The Electric Wizard

The Amazing Story of Dr. Walford Bodie

All that follows is true…

Dr. Walford Bodie, The Electric Wizard of the North, was the most famous stage hypnotist who ever lived. No hypnotist has ever come close to achieving his fame or fortune. A household name in his day, he was for a short time the world's highest paid entertainer. Eccentric, eclectic, electric… This is the amazing story of his life.

Samuel Murphy Bodie was born in Aberdeen on 11th June 1869, the son of William Bodie, a travelling baker when the Victorian Age was in full swing; Britain's Empire flourished, Queen Victoria reigned happy and glorious, William Ewart Gladstone resided in number 10 Downing Street and the Cutty Sark was launched in Dumbarton. The Suez Canal was opened linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, providing a short cut for trade to India and the Far East. England's first residential university women's college, the predecessor of Girton College, Cambridge, was inaugurated.

In America, Ulysses S. Grant was elected 18th president of the United States and the outlaw Jesse James committed his first bank robbery. Henry Morton Stanley was dispatched by the New York Herald to search for Dr. Livingstone in Africa and Leo Tolstoy finally published his epic novel War and Peace.

By the time Samuel Murphy Bodie reached the age of ten, he was already accomplished in sleight of hand magic and often put on magic shows at his school – he performed a short ventriloquism act and seemed predestined for a life on the stage. His other hobby was debunking fraudulent spiritualists by demonstrating how 'voices' were really coming from behind the curtain! Good for him!

Barely in his teens, Samuel Murphy Bodie left school just after his fourteenth birthday and started work for the National Telephone Company. He was fascinated by the new technology and his enthusiasm ensured that in 1884 he was put in charge of the National Telephone Company's stand at the Aberdeen Industry and Art Exhibition, demonstrating the new wonder of the age.

His ambitious nature soon became apparent when he decided to upgrade his social standing by changing his name to the more impressive sounding Walford Bodie. The Walford came from *Walford's List* of the rich and famous of the day. In fact young Samuel Bodie would develop a taste for titles and letters, both before and after his name. Given his later calling, it is reasonable to assume Bodie realised the value of the first impression, part of the hypnotist's stock in trade! Bodie obviously guessed that fame and fortune would go hand in hand.

Having got Annie Gray, his 16 year old cousin, pregnant, Bodie decided in 1885 it might be prudent to lie low for a while and so he enlisted in the First Volunteer Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders where he successfully completed one year's military service. In July 1886 he was honourably discharged and returned to work for the National Telephone Company. He had briefly considered becoming a man of the cloth (the irony!) but that was almost certainly only a fleeting idea and by the time Bodie left the army, he had matured into a tall, handsome, devilishly attractive young man with a shock of dark hair and a strong square jaw.

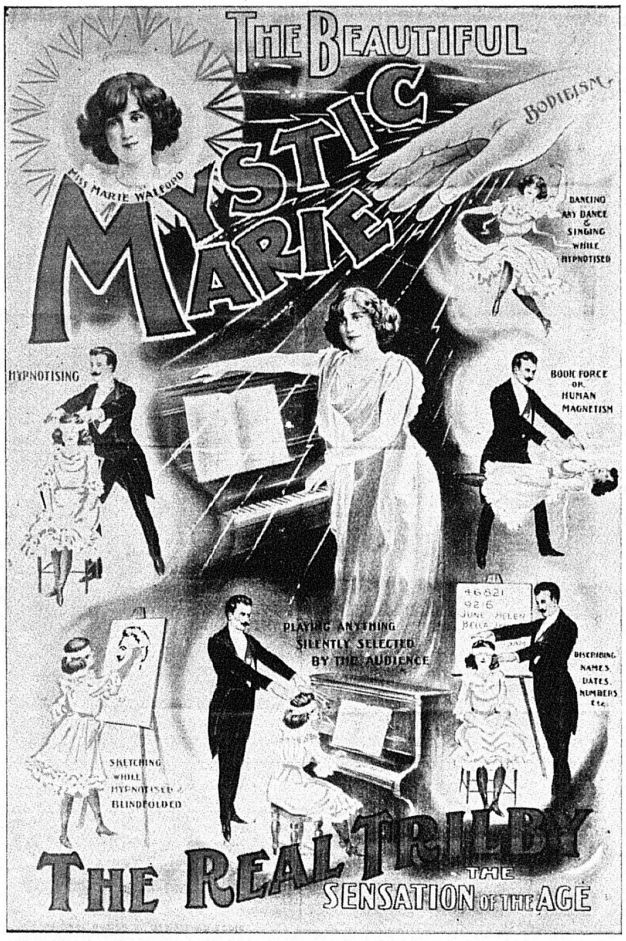
In 1887, he performed his magic show in the small community theatre in Banff and it was there that he met Jeannie Henry and instantly fell in love. Bodie's relationship with Jeannie Henry was as near a fairytale romance as you can get, although they hardly got to spend any time together because Bodie was so often 'on the road' with his magic show. Nonetheless, on April 28th 1888 they were married in Aberdeen.

Despite the difficulties and pressures caused by the frequent and lengthy absences that are part and parcel of a life in show business, it was a match made in heaven. Jeannie Henry would have understood better than any – she was also part of a show business family consisting of eight daughters and three sons, all of whom were talented in their own right. Eventually Jeannie and several of her sisters would join *The Bodie Show* bringing with them their musical and magical talents.

Before long, Walford Bodie attached the prefix ‘Dr.’ to his name, a practice common in the late Victorian era and one to which a blind eye was turned, in much the same way the title ‘Professor’ was adopted by Punch & Judy showmen. Jeannie and three of her sisters toured with her dashing new husband and *The Bodie Show* began to take shape. There was no doubt, even in these early years, that Bodie had been blessed with a charismatic personality – his appearance was striking, and his outrageous moustache a unique and instantly recognisable trademark. But in the main, it was his penetrating eyes that attracted the attention.

Right: Miss Jeannie Henry, later Mrs. Walford Bodie

On the stage, Jeannie became Princess Jeannie and her sister Helen, Princess Rubie. Marie took the role of *Mystic Marie*, performing a clairvoyant act combined with a little fortune telling! This set up was typical of the travelling shows of the time, each performer bringing their own unique talent to the table, providing audiences with a variety of piano playing, dancing, popular songs, ventriloquism and magic.



A Bodie Play-bill.
(DESIGNED BY DR. BODIE.)

Mrs. Walford Bodie.

It was not long before Jeannie fell pregnant and went into confinement, so Bodie, still touring, wasted no time in impregnating Helen, who had taken her sisters place in the show. Surprisingly, this turn of events, rather than splitting the family, brought the sisters

closer! Both Bodie's children would eventually join *The Bodie Show*, which toured with a horse drawn wagon, carrying not only the performers, but all the props and accoutrements. And so the show went on, playing the towns and cities of Scotland with occasional forays south of the border where the company was equally well received.

