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Beyond Svengali: Contemporary Stage Hypnosis Performance Techniques and Psychophysical Actor Training

Stage hypnotists are regularly booked in comedy clubs and on college campuses, as well as for private parties, schools, and corporate team-building activities. In this popular entertainment genre, hypnotists invite audience volunteers onstage, lead them through a procedure designed to induce hypnosis, and then guide them through a variety of performance activities. Many of these volunteers quickly and comfortably give extraordinarily uninhibited performances, singing, dancing, doing celebrity impressions, and participating in complex group improvisations. This paper explores the types of performance activities engaged in by volunteers, some similarities between the techniques stage hypnotists employ to evoke these performances and contemporary psychophysical actor training, and the possible implications that such similarities might suggest for actor training programs. Research data sources include stage hypnosis performances, interviews with volunteer performers, and training manuals for aspiring stage hypnotists. Cynthia D. Stroud teaches theatre and performance studies courses in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University. Her work has been published in Theatre Journal, Youth Theatre Journal, The Electronic Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and The Projector. Her primary research focus is the contemporary practice of stage hypnosis.

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In a packed comedy club, an unassuming middle-aged man was having a common nightmare: he opened his eyes and looked around a crowded room, only to realize he was naked. But in his case, he was not dreaming. He was on a stage and the audience was beginning to laugh. Slowly, surreptitiously, he reached for an empty chair, awkwardly using it to cover as much of himself as possible. But then he was told that he was not embarrassed to be naked in

public: in fact he was enjoying the attention, and he had never looked better than he did on that night. A grin spread over the man's face. He returned the chair to its place, leaned back, and stretched out to his full length. Placing his hands behind his head, he allowed himself to be admired, and the audience burst into laughter and applause. Then a hypnotist shouted "Sleep now!" and snapped his fingers, and the man's head dropped to his chest.¹

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Konstantin Stanislavski developed a system of actor training that still forms the basis of most western actor training programs today. In Declan Donnellan's introduction to Stanislavski's *An Actor's Work*, Donnellan writes that Stanislavski's "fundamental intuition was that acting is more than seeming to be real. Above all, he knew that acting and pretending are utterly different and that the distinction is both subtle and crucial."² But if acting is more than seeming to be real and different than pretending, how do we analyse a performance in which the participants are certainly performers but they are not quite acting or pretending, because some of them may believe that the situation *is* real? Such is the dilemma when hypnotised subjects are employed as performers. 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.³ Du Maurier introduced the world to the fictional hypnotist, Svengali, who has a mysterious influence over the novel's eponymous heroine: Trilby sings beautifully while under Svengali's spell, but can no longer perform after he dies. The character went on to appear in numerous plays and films, and the label "Svengali" has now become synonymous with someone who wields undue influence over a performer. But how does this century-old, fictional representation compare to contemporary stage hypnosis performance practices?

Today, stage hypnotists routinely coax extraordinarily uninhibited performances from audience volunteers. Some tour comedy clubs and college campuses, and others specialise in private bookings for parties, schools, or corporate team-building activities. The online *Worldwide Stage Hypnosis and Hypnotist Directory* currently lists over 400 hypnotists working in thirteen countries.⁴ It is probably not comprehensive, since it relies on self-reporting for inclusion, but even such an unscientific accounting suggests that a large number of performers are creating hypnosis-based shows.⁵ Many of their volunteer performers⁶ quickly and comfortably sing, dance, do celebrity impressions, and participate in complex group improvisations. This paper explores the types of performance activities engaged in by stage hypnosis volunteers, some similarities between the techniques stage hypnotists employ to evoke these performances and contemporary psychophysical actor training, and the possible implications that such similarities might suggest for actor training programs. Research data sources include stage hypnosis performances, interviews with volunteer performers, and training manuals for aspiring stage hypnotists.⁷

Given the diversity of venues, audiences, and styles, contemporary stage hypnosis 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 conventions are observable both in live shows 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 are similarly structured. Such performances usually begin with a solo performance section, during which the hypnotist familiarises the audience with the conventions of stage hypnosis performance and offers information and reassurances about the use of hypnosis for performance purposes. A section during which the hypnotist focuses on the volunteer performers then follows. First, interested audience members are invited to join the hypnotist on stage. Next, the hypnotist performs an induction procedure, designed to induce hypnosis in the volunteer performers. Finally, the hypnotist releases any volunteer performers that he or she deems unsuitable for the performance. During the final, and longest, portion of a stage hypnosis show, the hypnotist leads the volunteers through a series of performance routines which are usually comedic in nature and can often resemble improvised comedy scenarios.

