You’re listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I’m Eric Molinsky.

I recently went to a séance. I had never been to a séance before. In fact, I wasn’t even interested in going to séances until I heard about Jason Suran and his show The Other Side.

Jason is a mentalist by trade, which means he does mind reading tricks. I saw him do a few online. Like I saw a video where he put an audience member into a trance, told him to close his eyes. Then Jason asked the guy to tap every part of his body that Jason touched, except Jason wasn’t touching him. He was touching someone else five feet away. But the guy in the trance reacted as if it was his shoulder or his nose being touched.

I knew that his show, The Other Side, was going to be full of mentalist tricks, but it would also be a recreation of an early 20th century séance. I found that really intriguing because I think séances go right to the question, why do we suspend our disbelief?

I wasn’t allowed to record the show, so I’ll describe what happened without giving too much away.

The show takes place at The Norwood Club in Manhattan, which is a stately home that’s been turned into a membership club with dining and events. Our group was lead down to the basement, into a room that covered with black curtains, candles, and old photographs on a fireplace. There was even a gramophone playing wax records.

Jason is a young guy. He’s very dapper and friendly. And he knows how to charm a crowd. Jason set the mood as he talked about the history of séances. And he did mentalist tricks that mediums used to do back in the 1920s. I found them all pretty astounding.

At one point, we were asked us to write down the name of a loved one we wanted to contact, and put those cards in envelopes. I didn’t have to think twice about who to write down. It was my grandmother. We were very close. She was an artist who worked in a bold, modernist, abstract style. I have her artwork all over my apartment.
We gathered the envelopes into a basket. Jason picked them at random. Without opening them, he guessed who the cards were about. And the details were well beyond anything anyone had written down about their loved ones. It was astounding.

I actually really disappointed he didn’t pick my card -- even though I knew he couldn't talk to the dead. He made it very clear that these were nothing but tricks, but they were really convincing tricks.

At the end, the candles went out and the show got scary. Things literally went bump in the night. Someone screamed in our group.

A few days later, I met up with Jason a few days later at the Norwood Club. And I asked him why he wanted to be so clear that can’t talk to the dead before making us believe that he could.

JASON: For me, it's two fold. The first part is that that's actually kind of exactly what I wanted you to take away, that anybody could be susceptible to this. That you don't have to be, you don't have to be a believer, you don't have to be gullible. These, these séances worked for a reason. These tricks worked for a reason because they prey on something that is fundamental to the human condition. We're all vulnerable to this and we are all capable of buying what these folks were selling.

Yeah. I mean, it made me think a lot about the loved one that I wanted you. Like I told you, I was a little bummed that you didn't pick my, I'm, I don't know how, how purposeful that was or how random that was in terms of picking the envelopes. But I, you know, it was like I wanted you, I wanted you to say this person's name, I wanted these details to come out. Like I was almost like to get the illusion that I could talk to them, even though I knew it wasn't real.

JASON: Right. Because we want, we want to share. And because deep down, and especially if we don't believe in the afterlife, I think we know that sharing our memories of those people may be our only way of connecting with them and maybe our only way of keeping them alive. And so I think, yeah, there's a huge desire when you walk into the room to have me get it right. And that's a huge part of my advantage is that whether or not you're a skeptic on some level, you're on my side, on some level, you want me to win. If I don't, you're alone. You're alone with that memory. You're alone with those thoughts. And I think there's a desire to connect.
Well, in today’s episode, we’re going to look at an art form that’s largely forgotten. But there was a time when the biggest craze in America was talking to spirits – at least until the most famous magician of all time decided to make it his mission to break up the party.

That is after the break.

BREAK

To understand how Jason developed his show, we have to look at the history of séances in America.

It all started as a prank. In 1848, Maggie and Leah Fox were 11 and 15 years old, living in upstate New York. They came up with a system of pulleys and strings to make it seem like objects were going bump in the night. We don’t know if their mother really thought the girls were communicating with the dead, or if she thought she could make a lot of money off them. Either way, she took the girls on the road and their séances were a sensation. They even teamed up with PT Barnum for a while.

This was the start of a very American brand of spiritualism that was indistinguishable from show business. Mediums like the Fox sisters were celebrities.

But when they became adults, the sisters had a falling out. Maggie did a newspaper interview where she came clean about their tricks. Fans of her sister Leah refused to believe Maggie. The backlash was so swift – not to mention the loss of income for Maggie -- she denounced herself; claiming that evil spirits made her do the interview, and she went back to the séance business.

But Jason doesn’t see the Fox sisters or other mediums as being just charlatans. As a fellow performer, he has sympathy for them.