In 1894, electricity arrived in Aberdeen and Bodie was immediately intrigued by its possibilities. He already had a keen interest in science and his experience working for the National Telephone Company meant that he understood the complexities of wiring and more important, the difference between volts and amps! In 1890, the Americans had invented the most technologically advanced apparatus, specifically designed to ensure criminals refrained from any kind of reoffending – the electric chair. Bodie became equally fascinated by this invention and set about finding a way of obtaining one, or perhaps building one, for display in *The Bodie Show*. This story is absolutely true by the way!

He knew audiences would also be fascinated by this macabre instrument of death, so he came up with the idea of demonstrating its lethality by electrocuting his most lovely assistant, the lovely Isabella Henry, another of Jeannie's sisters. Isabella Henry would henceforth be known as *La Belle Electra*.

Using his knowledge of electricity and changing the charge to volts and not amps, Bodie was able to produce a mock electrocution, complete with sparks and lightning effects. And to add to the fun, following the dramatic display, members of the audience, usually young men, were invited onto the stage to try it out for themselves – at which point, Bodie made some minor adjustments and gave the unsuspecting volunteer a real jolt of electricity, much to the audience's delight and amusement. The 'victim' would tremble, turn blue, become lethargic, and 'fry' but without (hopefully) actually dying. On the occasions where volunteers were stunned into unconsciousness, Bodie would revive them by administering two or three (or four or five) hearty slaps to the face. Try getting this one past Health and Safely today!

The inclusion of the Electric Chair was an immediate sensation and audiences thronged to see *The Bodie Show*. In order to dispel the concerns of the righteous, Bodie explained to the awestruck audience that the reason he was including the segment was to show his distaste for the barbarity of the American invention (although hanging both men and women was still common practice in Britain at the time.)

By 1891, Bodie started to include a short demonstration of hypnotism into his stage show, as well as conversational ventriloquism. Jeannie Bodie became the world's first female illusionist, but it is Bodie's hypnosis act that was the real crowd puller. Volunteers grunted like pigs, flapped like birds, barked like dogs. In the interval, male volunteers hopped around the theatre on one leg and it is said that during a performance in North Wales, a hopping subject escaped from the theatre and was arrested by the local constable because he wouldn't stop hopping when told to do so! In 1901 Bodie produced a spectacular ventriloquism set piece featuring dolls which were uncanny in their resemblance to the entire [Boer] War Cabinet. The segment was met with great enthusiasm and was the *Spitting Image* of its day.

Throughout this period, the Henry sisters – singing, playing the piano, performing illusions – acted as supporting attractions. These were much simpler times – the days when you could sell out a theatre by making use of the services of the Town Crier (the forerunner of tweeting?) and people flocked to *The Bodie Show* from far and wide, and most especially in his native Scotland where he began to be achieve the status of local hero.

By 1891 the company had outgrown the horse and cart and was travelling more and more frequently by train. When *The Bodie Show* arrived in Thurso in the Scottish Highlands, they discovered to their shock that the whole town was in mourning over the tragic deaths of some local fishermen, lost at sea. Bodie donated the entire week's takings to the families.

Again in 1891, Bodie introduced a spectacular illusion where Jeannie would appear in a burst of flames and then vanish again into thin air. Audiences were stunned. The word of mouth must have spread like wildfire!

Without doubt, Bodie had a keen eye for publicity – and he was the inventor of a stunt that would be copied many times by others over the next one hundred years. He would hypnotise a subject and leave them sleeping in a coffin in a shop window for the whole week the show was running! This feat, carried out for the first time in Aberdeen, demonstrates Bodie's original thinking and genius! As his fame and reputation spread through the country, he was soon feted as *'The Most Remarkable Man on Earth,'* and *'The World's Greatest Showman,'* which by this time, in the last decade of the Victorian era (the same time Gilbert & Sullivan were at their most popular) he almost certainly was! I would love to have met him…

Over the next few years, as the show toured the length and breadth of Britain, Bodie's fame and thus his fortune increased. *The Bodie Show* was more than just novel, it was unique in that its content was literally shocking. Audiences had never seen anything like it before. I think Bodie had managed to create a perfect combination of drama, illusion, horror, hypnotism (something that was hardly seen at the time) and audiences were awestruck.

In 1894, George Du Maurier's scandalous book *Svengali* had been published and was proving a sensation. Genteel ladies covertly read it in drawing rooms and gentlemen pretended to be appalled and outraged by the story. It was almost entirely due to Du Maurier's *Svengali* that the public perception of hypnosis was from that moment changed forever. In the book, the evil controlling and sinister Svengali exercised total control over the helpless young and beautiful Trilby. The book was doubly shocking because of its sexual undertones…. and the public secretly lapped it up.

Svengali hypnotising Trilby – from an original engraving.

In 1897 Jeannie was again confined forcing Bodie to look for a new leading lady. He was introduced by his manager to Lil Clifford who was not only strikingly beautiful, but as luck would have it, also an excellent hypnotic subject who could go into deep hypnosis very quickly. Bodie saw the potential of using Lil for the shop window stunt that had proved so successful in Aberdeen. It was the right decision – the publicity attracted the crowds in their tens of thousands.

But now Bodie was determined to cash in on the Svengali phenomenon and introduced a Svengali segment into the show. This new melodramatic spectacle was an immediate crowd-puller. Audiences watched in stunned amazement as Bodie hypnotised the beautiful Lil – they gasped as Lil swooned into unconsciousness, as the tall, handsome Bodie caught her in his arms and issued commands. Lil would later marry Bodie's brother, John.

With the introduction of the Electric Chair however, Bodie started to fall foul of the press. Was this really entertainment? [of course it was!] If so, was it appropriate to present

something so macabre in theatres where there were sensitive women and children present? Bodie was steadfast in his defence of his own act. He understood a lot about human nature – of course people were thrilled by depravity – people loved to be teased and tormented – better still, they loved to see it happen to others and the more heartless and brutal, the more they would enjoy it. I'm not entirely sure of the accuracy of the quote that has been traditionally attributed to Bodie, but if it is, he had it right. *"I've got a living to make, to put it plainly; there's more money in shocking and terrifying than in edifying."*

The first man in the United States to have been executed in the electric chair was William Kemmler. Some reports of the execution stated that it took Kemmler several minutes to die and that his body began to smoke and even caught fire. And it was precisely that sort of thing that would draw the crowds! Ironically, in the midst of the controversy, which I suspect was stoked by Bodie, it was one of England's most famous hangmen who came to his rescue. Quite unexpectedly, during a performance, James Billington announced his presence in the audience and introduced himself. Bodie, he said, was quite right to decry the barbarity of this method of execution! Strapped to the electric chair, the soon to be deceased suffered, whereas the split second efficiency of the hangman's noose offered the victim an instant oblivion.

Billington was to become a useful ally and a firm friend. In the meantime, Bodie, ever the showman, invited Billington up onto the stage to try the chair for himself, promising that he would only give Billington *"half the charge."* In riposte, Billington cordially invited Bodie to take part in one of his hanging demonstrations, promising to drop him only half the distance! Billington, it has to be said, was a strange character, whose hobby was engaging in hand to claw and jaw combat with dangerous dogs, and he had the scars to prove it.