Arguments about the nature of hypnosis can be quite contentious among hypnosis researchers. As *New York Times* science writer Sandra Blakeslee notes, there is

still disagreement about what exactly the hypnotic state is or, indeed, whether it is anything more than an effort to please the hypnotist or a natural form of extreme concentration where people become oblivious to their surroundings while lost in thought.⁸

While the issue of just what hypnosis is or is not remains unresolved and beyond the scope of this article, it is the results of the procedure which are of most interest to a study of hypnosis in performance. Behavioural neuroscientist Arne Dietrich notes that hypnotised 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.”⁹ While the language, subject matter, and tone of stage hypnosis performances may vary in accordance with different venues and audience demographics, most of the performance activities are rooted in a few of the phenomena identified by Dietrich: vivid imagery, positive and negative sensory hallucinations, amnesia, and the acceptance of distortions in logic and reality.

Like the actor’s process of character development, such hypnotic phenomena are necessarily internal and experiential. Outside observers can no more determine whether a stage hypnosis volunteer is experiencing sensory hallucinations than they can determine whether an actor’s tears are the result of a genuine emotional experience. Whether a performer is “really” hypnotised is no more knowable than whether a performer is “really” sad. In both cases, only the performers’ visible, external reactions are available to observers. Thus, in order to craft public performances based on internal phenomena, stage

hypnotists must select performance activities that capitalise on their volunteers' visible, external reactions to internal experiences. Because audience members see only the outward response, 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 chooses to perform as if he or she were. Despite their different internal experiences, the performances given by all three volunteers could appear quite similar. Thus, this discussion is limited to the ways in which stage hypnosis performance activities are designed to utilise basic hypnotic phenomena, with no implication that the effect of such activities on individual volunteers can be understood with any certainty.

During activities involving vivid imagery, a 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. In a 2010 performance, for example, stage hypnotist Dale K told his volunteers they had each won a red Ferrari, and were about to drive it for the first time.¹⁰ K gave the volunteers time to respond to the news that they had won this vehicle, and most expressed shock and delight by smiling, jumping up and down, and clapping. 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, pantomiming their selections of items such as seat belts, driving goggles, roll cages, and helmets, K continued to enrich the details of the visualisation. 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' imagined reactions to the new sports car, checking his or her appearance in the rear-view mirror, and openly flirting with the imagined attractive bystander.

Performance activities based on hallucination go beyond suggestions that require volunteers to 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 common suggestion based on a negative hallucination¹¹ is that the volunteers will see the hypnotist, members of the audience, or even themselves partially unclothed or nude. During a 2009 performance, hypnotist Flip Orley suggested to a group of mostly female volunteers that the back of his pants was missing, and 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.¹² Due to the internal nature of such cognitive responses, however, it is 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 another example, hypnotist Michael Brody wove a series of suggestions for positive hallucinations into a narrative to create an extended performance activity. Brody told his volunteers they had won a trip around the world beginning with a bus tour through the Alps. He 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 neighbours. Next, Brody suggested that the heater was now stuck on, the bus was getting hotter, and they were beginning to sweat. As he 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 responded by removing their shoes and scratching 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 favourite 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,¹³ auditory, and olfactory hallucinations.¹⁴

