Cornering the Market on Fraud
Stage Magicians versus Spirit mediums

JOHN BENEDICT BUESCHER
George Mason University

It is well known that the first public demonstrations of physical manifestations of spiritualist phenomena were rapidly followed by demonstrations purporting to debunk them: The Fox sisters produced spirit raps at Corinthian Hall in Rochester in November 1849.1 The following year, the one-time Universalist minister Chauncey Burr put on debunking shows, in which he made cracking sounds with his toe joints.2 What is less often observed is the competitive nature of the magicians and mediums: in the latter half of the nineteenth century and beyond, the two were in fact in an ongoing competition for the same corner of the entertainment market; they sought not only to engage the same clientele, but also to pointedly maneuver around the legal and social impediments to the practice of their art.

The English magician John Nevil Maskelyne wrote in 1876 that, “Medium and conjuror means the same thing,” but “a bad conjuror will make a good medium any day. The spirit juggler,” he said, “shall keep you singing hymns for two hours in a darkened room (his own room, too!) and then pronounce the circumstances unfavourable. . . . [But the magician] must produce the effects whether the audience be ‘sympathetic’ . . . or not.”3

1. Emma Hardinge (later more commonly known by her married name, Emma Hardinge Britten), Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years’ Record of the Communication between Earth and the World of Spirits (New York: The Author, 1870), 42–47.

2. Burr was assisted in these performances by his brother Heman. Their knee- and toe-cracking efforts did not altogether convince their audiences, even though they appear to have hit on the Fox sisters’ actual method, at least according to the sisters’ later admissions. In 1851 the Burrs published the pamphlet Knocks for the Knockings, excerpted in the Methodist minister Hiram Mattison’s Spirit Rapping Unveiled! (New York: J.C. Derby, 1855).


Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft (Winter 2014)
Copyright © 2014 University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.
As spirit mediums developed into public performers, producing phenomena to convince their audience that spirits acted on the material world, stage magicians complained that the mediums were using tricks that were part of their repertoire, such as reading messages inside sealed envelopes, making blood-red writing appear on the arm, making objects appear seemingly out of thin air, opening locks, making musical instruments play themselves, levitating, and escaping from rope ties. The Scottish magician John Henry Anderson, known as “The Wizard of the North,” toured the United States in 1853 and wrote letters to the editors of the *Baltimore Sun*, suggesting various mechanical ways that rapping sounds could be made.4 Anderson made the debunking of mediums’ tricks a mainstay of his own performances both in America and in Britain, and in doing so, paradoxically kept spiritualism before the eyes of the public—at least in Britain—for almost a decade before it actually took root there.5

Magicians often conducted exposures of mediums’ fraud by reproducing the effects in ways of their own devising, sometimes not knowing for certain how the mediums did it. Each magician had his own way of bringing about any given effect—some relied on extensive machinery, for example, some relied on nothing but misdirection and legerdemain. Mediums too used a variety of ways to accomplish their effects, depending on the conditions in which they worked.

Magicians also testified against mediums in court. But this testimony might only amount to “The effect can be done in a number of ways. Here is one way. Here is another.” This does not necessarily show how the medium did it, which was what the prosecution wanted to show, but the magician might also testify that he attended a medium’s séance and discovered the precise nature of the fraud. Or he might testify that the medium admitted to him that he was only a conjurer and was presenting himself as a medium to make more money. This was the gist of the testimony magicians gave against the medium Charles Colchester, during his trial in 1865, when he was prosecuted

---


5. Thanks to my colleague Marc Demarest for this astute observation. Another well-known English magician working the American circuit during the earliest years of spiritualism was Antonio Van Zandt, who worked under the stage name of “Signor Blitz.” His memoirs describe spiritualism as “preposterous,” “nonsensical,” and “offensive”; *Life and Adventures of Signor Blitz; being an account of the author’s professional life; his wonderful tricks and feats; with laughable incidents, and adventures as a magician, necromancer, and ventriloquist* (Hartford: T. Belknap, 1872), 155–158.
Figure 1. J. H. Anderson’s speculation on rapping method, 1853.

for having performed without a “juggling” license. He had refused to apply for one, claiming it would infringe on his freedom of religion. The jury convicted him, however, and Colchester eventually admitted his performances were carried out by mechanical means.