As for the genuine volunteers who came forward on a nightly basis to be electrocuted, their lips turned blue, their hair stood on end, they went into spasm and eventually lapsed into unconsciousness. And after Bodie brought them round by administering several hard slaps, one is left even more astonished at what you could get away with in those days!

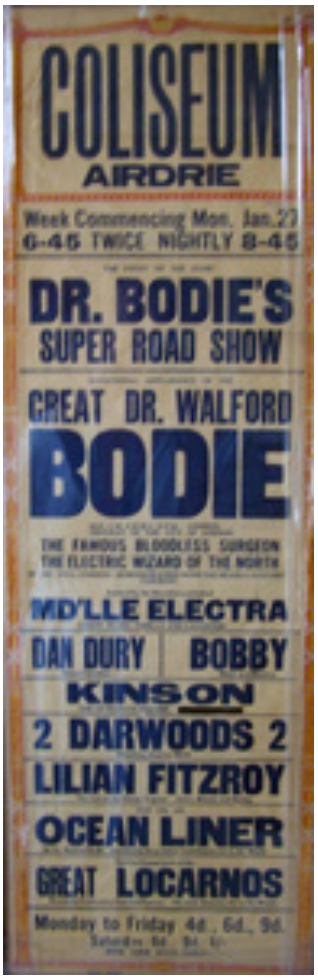
The next addition to the show would be the purchase of a Roentgen X-Ray machine – the very latest in scientific wonderment! This, Bodie was sure, would take the theatre by storm, and of course he was right again! The bright light of the machine showed audiences the inner workings of the human body in all its skeletal detail. To appreciate the effect this had on audiences, one must remember that no one had ever seen anything like it before. Theatres were still illuminated by gaslight and the sparks from the electric chair and the powerful light of the X-ray machine must have been truly wondrous to behold.

The other addition to *The Bodie Show,* in 1897, was the (as yet unknown) Scottish crooner, Harry Lauder, who went on to achieve worldwide fame in his own right. Bodie paid Lauder £4.10s a week.

But the mainstay of *The Bodie Show* was without doubt Isabella, *La Belle Electra*. It was Isabella who submitted to the electric chair before young male volunteers from the audience were invited to give it a try – when the electricity was turned on for real! Then, Bodie would reappear on the stage in cloak and top hat, while *La Belle Electra* attached electrical wires to his body, finally pulling down a great lever to switch on the current. Ever the showman, Bodie played the part of the Electric Wizard to its full effect. Thousands of volts of electricity shot through his body, blue flames engulfed him (the result of harmless static electricity) and those volunteers standing close to him would find their hair standing on end (again, the effect of static.) A courting couple would be invited to join hands with Bodie and attempt to kiss – and then the sparks really began to fly! The audience

marvelled at the spectacle, and Bodie, unsurprisingly, sold out every theatre in every town. The electric chair routine had developed into a full-blown set piece.

One of the qualities Bodie possessed in abundance was unlimited energy. Whilst at the Dundee Zoo, he had stepped into a cage of four ferocious hyenas, claiming to be able to hypnotise them. He later did the same in a den of wolves, and he writes in *The Bodie Book* about hypnotising animals.



In 1898, whilst in the middle of a run at the Birmingham Circus, a gentleman, later diagnosed as being mentally ill dashed onto the stage and attempted to murder Bodie in front of an audience of hundreds of people. The man threw a bottle of explosive chemicals onto the stage, but luckily they didn't ignite. Bodie however, was cut quite badly and was rushed to hospital. The man was arrested and banished to a lunatic asylum.

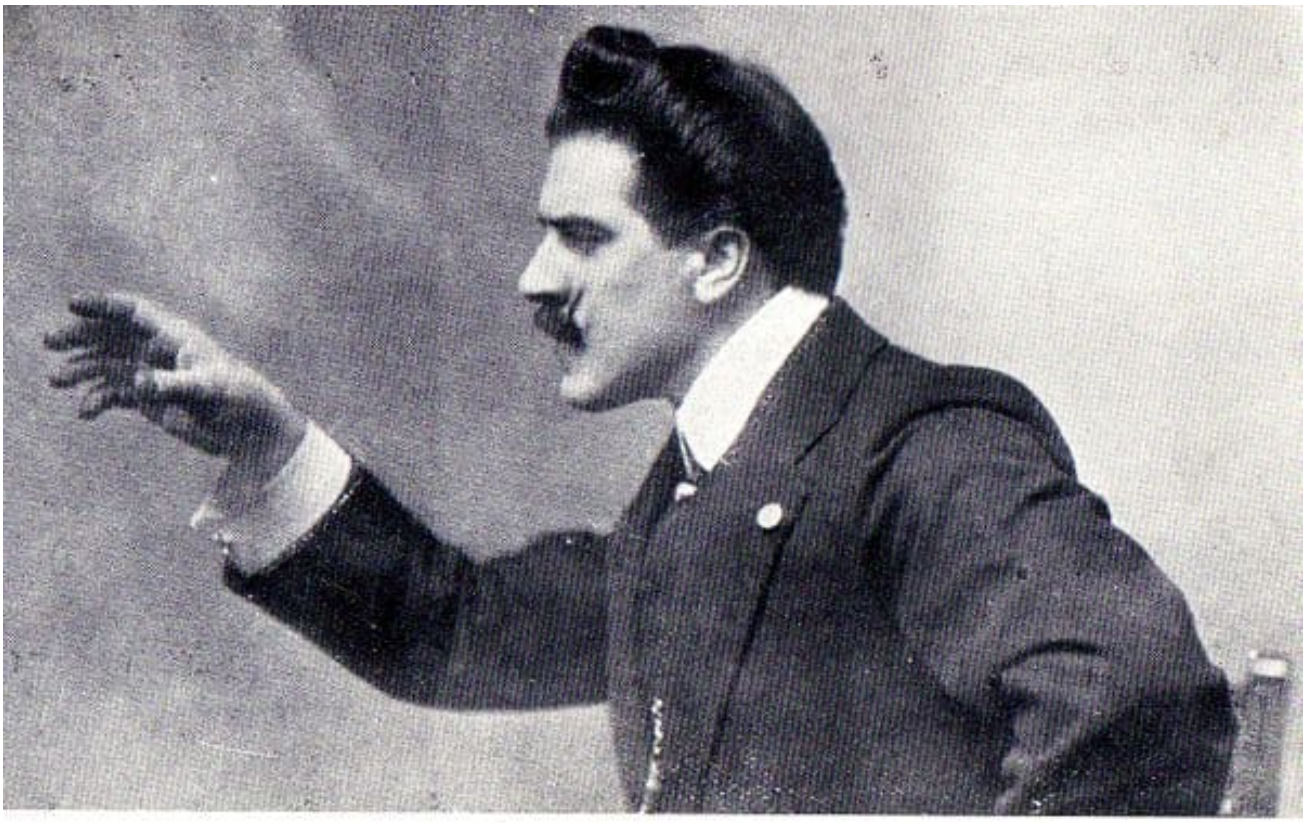
Also in 1898, Bodie delivered a lecture to members of the medical profession in London where, in typical Bodie style, he berated them for their lack of belief in hypnotism as a valid medical cure.

