotized? If so, does that matter? I suppose it matters only if belief that one is hypnotized is somehow equivalent to hypnosis or has some
effect on hypnosis. Since the research about what constitutes hypnosis is so unsettled, it is probably not possible to answer these questions.

My volunteer experience has also helped contextualize some ideas, expressed by both my interviewees and by researchers who study stage hypnosis, about the role that performing for an audience can play in influencing volunteers’ behavior. In “Toward an Explanation of Stage Hypnosis,” William B. Meeker and Theodore X. Barber assert, “The stage setting has unique expectancy characteristics which are very helpful in eliciting apparent hypnotic behaviors” (61). Meeker and Barber list a number of these expectancy characteristics, including a natural desire to cooperate with the hypnotist to create an entertaining performance, a desire to avoid the embarrassment that would result from singling oneself out by not complying with suggestions, the sheer enjoyment that comes from performing, and the excuse for engaging in outlandish behavior that hypnosis affords (63-4). Several times during the performance, I found myself concerned that I might not be “doing it right,” such as when I worried that I may have missed instructions from Conrad to open my eyes during the driving routine. I never stopped to wonder why it might be a problem if my performance was different from those of the other volunteers. So what if their eyes were closed and mine were open? Other times, I was pleased by positive feedback, or even by the absence of negative feedback, either from the audience or from Conrad, such as the instance when Conrad mocked a volunteer for placing his or her hands too low on the steering wheel, and I responded first with pleasure that I must be doing it right, and then with annoyance as I realized that my pleasure indicated that I might care whether or not Conrad approved of my performance choices. Additionally, I found myself unwilling to “ruin” the performance by refusing to comply, without ever stopping to think about why I assumed my non-compliance would not be just as entertaining as compliance. In this way, my performance
experience reflected many of the ideas presented by Meeker and Barber, as well as similar ideas expressed by my interviewees. For example, although he has no question that he did experience hypnosis, David McKinley reports that hypnosis feels more like peer pressure than it does not having control over what you’re doing. I was completely aware of everything, but it didn’t feel like I was in control. I felt like I had to listen to what this guy was saying to me, and that being told to sit down before everyone else should seem like a bad thing, because everyone in the audience would be like, “Aw,” when [other volunteers] were told to sit down. So it was a bad thing, and you didn’t want to disappoint the audience or disappoint the hypnotist. (Personal interview)

McKinley seems to have experienced the same need to “do it right” that I did, and just as Meeker and Barber propose, the desire to please the audience and the hypnotist, helped fuel that need.

Another aspect of my performance experience that has forced me to reevaluate my earlier ideas is related to the ability to tell whether or not a volunteer is hypnotized. Many of my interviewees report that, while watching shows, they have been able to tell which volunteers were hypnotized and which were not, based on the volunteers’ appearance and behavior. Even though I know that hypnosis has few if any irrefutable markers, I have often succumbed to the temptation of trying to pick out which volunteers are “really” hypnotized as well. However, several aspects of my performance have forced me to accept that, whatever hypnosis is or is not, it is probably not possible to reliably gauge it externally. For example, I am certain that while I was performing, although I do not believe I was hypnotized, I would have been appraised so by any onlooker. With my contacts dried out, my eyes were glazed and unfocused. My need to concentrate in order to understand Conrad’s speech resulted in a mostly blank expression. My
ready compliance, born of my pledge to myself to follow all reasonable suggestions, must have made me look as though I was under Conrad’s complete control. I do not know what a hypnotized person should look like, but I know that I must have looked like many of the film and television depictions of hypnosis that probably serve as the source of many people’s images of a hypnotized person. I’m sure that if I saw a volunteer who looked and behaved as I did, I would have deemed her to be hypnotized, even though I should know better.

Additionally, I wonder whether my anxiety in response to the high speeds suggested in the driving scenario might have led audience members to conclude that I was hypnotized. I approached the activity like an actor, vividly imagining the situation and allowing myself to respond accordingly. My response was genuine and unpremeditated; however, I do not recall ever seeing another volunteer appear visibly distressed during this type of routine in other shows. In his article, “Neurophysiological Correlates of Hypnosis and Dissociation,” David Spiegel names absorption as one of the three main components of hypnosis along with dissociation and suggestibility (440). Spiegel explains that absorption is “the tendency to become fully involved in a perceptual, imaginative, or ideational experience” (440). Although I do not believe that I was hypnotized, my discomfort during this routine appears to align well with the definition of absorption. I wonder whether my commitment to the visualization might have led audience members to conclude that I must be hypnotized. Conversely, perhaps by its very novelty, my atypical reaction might have led observes to question how fully I might be participating.

Volunteering for a show has also provided some insight into reports by my interviewees that participating in stage hypnosis does not feel like being part of a performance. Jones, for example, says she was surprised when audience members approached her after her performance and told her she was funny. She explains, “I didn’t really think I was doing anything.” Rather
than trying to be funny, she says she “would just listen to everything [the hypnotist said]” and then she would do it. McKinley also notes that stage hypnosis does not feel like performing. He explains that the hypnotist “told me what to do, and me doing what he said was funny, not me coming up with something funny and being funny.” I was not sure I understood their sentiments before I volunteered, but now I think I do. I, too, experienced a sense of surprise when audience members complimented my performance after the show, because it had not felt as though I was “doing anything” other than following directions. I did not have to exert much creative effort in order to participate, and therefore my participation did not feel like a performance, and it certainly did not feel like a performance worthy of being called “one of the best ones,” as the women in the ladies’ room called it.

My visceral, negative reaction to performing the prostitute scenario also seems related to this difficulty in perceiving stage hypnosis as a performance. As an actor, I have little trouble playing characters whose values, behaviors, and/or beliefs conflict with my own, but during stage hypnosis, I did not feel like I was being asked to play a role. Instead, I felt as though it was me, or at least some version of me, who was following directions by drinking a cocktail, driving a car, and waving at a friend. Thus, the prostitute would also have been me, rather than a character I was playing. It seems that the self is far more implicated in stage hypnosis performance than in more traditional dramatic performance, and thus stage hypnosis can cease to feel like a performance at all. Prior to volunteering, I imagined performers might feel that the label of hypnosis granted them a certain freedom to behave outlandishly, because spectators would assume that the volunteers lacked volition and thus could not be held accountable for their actions. My experience did not bear this out, however, because during the performance I felt more connected to my actions rather than less. I have no way of knowing, though, whether
someone who felt they were hypnotized might experience this differently than I did.

My participation has also given me new insight into the time distortions reported by some of my interviewees. Many of them report feeling as though their time onstage passed extremely quickly, and thus they wonder whether this distorted sense of time is evidence of some altered mental state caused by hypnosis (Jones, McKinley, Niederkohr, Paben). For me, the passage of time felt very similar to other performance experiences I have had. The way hours can pass onstage in what feels like an instant seems related to the phenomenon that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow.” This is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (4). Csikszentmihalyi explains further that “the sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes stretch out to seem like hours” (49). I cannot help but wonder whether someone with little or no performance experience might attribute a distorted sense of time to hypnosis, when such distortion may be common to performance in general. Csikszentmihalyi’s work would seem to support my speculation, because he identifies several categories of “flow activities,” in which the provision of enjoyable experiences is primary. One of his categories, “mimicry,” consists of activities in which “alternative realities are created, such as dance, theater, and the arts in general” (72). One interviewee with some performance experience also seems to support the idea that a distortion in the perceived passage of time may be part of the performance experience generally and not necessarily related to hypnosis. As a member of a debate team, McKinley explains that during a debate he is totally focused on his performance, which causes a perception that time has passed more quickly, and he says the time distortion he experienced while participating in stage hypnosis felt very similar. On the other hand, although Csikszentmihalyi asserts that time can also pass more slowly during flow experiences, none of my interviewees report such a stretching
of perceived time while they were on stage. The specificity and consistency of their perceived
time distortions, then, might still provide an argument in favor of some altered mental state
caused by hypnosis.