Performance activities involving amnesia often include suggestions for volunteers to forget basic information such as names, numbers, or even the reason they are on stage. In an interview, volunteer performer R. Nicole Hurtsellers recalled her confusion at forgetting basic information: "He made me forget the number seven, somehow, and I wish I knew exactly what 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 demonstrated, counting each of her fingers aloud, but omitting the number seven. By skipping directly from six to eight, she seemed to end her count with eleven fingers. She continued, "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." Counting her fingers again, she says, "Five, six, eight, nine. I just didn't understand how, suddenly, I had eleven fingers. It wasn't coming together for me."¹⁵ In an even more dramatic example of amnesia in performance, Brody told a volunteer named Kaylee that she would forget her name. When Brody asked the young woman her name a moment later, she looked utterly bewildered and 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 as her own. The resulting performance looked like a hypnotic version of the old "Who's on First?" routine.¹⁶

Finally, many stage hypnosis performance activities also incorporate suggestions that encourage acceptance of distortions in logic and reality, either alone or in combination with other types of suggestions. Much of the humour in such suggestions is derived from watching the volunteers' unquestioning acceptance of situations that seem patently absurd. When she volunteered for Dale K, Kristina Jones was told that she and another female volunteer were labour 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 humour in such a situation now, Jones related in an interview that she was surprised during the performance when audience members laughed, and when they came up afterward to tell her how funny it was. She explained 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."¹⁷ This lack of awareness would seem to suggest that she accepted the distortion in logic and reality during the performance.

Without question, the activities performed by stage hypnosis volunteers 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, or incorporate distortions in logic and reality while playing roles. In 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 other actors holding plastic guns are threatening their lives, and to play out deeply private moments of emotional upheaval in front of audiences that may include hundreds of people. Acting teachers and directors can often help inexperienced actors deliver powerful and convincing performances when given enough rehearsal time. What is 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, volunteers often give deeply committed and convincing performances. For example, volunteer performer Chelsea Talbott revealed in an interview that she wept openly during a performance when a hypnotist told her she had hit a dog with her car.¹⁸ There is something truly fascinating about the ways in which stage hypnosis performances can sometimes blur the lines between “make believe” and “make belief.”

The results that hypnotists sometimes achieve naturally lead some observers to question whether their volunteers are actually untrained amateurs, or whether hypnotists might be using pre-selected performers. While allowing for individual differences among hypnotists, the question about the use of “plants” or trained volunteers seems to have been resolved in recent decades. This practice was not unusual as recently as the mid-twentieth century, but the use of plants in the audience or other kinds of trained subjects appears to have markedly declined in the latter half of the twentieth century. William Meeker and Theodore Barber 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 the modern hypnosis show.¹⁹ Thus, it would appear that most stage hypnotists are not intentionally using trained performers and that the volunteers are truly that: people from the audience who may or may not have any previous experience on stage. Their presumed inexperience makes their remarkably uninhibited performances that much more unexpected.

While the results achieved by all stage hypnotists are not uniformly remarkable, their techniques are ripe for exploration because when a skilled hypnotist interacts with enthusiastic volunteers, the results can be impressive. In an intriguing example, Orley led his volunteers in a group improvisation involving a talk show interview. While explaining the scenario, Orley modeled an American Southern accent, explaining that all of the volunteers would use this accent during their “interview.” By the time they performed, the volunteers’ accents were far more consistent than one might expect from a group of amateurs.²⁰ Orley achieved in a matter of minutes what an acting teacher or director might spend weeks or even months working on. Although his shortcut appeared to be merely imitative, it was tantalizingly effective, and leads to questions about whether the effect might linger, or if, as with Svengali’s effect on Trilby, it would vanish with the hypnotist’s exit.

The beginnings of an explanation for such successful performances may come through a comparison between techniques practiced by stage hypnotists and those practiced in many psychophysical actor training programs. Sharon Marie Carnicke writes that “The history of twentieth-century actor training can be seen as a series of explorations, inspired by Stanislavsky’s guide, and each probing a different pathway into the actor’s unique creativity as a performer.”²¹ With so many contemporary Western actor training programs taking their inspiration from Stanislavski’s System, the hallmarks are ubiquitous. A wholly

informal survey of ten introductory acting texts revealed numerous commonalities, such as physical relaxation, creating a “circle of attention” onstage, and providing concrete goals and obstacles for performers.²² Of these ten textbooks, seven had whole sections or chapters on the importance of relaxation and the release of tension and two others had at least some exercises in deep breathing and progressive relaxation. Three had chapters detailing how to create circles of attention or a state of public solitude onstage, and six others contained some exercises to help actors achieve a sense of onstage focus. Eight addressed goals and obstacles, either directly, or using other, similar terminology. The process of hypnosis induction used by many stage hypnotists contains parallels to the aforementioned actor training techniques.