By the turn of the century, he was mixing the electric chair act with hypnosis, claiming that although the application of 150 volts would be enough to kill, the subject could withstand much higher doses simply by entering hypnosis. [The veracity of this assertion has yet to be scientifically tested!] He also included other feats, which we know today to be illusions, for example, the 'suspension' of a woman in mid air. Every magician worth his salt knows how that one's done, but Bodie's audiences didn't and they gasped in astonishment. The success of the Svengali and Trilby segment was still the dramatic pull it had always been, but Bodie continued to infuse it with more mystique, more astonishment. But more than anything else it was Bodie's powerful, almost overwhelming personality allied with his strong, masculine good looks that was the real key to his success. [I really would loved to have seen the whole show!]

On January 22nd 1901, Queen Victoria died, and with her departure, so ended the magnificent, proud age that bore her name. With the new century, the Edwardian Era heralded a wondrous time of invention and innovation and saw rapid advances in science and technology. Bodie, with his charm and enormous stage presence was just the man to exploit it. Dr. Walford Bodie's fame and fortune would grow beyond his wildest imaginings.

Despite his powerful stage persona, Bodie was also a hugely kind, generous and gentle man. He had now (quite fraudulently) added the letters M.D. to his name. Wherever he performed, and for no fee, he would spend the daytime helping the poor, in particular those with ailments who could not afford to pay medical bills. No doubt this afforded him a certain amount of free publicity, but he was also passionate about using hypnosis to cure a variety of ills. He practiced manipulation of the limbs and spine, and he had hands that were big enough and strong enough to do it. He combined these skills with hypnotherapy and electrotherapy. He even gave away tickets to those who otherwise couldn't afford to see him. And the public loved him for it – but not so the medical profession, from whom Bodie would hear more.

As word of his miracle cures spread, so people flocked to see him. Bodie discovered that a mild tingling dose of electricity could alleviate all sorts of discomfort and ailment, especially those psychosomatic in nature. By this stage of his career, Bodie was already wealthy, and yet he gave his time, free of charge to the poor of every town he played. I don't know many people today who would do that. In fact, I don't know of any at all.



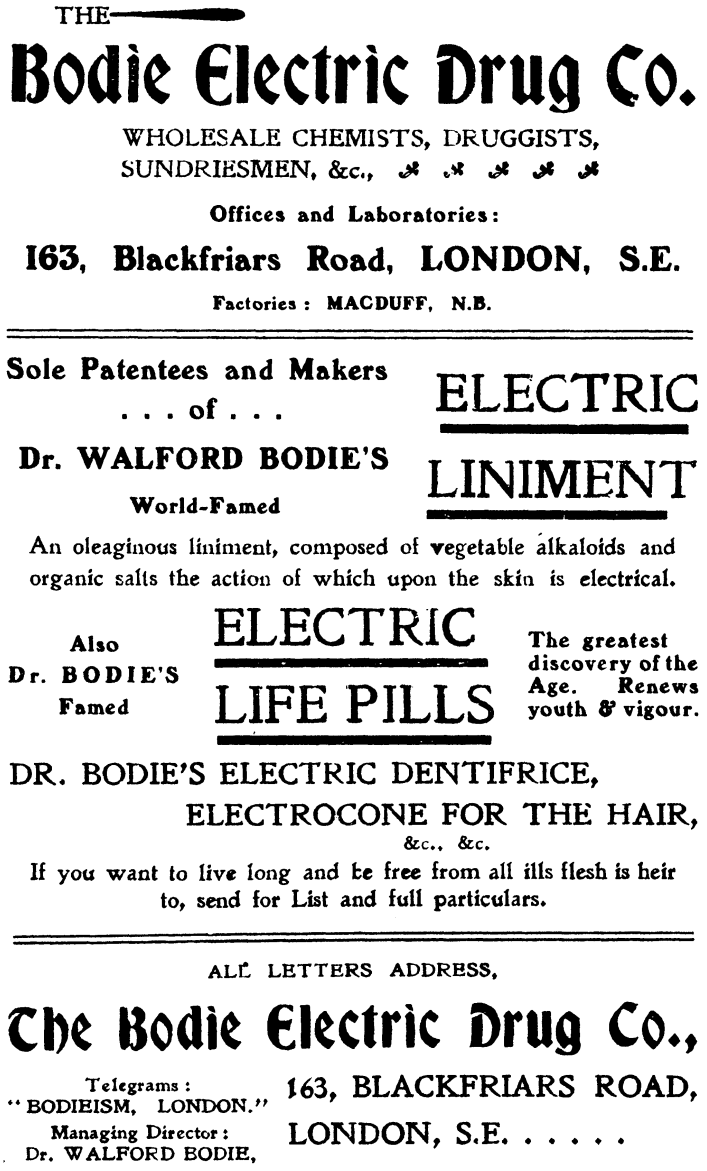
Dr. Walford Bodie Mesmerising a Subject.

But Bodie had started to attract the attention of The Medical Defence Union. Was Bodie undermining their natural authority? There were rumblings within the medical profession and it wasn't long before Bodie started to be regarded as a potential threat.

Then, one day, and completely out of the blue, a gentleman by the name of Rupert Burnham came to call. Burnham's own stroke of genius was to introduce Bodie to a new and exciting concept – merchandise! His idea was for a new enterprise – *The Bodie Electric Drug Company!* This new entity would produce Electric Ointments, Elixirs and Potions, Electric Life Pills, Electric Liniment, even an Electric Dentifrice. Every advertisement, every bottle, every box would have Bodie's image and name on it. Burnham would stump up the money to finance the operation, and would pay Bodie a handsome percentage of the profits. In effect, Bodie would earn money for doing nothing – and rather a lot of money it would turn out to be. The deal was settled with a shake of the hand, and it was one of the best day's work Bodie ever did.