JASON: You have to wonder if you were in some of these people's circumstances and all of a sudden a career path presented itself that was going to give you money, security, adulation, notoriety. What would you do? They put food on the table for a lot of people who came from backgrounds where there weren't a whole lot of other options career wise. Um, for a lot of the women who did it, it was an opportunity to perform in a capacity that they never would have
been allowed to otherwise. You know, there weren't a tremendous amount of female magicians, but in overwhelming, uh, portion of the mediums were females and they were getting away with saying things and doing things and subverting cultural mores, you know, in the Victorian era.

The public’s fascination with séances came in waves that corresponded with traumatic events. The first big wave came after the Civil War. And the second wave came after World War I and the Spanish Influenza, which left millions of people grieving – which made them vulnerable to wishing there was some way to contact their loved ones.

Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of Sherlock Holmes, was a strong believer in séances. Also his son had been killed in World War I.

David Jaher (Jere) wrote a book called The Witch of Lime Street about the history of séances. He says you can’t underestimate how much Arthur Conan Doyle legitimized séances.

DAVID: You know, Conan Doyle is known as being this detective author, but he was also one of the great public speakers of his day. Um, and he was incredibly popular in America. He was beloved. He was trusted people imbued with him with the same credibility they would Sherlock Holmes. So when he became interested in, in spiritualism, when he became interested in séance phenomena, people really began to take it seriously.

You know who else took it seriously? The magazine Scientific American. They published a lot of articles about séances, but they didn’t denounce them. They tried to keep an open mind. Jason says we have to remember:

JASON: It’s this moment in human advancement where science is just well understood enough that anything seems possible but not so well understood that we know what’s not possible.

Photography, so many people at the beginning thought you could see spirits and photography when it was just sort of like, you know, photographic tricks or errors

JASON: And the telephone and radio. I mean, imagine being one of the first people to hear from a neighbor that there's this new technology that lets your voice travel thousands of miles instantaneously. You know? I mean, I don't think it was such a big jump from even a scientific point of view to think, sure, maybe there is some other force or energy that persists after death.
But words like “maybe” weren’t good enough for Arthur Conan Doyle. When he was touring America, he walked into the offices of Scientific American in New York and demanded that they stop reporting on séances as if there are two sides to this debate because he was completely convinced that mediums could talk to the dead. Although David says:

DAVID: The Scientific American responded in a way that horrified Conan Doyle. They told them, okay, we’re going to conduct our own investigation, but we’re going to do it in the guise of a contest and the 1920s, you know, contests were incredible rage. So what they did was they sponsored this, this prize contest. They’re offering more money than was offered for the Nobel Prize in science to any psychic medium who could manifest genuine psychic phenomena before a committee of some of the top scientists in the United States.

Conan Doyle may have thought the contest was crass, but he got on board quickly. In fact, he enlisted his favorite candidate – a woman that he was certain would win the contest: Margery Crandon.

Crandon was a high society woman in Boston who held séances at her home in the posh neighborhood of Beacon Hill. Allegedly, ghosts would ring bells and move objects around the room. She also channeled the voice of her dead brother, which people said was super creepy and convincing.

Similar to the Fox sisters, Marjorie Crandon used male chauvinism to her advantage. Men would ask, how could a proper Bostonian woman pull off magic tricks that would fool scientists, and have rough language coming out of her mouth? Clearly the spirits must be manipulating her!

DAVID: I mean the, the term for psychics in Victorian times they called them sensitives. And it was felt that women were more receptive and have that kind of psychic receptivity. They were more likely to have supernatural powers. Again, this is taken from, you know, medieval times and even classical times. But so it was believed that women, um, manifested ectoplasm, which is sort of the precursor, what ghosts, how ghosts are formed through the orifices of their body.

By the way, if the word ectoplasm sounds like Ghostbusters – that’s not a coincidence. Dan Aykroyd’s great grandfather was a medium during this time.
In the '20s, scientists developed methods to prove that mediums like Marjorie Crandon were emitting ectoplasm without any trickery.

DAVID: They would be put in these spirit cabinets because it was believed they needed privacy to form their ectoplasm. And if you've ever seen a spirit cabinet, their arms and legs are sticking out and people are holding their arms and legs to make sure there are no shenanigans going on, that they're not in some way cheating. A woman would, would have to be strip searched to make sure they weren't storing any fake ectoplasm in the orifices of their body. This would go on, this went on before Marjorie's séances. She would be strip-searched. Um, she would perform séances in her Kimono -- very often she wasn't wearing any underwear. So here she is sitting in these séances, you know, with these middle-aged professors and scientists and she was a very attractive woman and incredibly charismatic.

But there was one expert who vowed he would not fall for her charms: Harry Houdini.

Houdini started out as a believer. He was very close to his mother. After she died, he went tons of séances trying to contact her. That's how he became friends with Arthur Conan Doyle, who introduced Houdini to the mediums in London.