The first of these techniques, relaxation and the release of tension, is often treated as a foundation on which all other actor training techniques are built. For example, in his book, *The Actor in You*, Robert Benedetti calls tension “the greatest enemy of the creative state.”²³ To combat this enemy, he offers several exercises aimed at helping the actor “let go” of chronic physical tension, of mental stress and fear, and of the mistaken idea that extraordinary effort is needed to produce an extraordinary performance.²⁴ Similarly, nearly all stage hypnosis induction scripts include suggestions for relaxation. The process aligns with the American Psychological Association’s (APA) description of hypnotic inductions in general, because “most include suggestions for relaxation, calmness, and well-being.”²⁵ Geoffrey Ronning, founder of a training school for stage hypnotists, explains the importance of relaxation 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.”²⁶ A sample induction script included in hypnotist Ormond McGill’s book sounds much like progressive relaxation exercises used in many acting classes: “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 . . .” This process continues throughout the body to the feet.²⁷ In a 2011 performance, stage hypnotist The Sandman utilised 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, The Sandman still included relaxation. After the volunteers fell forward in their chairs, he touched and massaged their necks and shoulders, which allowed them to more fully release these muscles and thus to drop forward even further in their chairs.²⁸

Further, as is common in actor training, many hypnotists seem to help their volunteers create a “circle of attention” by removing their focus from the audience and placing it on the stage. In *The Actor, Image, and Action*, Rhonda Blair notes that “*Attention*, in formal neuroscientific terms, means something quite specific: it is what allows the organism to prioritize and engage elements in

its environment, sorting through stimuli and focusing on what might affect it positively or negatively.”²⁹ She links this idea with Stanislavski’s *circle of attention*, in that attention allows the actor to expand and contract his or her area of focus in order to concentrate on an event or object of significance to the character. In the case of stage hypnotism, the volunteer is encouraged to sort through incoming stimuli and focus quite specifically on the directions given by the hypnotist, while disregarding other, distracting stimuli. Hypnotist Will Power demonstrated this technique in a performance when he 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.³⁰ Similarly, Orley gave the hypnotic suggestion that although his volunteers would be able to hear laughter and applause, they would not respond or be upset by this, and that such noises would only serve to relax them more deeply.³¹ In this way, the hypnotist can filter out distractions, helping amateur performers feel more comfortable on stage and less self-conscious by keeping their focus on the stage, the hypnotist, and the hypnotist’s suggestions.

Compelling drama is rooted in conflict. In another similarity with many actor training methods, stage hypnotists stress the importance of giving their volunteers clear goals and obstacles in order to create dramatic conflict. In his book, *Acting One*, Robert Cohen explains the importance of goals and obstacles for the actor: “There is one fundamental principle in acting. It’s that the actor must always play toward a goal . . . The actor acts by pursuing—often vigorously—the presumed goal of the character.”³² Furthermore, in order for the pursuit of the goal to be sufficiently interesting—for the actor and the audience—it must be difficult to achieve. Thus, the goal must be pursued in the context of an obstacle.³³ In a statement that directly connects stage hypnosis with this aspect of acting, Ronning notes that:

like all good theater, you need to continually put your subjects into conflict situations. That is the core of all drama, resolving conflict . . . I mean overcoming some challenge, anything from your mouth is dry to a single fly is driving you crazy.”³⁴

McGill recommends choosing activities at which the volunteers would really want to succeed, such as a screen test for a movie role, because “this provides strong basic motivation to act out with enthusiasm.”³⁵ In performance, Orley provided an example by setting up a fictional quiz show with a strong goal: a cash prize. He then gave his volunteers a large obstacle: the hypnotic suggestion that they were unable to remember their own names, and, of course, “What is your name?” was the prize-winning question.³⁶ It was both amusing and disquieting to watch as volunteer after volunteer could not answer the question despite their best efforts.