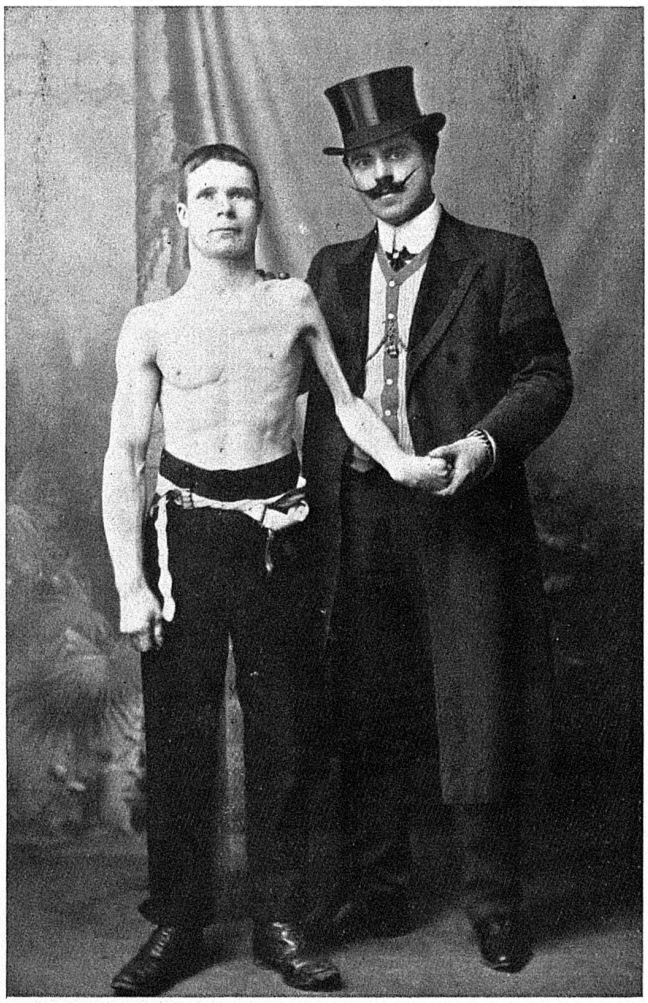
By 1903, *The Bodie Show* was getting bigger with every passing year with sell out seasons all over the country and now, for the first time, a lengthy season in the West End was in the offing. Bodie's reputation preceded him and by the time he arrived in London, he was as famous for his hypnotic powers and his work with the poor and incurable as he was for his stage show. Once in London, he started to include these cures as part of the performance. Again, audiences were intrigued… and they wanted more.

There were never any complaints against him – on the contrary, he had collected innumerable plaudits from the people he had treated. While the public began to adore him for his compassion and understanding, the medical profession began to feel more and more threatened by his activities which, to make matters worse, were being dispensed free of charge! Whether or not Bodie realised the mild electric treatment he administered was more often than not the result of the placebo effect we will probably never know – the only matter of any importance was that it worked. Bodie's 'Bloodless Surgery' had by now earned him a fine reputation throughout the whole of Great Britain.

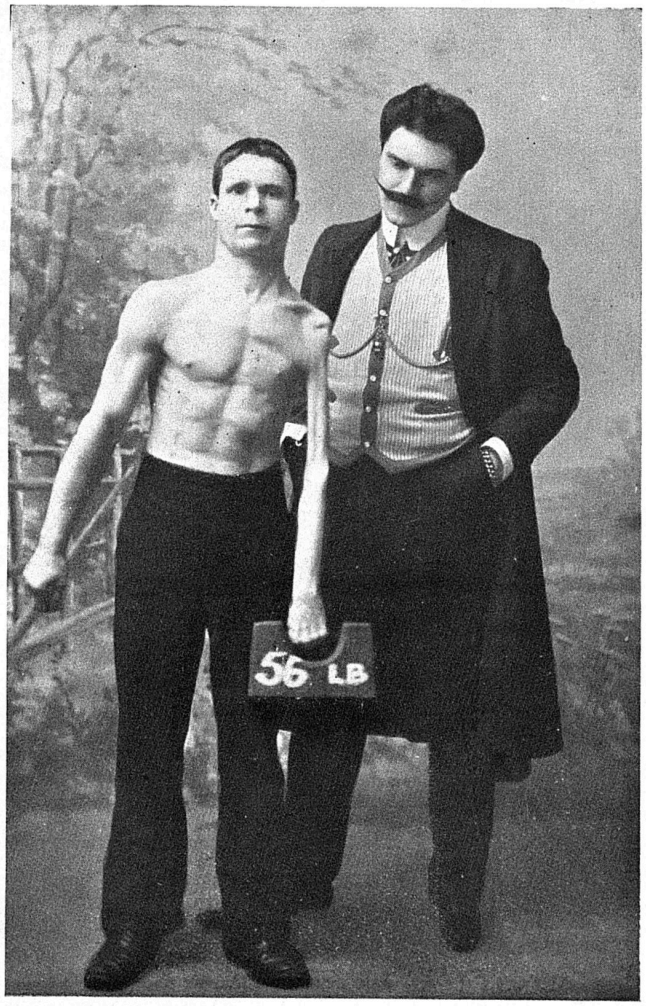


In the summer of 1904, *The Bodie Show* became the sensation of London and every twice-nightly performance at the London Britannia was fully subscribed.

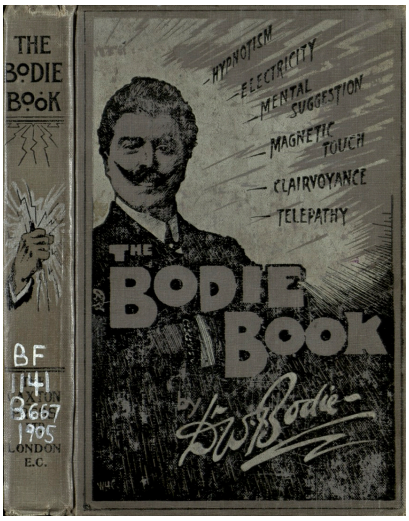
Cashing in on the spectacular success of the London season, *The Bodie Book* was published. If you happen to have one in good condition, it's now very much a collectors item and worth several thousand pounds! *The Bodie Book* ran to ten editions and sold more than forty thousand copies. Again, one must be aware of the times; forty thousand was a substantial number in the 1900's.



Before Treatment.
THE PATIENT CANNOT LIFT HALF-AN-OUNCE.



After Treatment.
THE PATIENT LIFTS HALF-A-HUNDREDWEIGHT.



By the close of the 1904 London season, Bodie had become very wealthy indeed. But it was 1905 that would prove to be his most lucrative year. A second London season sold out, *The Bodie Book* sold like hot cakes, and the pills and potions, liniments and ointments from *The Bodie Electric Drug Company*, the icing on the cake. His Majesty King Edward VII attended one of the London performances and visited Bodie backstage. But the crowning glory came in grateful recognition of his work with the poor. In October 1905, Bodie was made a Freeman of the City of London, a very great honour indeed. He also became the highest paid entertainer in Britain, while the New York Times claimed he was now the highest paid showman in the world.

Whenever he was quizzed about the letters M.D. attached to his name, Bodie always insisted they stood for *Merrie Devil*.

But the addition of the letters M.D. was a bridge too far for the Medical Defence Union and in July 1903 they had taken him to court. The outcome of the case wasn't so bad for Bodie; he got away with the title 'Dr.' because in those days it was held to be a generic term, and in any case a lot of entertainers used it. In the case of the letters M.D., Bodie

received a only gentle slap on the wrist. In fact Bodie had taken the precaution of buying his M.D. from Barrett College in America, an early day 'diploma mill.' An excerpt from the Judge's summing up perhaps explains the position best: *"Perhaps his methods may not suit the taste of all –and it was well-known that doctors were jealous people – but we have evidence of cases where doctors have failed, and which have been cured by doctor Bodie's treatment. There was no doubt that he had done a great deal of good. He could not be stigmatised as a 'quack' or an impostor."* The Medical Defence Union was incensed by the decision.

