

Mesmer, Freud, The Amazing Polgar – and Pay-Per-Views

The Contribution of Hypnotism to the Art and Science of Contemporary Professional Wrestling



Sidney H. Reiss - Hypnotist (c. 1949)

By David M. Reiss, M.D

It was mesmerizing as a pre-teenager, sitting on the couch with my father, watching the flickering images on the black-and-white PhilCo television, Channel 9 (there only were 5 channels). Most of the names don't come back to me, but I vividly recall my father, Sidney H. Reiss, pointing out Antonino Rocca, Gorilla Monsoon, Bobo Brazil, Haystack Calhoun, among the many other Wrestlers. What might now be called "bonding time", just my Dad and I, usually on my mother's "Mah Jong" nights out...

My father, a Social Worker by formal occupation, and previously an amateur boxer and wrestler, knew much more about mesmerization – he had also been a Stage Hypnotist. Which leads to my writing this piece: finding unexpected connections between myself, my father, Mesmer, Freud, Dr. Jerry Graham, Killer Kowalski, The Amazing Polgar, Jim Barnett, Chris Jericho, and my career as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist; providing a bit of history starting from the 18th Century; leading to techniques pertinent to 21st Century Professional Wrestling.

German-born Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) believed that there was a physical magnetic fluid interconnecting every element of the universe, including human bodies, and that human disease resulted from a "disequilibrium" of this fluid within the body. Curing illness was accomplished by a physician employing "animal magnetism" to re-stabilize the fluid of life. In Mesmer's footsteps, Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825), began to experiment with "magnetic healing," but eventually recognized that it was not "magnetism", but the special rapport between the doctor and the patient which led to an altered state of consciousness. The original works of Freud involved theories which had their beginnings in the ideas of Puységur and Mesmer.

The study of hypnosis was hardly confined to medical or psychiatric treatment. The art of inducing a hypnotic trance became popularized: stage hypnotism was born as a form of entertainment, the concepts derived from hypnotism were employed as a way to influence an audience; and hypnotism was developed as a technique for improving athletic or stage performance. Most pertinent to Professional Wrestling is the manner of adapting hypnotic techniques to engage in an unusually personal relationship with the wrestling fan; even if from a distance, or via television.



*Sidney Reiss, hypnotizing troops.
Hollywood Canteen, c. 1943*

My father was a stage hypnotist during the 1940's, and during World War II. He served in the entertainment squadron, his Stage Hypnosis performances helping to distract troops from their pain, fear and grief. After his military service, my father decided not to go on the road, but became a colleague of "The Amazing Polgar". Dr. Franz Polgar (1900–1979), known as a psychologist, hypnotist, lecturer and entertainer, who recounted having been born in Enying, Hungary and having earned a doctorate in psychology from the University of Budapest. In his 1951 autobiography Polgar even claimed that he had

served as Freud's "medical hypnotist" in 1924 and had worked in close association with Freud for six months, assisting in the treatment of Freud's patients. However, it is reported that "In 1982, Gravitz and Gerton investigated this claim and determined that it had no foundation" – there are some who have questioned exactly how much of Polgar's history was "a work", all part of his stage persona.

For quite some years, even after I was born (although before I can remember), my father would "scout" shows of other stage hypnotists performing in the New York City area, and then work with Polgar to refine his act. Polgar's "calling card" trick was that he would never allow a promoter to pay him directly – but he never left a performance without his paycheck. Polgar would instruct the promoter to hide the check somewhere in the auditorium, in the presence of the audience, out of sight of Polgar. Franz would then instruct the audience to remain silent, choose an audience member seemingly at random (usually a striking young woman), and holding her hand, walk through the auditorium and locate his night's pay – while listening for subtle rumblings among the audience, watching the eyes and facial expressions of the woman he selected, and surreptitiously constantly taking her pulse as they "held hands." I personally had the opportunity to see Polgar in 1976, seven years after my father had died and when Polgar himself was already over 75 years old – and sure enough, Franz did not leave the performance empty handed. And as soon as he found the check – his first major "stunt" after a few opening hypnotic "tricks" – he owned the audience.

Yet it is more than just a simple analogy between Polgar's winning over an audience and having them suspend disbelief in response to his performances of hypnotism and "mentalism", and the ability of a Wrestler to induce fans to suspend disbelief and engender "pop" and "heat." Polgar

was the first hypnotist to have a television show. As explained on his IMDb (Internet Movie Database) page, "Running just ten minutes on Friday evenings, this program, hosted by expert hypnotist Dr. (of psychology) Franz Polgar, looked into the mysterious world of the human mind, and gave viewers a brief glimpse of what kind of potential might be waiting inside. Each episode dealt with a different phenomenon, such as the ability to remember events from long ago, the ability to ignore pain, and the ability of the hypnotist to suggest things to the subject that would be believed absolutely..."