Magician John Maskelyne attended the performances of the American brothers William and Ira Davenport when they toured Britain in 1864–65. Their demonstrations were presented as the effect of their mediumistic power, through which spirits would enter a closed cabinet in which they were tied to chairs, free them from their ropes, and then play instruments that floated around in the dark. Their performances opened with a speech by Universalist clergyman Jesse Ferguson, who declared that spirits were behind it all, that it was not just trickery.

The Davenports’ performances in London created a sensation that inspired Maskelyne and his partner George Alfred Cooke to begin a long-running exposé show just down the street at the Egyptian Hall, where they duplicated the phenomena of the Davenports and showed the audience their tricks.

British spiritualists who promoted the Davenports as true and powerful spirit mediums took these performances at the Egyptian Hall as insults and

6. The trial was held in Buffalo, and the testimony was reported in newspapers around the country. For the magicians’ testimony, see “The Colchester Case. Testimony of Magicians,” Washington Times, August 24, 1865.
Figure 2. John Nevil Maskelyne.
challenges. Three of these spiritualists, each on their own, decided to expose the exposers by putting on shows in which they would reveal how Maske-lyne and Cooke did their tricks. Although this temporarily disconcerted Maskelyne because his own stage secrets were being revealed, it did not stop his popular shows. And although exposing the exposers may have delighted spiritualist audiences who held a grudge against Maskelyne and other magicians, it reinforced the public’s sense that what spirit mediums called “tests of the physical manifestation” of the spirits were done through trickery. Exposures clearly suggested that the tests had failed.

One basic rule of stage magic is that you don’t warn your audience that you’re about to play a trick on them. You push your warning, if there is to be one, off to the margins of your performance as best you can, so as not to interfere with the audience’s suspension of disbelief. For a staged séance, one would naturally push any warning out of the performance altogether and proceed with the audience directly, even if some technical admission was made beforehand in an advertisement or before the magistrate that this was offered only as entertainment.

The Davenports—and, later, the American, Anna Eva Fay—remained silent on the matter, or spoke with plausible deniability on the public record outside their demonstrations about what went on in their performances, while implicitly relying on others to speak on their behalf, to testify that they were true spirit mediums, and thereby to create eager audiences of believing spiritualists.

While Anna Eva Fay performed as a spirit medium at Queens Concert Hall in London, Maskelyne and Cooke reproduced her dark séance phenomena at the Egyptian Hall twice daily. Her advertisements were nuanced (or misleading) about what she did onstage. The American magician and antispiritualist Samri Baldwin wrote of one of her ads:

There is no claim that effects are produced by any supernatural agency, and this omission will be readily understood by lawyers and all who observe that it is an advertisement calling on people to spend their money. But when the people are

7. These spiritualists were all connected at one time or another to the British spiritualist journal, The Spiritual Magazine: George Sexton, Francis Ward Monck, and Frederic Rowland Young; all three were Christian ministers who supported spiritualism as a repudiation to Materialism; Maskelyne, Modern Spiritualism, 102–8; see also Georg Sexton, Spirit-Mediums and Conjurers; an oration delivered in the Cavendish Rooms, London, on Sunday Evening, June 15th, 1873 (London: J. Burns, 1873), and Iota (pseud.), Maskelyne and Cooke: an exposé of the falseness of their pretensions, by Iota, proofs corrected by Mr. Maskelyne (London: J. Burns, 1873).
assembled, the claim of spirit presence and agency is boldly proclaimed. The medium
describes angelic beings and gives their names, and calls on her audience to recognize
and claim as their own the dear departed.8

She was repeatedly caught using trickery, and one of her stage managers,
the magician Irving Bishop, published a book in which he revealed how she
did the mentalist portions of her performances, but she never admitted to
trickery, until well after her retirement, and then only very quietly.9 She
always allowed spiritualists to claim her as a true medium. Nevertheless, near
the end of her life she was inducted into the Magic Circle, a distinguished
club of stage magicians. After all, even though the magician exposer of
mediaums argued that they were engaged in a public service of exposing the
truth, a magician’s performance, in some important sense, is always a lie, and
Fay’s deceit was apparently less of a sin than if she had exposed secrets.10