One additional stage hypnosis technique bears examination. In addition to the techniques already mentioned, which appear to imitate some features of psychophysical actor training, stage hypnotists appear to manipulate their

volunteers' expectations, by removing fear of failure or embarrassment and instilling the belief that they can succeed at any performative task suggested, no matter how unusual or remote from their prior experiences. For example, 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."³⁷ 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."³⁸ 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 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."³⁹

If these techniques are successful, by the time the stage hypnotist has completed the hypnotic induction, he or she has created a calm, relaxed, focused group of performers who are comfortable performing in front of strangers. They are no longer concerned about the audience members watching them from the darkened auditorium, which Stanislavski described as "the black hole."⁴⁰ They also believe that they will be able to perform, because they have been told that hypnosis will free them to do so. Then the hypnotist simply releases any volunteers from the stage who have not fully accepted these suggestions and the performance begins in earnest. Most startling, the hypnotist can accomplish this in around ten minutes of hypnosis induction rather than weeks or months of acting classes. However, while the identification of some intersections between stage hypnosis techniques and psychophysical actor training programs is easy, identifying the significance of these similarities is somewhat more difficult. What does it mean to discover that stage hypnotists and psychophysical acting teachers employ some of the same techniques? Why are the techniques employed by stage hypnotists so fast-acting? Might these techniques have implications for the kinds of pedagogies employed in the acting classroom?

The single most obvious difference between stage hypnosis techniques and actor training is, of course, the presence or absence of hypnosis. Actors do not undergo a hypnotic induction and thus they are presumed to have full control of their faculties, regardless of any coincidental similarities in technique. However, research suggests that many of the effects demonstrated during stage hypnosis can be achieved without the use of hypnosis at all. For example, some researchers argue that performances generated by stage hypnotists might be explained by the selection of highly compliant volunteers, the social pressure inherent in the stage setting, and occasional trickery, rather than by the effects of hypnosis.⁴¹ Many stage hypnosis guidebooks advise that occasionally some volunteers will not become hypnotised but will simulate the effects in order to participate, and that their desire to simulate well often makes them excellent performers.⁴² Additionally, like students who enroll in an actor training program,

stage hypnotists' volunteers are self-selected, and may be more likely to be willing and enthusiastic performers. Thus, if hypnosis is not necessarily required to obtain the same performance effects, then it seems reasonable to ask whether any stage hypnosis techniques could or should be transferable to the acting classroom.

While it might seem simplistic, stage hypnotists' use of positive reinforcement, in order to assure volunteers of their ability to perform, bears closer examination. This notion that what a person is told could make large changes in how he or she thinks and feels is borne out by research. For example, Meeker and Barber note that "Stage hypnotists have long been aware that the induction of 'hypnotic trance' is not necessary to elicit a high level of responsiveness to suggestions from a substantial number of Ss [subjects] and from a very large number of volunteers."⁴³ Hypnotist Harry Arons agrees that a "hypnotic 'trance' is not needed to perform a hypnotic demonstration,"⁴⁴ and McGill asserts that "hypnotic effects can be accomplished in the waking state without benefit of formal hypnosis."⁴⁵ A formal hypnotic induction may not be necessary to achieve hypnotic effects, because waking suggestions—suggestions given to people who are not hypnotised—can be surprisingly effective in altering perception and behaviour. In other words, although it sounds counterintuitive, simply telling people that something is true often makes it true for them. In studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, researchers discovered that many people accept waking suggestions, especially when those suggestions come from a perceived authority figure or expert.⁴⁶ These studies were conducted with college students who had not undergone a hypnotic induction, but nevertheless, after being told that they could not do so, about half of the students were unable to unclasp their hands, while about a quarter could not get up from their chairs or remember their names.⁴⁷ A somewhat lower, but still statistically significant, percentage of subjects also responded to other suggestions, such as visual and auditory hallucinations, analgesia, and heightened strength and endurance.⁴⁸