In the end, my participation has generated as many questions as insights. I think I
understand certain aspects of the volunteer experience more clearly, but I cannot help but feel a
sense of loss: like several interviewees, including Blossom, Burns, and Thomson, who report
disappointment over not becoming hypnotized and a sense that they may have missed out on
some fuller, richer experience, I cannot help but wonder what new discoveries I might have
made if I had felt myself to be truly hypnotized during the show. I am not sure it really matters
whether hypnosis can be gauged internally, or what hypnosis should or should not “feel like.”
What is more important is my perception that I was not hypnotized. This lacuna framed the
performance experience for me, and defined my interpretation of many of its aspects. True to the
slippery nature of hypnosis as a phenomena and a measureable condition, however, even aspects
of the experience about which I feel quite certain have repeatedly been thrown into question as
new information and ideas emerge.

* * * * * * * * *

I am normally a painfully slow and meticulous writer, what Harry F. Wolcott would call
a “bleeder” (Writing Up Qualitative Research 24), but back at my desk following my stage
hypnosis performance, I write at a blistering pace. I knock out twenty-seven pages about my
experience in three days. Within three weeks, I am up to forty-six pages, and the account of my
participation has become a new (and unplanned) dissertation chapter and also generated a
conference paper. I have never written this quickly, and I am at a loss to explain my sudden burst
of inspiration. Then, I recall my hasty wish during the performance: “I want to finish my
dissertation.” Could Conrad’s guided visualization have influenced me in some unexpected way? Although I do not believe I was hypnotized, I have only my subjective internal experience on which to draw. I did not “feel” hypnotized that night. However, if I am going to rely on my internal experiences for evidence, I have to acknowledge that I did feel hot when Conrad said it was hot, I had a strong emotional reaction to the driving scenario which might be interpreted as an example of absorption, and now, I really want to finish my dissertation.

Complicating matters further, in a casual conversation at home, my husband, who has undergone therapeutic hypnosis many times, explained that for him, hypnosis does feel like something: a deep relaxation coupled with an intense focus. Furthermore, he assured me that the relaxation he experiences during hypnosis feels different from non-hypnotic relaxation, such as when he is simply hanging out at home on the couch: the difference is rooted in the intense, inward focus. He described hypnosis as relaxation with a directed purpose. However, applying my husband’s criteria for hypnosis to my experience still does not definitively answer my questions: I certainly did experience an intense, inward focus, but I was not at all relaxed. So, was I hypnotized that night? Probably not. Can I be certain of that? Probably not.
“Et maintenant dors, ma mignonne!” (du Maurier 379)

[And now sleep, my darling.] (Denisoff 335)

In George du Maurier’s novel, the fictional mesmerist, Svengali, dies while conducting the hypnotized Trilby, during a London concert. After Svengali dies, Trilby immediately reverts to her former, tone deaf state; she can no longer sing and is jeered off the stage. Trilby’s old friends seek her out backstage, where they catch a glimpse through a doorway of Svengali’s partially-clothed body on a table, surrounded by doctors. At that, the book’s narrator incorrectly declares, “That was the last they saw of Svengali” (366). While it may be the last time any of the characters see Svengali alive, it will not be the last time they encounter him. Trilby weakens after Svengali’s death, and her health declines steadily in the weeks and months that follow. One afternoon, an unexpected delivery arrives: it is a large, framed portrait of Svengali, with no note or message of explanation. He is depicted turning over a leaf of music with one hand and holding up his conductor’s baton with the other, as if caught in the midst of a concert, and his eyes are “looking straight out of the picture, straight at you” (415). Trilby is mesmerized by the portrait (literally and figuratively) and briefly bursts into song, singing as gloriously as she once did under Svengali’s spell. Her impromptu performance complete, she falls back onto a pillow, seemingly asleep, then utters “a little short sigh,” and repeats, “Svengali . . . Svengali . . . Svengali” (420, ellipses in original). In the stillness that follows, it takes her companions several minutes to realize she has died with his name on her lips. Although Svengali’s physical body is
long gone, his image looms large, both in the portrait and in the characters’ imaginations. My research suggests that du Maurier’s fictional mesmerist, as well as the historical figures which provided his inspiration, still loom large today in the public imagination.

The project of this study has been to examine stage hypnosis as a contemporary popular entertainment form and investigate the relationship between public perceptions of stage hypnosis and the ways in which it is experienced and practiced. In pursuit of understanding, I employed several qualitative research methodologies. I engaged in close readings of historical, literary, and dramatic works that depict hypnosis and stage hypnosis and searched for links between such representations and current public perceptions about hypnosis performances. I attended stage hypnosis shows in order to identify and document their structure and broad performance conventions. I conducted personal interviews with stage hypnotists in order to discover how they understand their work. I interviewed volunteer performers to see how they view their performances, and to examine whether prior perceptions of stage hypnosis might play a role in the volunteer experience. I read training manuals written by stage hypnotists about their craft as well as books and articles detailing the results of current hypnosis research in order to provide context to my findings and to help me to understand this performance genre more fully. Finally, I volunteered to participate in a stage hypnosis performance, documenting and analyzing the experience both as a way of furthering my understanding of stage hypnosis and as a way of understanding the performance experiences reported by my interviewees.

Discoveries

With this study, I have helped begin to redress the lack of scholarly attention that has heretofore been paid to stage hypnosis as a performance phenomenon. I have also come closer to understanding many of the issues that propelled me to initiate this research, such as some
possible sources of public perceptions of hypnosis and the impact that such perceptions might have on the volunteer experience. After examining depictions of hypnosis and stage hypnosis in historical narratives and literary and dramatic works, I identified nine assumptions about hypnosis and stage hypnosis which permeate such works. I further identified examples of many of these nine assumptions in more recent popular sources, including film, television, and digital media, as well as in volunteer performers’ statements about their experiences, and in stage hypnotists’ reports about the expectations of their volunteers and audience members. Although I cannot determine causality, the similarity of the recent assumptions to the earlier ones suggests that public perceptions of hypnosis and stage hypnosis can be traced, at least in part, to the character of Svengali, as well as to the historical figures which provided his inspiration.