The stage magician Joseph Dunninger wrote, “The same fundamental
desire stimulates both the medium and the magician. Both feel the urge to
mystify the public. Both have held to the same theory: ‘Mundus vult decipi;
decipiatur,’ and they enjoy the privilege of belonging to the chosen few who
can deceive the world.”11 In other words, magicians and mediums were
doing the same things except that the magicians admitted what they were
doing, whereas the mediums did not. Owners of magic shops purveyed
material to both stage magicians and mediums. Inventors made apparatus for
both, without distinguishing them. Sometimes they were even disinclined to
sell to stage magicians, especially to those who specialized in exposures of
mediaums: that was bad for the magic business, they thought.12

8. Prof. S. S. Baldwin, Spirit Mediums Exposed (Melbourne: M’Carron, Bird and
Company, 1879), 4.

Clairvoyance or Second Sight (Edinburgh: John Menzies, 1880); John W. Truesdell, The

10. In contrast to Anna Eva Fay’s acceptance into the Magic Circle, one of its
distinguished founders, the famous stage magician David Devant, was expelled from
it after publishing his memoirs near the end of his life, in which he revealed how he
accomplished some of his effects.

11. Joseph Dunninger, Inside the Medium’s Cabinet (New York: D. Kemp and

12. See, for example, the Ralph E. Sylvestre Company’s 1902 magic catalog,
Gambols with the Ghosts, which explains the company’s opposition to spiritualist
exposés.
The magician was supposedly distinguished from the medium by the framing: Is the performance admitted to be real or not? But there are degrees of admission and suggestion. The distinction between calling one’s performance an entertainment and a real séance was often treated only as a legal nicety. Presented as real, a séance for money might be subject to police raids and prosecution for fraud; presented as entertainment, the same event could command police protection against anyone trying to interfere. The performer could even have someone come out on stage and lecture about spiritualism beforehand and say that what they were about to see was real, and it would still be protected as part of the entertainment.

This separated the magician from the medium from the performers’ point of view. But how about from the audience’s point of view? Sometimes the intent or the content of the performers’ work had very little effect on the audience. Samri Baldwin began performing as a young man, imitating—without comment—the effects he had seen at the Davenports’ performances. Then he noticed that many spiritualists were eager to attribute his performances to the spirits and declared him a powerful medium. So he added stronger and stronger disclaimers, saying what he did was done through trickery. His biographer described the result: “He was vilified, called a rogue, a recreant medium, and scurrilous falsehoods of all kinds were set afloat and promulgated by the spiritual papers. This finally decided Baldwin to make the Exposition of Spiritualism a life-time work.”

Some spiritualists allowed the mediums to label themselves as entertainers to avoid prosecution by the authorities, while agreeing among themselves that the medium was really calling forth the spirits. Also, some spiritualists insisted that there were famous magicians—such as Anderson and Maskelyne—who actually did have real powers, even if they did not present themselves that way, but affected to pretend that they were only stage magicians. Maskelyne wrote: “It is wonderful to note the credulity of even intelligent people; frequently at the Egyptian Hall the ‘materialized spirit’ is addressed in an imploring tone by some of the faithful amongst the audience, with ‘John, John! Speak to your old friend, John!’”

Anna Eva Fay started her career by assisting her husband Melville Fay, who became notorious among spiritualists for portraying himself, practically on

alternate performances, as, first a spirit medium, then as a debunker of spiritualism, then again as a medium, depending on the audiences he thought he could recruit and the money he could make. When Fay died in 1889, Luther Colby, the editor of the spiritualist newspaper, The Banner of Light, still could not decide whether he had been a true medium after all.15

Modern stage magic performances, where everyone is supposed to understand that it’s not real magic but trickery, is somewhat new. Magic performances began generally to be teased apart from witchcraft around the end of the sixteenth century, when the very existence of witchcraft began to be questioned.16 Modern magical performances could be thought of as epistemological theater, in which the law’s acceptance of Enlightenment rationalism assumed a lack of belief in the supernatural explanation, but where effects were understood as being accomplished by natural, if hidden, means. The law’s assumption demarcated a kind of performance space where, as long as the performer, metaphorically speaking, somehow displayed a sign saying “Entertainment” on it, the mysterious doings occurring within that space could proceed, no matter what he or she was doing there and no matter what the individual audience members might think was happening there.