DAVID: And Conan Doyle believed that he was indoctrinating Houdini and to the movement because he thought Houdini himself had genuine supernatural powers and he thought Houdini was going to become this figure who wound up, um, substantiating spiritualism is substantiating supernatural phenomena through his own demonstrations of it.

But Houdini saw through their tricks, and he felt betrayed. So he dedicated the rest of his life to proving that mediums were fakes. And of course he'd do it with his usual theatrics. He’d show up at a séance in disguise, then rip off a false beard and yelling, “I am Houdini, and you are a fraud!”

Arthur Conan Doyle was furious, which may be one of the reasons why doubled down in trying to get scientific evidence of séances.
When historians write about this period, Houdini is usually depicted as a hero, stopping con artists from exploiting people who were grieving. But Jason is not as sympathetic.

JASON: You know, I think he was deeply committed to the, to the pursuit of, of truth. But he was also a very vindictive guy. Yeah. Houdini gets his name from Robert-Houdin who you know was this famous French magician that Houdini just loved and admired and respected. And at some point in Houdini's life, he finds out that Robert Houdin's autobiography is all bullshit, which like if you've read Robert Houdin's biography is so obviously bullshit. It's, you know, he, he, him being abducted as a child by you know, a secret tribe and given his magical path, like autobiographies by most people were bullshit. Cause he couldn't fact check on me back then. And magicians were just a whole other league, but Houdini gets so, you know, upset at finding out his hero's full of shit that he writes his own, uh, basically his own book on Robert-Houdin, but he basically eviscerates his own hero because he's so wounded by this revelation.

And now Houdini had his sights on Marjorie Crandon -- the most supposedly authentic medium in America. And as she was acing her way through that contest from Scientific American, winning over all the experts, on her way to collecting the grand prize. But there was one more judge on that panel she had to convince. Houdini.

David Jaher says their showdown was a media sensation.

DAVID: When Houdini confronts Marjorie, it's almost like a modern representation of this classic kind of conflict or confrontation between a sorceress and a potent male. I mean, you have this in myth, you have, um, a sorceress like, um, Circe. Odysseus confronts her and it's the test of, of male sort of moral rectitude and physical power versus, uh, females supernatural power. And then you have it with King Arthur, um, and Morgan the Fe, you know, Morgan, the Fe steals his sword and essentially emasculates them. And that's exactly what, uh, what Circe does to Odysseus's men, she enchants them. She turns them into swine. So what Houdini believed was that Marjorie had this mythic kind of seductive power and that she had seduced all these scientists who declared her genuine and he declared himself, you know, the first man who was not going to be seduced by her.
Crandon welcomed the challenge. And Houdini learned, he may have met his match. He kept coming up with ways to trip her. Like at one point, he put her in one of those spirit cabinets that immobilized her limbs.

DAVID: And he, but he vowed that once he put her in inside this spirit cabinet, she wouldn't be able to manifest any phenomena. The séance had gone on for just a few minutes when the whole top of the cabinet just spontaneously burst apart. So Houdini, I wouldn't say that he believed that she was doing these things by supernatural means, but he a lot of explaining to do because he had filed that, you know, nothing was going to happen when she was in this cabinet. And, and things did happen.

Eventually he was able to reproduce most of her feats on his own. But he couldn’t explain all of them, which infuriated him. Still, he refused to grant her the prize.

Her fans -- her stans doubled down in their support denouncing Houdini as fake news. In the end, what did her in is what took down a lot of mediums. They had to keep topping themselves to impress their believers. After a while, she ran of luck. One of her tricks become way too apparent, even to her supporters. And that was the end of her career.

But by the 1930s, the public had lost interest in mediums. David says that’s partly because Houdini had died from a blow to the stomach by a man that hated Houdini’s anti-miracle crusade. So spiritualism, as the movement was called back then, had lost its famous arch nemesis.

DAVID: Houdini brought spiritualism such recognition in such attention because he was so popular and because this crusade he was on to discredit it, brought the movement even more attention. But in a sense, she and Houdini really destroy each other.

There are still plenty of mediums today, but they usually just stick to cold readings on talk shows, as if the bright lights of a TV studio are supposed to make them seem authentic. The theatrics of early 20th century séances are now considered hokey and fake.

DAVID: Now, my own theory has a lot to do with the fact that spirituals and was very popular in the radio age, but when you move more to a visual age, now
you’re moving into the era of more of moving pictures. Could spirituals phenomena, you know, really stand the scrutiny of cameras and a visual age?

That’s exactly what Jason Suran wanted to find out with his show *The Other Side*.

The basic history of séances is available for anyone to read, but the story behind those tricks are closely guarded secrets. Jason had to learn from old pros.

I asked him how mediums were able to pull off tricks like asking someone to write down the name of loved one who died on a chalkboard, and then pulling out another chalkboard with the same name already written on it.