While such studies refer to "waking suggestions" to describe suggestions given to subjects who are not hypnotised, it is likely that many hypnotists and even some hypnosis researchers would question where to draw the already-blurry line between "waking" and "hypnosis." Hypnosis researcher Tim Bayne states that "Hypnotic subjects report perceiving things that are not there, they report not perceiving things that are there, and they report unusual alterations in the phenomenology of agency."⁴⁹ Those students who had not undergone a hypnosis induction would appear to be experiencing exactly the kinds of changes described in hypnotic subjects by Bayne. Even the APA's own definition simply describes hypnosis as a procedure during which it is suggested that a subject experience "changes in sensations, perceptions, thoughts, or behavior."⁵⁰ By this broad definition, those students who had been told that they would be unable to unclasp their hands or would be unable to remember their names *were* experiencing something like hypnosis, despite the fact that the researchers had not performed any induction procedure and had not told the students that they would be hypnotised. A researcher had suggested that subjects would experience

changes in sensations, perceptions, thoughts, or behaviour, and the subjects accepted those suggestions. It is extremely interesting, if somewhat disquieting to learn that a researcher simply telling a college student that something is or is not possible could make that true for the student. However, this suggests that stage hypnotists' use of positive reinforcement to assure volunteers of their ability to perform might be equally effective in the acting classroom, so long as teachers and directors remain mindful of the persuasive power of such waking suggestions and apply them responsibly.

While the powerful effects of positive reinforcement could be helpful with student actors, it seems doubtful that other stage hypnosis techniques could prove equally applicable. In fact, despite the speed with which they work, a good argument against using stage hypnosis techniques can be found in the performances themselves. While the results seem impressive on first examination, a closer look reveals that their range may be limited. For example, although hypnotists often have great success in quickly making volunteer performers feel comfortable and open to performing, comfort and receptivity do not necessarily ensure a skilled performance. 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."⁵¹

A scenario described earlier provides an interesting example of the potential limitations of stage hypnosis techniques. Orley's volunteers quickly reproduced an American Southern accent that he modeled for them, and began using it much more consistently and uniformly than might be expected from a group of amateurs. However, when he requested more complex challenges that would require less imitation and more creativity and improvisational skill, the results were less impressive. For example, Orley told one volunteer that aliens had implanted a language chip in his brain that would cause him to speak in their unknown, alien language, but the volunteer was unable to comply. The volunteer attempted a few random syllables, seemed confused, and eventually gave up.⁵² Although gibberish exercises are common in acting classrooms, they take practice to master. The discrepancy between the volunteers' quick reproduction of the Southern accent and the failure of this suggestion encouraging glossolalia seems to represent the difference between imitation and creative generation. Through hypnosis, Orley produced extremely adept imitators, but the volunteers displayed markedly different levels of improvisational skill and basic performance ability. This difference may well correspond to the subtle but crucial difference that Stanislavski identified between acting and pretending.

The difference between imitation and creative generation may also point to the most significant implication of the identified similarities between stage hypnosis techniques and psychophysical actor training. Given the fluid and contentious nature of current neuroscientific research on hypnosis, it is not yet possible to know the applicability of hypnosis to what is happening in the performer's brain, but if stage hypnotists produce performers who are more

likely to passively accept suggestions than to creatively engage in the performance, any similarities should be examined carefully. It is easy to see how some of the hypnotists' techniques are similar to actor training, but a bit thornier to ask whether actor training is ever like hypnosis. However, acting teachers suggest that actors experience "changes in sensations, perceptions, thoughts, or behaviour"⁵³ all the time in acting classes. Given the "as if . . ." nature of so many acting exercises, further analysis of this response seems warranted, and, in fact, some acting textbook authors already seem cognisant of this link. For example, in *Acting One* Robert Cohen states that: "Rather simple (and private) imagination exercises can help an actor probe his or her unconscious, inducing a 'daydream' state where emotions, memories, and longings commingle just below the surface. These exercises in self-exploration are akin to hypnosis and meditation—both of which are often used by actors to attain what Stanislavsky . . . called the 'creative mood.'"⁵⁴