Bodie had purchased a fine and substantial property (The Manor House) in Macduff, Scotland, and the Bodies moved in on Boxing Day 1905. The house still stands but I have no idea who lives there today. Nonetheless, once ensconced in this fine gentleman's residence, Bodie decided to add another title to his Curriculum Vitae, that of *Laird of Macduff*. One suspects this was partly a joke, but it's impossible to ignore the possibility that Bodie was perhaps a little needy when it came to the recognition bestowed by titles and qualifications. Bodie also adopted a slogan, which henceforth would be attached to every poster, flyer and advertisement: '*Follow Who Can.'* This was simply brilliant and served its purpose perfectly – to raise him above any other showman.

At the end of 1905 he settled into a third season at the London Britannia. This was the year the New Zealand All Blacks had arrived in Britain for a rugby tour and Burnham made it his business to contact the team manager, George Dixon. The plan was to get the team captain, Dave Gallagher to promote Bodie's Electric Liniment – a plaudit from such a famous sporting figure would be marvellous publicity. On January 9th 1906, Dave Gallagher, All Black Captain and famous sportsman signed the endorsement. Things had never been better.

In 1906 *The Bodie Show* moved on – to Blackburn, Lancashire. In a new twist to the Electric chair segment, Bodie was now offering ten shillings for each thirty seconds a volunteer could remain in the chair. This was in order to silence any of Bodie's critics and prove to the audience the electric shocks were genuine, but on the night of 27th April, a professional electrician by the name of James Wright volunteered for the chair. Wright had secreted about his person some insulating material and had wrapped his wrists in copper gauze, connecting them with a copper wire, which went up his sleeves and over his shoulders. It was soon apparent that Wright was not getting electrocuted as planned and Bodie realized there was some kind of skullduggery afoot. Wright was marched to a convenient dressing room and searched. Wright's trick was exposed to the shocked audience (pardon the pun.) Wright, furious at being caught, sued Bodie for assault and false imprisonment. He was awarded a derisory (even in those days) £3 in damages.

Not long after the Blackburn Prison Experiment [surreal psychology joke there!] Bodie met a young comedian who was touring with Casey's Court Circus. Bodie immediately recognised that this youth had a great and as yet barely discovered talent. The young man in question would indeed go on to achieve fame in his own right. His name…? Charles Chaplin. Bodie could see from the outset he had star quality and did his best to poach him from the competition. Chaplin though, decided to stay loyal to Casey's. The rest of Charlie Chaplin's story is history, but in 1906, Chaplin's immediate popularity was derived from doing a fine impersonation of… Dr. Walford Bodie, which had audiences in stitches.

Above left: the real Dr. Walford Bodie; Right, Charles Chaplin as Dr. Walford Bodie.

In the meantime, Bodie had become such a hero in his native Scotland, he had a song written about him, a reel entitled *'The Ghost and Bodie O'* which went on to achieve a certain popularity in Scotland. The came 'T*he Bodie Waltz*' which became even more popular and was a favourite at soirees and musical evenings.

In late 1906, 'Mystic' Marie Henry, one of the original members of *The Bodie Show* fell ill and died a short time later of tuberculosis, a popular, if undiscriminating disease depressingly common. Bodie was devastated by the loss of Marie and it is clear that her demise must have broken his heart. Marie's grave is still to be seen in the Doune churchyard, Macduff, paid for by Walford Bodie. It is a magnificent monument, topped by a marble angel.

After Marie's tragic departure from the world, Bodie introduced a new segment in the show – *The Cage of Death.* The Cage was a special effects masterpiece, with flashes of lightning

and blue flame. Remember, this was a time when hardly anyone, save perhaps the *very* rich, had electricity in their homes, and so this display must have been truly breathtaking.

Marie's grave is still to be seen in the Doune churchyard, Macduff, paid for by Walford Bodie. It is a magnificent monument, topped by a marble angel.

The hypnosis segment of the show was just as thrilling, although Bodie cheated – he had his stage manager, William Collings, come up onto the stage every night, the idea being that once one person got up, more would follow. In any case, Collings reportedly did an excellent barnyard rooster impression, so it would have been madness not to include him in the show!

In 1907, a comedian by the name of George Formby joined *The Bodie Show* as a guest 'turn' and stayed with the company for eighteen months. George Formby Senior was the father of the more famous ukulele playing, lamp post leaning, window cleaning, street corner loitering, irritant beloved of the lower ranks of the British armed forces during the Second World War.

And so the success continued unabated. The Medical Defence Union had taken Bodie to court in 1906, but Bodie had emerged once again the victor and by 1909 Bodie was still performing to sell out crowds, twice nightly, at the Central Theatre in Edinburgh. All the favourite segments were included; hypnotherapy, under the heading *'The Bloodless Surgeon'* the Electric Chair, the X-Ray machine, *The Cage of Death*, Isabella – *La Belle Electra*, and of course the comedy hypnosis.

Sat in the audience one night during the Edinburgh run was the legendary Harry Houdini who introduced himself after the show. From that first meeting, both entertainers become lifelong friends until Houdini's premature and unnecessary death in 1926.

But if the third London season of 1905/1906 hard marked the zenith of Bodie's career, 1909 was to become the watershed moment when things would start to go awry.

In July 1909, the Bodies suffered a tragic blow. Their beautiful daughter Jeannie died at the age of just eighteen. To add to Bodie's woes, three months later, the Medical Defence Union was to secretly sponsor another action launched against Bodie in the High Court in The Strand. Their earlier attempts to expose him as a fraud, once in 1903 and again in 1906 had come to nothing, but this latest case was to prove more difficult for Bodie to manage.

The Bodie Electric Drug Company now looked as if it was very likely to fold. There had been disagreements between the parties involved – Burnham had earlier brought in another investor – and it now seemed certain that this particular source of income was about to end. Bodie however, was not too concerned about the loss of the merchandise revenue – his main interest and energy was, as always, focussed on the show and by now he was wealthy enough not to have to worry about the pills and potions business. So he was content to let it die a natural death.

But in 1906, Bodie had taken on an apprentice, Charles Henry Irving, who, in return for a payment to Bodie of one thousand pounds, would become Bodie's apprentice, and expected to learn all the tricks of the trade. Irving would work for *The Bodie Show* as stage manager and in return, he would be mentored by Bodie. But by early 1908, Irving began to suspect he wasn't getting his money's worth and the two parted company.

Temporarily unemployed, Irving began to pine for his thousand pounds and wrote to Bodie asking for it back… and Bodie refused. Irving sued, accusing Bodie of misrepresentation, his specific charge being that Bodie had pretended to be a doctor when in fact he was not. The Medical Defence Union saw an opportunity and bankrolled Irving's prosecution. *The Great Bodie Trial* was about to begin!