I discovered that my interviewees’ prior assumptions and expectations about stage hypnosis did not seem to have an appreciable effect on whether or not they believed they became hypnotized during performances, or on whether or not they were able to fully participate in those performances. Such preconceived ideas, however, did seem to have an impact on the way my interviewees felt about their performances, both during the show and afterward. When interviewees’ experiences did not match their expectations for hypnosis, disappointment, confusion, and/or discomfort often resulted. Interviewees whose hypnosis experiences did not match their expectations often concluded that they were not hypnotized, even when they had not previously experienced hypnosis, and thus had nothing against which to compare their responses. For some interviewees, feeling as though they were not hypnotized led to disappointment about missing out on what they assumed must be some fuller, richer experience that other volunteers were having, to feelings of personal failure about not achieving hypnosis, and/or to anxiety that they might be “found out” as fakers by the audience or the hypnotist. If entertainment and
enjoyment—for both audience members and volunteers—is a goal of contemporary stage hypnosis performances, my findings could suggest that stage hypnotists should attempt to address volunteers’ prior assumptions and dispel their misconceptions, perhaps as part of their pre-talks. While extensive lectures about the nature of hypnosis are probably not necessary or desirable during performances, stage hypnotists might do well to take a cue from hypnotist Jonathan Royle who reminds his volunteers, “there is no such thing as a ‘Hypnotised’ feeling” (42).

Whatever the experience for the volunteers, audience members still experience stage hypnosis in the context of performance. As a performance phenomenon, stage hypnosis shares similarities with several other popular entertainment genres, including stand-up comedy, reality television programs, and shortform improvisational comedy. Like stand-up comedy, stage hypnosis relies on the charisma and timing of a single performer for a portion of its entertainment value. In his guidebook for aspiring hypnotists, Geoffrey Ronning asserts that, “Clients do not hire us to watch us do hypnosis. We are hired to entertain. . . . A poorly skilled hypnotist, with good theatrical skills, will always outperform the most knowledgeable hypnotist with limited dramatic skills” (153-4). Thus, as with stand-up comedy, an entertaining delivery is vital to the success of a stage hypnosis show. Unlike stand-up, however, stage hypnosis is not entirely a solo endeavor. To be successful, stage hypnotists must not only develop and present an entertaining stage persona, but also shape and direct the performances of others. As Ronning reminds his readers, “you are not the star of the show, your volunteers are” (154).

In the case of stage hypnosis, the “stars” of the show are volunteers from the audience who are (presumably) untrained in performance techniques. In this way, stage hypnosis resembles reality television programs. In both kinds of shows, the performers are presented as
“real” people, rather than professional actors, and part of the entertainment value is generated by
the assumption that the performers’ responses are spontaneous and unscripted. However, with
both stage hypnosis and reality television, the performances seen by the audience are highly
coached, shaped, and edited by others. A hypnotist leads his or her performers through a
structured series of activities, while producers and editors of reality television programs
selectively edit footage in order to shape narrative arcs. One primary difference between the two
genres is that reality television audiences can assume the performers, however outlandish their
behavior, are actively choosing to engage in such antics. Stage hypnosis shows, in contrast,
promote the perception that the performers’ actions are being controlled by the hypnotist.
Perhaps this difference is one more of packaging and presentation than of substance, however.
Although volunteers’ behaviors may be presented to the audience as under the hypnotist’s
control, my research suggests that some stage hypnosis volunteers may actively choose how and
to what degree they will engage in the suggested activities. Reality television performers’
behaviors may be presented as fully volitional, but some performers may feel enormous
pressure—from producers, from networks, from sponsors, and/or even from viewers—to behave
in prescribed ways in order to guarantee higher ratings. The stage hypnotist encourages the
notion that the volunteers lack free will, and openly instructs and directs the course that the show
will take in full view of the audience. In contrast, reality television is presented as fully
volitional, and the control that producers and editors of reality television programs exert over the
final product remains behind the scenes.

Stage hypnosis shares the most similarities with shortform improvisational comedy
performances. Both kinds of shows are comprised of several short, unscripted scenes, which
often present incongruous and/or absurd scenarios that are intended to be comedic in tone. In
both styles of performance, scenes are usually based on a predetermined structure or idea, and suggestions by someone other than the performers often help determine how those scenes will play out. Despite the many similarities between the two forms, however, there are still significant differences. Improv comedy audiences can expect to see trained, experienced performers, who draw on their creativity and quick thinking to respond to the actions and suggestions of others. Suggestions for how scenes should proceed may be supplied by their fellow performers, or ideas may be solicited from the audience. Stage hypnosis shows, in contrast, feature untrained, amateur performers, and suggestions for how scenes should proceed are supplied only by the hypnotist. Even when I have seen audience suggestions used during stage hypnosis shows, the hypnotist has served as an intermediary between volunteers and audience members, soliciting the audience suggestions, choosing which ideas will be used, and then transmitting those suggestions to the performers.

It seems unlikely that audiences would flock to performances advertised as “untrained performers following directions,” yet stage hypnosis performances, which could be described in just this way, are enormously popular. When I began this research, I assumed that hypnosis performances would be rare and that I would have to travel far to find them. Instead, I discovered them nearly everywhere I looked. Hypnotists are regularly featured at a comedy club near my home and on my college campus, and seven of the twelve shows I attended took place within a twenty-minute drive of my house. Stage hypnotists’ websites often advertise tours that encompass dozens of performances in as many cities. Hypnotists are headliners in Las Vegas and featured performers on cruise ships. They can be found at high school assemblies, in comedy clubs, and at corporate events. The ubiquity of stage hypnosis performances suggests that audiences find them compelling for reasons that must transcend an interest in watching
“untrained performers following directions.” Hypnosis itself, and particularly audience perceptions of hypnosis, would seem to be that compelling element.

Possibilities

In his book, *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America*, Fred Nadis contends that, “As a public, we view hypnosis as a blend of science, art, and the otherworldly, our conception filtered through the pulp imagination that once led, for example, to the beautifully drawn panels of the cartoon *Mandrake the Magician*, in which the dapper magician defeated thugs with his paralyzing hypnotic illusions” (xii). In addition to hypnosis, Nadis counts many forms of performance that commingle science and mysticism among his “wonder shows,” including quack medical demonstrations, magic, and mind reading. Of all such wonder shows, Nadis says, “Often there is a hint of real magic, a whiff of the vapors from a wizard’s lair, in such presentations” (xiii). In the eighteenth century, Mesmer supported his “hint of real magic” with scientific-sounding explanations for his magnetic treatments. This appeal to his patients’ Enlightenment values probably increased their faith in his techniques, which thereby increased the chances that their conditions would improve. Today, stage hypnotists often clothe their performances in the contemporary language of neuroscience and psychology in a similar bid for authenticity. Although researchers do not agree about what hypnosis is, how it works, or even if it exists, stage hypnosis forges a contract with the audience that the hypnosis they are about to see is “real,” which necessarily implies that this thing called hypnosis is “real,” and that the collection of behaviors the volunteers will exhibit reflects what hypnosis looks like (or should look like). Even a hypnotist like Ron Diamond (discussed in chapter 4), who acknowledges to his volunteer performers that the hypnosis in his show is “pretend,” attempts to maintain the illusion for the audience that what they are seeing is “real,” by using the off-mike
technique to keep the audience from hearing any remarks to the volunteers that might reveal his pretense.