JASON: However the hell they can get away with it. *(Laughs)*

JASON: But that's the truth, right? Like, I think the best mentalists and the best psychics and mediums and performers of, of any kind of, uh, mind reading or the people who've practiced every skill in the, in the book and, and sort of have all the tools at their disposal for any given moment, right? There is no one way to get there, right? There were mediums who would get to town early and you know, research every single person in their audience. There were mediums who learned to read people's writing by the sound shock would make on a like a chalkboard slate. You know, they'd give you a chalkboard and say, write down that name. And they could tell from the chalk sounds there were people who were just fabulously good cold readers who just knew how to zero in on the thing you wanted to hear and tell it to you.

Although in developing his show, Jason also learned a lot just through trial and error.

JASON: The thing I found fascinating was that it was often the, the smallest effects that had the biggest impact. I remember in one of the very first runs that we did of this, you know, there's a moment in the show where, um, an object is borrowed from the audience and it's sort of, um, uh, behaves on its own and then, and move some of its own accord. *I know it well. That was my object.*

JASON: Yes. And then there's a second moment in the show, much later where the lights are out and all hell breaks loose. And I overheard after the show in the first year that we did at a woman talking to her friend and she goes, when, when,
when all hell broke loose. I knew that that was just a trick, but I'm pretty, when that object moved earlier in the show, that was my dad.

**Woah!**

JASON: And you know, I had the wind knocked out of me. I had no idea how to even, she didn't, she wasn't talking to me. So I, I, but you know, the desire to like rush over to her and be like, no, it wasn't. Because I don't want someone to walk away feeling like I really communicated with their dead loved ones. I want them to walk away understanding, understanding how people could believe that. But I don't want someone to walk away believing that cause then they might, they might actually go to somebody who could take advantage of them. It was such an educational moment because it illustrated how sensitive you have to be to what people are coming in with, to the expectation. I have a much better understanding now of my audience's expectations than I did when I first started.

**Is there anyone that you wish that you could contact?**

JASON: Absolutely. Um, my, I was just thinking about this today, actually. My aunt passed away, um, this summer and she helped raise me. She, uh, so, you know, we were very, very close and she didn't have kids of her own. So my, my sister and I were her babies, you know, for all intents and purposes and I wasted so much time towards the end, especially, she was sick and you just don't, no matter how, no matter what I think you'll look back and go, I could have called more. And I was lucky enough that I got to Chicago before she passed. And we knew that and it was sort of a matter of time kind of thing and I remember just spending all of that time telling her things, I wanted her to know. And yeah, if somebody told me that I could still say those things now and she could hear me, I know for a fact I'd want to believe.

**Hmm. Yeah, I know. That's powerful. I could see that. Yeah. I mean, did, did, going back to do the show after that, did, did it make you approach the show differently?**

JASON: Completely

**Really?**

JASON: Yeah, because when I wrote it, when I was, I mean, the first version of this show, I was, Oh God, I was 23, maybe 20. Yeah, 23 and I'm 28 now. And I was lucky enough when I was 23 that nobody really close to me had died. And so the show's evolved a lot as that situation has changed and I've become a lot more acquainted with personal loss and, and, and what it means to grieve. You are touching a live nerve ending and you are very possibly exploiting people's grief for the purposes of entertainment, which is a gross thing to do fundamentally. To me the show is not about spooky, spooky Halloween time. You know, to me the show is fundamentally about why we believe the things we do and why, why this particular art form captured the public imagination and why
people went to these things. And I think it was impossible, or at least I found that it was impossible to talk about that without being willing to give people the experience of, of being in the real thing.

As Jason and I were leaving the club and he were about to part ways on the street, I told him that my assistant producer Stephanie had gone to the show with me, and the experience inspired me to tell her about how my grandmother. We talked about how she was an artist, and how I think of her every time I look at her paintings, except it feels like a one-sided conversation. But it was nice to tell Stephanie about my grandmother. It was a bonding moment for us.

Jason said that’s exactly what he wanted me to get from the show – to realize we don’t need a medium to talk the dead. All we need to do is talk about the dead, by sharing our memories with the living. It’s a simple trick, but it can make them feel alive again.

That’s it for this week. Special thanks to David Jaher (Jere) and Jason Suran. During the interview, I asked Jason if anything ever happened in his show that surprised him.

JASON: We had someone pee all over a chair once that they got so frightened that they, uh, they, they peed their chair. That was unexpected.

Wow.

JASON: That was recently actually.

Really?! Wow. Did that make you feel powerful or afraid of how power, how much power you add as a entertainer

JASON: More than anything, it made me feel, uh, it made me feel nervous for what it was going to cost to get share fixed, cleaned. (Laughs)

Jason’s show The Other Side is running through October at the Norwood Club in New York. I have links to it, and David Jaher’s book in the show notes.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show’s website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.
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