While such exercises are undoubtedly useful in actor training, when an accepted authority figure leads those exercises, a hypnotic induction may not be required in order to generate the kind of passive belief and compliance associated with hypnosis. Acting students are often eager to learn from experts in their craft and this can raise the acting teacher to exalted status in their eyes. Even well-intentioned teachers can be flattered by this kind of attention and encourage it. It would be unfortunate if innate response to an authority figure caused acting teachers to inadvertently assume the role of Svengali, issuing commands to passively accepting students. While a guru-style acting teacher might produce an impressive performance product in the short run, he or she might create dependent actors, rather than nurturing creative, independent performers. After all, the performance effects generated by the original Svengali lasted only as long as he remained in constant contact with his protégée.

¹ Will Power, stage hypnotist, "Will Power's Comedy Hypnosis Show," Funny Bone Comedy Club, Perrysburg, Ohio, July 15, 2009.

² Declan Donnellan, Introduction, Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), x.

³ George Du Maurier, *Trilby* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894).

⁴ "Worldwide Stage Hypnosis and Hypnotist Directory," *Joedevitohypnotist.com*, accessed July 1, 2013, <http://www.joedevitohypnotist.com/joes-favorite-links.html>

⁵ For the purposes of this paper, the term *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. Similarly, the term *stage hypnotist* will refer to the person who both identifies him- or herself as a hypnotist and creates a performance that includes hypnosis as a component.

⁶ For the purposes of this paper, the terms *volunteer performers* and *stage hypnosis volunteers* will refer to those people who agree to participate as performers in shows that include hypnosis as a component.

⁷ Much of this data was compiled as part of the author's dissertation research, which included attendance at twelve hypnosis shows, interviews with six hypnotists and twelve volunteer performers, examination of nine guidebooks written for aspiring hypnotists, and the author's own volunteer performance experience.

⁸ Sandra Blakeslee, "3, 2, 1: This is Your Brain under Hypnosis," *New York Times*, November 22, 2005, accessed July 27, 2009,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/22/science/22hypno.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

⁹ Arne Dietrich, "Functional Neuroanatomy of Altered States of Consciousness: The Transient Hypofrontality Hypothesis," *Consciousness and Cognition* 12 (2003): 244.

¹⁰ Dale K, stage hypnotist, "Dale K Hypnosis," Bowling Green State University Lenhart Grand Ballroom, Bowling Green, Ohio, August 21, 2010.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Flip Orley, stage hypnotist, Connxions Comedy Club, Toledo, Ohio, January 22, 2009.

¹³ 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 to pain, temperature, and body position as well.

¹⁴ Michael Brody, stage hypnotist, Evergreen High School, Metamora, Ohio, October 10, 2011.

¹⁵ R. Nicole Hurtsellers, interview by the author, November 29, 2011.

¹⁶ Michael Brody, stage hypnotist, Whiteford High School After-Prom, Ottawa Lake, Michigan, May 8, 2011.

¹⁷ Kristina Jones, interview by the author, October 20, 2011.

¹⁸ Chelsea Talbott, interview by the author, October 25, 2011.

¹⁹ William B. Meeker and Theodore X. Barber, "Toward an Explanation of Stage Hypnotism," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 77.1 (1971): 66.

²⁰ Orley, stage hypnotist. Connxions Comedy Club, Toledo, Ohio, January 22, 2009.

²¹ Sharon Marie Carnicke, "Stanislavsky's System: Pathways for the Actor," in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2000), 33.

²² The following ten acting texts were chosen for examination for the sole reason that they were offered as perusal copies by their respective publishers to the author while teaching college acting courses. Thus, they seemed likely to be easily accessible and in common usage in actor training programs:

Robert Barton, *Acting: Onstage and Off*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003).

Robert Benedetti, *The Actor at Work*, 9th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2005).

Robert Benedetti, *The Actor in You: Sixteen Simple Steps to Understanding the Art of Acting*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2008).

Robert Cohen, *Acting One*, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

Carlton Colyer, *The Art of Acting* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether, 1990).

Jack Frakes, *Acting for Life: A Textbook on Acting* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether, 2005).

Stanley Kahan, *Introduction to Acting*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998).