This fascination with the mystical and otherworldly, especially if it can be “proven” with garbled pseudoscience, is neither new nor limited to stage hypnosis performances. Stage hypnosis is merely one example of a long tradition of such entertainments, including traveling medicine shows, stage magic, demonstrations of electricity and magnetism, mind reading, and séances. In 1891, only three years before du Maurier published *Trilby*, J.K. Huysmans addressed the attraction people feel for both the natural and the supernatural in his novel of Satanism and sexual obsession, *Là Bas*. In the novel, a character declares that they are living in “strange times,” because, “At the precise moment Positivism reaches its height, mysticism awakes and a mania for the occult begins” (244). His companion agrees, but argues that their situation in *fin-de-siècle* France is not unique, because the same tension has been felt during many other periods in history, explaining, “When materialism rages, magic rears its head” (245). While these characters are referring specifically to the “vacillation and confusion” (244) that occurs at the end of each century, I think their observations about the human desire for both the rational and the incredible can be applied more generally. In a contemporary example, the 2004 film, *What the #$*! Do We Know!*[^1], marketed as a documentary but framed by a fictional narrative about a photographer, claims that quantum physics and neuroscience can be combined in order to reveal spiritual truths about the universe and human consciousness. Particle physicist, Simon Singh calls the film, “pure claptrap,” and takes special umbrage at the filmmakers’ misapplication of

[^1]: Often called *What the Bleep Do We Know!*?, the film’s title typography is quite complex, and points to the filmmakers’ attempts to link their subject matter with science and mathematics. Although I am unable to provide a complete reproduction of all of the mathematical symbols here, the title is rendered *What tHe #$*! Do WΣ (k)πow!*?, with the addition of right-handed arrows which represent mathematical vectors, over the letters e and D.
the Heisenberg uncertainty principle to claim that observing water changes its molecular
structure. The filmmakers then use that false claim to argue that because the human body is 90%
water, observing ourselves can make fundamental changes to our consciousness at the quantum
level (“The Minds Boggle,” n. pag.). While scholars throughout the world dismissed the film as
“pseudoscience” and “quantum mysticism,” it was a sleeper hit. Publishers Weekly reports that
positive word-of-mouth kept the film in theatres for a year, and domestic grosses topped ten
million dollars, which is a respectable amount for a documentary. DVD sales were even stronger,
with a million copies sold in the first six months of release (Hogan, n. pag.). I believe that the
same desire for the commingling of science and magic that makes a film like What the #$*! Do
We Know!? successful, also makes stage hypnosis performances compelling for many people.

Stage hypnosis seems to create a feedback loop in which hypnotists structure their shows
to conform to some of their audience members’ expectations for what hypnosis should look like,
and then those expectations are reinforced and perpetuated when they are fulfilled on stage. In
his book Deeper and Deeper: Secrets of Stage Hypnosis, Jonathan Chase supports this idea in a
discussion about audience expectations. Chase notes that, “Most people will accurately describe
the antics of a hypnotised subject on stage even if they have never seen a live show. They know
how it goes” (21). Thus, he claims, it is important for stage hypnotists to meet at least some of
those expectations in order for audience members to buy into the reality of the performance. He
cites several examples of meeting audience expectations, including stage hypnotists’ use of the
word “sleep.” He explains that his dictionary describes hypnosis as, “a state like sleep,” and says
that this is what “the average person perceives the state to be” (3). However, Chase argues that
hypnosis is nothing at all like sleep, apart from the fact that people often close their eyes during
both. Although stage hypnotists know their volunteers are awake and aware, they often
command them to “Sleep!” because it is “easier and far more dramatic than saying, ‘please return to the altered mental state where your imagination is expanded and your inhibitions are lowered.”’ Also, Chase asserts, “the audience expects it . . . and they do pay the wages” (3, ellipses in original).

Similarly, Chase claims that the extended induction procedures employed by many stage hypnotists are also mostly window dressing. As he explains, both the audience and volunteers assume that they know what a hypnotic induction looks like, and therefore the stage hypnotist should meet their expectations. Chase believes that by the time a stage hypnotist finishes the pre-talk and pre-tests, the volunteers are already hypnotized. Elaborate induction procedures, therefore, are for the benefit of the audience, because, “They want at this point to see something dramatic, something astounding, above all they want theatre, and you being an exemplary showman/woman will give them just that. Only you will know that hypnosis as such has already been ‘induced’ and that what you are actually doing now is ‘deepening’ the state, and making yourself look good” (74-5). Then, having incorporated expectations and assumptions about hypnosis into the induction procedures, a stage hypnotist has created the conditions under which audiences and volunteers believe that hypnosis should be possible. By meeting their expectations, both the audience and the volunteers are able to suspend their disbelief and accept the performance as “real” hypnosis. Chase asserts that playing on expectations and assumptions is particularly important for getting the desired performance from volunteers, saying, “Stage Hypnosis works because [the volunteers] want it to and believe it can. Therefore once hypnotised they will behave in the way they believe to be correct for the state of mind they believe they are in” (21, capitalization in original). Thus, Chase’s assertions appear to support my contention that stage hypnosis as a performance phenomenon draws on expectations and assumptions about
hypnosis in order to represent hypnosis to audiences, while at the same time helping to reinforce and perpetuate those same expectations.

Like Chase, many of the hypnotists I interviewed freely discuss the perceptions and misperceptions about hypnosis they believe their audiences carry into their shows. Unlike Chase, however, fewer of my interviewees are willing to openly acknowledge their complicity in generating, promoting, or utilizing such ideas in their work. Thus, there seems to be an uneasy relationship between audience expectations regarding the role of the hypnotist and the performance strategies stage hypnotists adopt in response to such expectations. Some of the hypnotists I spoke to admit that they actively reinforce audience assumptions when they prove useful, whether or not those assumptions are accurate; some report a sense of resignation over the need to perpetuate misperceptions for the sake of expediency in performance; and some say they actively resist audience expectations through direct engagement and attempts to demystify hypnosis.

In one example of reinforcement of audience assumptions, stage hypnotist The Sandman explains the importance of costuming in creating the appropriate image for the audience. He says that, “you can use their ideas to your advantage,” suggesting that sometimes people’s perceptions about hypnosis can be used to achieve performance goals (Personal interview). One way that he uses perceptions to his advantage involves his attire: he explains that he has changed his appearance markedly from the one he presented when he began performing. Early in his career, he says he dressed in “regular” clothes on stage. However, he discovered that it was advantageous for him to cultivate a particular image, based in part on ideas that his audience members already had about what hypnotists should look like. Thus, he began performing in increasingly striking and unusual garb. For example, he accessorized a tuxedo with knee-high
boots, and he grew his hair out quite long. Then, despite the fact that his hair was not yet graying, he had his long hair bleached completely white. He explains that he told the colorist to, “Make me look like a wizard.” Although the image The Sandman describes reminds me more of a pirate than a wizard, it seems clear that he was trying to cultivate an exotic, eccentric, and even outlandish persona in order to match the image of a hypnotist that he believed his audience members already carried. (I interviewed The Sandman during a break between two of his performances. On that night he was dressed in a tuxedo with tails, and he wore a sequined top hat perched atop his totally bald head.) The Sandman’s assumption that his audiences expect a hypnotist to be clad in eccentric attire, hearkens back to descriptions of Mesmer written by later historians that highlighted his (probably fictional) affection for lilac coats and velvet capes. Although such garb would not have been unusual in Mesmer’s time, later writers treated descriptions of his appearance as proof of Mesmer’s eccentricity, perhaps because this conception matched the one these writers expected for a hypnotist/mesmerist.