The start of the trial followed a familiar pattern – Bodie claimed 'showman's privilege' and the support of those he had cured over the years. The other side claimed dishonesty and deception. This time however, they had a distinct advantage – unlike in rounds one and two, they had inside information! Bodie's tricks were explained in detail to the court – the secrets of the electrical apparatus were revealed, and worse, Bodie's habitual use of a 'stooge' to encourage people to come on stage was exposed. Bodie produced a box stuffed with hundreds of letters from his 'patients' but the judge ruled them irrelevant. The

prosecution argued that it was simply not possible to claim that people had been cured when there were no medical certificates to show they were ill in the first place, and in any event, the authors of the letters were not present to be cross-examined.

At the end of the trial, the judge found that a breach of contract had indeed occurred and Irving was awarded his full one thousand pounds damages. Bad enough Bodie had to hand the money back, but far more damaging was the trial had succeeded in discrediting Bodie and had unmasked him as a fraudster.

But Bodie was not a man to be discredited! He continued to use the prefix 'Dr.' in all his publicity and even had a new poster designed, which in true Bodie style *celebrated* the case by describing himself as *The HIGH COURT VICTOR!*

The only real lasting effect of the trial was that Bodie was now a little more cautious over his use of the letters M.D.He still joked that the letters M.D. had stood for *Merrie Devil*, but was now more cautious in their use.

Even though he had never ventured beyond the British Isles, the trial had attracted considerable attention in the United States, where the New York Times devoted half page three to the story, complete with photographs. At home, it soon became obvious that audiences were completely unconcerned about the trial – they still flocked to the theatre and were happy to pay for good entertainment.

Bodie's incurable compassionate streak continued unabated. Beneath the flamboyant showman-like exterior, Bodie just couldn't help himself. He went out of his way to help the poor, who worshipped him. But in 1909, after the trial, he received a terrible snub when he sent a cheque for £500 to the Glasgow Hospital children's department. The cheque was

returned on the grounds that he was considered a quack! [Is it me… or is this just outrageous snobbery borne out of vested interest?]

The end of the *Great Bodie Trial* however was not the end of Bodie's troubles. The Medical Defence Union now embarked on a course of sabotage. At the Glasgow Coliseum, during the first house of the opening night on November 8th 1909, there was some mild heckling from some medical students in the audience. The same thing happened in the second house but this time Bodie was ready for them and delivered a scathing put-down line, which quieted them.

Thursday evening November 11th 1909 was a different story. The students had organised themselves into a lynch mob a thousand strong. They hurled rotten fruit and rotten herrings. Not content with that, they hurled the brass knobs from the orchestra pit rail. The police were called in and there was a scuffle during which innocent members of the audience were intimidated. The show was brought to an abrupt halt and the mob marched on Glasgow's West End. A few days later, on November 15th in London, some three hundred students, no doubt inspired by their Glasgow counterparts, attacked Bodie's home, burning an effigy of him in the street. They smashed a window, menaced passers-by and assaulted police, chanting "Bodie! Bodie! Bodie! Quack! Quack! Quack!"

In both cities, some of the students had clearly been drunk. Admittedly they did not start their nonsense while the female performers were on stage – rather they waited for Bodie's appearance. *La Belle Electra* fled the stage but Bodie bravely stood his ground. It was then the students started throwing things. Bodie made a decent and brave attempt to negotiate with student leaders in order to calm the situation, but when he returned to the stage, the bombardment continued and students stormed the stage damaging the safety curtain. The situation very quickly spiralled out of control. Not even the police could do anything to stop the tumult and were themselves pelted and assaulted. After barricading themselves in a dressing room, *The Bodie Show* had managed to make good their escape via a back door.

Bodie's subsequent performances were cancelled as theatre owners worried they might be next. A dozen or so students were arrested and charged with affray and assaulting the police. The press, surprisingly, downplayed the importance of the disturbances, even though the Glasgow riot was, and remains, the most serious the city has ever seen. As for Bodie, he was genuinely upset by the riots and I think the events of Glasgow and London affected him deeply.

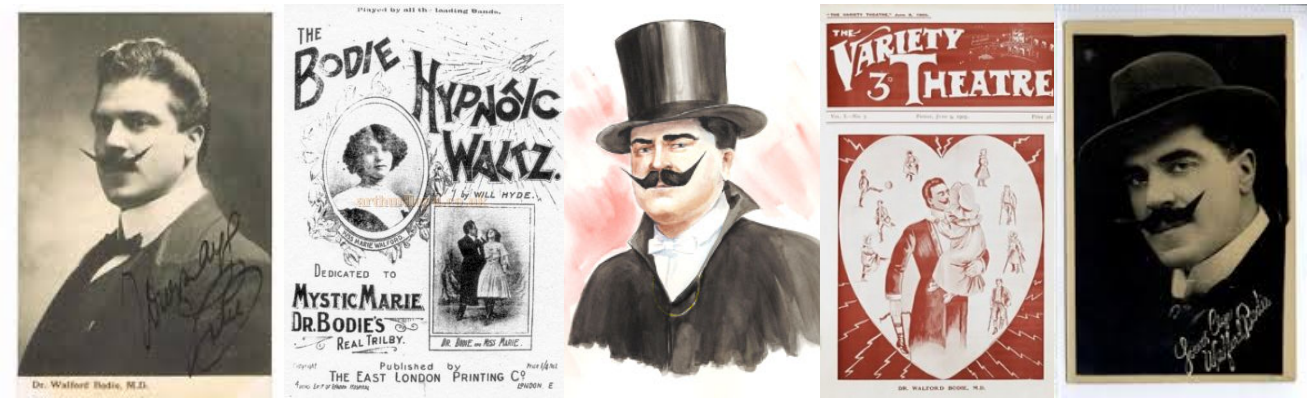
The riots and the trial had taken its toll and Bodie returned to Macduff to gather his wits. There, he began to plan an appeal against the scoundrel Irving – after all, Irving must have learned a great deal during his time as Bodie's apprentice! This assumption is wholly logical. 'Learning the ropes,' to coin a phrase, is a rapid learning curve. Show me a magician's assistant who doesn't share the magician's secrets! So Bodie appealed the decision… and lost.

Irving's sponsor was once again the Medical Defence Union. Bodie considered that his reputation as an entertainer and healer had been tarnished, so obviously he felt he had no choice but to appeal. Even so, the cost of the original trial, including the damages, together with the costs of the appeal represented a mere four weeks earnings!

I think Bodie possibly set too much faith in the words of Mr. Justice Grantham's summing up at the end of the first trial in Leeds in 1903. In the end, as is often the case in litigation, it all came down to two differing opinions of two different judges – the first, Mr. Justice Grantham, recognising that Bodie had carried out bona fide cures, before a different judge decided to side with the medical profession. The judge in the 1909 trail had unfairly

allowed the real issue – Bodie's dispute with Irving – to be sidetracked into an exposé of Bodie's magic tricks.