Perhaps this is why prosecutions for witchcraft stopped, and conjurers were prosecuted under ordinances dealing with the licensing of what was called “juggling,” and then under commercial laws governing fair trade, specifically taking money under false pretenses. For many stage magicians, spirit mediums were by definition frauds because supernatural intervention was impossible. But this assumption strikes me as the handmaid of Enlightenment propaganda against religious supernaturalism. Magician Jasper Maskelyne—John Maskelyne’s grandson—wrote that the magician searched around the world for mystery upon which he could throw “the light of reason on to the dark spots of human superstition and misguided credulity.”17

Spirit mediums broke this epistemological convention, in a kind of Romantic revolt against materialism, and presented, as their epistemological theater, one that included supernatural intervention into the material world.

16. Reginald Scot’s 1584 The Discoverie of Witchcraft is notable, not just for its rationalist attack on the notion of witchcraft, but also for its section composed of a longish description of sleight of hand tricks, making it a very early example of published how-to books on the magician’s craft.
The great nineteenth-century stage magician Robert-Houdin, who protested spiritualism as a fraud, once wrote that “The conjurer is not a juggler; he is an actor playing the part of a magician.” To which a spiritualist would reply, “The medium is not a juggler; he is a magician, who sometimes can only play the part.”

A devoted spiritualist who attended one of “Wizard” John Henry Anderson’s debunking shows at New York’s Winter Garden contrasted Anderson’s performance with that of a “genuine” medium:

His best performances are utterly insignificant, when compared with the spiritual phenomenon of the tangible spirit hand which is seen and felt in some of our circles. There is this remarkable difference also between the Wizard and the genuine medium. The Wizard is (1) a professed deceiver of the senses; (2) he knows all the means by which he deceives; (3) he knows beforehand all the phenomena which are to occur at an exhibition. But the Spiritual Medium professes (1) to accomplish nothing; (2) even in the case of the simple raps he does not know how they are produced; (3) at a given sitting, he does not know what specific phenomena may be expected. Our mediums do their best things unconsciously. The Wizard does his best things by studied art.

This, of course, assumes that the medium is truly “unconscious” of the effects that are produced.

Nevertheless, magician exposers of mediums sometimes joined with spiritualist exposers of mediums, whose object was to purge the ranks of the mediums, to separate out the real ones from the fraudulent ones. This motive sometimes led mediums who were also believing spiritualists to confess their own fraud.

Spiritualist exposers of fraudulent mediums tended to intervene directly into séances they suspected, grappling with materialized ghosts, turning on

---

18. This is also sometimes attributed to American stage magician Harry Blackstone, Sr. Perhaps it is significant that both Robert-Houdin and John Nevil Maskelyne began their careers as watchmakers, a sort of prototypical Enlightenment profession. They both relied heavily on stage effects accomplished through machinery.


20. See, for example, A. Medium, Revelations of a Spirit Medium; or, Spiritualistic Mysteries Exposed (St. Paul: Farrington and Company, 1891).
lights, and searching mediums’ luggage for paraphernalia. These were spiritualists who believed that true spiritualism was scientific (as opposed, so they believed, to other religions that depended on uncritical belief).21

Mediums, when confronted with evidence of fraud, sometimes claimed that they alternated between real powers and trickery, and justified this as a heuristic device, to bring materialist unbelievers to an existential crisis, to amplify their suspension of disbelief and pull them over the edge to belief, to show them a higher vision of the world. Some spirit mediums claimed that they cheated some of the time if they were pressured or expected to produce, or if surrounding psychic conditions, such as the presence of skeptics, rendered them powerless, or if their own health was poor, or if they were dealing with recalcitrant spirits who would not produce what was wanted. Such spirits could even materialize evidence that would indict mediums as fakes.22

At a time when fraudulent mediums were trying especially hard to protect themselves against being exposed, some spiritualists finally argued that any condition that provided a controlled test of the mediums’ powers would preclude the manifestation of those powers.23 But stage magicians, too, required that they keep control of their performances: They too relied on a gap between what the audience would say they saw and what they did see—that place where magic happens.

The magicians who exposed or replicated spiritualist phenomena were dependent on the mediums, fraudulent or not. It is rather unlikely that the magicians would have been able to find audiences for such shows unless spirit

21. The spiritualist editor of the Religio-Philosophical Journal, John Curtis Bundy, for example, was a leader in the spiritualist camp of those who endeavored to expose fraudulent mediums, whereas the editor of the Banner of Light, Luther Colby, was of the more credulous camp of spiritualist who did not wish to inflict spirit mediums with a “persecuting spirit.”