Stage hypnotist Pattie Freeman provides an example of active resistance of audience expectations. She says she always asks her audiences if they have any questions or concerns about hypnosis at the beginning of her shows. Then, she dispels any misperceptions they express. Freeman points out that when she reassures her volunteers that hypnosis is not dangerous or scary, they feel more comfortable, both with her and with the hypnotic process. She explains that after she addresses their concerns, “they realize . . . they could leave any time they want, and it’s nothing that’s going to harm them, and it’s not going to stay with them forever and ever” (Telephone interview). Thus, they are able to relax and have a good time, which ultimately leads to a more entertaining show for the audience. The strategy employed by Freeman, however, still relies on audience expectations to enhance her show. By allowing her audiences to reiterate their
assumptions and misperceptions about hypnosis, she secures an opportunity to gain their trust and increase rapport by reassuring them that such beliefs are inaccurate. Her approach aligns well with the quote from hypnotist Dantalion Jones with which I opened chapter 3: “When it comes to hypnosis people want magic. To make the most effective hypnosis session there are two things you must accomplish: a) tell them why hypnosis is NOT magical and that the hypnosis process . . . demands their full cooperation, and b) provide them with an experience that seems magical” (32, italics in original). Regardless of the strategies they employ, many hypnotists I interviewed report that addressing the imaginary hypnotist in audience members’ minds is an important aspect of their work.

If stage hypnosis shows were simply an exercise in identifying public perceptions about hypnosis and then making use of those perceptions to craft performances, I would be comfortable relegating stage hypnosis to a minor footnote in the larger discipline of performance studies. Although the ineffable nature of hypnosis in general makes ontological claims about the nature of hypnosis in performance difficult to make, my research suggests that stage hypnosis occupies a far more fascinating—if somewhat slippery and unstable—position. Some interviewees experienced hypnosis as a lack of volition and/or a lack of conscious awareness of their actions, while others experienced it as a strong desire to comply with suggestions and/or an intense focus on the hypnotist. Those interviewees who believed they became hypnotized report that they “felt” different, even though some hypnosis researchers and stage hypnotists insist that hypnosis does not “feel” like anything. Most interviewees found the experience difficult to describe, and some even found it difficult to remember. Despite these inconsistencies and challenges, some experiential commonalities do appear. Many of my interview subjects clearly report specific and definitive experiential changes when they believed they were hypnotized.
Although we cannot know precisely how people experience hypnosis, these reported changes are enough to convince me that something is happening to these volunteers, whether or not we call that thing “hypnosis.” For example, as I discussed in chapter 4, Chad Paben reports that he became hypnotized at only two of the three stage hypnosis shows he attended. In order for him to make that distinction, something about the experiences must have been different for him. Paben and R. Nicole Hurtsellers both describe hypnosis as akin to dreaming, while Kristina Jones compares it to intoxication, and Wade Niederkohr likens it to anesthesia (Personal interviews). All of these comparisons suggest the interviewees experienced a significant, perceptible change. Jones was even able to perceive subtle changes in her experience of hypnosis throughout her performance. She says she felt as if hypnosis would “wear off” during active suggestions, but that between activities the hypnotist helped the volunteers return to a more focused state, which she described as getting “back into the mood a little bit.” Whatever “the mood” is, whether it is called hypnosis or something else, it seems to include perceptible changes for the individual, most commonly in focus and attention, behavior, and memory. Interestingly, these reported changes closely align with some of the expectations for hypnosis found in literary and historical sources, as well as in other interviewees’ statements.

In both themselves and others, interview subjects report that being hypnotized causes changes in focus and attention, which can result in a deep commitment to the onstage action. Chelsea Talbott was so focused on the hypnotist’s instructions during her performance she did not notice when another volunteer fell on her, causing an injury to her leg. When I asked Jones and Paben whether they thought their fellow volunteers were hypnotized, neither was able to answer with assurance, because they had not been attentive to them. Paben, for example, could not speculate about the condition of his fellow volunteers, explaining, “there was never a
moment when that thought would have crossed my mind, I don’t think.” Although he was aware of other people around him, he was not attentive to them. Interviewee David McKinley was also inattentive to his fellow volunteers, saying “They were there, but it’s like they—weren’t there?” (Personal interview). Both Paben and McKinley report their focus was so intense that they took their routines very seriously, even when their actions were comical. Paben reports being aware of the audience’s laughter, but not paying attention to it or even really understanding its source. McKinley, too, notes that he could tell from their laughter that the audience found many of the routines funny, but in the moment he did not see the humor in the routines, wondering, “When people are telling it back to me, yeah, it’s funny, but why didn’t I find it funny on stage?”

Many of my interviewees also seem surprised by their own behavior under hypnosis, which suggests that they found it to be uncharacteristic or unusual. As I detailed in chapter 4, Jerry Barnett says that during the performance he and the other volunteers answered questions about “stuff that would embarrass us if we knew what we were actually saying” (Personal interview). Similarly, Niederkohr felt embarrassed when he learned he had engaged in a suggestive routine with platonic female friend, and was surprised to find himself responding to suggestions even after the performance was over. Jones reports that while performing, her behavior was so uncharacteristic that it alarmed her boyfriend. As I mentioned in chapter 3, while performing for hypnotist Dale K, audience members were instructed to approach the volunteers on their way out of the venue and shake their hands. In response the volunteers would whoop like cowboys. Because Jones’s boyfriend arrived late to the performance, he did not hear these instructions and did not understand why Jones kept shouting when people approached her. He became so concerned with her bizarre behavior, that Jones describes his reaction as “freaking out.” While performing for the same hypnotist as Jones, McKinley participated in the same
activity. He explains that because he stopped and shouted for every audience member who shook his hand, “it took me forever to get out of the building,” but that it did not occur to him at the time that he could simply stop doing it.

Many of my interview subjects also experienced disruptions in their memories that they attribute to hypnosis. Barnett, Hurtsellers, Paben, and Talbott found their memories of their hypnotic experiences fragmented, while Niederkohr has no memory of his experience at all. Additionally, as I detailed in chapter 4, Hurtsellers and Jones both report experiences with amnesia that seem to have been initiated and terminated by the hypnotist. During Hurtsellers’ performance, the hypnotist made her forget the number seven for awhile. In a more complicated example, the hypnotist with whom Jones worked gave the suggestion that the volunteers would not immediately remember their participation in the show. However, as soon as they stepped out of the performance venue, they would remember everything about the performance. Jones reports that it “worked just like that,” because when she stepped through the doorway and out of the venue, “it just kinda like hit me, like, what just happened? Like, now I remember everything . . . exactly how he said it was supposed to work.”