Paul Kassel, *Acting: An Introduction to the Art and Craft of Playing* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2007).

Charles McGaw, Kenneth L. Stilson, and Larry D. Clark, *Acting is Believing*, 10th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2009).

Bruce J. Miller, *The Actor as Storyteller: An Introduction to Acting* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 2000).

²³ Benedetti, *The Actor in You*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 33-39.

²⁵ Irving Kirsch, "APA Definition and Description of Hypnosis: Defining Hypnosis for the Public," *Contemporary Hypnosis* 11.3 (1994): 143.

²⁶ Geoffrey Ronning, *The Ronning Guide to Modern Stage Hypnosis* (Phoenix: Westward, 2008), 106.

²⁷ Ormond McGill, *The New Encyclopedia of Stage Hypnotism* (Bethel, CT: Crown House, 2008), 336.

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- ²⁸ The Sandman, stage hypnotist, "The Sandman: Magic of the Mind," Funny Bone Comedy Club, Perrysburg, Ohio, October 8, 2011.
- ²⁹ Rhonda Blair, *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience* (London: Routledge, 2008), 61, italics in original.
- ³⁰ Will Power, stage hypnotist, "Will Power's Comedy Hypnosis Show," Funny Bone Comedy Club, Perrysburg, Ohio, August 19, 2009.
- ³¹ Orley, stage hypnotist. Connxions Comedy Club, Toledo, Ohio, January 22, 2009.
- ³² Cohen, *Acting One*, 22.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 22-23.
- ³⁴ Ronning, *Ronning Guide*, 148.
- ³⁵ McGill, *New Encyclopedia*, 405.
- ³⁶ Orley, stage hypnotist. Connxions Comedy Club, Toledo, Ohio, January 22, 2009.
- ³⁷ McGill, *New Encyclopedia*, 343.
- ³⁸ Ronning, *Ronning Guide*, 133.
- ³⁹ Dale K, "Q & K," *Dale K: Seriously Funny Hypnosis Shows, 2007*, accessed August 26, 2009, <http://www.dalek.com/qandk.php>.
- ⁴⁰ Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 87.
- ⁴¹ Meeker and Barber, "Toward an Explanation," 61.
- ⁴² For examples of such advice, see Jonathon Chase, *Deeper and Deeper: Secrets of Stage Hypnosis* (St. Louis: Corley, 2006), 152-5, and McGill, *New Encyclopedia*, 294.
- ⁴³ Meeker and Barber, "Toward an Explanation," 62.
- ⁴⁴ Harry Arons, *How to Routine an Ethical Hypnotic Lecture-Demonstration* (Irvington, NJ: Power, 1961), 10.
- ⁴⁵ McGill, *New Encyclopedia*, 51.
- ⁴⁶ For examples, see: M. L. Andersen and Theodore R. Sarbin, "Base Rate Expectancies and Motoric Alterations in Hypnosis," *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 12 (1964): 147-58; Theodore X. Barber, "Measuring 'Hypnotic-Like' Suggestibility with and without 'Hypnotic Induction,'" *Psychological Reports* 16 (1965): 809-44; Theodore X. Barber, *LSD, Marihuana, Yoga, and Hypnosis* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970); André M. Weitzenhoffer and B. M. Sjoberg, "Suggestibility with and without 'Induction of Hypnosis,'" *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 132 (1961): 204-20.
- ⁴⁷ Barber, "Measuring 'Hypnotic-Like' Suggestibility."
- ⁴⁸ Barber, *LSD, Marihuana, Yoga, and Hypnosis*.
- ⁴⁹ Tim Bayne, "Hypnosis and the Unity of Consciousness," *Hypnosis and Conscious States: The Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective*, ed. Graham Jamieson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 93.
- ⁵⁰ Kirsch, "APA Definition," 143.
- ⁵¹ Ronning, *Ronning Guide*, 129.
- ⁵² Orley, stage hypnotist. Connxions Comedy Club, Toledo, Ohio, January 22, 2009.
- ⁵³ Kirsch, "APA Definition," 143.
- ⁵⁴ Cohen, *Acting One*, 160.