22. The medium Eusapia Palladino, for example, famously told Harry Houdini before he sat down to test her powers that she would cheat if she were allowed to. Mischievous spirits were sometimes blamed for “setting up” mediums who were exposed at materializing séances: such spirits were said to be able to instantly materialize incriminating lengths of gauze in the spirit cabinet, or, when a skeptical audience member managed to smear lampblack on the mouthpiece of a spirit trumpet, to materialize a ring of lampblack around the medium’s mouth.

23. An extreme statement of this line of reasoning is British spiritualist and editor William Harrison’s, “The Investigation of Spiritual Phenomena by Novices,” Spiritualist Newspaper, May 19, 1876, but spiritualists long protested that the presence of skeptics and doubters at a séance tended to dampen, if not altogether preclude, the production of mediumistic phenomena.
mediums had first excited the public. So the magicians, as much as they complained about spiritualism, were in some sense parasitic on it. P. T. Barnum wrote about *The Humbugs of the World*—among whom he did not include himself. No, he was an honest exposé of humbug, he said. He wrote, “I once travelled . . . in company with a magician. The first day in each town he astonished his auditors with his deceptions. He then announced that on the following day he would show how each trick was performed, and how every man might thus become his own magician. The exposé spoiled the legerdemain market, on that particular route, for several years.”

But Barnum was a supreme humbug. His entire fortune derived from humbugging the public, not from exposing humbugs. And if magicians succeeded only in exposure, in killing real magic, as they declared, what audience would remain after they’d emptied their audiences’ pockets on succeeding days?

It was not the case that borrowing or stealing secrets went only one way, as magicians claimed. Some spirit mediums invented effects that magicians studied and reproduced onstage. An example was the precipitation of paintings on a blank canvas, a scam that the fraudulent medium Ann Odelia Diss Debar first brought into public notoriety in New York City in 1886.

During her various trials for fraud, the prosecution fielded popular stage magicians to testify against her. These included Harry Kellar, who had begun his career as an assistant to the Davenports. Kellar gravitated toward complicated machinery for his own stage effects, so not surprisingly, his suggestions about how one might precipitate images onto a canvas were complicated and messy, involving chemical solutions, secret panels, and projection machines. It was not a very convincing explanation. Diss Debar certainly used a variety of methods, but most of them relied on simple legerdemain and misdirection.

Magician Alexander Herrmann, trying to capitalize on her notoriety, then


26. Kellar also worked with the Seybert Commission in sorting out spiritualist fraud, and confronted several famous mediums in exposés, including William Eglington and his slate writing. Spiritualist correspondents in the *Banner of Light* often wrote to the paper, asserting that they “exposed” his exposés, that is, that his purported duplications of mediums’ tricks did not in fact match the wonders that mediums could produce.

27. At an earlier trial of Diss Debar for fraudulent mediumship, the prosecution brought in stage magician Carl Hertz to testify.
Figure 3. Anna Odelia Diss Debar. From Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, April 21, 1888.
contracted with her to appear as part of his show, but her methods did not carry over well to a brightly lit, public venue. Nevertheless, the effect of precipitated paintings caught the public’s fancy. And it continued to be perfected and used by other spirit mediums, most infamously by the sister mediums Lizzie and May Bangs in Chicago. For a long time stage magicians could not figure out how they did it, but when the magicians did finally hit on the secret, an artful substitution of an already-painted canvas for a blank one, the effect appeared in the acts of magicians around the world.28

Stage magicians and spirit mediums were a family, even when they fought. And the fight continues today, after a fashion: Some stage magicians and mentalists still endanger their collegial fellowship with their professional fellows by performing as if they possessed real psychic powers and not admitting to their audiences that what they are seeing is a trick. Meanwhile, many of their magician colleagues continue to dedicate their time and treasure to debunking spirit mediums, and mages who exhibit psychic or paranormal powers.

28. Their technique was finally unraveled by magician David Phelps Abbot, and published in his pamphlet, The Spirit Portrait Mystery: Its Final Solution (Chicago: Open Court, 1913).
The question of truth versus fraud is an important one, but perhaps it is so important that it has had a blinding effect on historians. When we’re looking at spirit mediums and stage magicians battling it out over each group’s sins, it has tended to distract us from the interesting kinship they share, as if we’ve been misdirected, as a magician might do it.