Thus, when they believed themselves to be hypnotized, many of my interviewees experienced a failure to attend to outside stimuli, an intense focus on the hypnotist’s instructions, behavioral changes unusual enough to generate surprise and concern, and disruptions in memory. Taken together, their experiences would seem to suggest that some significant change took place within them. Perhaps this collection of experiential and behavioral changes is caused by the condition that we currently label “hypnosis.” On the other hand, perhaps these changes are a specific outcome of the performance conditions created by stage hypnosis or even by live performance more generally. Whatever the cause, such changes hint at the paradoxical position
occupied by stage hypnosis: it is both authentic and contrived simultaneously. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned that stage hypnosis creates a feedback loop in which hypnotists structure their shows to conform to their audience members’ expectations for what hypnosis should look like, and then those expectations are reinforced and perpetuated when they are fulfilled on stage. For most stage hypnotists, however, such sleight-of-hand does not seem to be an end in itself. Rather, many hypnotists acknowledge that stage hypnosis “works” because people believe that it works, and thus, by recreating the conditions under which volunteers believe that hypnosis should occur, stage hypnotists attempt to create the conditions under which hypnosis could occur. Traditional theatrical performances encourage willing suspension of disbelief, but by reinforcing audience members’ expectations about hypnosis, stage hypnotists seem to encourage belief. Questions about whether or not hypnosis exists as an objectively real phenomenon, then, become irrelevant to such performances: a lack of evidence to support religious beliefs does not preclude people from regularly having profound religious experiences, just as a lack of evidence to support hypnosis does not preclude people from having hypnotic experiences.

This emphasis on belief—for both audience members and volunteers—may help to explain why my interviewees so often raised the issue of authenticity. Although I never asked interviewees whether or not they became hypnotized during their performances, much less whether their hypnosis had been genuine, they regularly felt compelled to reassure me that they had not “faked” hypnosis. Worried that it might “ruin” the performance for his friends, Toney was hesitant to reveal he had not been hypnotized. Niederkohr found performances by volunteers he thought were not hypnotized disappointing, even when they were admittedly funny. Even I did not reveal that I did not believe I had been hypnotized, when I was approached after my performance by two women who asked me what it was like. Like Toney, I worried that such an
admission might “ruin” the performance for them. All theatrical performance holds a particular kind of power to move us to engage with circumstances that we know to be fictitious. At the same time, all theatrical performance presents circumstances that are objectively real: living, breathing people are moving and speaking in front of us. Part of the magic of performance is in the commingling of these two worlds. To ask whether stage hypnosis is “real” may ultimately be the wrong question. It may be more interesting to ask why we yearn for such authenticity.

Questions

While I cannot solve the riddle of hypnosis, I can possibilize some areas of study that seem promising for future investigation. For example, although I have not engaged reception theory directly in this document, my work does point toward some directions for future reception theory research. In “Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance,” Marvin Carlson laments the dearth of research regarding “what an audience brings to the theatre in the way of expectations, assumptions, and strategies which will creatively interact with the stimuli of the theatre event to produce whatever effect the performance has on an audience and what effect the audience has on it” (97). Carlson’s concerns were published in 1989, and many scholars, including Carlson himself, have begun to redress this gap in knowledge since that time; however, this area of inquiry is far from exhausted. The bifurcated research methodology that I have employed here, using textual and historical analysis as well as interviews and participant observation, may provide one model for the analysis of audience reception in other popular entertainment forms whose structure does not align neatly with traditional theatrical performance, such as magic acts, variety shows, rock concerts, and circus and sideshow performances. For example, audience reception research regarding such performances may help to answer questions about the effect that variables such as audience demographics, venue, or
recognized genre, might have on audience expectations, and about how audiences respond when those expectations are met, defied, and/or subverted.

Additionally, much work remains to be done on issues of gender and sexuality in stage hypnosis performance. The vast majority of stage hypnotists are male, and the overwhelming gender imbalance in the field raises questions about power and control. Whether or not hypnosis allows volunteers to be “controlled,” the hypnotist’s role as the orchestrator of the performance, as well as the perception that volunteers are without free will can create enormous power imbalances. When such power imbalances are combined with highly sexualized performance styles, such as the “erotic” or “XXX” shows popular at many comedy clubs, public perceptions of hypnosis as a potentially dangerous instrument of coercion might be fortified. In one particularly troubling instance during a performance that I saw, stage hypnotist Will Power suggested that the volunteers were filming an orgy scene for a pornographic film (Power, 15 Jul. 2009). A young woman responded immediately to the orgy suggestion by shaking her head and waving her hands to indicate her refusal to participate. Despite her unambiguous rejection of the scenario, Power proceeded to place the arm of the man on her right around her shoulders and the hands of the man on her left onto her thigh. (Power’s actions were not specific to this young woman; he encouraged others on the stage to make contact in the same way.) Unable to see her physical protestations with their eyes closed, the two men began to grope her. She responded by screaming and yelling “cut” while clapping her hands like a film clap board, and although the young woman was laughing, it was clear she was deeply uncomfortable being touched in this way. Power, however, did not stop the action, allowing the orgy scene to play out for ninety seconds after her initial, physical indications of refusal, twenty seconds of which occurred after
she began yelling “cut.”\(^2\) (While Power did not respond to her protestations, it is noteworthy that
the male volunteers stopped touching her almost immediately when she began to refuse vocally.
The fact that they stopped as soon as they heard her protestations strongly suggests that the men
were not intentionally disregarding her earlier, physical refusals, but that they simply could not
see them with their eyes closed.) Because the stage situation already carries with it an enormous
incentive to comply in order to create an entertaining performance and to avoid embarrassment,
Power’s failure to stop this routine at the first sign of her discomfort virtually assured that it
would continue. In addition to such issues of power and control, many of the performances I
have seen are also highly heteronormative, and seem to operate on the assumption that depictions
of female homosexuality are inherently titillating while depictions of male homosexuality are
inherently humorous. These issues and many others relating to gender and sexuality are ripe with
potential for future study.

Additionally, one of the most interesting issues to emerge in my research concerns
hypnosis inductions which are performed live on stage in a fictional context. In our interview,
stage hypnotist and stand-up comic Meghan O. Koesters mentions her interest in theatrical shows
which feature scenes of hypnosis, such as the recent musical, *Next to Normal* (Personal
interview). Such productions highlight the difficulties in defining hypnosis, as well as the
difficulties determining when and how it occurs. The American Psychological Association’s
amended 2004 description of hypnosis says that an induction is “an extended initial suggestion
for using one’s imagination” (Executive Committee n. pag.). When a hypnotist performs a
hypnotic induction, he or she usually recites a series of prepared statements (the “extended initial
suggestion”), that are intended to induce hypnosis in the subject. Researchers disagree about the

\(^2\) I am able to provide such a detailed description of this routine because I purchased a
performance recording.
necessity of a formal induction,\textsuperscript{3} but when used, its intended purpose—to transition the subject into the hypnotic experience—seems to be universally accepted. If this extended suggestion brings about specific changes in the subject that can be labeled “hypnosis,” then the uttering of such an induction is important: the induction would appear to work as a kind of incantation, the speaking of which alters the subject’s perceptions, sensations, and/or cognition. Therefore, in a fictive context, an actor who performs an induction procedure on another actor in the course of a production could potentially hypnotize that actor. This possibility seems unlikely.