I have been told that according to Bobby Shane, Franz Polgar and Jim Barnett came to be acquaintances. James E. Barnett (1924 – 2004) was a professional wrestling promoter, one of the promoters of Australia's World Championship Wrestling and the former owner of Georgia Championship Wrestling. Evidently intrigued by Polgar's use of the then new medium of Television, Jim had Polgar share with him some of the skills of entrancing not only the "subjects" on stage, but the television audience – techniques which Barnett then integrated into his Wrestling promotions.

The connections between Wrestling and Wrestlers and hypnotism grew deeper. As quoted by Tom Hicks, "One of the most difficult and complex people to grace the world at large, and not just wrestling, would be Dr. Jerry Graham... As I believe Red Bastein put it, 'If you hear a story about Dr. Jerry Graham... it's true.' A complex man who had great intelligence, was supposedly a real life Ph.D. and was a master of hypnosis as well. He often entertained wrestlers



*Sidney Reiss, amateur wrestler, in action teaching students.
c. 1935*

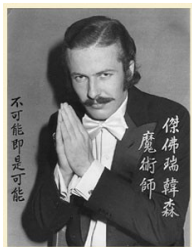
in the locker room with demonstrations of his [hypnotic] talents." As described by Gary Howard in, "The Rassler from Renfrew", "Dr. Jerry Graham was another fan favorite with a good pre-match hook, for the doctor, in addition to being an accomplished wrestler, was a hypnotist. He would demonstrate his skill to audience volunteers who would be asked to do ridiculous things. One fan would eat a lemon thinking it was an apple and then refuse to eat an apple thinking it was a lemon. Some shed clothing in the belief that it was too hot, and then searched frantically for clothes when told that it was too cold. It wasn't unusual to see a young man racing around the ring with a broom between his legs in the belief that the object was a horse. Dr. Jerry Graham was not alone in the industry to have a direct interest in hypnosis. Dr. Lee Grable and Chief Kit Fox were said to be students of the art. Dr. Timothy Geohagen, master of the sleeper hold, was also a hypnotist, yoga teacher and practitioner of astrology and holistic medicine. Mario Galento, was known to employ hypnotic techniques, and as per IMDb, "...was a professional wrestler from the 1950s thru the 1980s. Well known to all was his propensity to make fans nearly riot over his 'bad guy' image..." Greg Oliver and Steven Johnson wrote of Galento in "The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame", "he had a unique hold on people... 'Frankie Cain said, 'He had that down-home philosophy that people believed... He had a great personality. No one had one just like it.'"

Galento was so known for his mic work that he was also in two movies in 1956 and 1960. As it is not uncommon for the actual life of a Wrestler to incorporate markedly different pursuits than their ring persona might indicate, as described in his August 31, 2008 obituary in the New York Times, "Walter (Killer) Kowalski [was] one of professional wrestling's biggest stars and most hated villains when wrestlers offered a nightly menu of mayhem in the early years of television. He had hoped to become an electrical engineer... Beyond the ring, Kowalski displayed a gentle and even aesthetic side. He became a vegetarian in the mid-1950s, pursued charitable work for children with special needs and delighted in photographing fellow wrestlers." And Killer Kowalski was also a student of hypnotism.

The idea that the "Golden Age" of Wrestling and Stage Hypnotism are only in the past is far from true. Today, in the age of Indie promotions, massive television audiences for the national promotions, and world-wide Pay-Per-View spectaculars, it remains just as important for a Wrestler to mesmerize the audience, to induce a suspension of disbelief, to trigger an intensely personal emotional reaction – whether from across the high school gymnasium or from across the world. The basic rules of inducing hypnotic trance remain the same, and I challenge the reader to closely watch the Masters among us today, to carefully observe the actions of, for instance Chris Jericho, without seeing the same hypnotic techniques employed (techniques I am personally familiar with, as some are selectively employed to a certain extent by experienced psychotherapists): gain the emotional attention of the audience immediately, through facial expression, movement, gestures; speak using terms that carefully enjoin the audience to imagine a future event that may subtly defy "normal" expectations; move from one emotional strike to the next, leaving no room to retreat to distracting every-day thoughts and concerns; reinforce suggestions by using repetitive phrases, motions or gestures; use facial expressions so that those you are speaking to are motivated not to look away; maintain a tone of voice and cadence that is rhythmic, reassuring and soothing – even when the content may be serious, confrontational, or even surly and hostile; consistently hold the focus of attention to the chosen thoughts and emotions; and when the talking stops in the squared circle, manipulate the action, evolve the "story", employ pantomime, so that the ring and the athletes in the ring, at least for a moment in time, are truly perceived as the Center of the Universe.

Written in honor of the Centennial of the birth of Sidney H. Reiss,
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