If, however, the same actor does not become hypnotized because neither of the two actors intended for hypnosis to result from the induction procedure, then it is the involved parties’ intent to generate hypnosis, and not necessarily any specific induction procedure, that creates hypnosis. When the notion of intent is introduced into the hypnotic experience, I am reminded of J. L. Austin’s concept of the performative utterance: speech acts that create, constitute, or change the reality in which they occur. In “How To Do Things with Words: Lecture II,” Austin calls such speech acts “cases and senses in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something” (177, italics in original). The same speech act, however, would be “hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage,” because the parties involved do not intend that the speech act should effect change. (181). Thus, when a judge proclaims, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” a marriage results, but when an actor playing a judge speaks the same words to two other actors playing a wedding scene, no one is married because none of the parties intended that outcome. If a hypnotic induction works the same way—a hypnotist creates a hypnotized person by speaking the words of the induction, but

\textsuperscript{3} See Ernest Hilgard’s “The Domain of Hypnosis: With Some Comments on Alternative Paradigms” and David Spiegel’s “Painstaking Reminders of Forgotten Trance Logic” for examples of arguments that an induction is not necessary for hypnosis to occur.
an actor playing a hypnotist does not—then this argues for a sociocognitive model of hypnosis, in which, like marriage, all of the parties involved agree to enter into the condition upon the speaking of the appropriate words.

While a conception of the hypnotic induction as a performative utterance does not preclude a neurological basis for hypnosis, it argues against the possibility that hypnosis (or at least stage hypnosis) might be a distinct state with measureable physiological markers. Rather, it may be more like a rite of passage, wherein the induction procedure serves as a liminal transition into a new position or status that is recognized by society. According to Victor Turner in “Liminality and Communitas,” after a rite of passage, the ritual subject is “expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards” which are expected of a person in this new social position (89). An examination of stage hypnosis as a kind of rite of passage might shed light on certain social-psychological aspects of hypnosis performances, which encourage even volunteers who do not believe they are hypnotized to continue with the performance or even to “fake” hypnosis: perhaps aspects of the induction “ritual” itself make volunteers feel as though they should “behave in accordance with certain customary norms.” Thus, further analysis of stage hypnosis through the ideas of Austin and Turner might even offer insights into the experience of hypnosis more generally.

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Just as I am writing the concluding words of this study, my husband—a long-time proponent of therapeutic hypnosis—leans into my study room and offers this thought: “There’s no such thing as a hypnotist, just as there’s no such thing as a teacher.” As he has been a teacher for over twenty years, his comment is unexpected and piques my interest. He goes on to explain that no one really teaches anyone else anything: all learning is self-generated. The teacher’s job
is to facilitate the circumstances and provide the context in which such self-generated learning can occur. By his logic, then, all hypnosis is self-hypnosis. The hypnotist simply creates the conditions in which hypnosis may occur. Perhaps this idea is not as exciting as that of the all-powerful Svengali, who uses hypnosis to release extraordinary abilities and talents in his subjects at the same time that he deprives them of all agency or volition, but it offers the potential for something much more interesting: the notion that those extraordinary abilities and talents already reside within us, as well as the power to release them, on stage or off.
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APPENDIX A. HSRB APPROVAL

September 23, 2011

TO: Cynthia Stroud
THEA

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H12D015GE7

TITLE: Stage Hypnosis in the Shadow of Svengali: Historical Influences, Public Perception, and Contemporary Practice

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of September 22, 2011, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on August 23, 2012. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, send a request for modifications to the HSRB via this office. Those changes must be approved by the HSRB prior to their implementation.

You have been approved to enroll 420 participants. If you want to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/ Modifications:
Stamped original consent forms are coming to you via campus mail.

c: Dr. Lesa Lockford

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7
APPENDIX B. HSRB CONTINUING APPROVAL

Bowling Green State University
Office of Research Compliance

DATE: November 13, 2012
TO: Cynthia Stroud, MA, BFA
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [392154-1] Stage Hypnosis in the Shadow of Svengali: Historical Influences, Public Perception, and Contemporary Practice
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: November 13, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: November 12, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 12, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7718 or hsrb@bgzu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT FOR STAGE HYPNOTIST INTERVIEWS

My name is Cynthia Stroud. I am a PhD student in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University. I am studying stage hypnosis as a performance genre. In addition to you, I am interviewing several stage hypnotists to further my understanding of this type of performance.

Purpose of the Research:
I am exploring the relationship between how the public understands stage hypnosis and the ways in which it is practiced. While you will not be compensated for your participation, you will be helping those of us who study performance learn more about this popular performance genre. I hope that my study will benefit stage hypnotists indirectly through increased visibility and understanding.

Procedure for the Interview:
In this interview, you will be asked a series of questions and I will take detailed notes. To help me recall what you said, I would like to record the interview. These recordings will not be shared publicly. However, you may choose not to be recorded if you prefer. The interview should take approximately forty-five minutes.

Your Participation is Voluntary:
Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decide to skip questions or stop participating at any time without penalty. Your relationship with Bowling Green State University or any person or institution involved in the research will not be affected by whether or not you choose to participate.

I Will Use Your Name unless You Request Otherwise:
This interview is not anonymous. Your name, your occupation as a stage hypnotist, and any interview responses you provide may be included in my dissertation and/or subsequent research on this topic. You may request to be identified by an alias such as your stage name in my research, but the consent form requires your signature using your legal name. The full text of my finished dissertation will be available digitally through the OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. However, raw interview data, such as my notes, interview recordings, and signed consent forms, will be available only to my academic advisory committee and to me. These materials will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office for a minimum of three years before they are destroyed.

Your Risk is Minimal:
Because your participation consists only of a voluntary, personal interview regarding your performance of stage hypnosis, I do not believe that you will encounter any more risk than you do in everyday life.
You Must Be At Least 18 Years Old:
You must be at least 18 years old in order to participate in this interview.

You Will Receive a Copy of this Consent Document:
You will be provided with a copy of this consent document to take with you. If you wish, you may also have a copy of the signed consent form.

Contact Information:
Please feel free to contact me or to contact my advisor if you have any questions.

Researcher: Cynthia Stroud
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Theatre and Film
Bowling Green State University
338 South Hall
Bowling Green, OH 43403
cstroud@bgsu.edu

Advisor: Dr. Lesa Lockford
Associate Professor
Department of Theatre and Film
Bowling Green State University
338 South Hall
Bowling Green, OH 43403
lockflo@bgsu.edu
419-372-9381

If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu).

Thank you for your time and your participation.
Informed Consent for Stage Hypnotists

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research. Additionally:

Recording:

___ I agree that this interview may be recorded.

___ I DO NOT agree that this interview may be recorded.

Use of Your Name:

___ You may refer to me by my LEGAL NAME if material from this interview is referenced in your research.

___ You may refer to me by my STAGE NAME if material from this interview is referenced in your research:

______________________________
Participant's Stage Name (Please Print)

___ You MAY NOT refer to me by my legal name or stage name if material from this interview is referenced in your research. (If you select this option, I may assign you an alias if material from this interview is referenced in my research.)

______________________________
Participant's Name (Please Print)

______________________________
Participant’s Signature

______________________________
Date
APPENDIX D. RECRUITMENT LETTER FOR STAGE HYPNOTIST INTERVIEWS

[Name of Recipient]

My name is Cynthia Stroud, and I am a PhD student in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University. I am studying stage hypnosis as a performance genre. I received your name from [insert here]. Because you are a practicing stage hypnotist, I would like to speak with you in order to further my understanding of this type of performance.

During the interview, I will ask you a series of questions about your practice of stage hypnosis. To help me recall what you said, I would like to record the interview. However, you may choose not to be recorded if you prefer. The interview should take approximately thirty minutes.

If you are willing to participate, or if you have any questions about my research, please contact me via email or phone:

cstroud@bgsu.edu
419-460-0577

You may also direct questions to my advisor:

Advisor: Dr. Lesa Lockford
Associate Professor, Department of Theatre and Film
Bowling Green State University
338 South Hall
Bowling Green, OH 43403
lockflo@bgsu.edu
419-372-9381

You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Stroud
cstroud@bgsu.edu
419-460-0577
APPENDIX E. QUESTIONS FOR STAGE HYPNOTIST INTERVIEWS

1. How did you become interested in performing stage hypnosis?
2. What kind of training or preparation did you undertake in order to learn stage hypnosis?
3. Have any other performers, past or present, influenced your performance style or approach?
4. How has your performance style or approach changed over the course of your career?
5. What have you learned or discovered about hypnosis through performing stage hypnosis?
6. Describe the qualities of an ideal volunteer for your show.
7. What might make someone less suitable as a volunteer for your show?
8. In your experience, how would someone’s previous experience with hypnosis or ideas about hypnosis affect his or her performance as a volunteer?
9. Why do you think audiences are drawn to stage hypnosis performances?
10. What do you think your audiences expect to see when they attend a stage hypnosis show?
11. In what ways do your performances meet or resist these expectations? Can you give me an example or two?
12. What kinds of assumptions about hypnosis do you think your audience members bring with them to your performances? What do they think hypnosis is and how do they think it works?
13. Where do you think these assumptions come from?
14. Given your experience with hypnosis, how accurate are these assumptions?
15. Do different types of audiences bring different assumptions? For example, do you notice a difference between comedy club audiences and corporate audiences? If so, how does that affect your show? If not, do you have any ideas why the same ideas about hypnosis are so widespread?
16. Do you choose to educate your audiences about the nature of hypnosis in your performances? Why or why not?

17. Tell me something about stage hypnosis that you think most people would be surprised to hear.
APPENDIX F. INFORMED CONSENT FOR VOLUNTEER INTERVIEWS

Informed Consent for Volunteer Performer Interviews

My name is Cynthia Stroud. I am a PhD student in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University. I am studying stage hypnosis as a performance genre. I am interviewing people who have volunteered to perform in stage hypnosis shows to further my understanding of this type of performance.

Purpose of the Research:
I am exploring the relationship between how the public understands stage hypnosis and the ways in which it is practiced. While you will receive no direct benefits for your participation, you will be helping those of us who study performance learn more about this popular performance genre.

Procedure for the Interview:
In this interview, you will be asked a series of questions and I will take detailed notes. To help me more accurately recall what you said, I would like to record the interview. These recordings will not be shared publicly. However, you may choose not to be recorded if you prefer. The interview should take approximately forty-five minutes.

Your Participation is Voluntary:
Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decide to skip questions or stop participating at any time without penalty. Your relationship with Bowling Green State University or any person or institution involved in the research will not be affected by whether or not you choose to participate.

I Will Use Your Name unless You Request Otherwise:
This interview is not anonymous. Your name and any interview responses you provide may be included in my dissertation and/or subsequent research on this topic. You may request to be identified by an alias in my research, but the consent form requires your signature using your legal name. The full text of my finished dissertation will be available digitally through the OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. However, raw interview data, such as my notes, interview recordings, and signed consent forms, will be available to my academic advisory committee and myself only. These materials will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office for a minimum of three years before they are destroyed.

Your Risk is Minimal:
Because your participation consists only of a voluntary, personal interview regarding your participation in stage hypnosis, I do not believe that you will encounter any more risk than you do in everyday life.

You Must Be At Least 18 Years Old:
You must be at least 18 years old in order to participate in this interview.
You Will Receive a Copy of this Consent Document:
You will be provided with a copy of this consent document to take with you. If you wish, you may also have a copy of the signed consent form.

Contact Information:
Please feel free to contact me or to contact my advisor if you have any questions about the research or your participation in the research.

**Researcher: Cynthia Stroud**
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Theatre and Film
Bowling Green State University
338 South Hall
Bowling Green, OH 43403
cstroud@bgsu.edu

**Advisor: Dr. Lesa Lockford**
Associate Professor
Department of Theatre and Film
Bowling Green State University
338 South Hall
Bowling Green, OH 43403
lockflo@bgsu.edu
419-372-9381

If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu).

Thank you for your time and your participation.
Informed Consent for Volunteer Performer Interviews

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research. Additionally:

Recording:

____ I agree that this interview may be recorded.

____ I DO NOT agree that this interview may be recorded.

Use of Your Name:

____ You may refer to me by my LEGAL NAME in your research.

____ You MAY NOT refer to me by my legal name in your research.
   (If you select this option, I may assign you an alias for the purposes of my research.)

Participant’s Name (Please Print) __________________________________________

Participant’s Signature __________________________________________ Date ______
Have you ever volunteered for a stage hypnosis show?

Then I’d like to interview YOU!

I am a PhD student in Theatre at BGSU and I’m studying stage hypnosis. I’m interviewing people who have volunteered to perform in stage hypnosis shows because I want to find out what it’s like for people when they perform in a show. I would very much like to interview you. Please call or email if you’d like to be interviewed, or if you have any questions and want to find out more about my research.

Cynthia Stroud
cstroud@bgsu.edu
419.460.0577

Advisor: Dr. Lesa Lockford
lockflo@bgsu.edu
419.372.9381
APPENDIX H. QUESTIONS FOR VOLUNTEER INTERVIEWS

1. When and where did you volunteer to perform in a stage hypnosis show? Do you remember the name of the hypnotist?

2. Was this the first time you had ever been to a stage hypnosis show, or had you seen stage hypnosis before?

Questions 3-6 apply only if the subject indicates in Question 2 that he/she has attended a stage hypnosis performance before. If he/she has not attended such a performance before, skip to Question 7.

3. Can you give me an idea of how many times you’ve attended stage hypnosis shows?

4. What made you go back after the first time?

5. What kinds of similarities and differences did you notice among different shows?

6. Was this the first time you had ever volunteered to be in the show? If it was not the first time, what made you want to do it again?

7. Had you ever been hypnotized for any other reason before you participated in stage hypnosis, like to help you stop smoking, lose weight, or lower anxiety? What was the outcome?

8. What made you want to volunteer to participate in this performance?

9. Tell me a little bit about the hypnotist. What was he or she like? Did anything in his or her performance style stand out to you?

10. During the performance, what kinds of things did the hypnotist ask you and the other
volunteers to do?

11. Do you think all of the volunteers who were performing with you were hypnotized? Why or why not? How could you tell?

12. Before you participated in the show, did you have any ideas about what hypnosis was or how it worked?

13. How was your experience of hypnosis similar to or different from what you expected?

14. Was there anything about stage hypnosis that surprised you?

15. Did you enjoy participating? Why or why not?

16. What happened when the performance was over?

17. If you attended the performance with other people, how did they respond afterward?

18. How did you feel about your participation afterward? Have your thoughts about it changed at all since then? How?