Whatever your standpoint on this issue, it must be remembered that Bodie had achieved some marvellous results. More than that, he never charged a penny for his services. William Collings, Bodie's old stage manager claimed to have been blackmailed into giving evidence against his former employer and his statement was read out in music halls and theatres around the country. Bodie also issued a 'Renunciation Statement' but for his pains was taken to court a second time by Irving – again quietly assisted financially by the Medical Defence Union – and ordered to pay a further £200 in libel damages. In 1910, Bodie's mother passed away, someone to whom he had always respected and to whom he had been close.



Above: Portraits of Bodie, dates unknown. The Bodie Hypnotic Waltz and the front cover of The Variety Theatre portraying him as hero to the poor and needy.

It was now time to seriously take stock of the situation. The disaster of the legal proceedings had exhausted him and he was not only disappointed, he was bitter. Little did he realise realise at the time that the publicity surrounding the trial would actually serve to fix his name in the public psyche. Without any effort on his part, Bodie had become a respected champion of the poor, and household name.

In 1910, he published a second book, *Stage Stories*. The book was a collection of theatrical anecdotes that beautifully capture the flavour of the show business world in the last years of the Victorian age and the first years of the Edwardian. In short, it offers us a glimpse of a time gone forever. *Stage Stories* was followed by a fictional novel, *Harley the Hypnotist,* the story of a crime-fighting hypnotist. Any of these books, especially in good condition, are worth a lot of money today and surviving copies are extremely rare.

Bodie returned to the stage in 1911 with a new show. *La Belle Electra* was still part of the line-up, as was the ever more popular hypnosis section, but gone were *The Cage of Death* and the X-ray machine. Gone also were the letters that had caused all the trouble in the first place – the suffix M.D. was noticeable by its absence.

Dr. & Mrs. Walford Bodie's Royal Magnets had evolved into more of a family variety show, with guest artistes including a respectable comedian and vocal and musical interludes. Bodie even resurrected his ventriloquism act (after an eight year absence.) This new presentation included Louise Henry, another of Bodie's sisters in law, as well as his son, Albert Edward Bodie. In July 1912, in a carefully planned return to his roots, the new show opened at the Palace Theatre Aberdeen and was another huge success. Appearing at the same time in Aberdeen was the [by now] great Harry Lauder… but Bodie outsold him!

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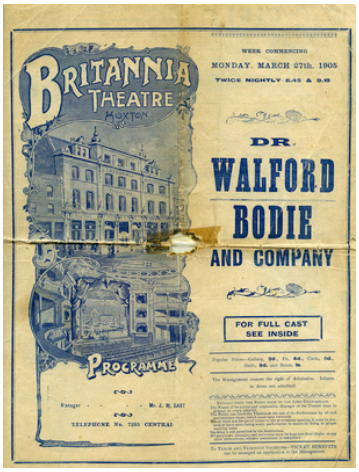



Above: I suspect Bodie may have been a bit of a dandy – something not unknown in show business, but I think he definitely enjoyed dressing up!

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In 1913, the London Magician's Club was formed – the forerunner of The Magic Circle. Its president was none other than Bodies great friend Harry Houdini, while its vice president, one Will Goldston. Naturally, Bodie assumed that he would be invited to become a member, but there was a problem with Will Goldston.

The two had met a few years before and had seemingly got on well enough, although there had been a minor disagreement over the purchase of a water colour, but the two had worked together on an earlier project, the 1909/1910 Magicians Annual, to which Bodie had contributed an article. But something had occurred in the meantime – we know not what – between Bodie and Goldston.

Both Bodie and his son Albert's membership fee was returned by Goldston. Bodie had been snubbed, he had been insulted… and he was affronted! Whatever it was, the issue was clearly of a personal nature, otherwise why would Goldston also return Albert's subscription?

Of course Bodie would have presumed that membership would be a formality and he appealed to Houdini for help but to no avail – Houdini attempted to intercede but Goldston would not be moved. Was this a case of professional jealousy? Perhaps after the Great Bodie Trial, Goldston no longer wished to be associated with him? Whatever the reason, Will Goldston had blackballed Bodie's application and Bodie quite rightly felt he had been stabbed in the back.

More tragic events were to follow… In 1912, Bodie's sister in law, Louisa Henry died suddenly. No sooner had the family got over the shock of losing not only a close relative but also a talented member of the company, but Bodie's other daughter Kittie passed away suddenly in 1913. Bodie's son Albert, born in 1889, was to die of complications following a relatively straightforward surgery in 1915. The losses all came at once. Thus decimated, *The Bodie Show* started to struggle.

As if all this wasn't enough, someone half a continent away decided to start a world war! Without warning, for the sake of King and Country, fathers and sons marched off to France in their hundreds of thousands. Attendances fell off dramatically. Bodie reinstated the 'healing' segment in the show and again spent much of his free time treating the poor, again for no fee. The whole nation suddenly found itself on austerity measures and, with a sizeable proportion of the male population away fighting in the trenches, those left at home were in no mood to spend what little money they had on trivia.

For Bodie, there was only one obvious course of action – *The Bodie Show* would embark upon a tour of South Africa, India and Ceylon! Cape Town (been there) Durban (been there) Pietermaritzburg (been there) were all on the itinerary and Bodie was preceded in each city by his reputation. But on the way home from India, where the Bodies had visited Bombay and Delhi (been there too) their ship, the *Arabia,* was sunk off Malta by a German U boat on November 6th 1916.

Had it not been for a nearby French minesweeper, the Marseilles, *The Bodie Show* would have closed for good. True to form, Bodie was one of the last four people to leave the ship.

Jeannie Bodie never fully recovered from the ordeal. All the Show's accoutrements, five tons of equipment, props and costumes went down with the *Arabia*.

Bodie was far from being down and out – he was still financially secure – and would remain so even if he never worked again. He had a beautiful home in Macduff, the Manor House, and plenty of cash reserves. Moreover, he was determined, once the war ended, to start again. He was astute enough to recognise that once hostilities ceased, he would once again be in demand, and the one remaining female star of the show, the beautiful Isabella – *La Belle Electra* – would be the starting point.

One immediate obstacle was that Music Hall had become very popular. Whilst most of the larger prestige theatres had closed 'for the duration,' the wartime government had encouraged the composition and performance of patriotic songs, good for morale and good for keeping the population 'on message.'

After the cataclysmic events of the War, and the bewildering profusion of industrialised weaponry – the Zeppelins, the enormous battleships, the tanks, the earsplitting explosions, not to mention the hopeless and terrible loss of life, Bodie's electrical apparatus was simply not as impressive as it once had once been. The world had changed forever, and Bodie needed to change with it, or perish.

Nonetheless, Bodie and his now reduced company would tour again. Performing in Glasgow, something went wrong (we know not what) with the electrical circuitry of the new Electric Chair. Unintentionally and accidentally, Isabella received a massive electric shock and was immediately rushed to hospital where her condition swiftly became critical. *La Belle Electra* was not long for this world.

Isabella Henry passed away on December 21st 1919. The beautiful *La Belle Electra* was now lost forever. She was 43 years old, still looked years younger than her age, and still

the mainstay of *The Bodie Show*. Isabella's grave is to be seen today in Doune churchyard, Macduff, next to the grave of Mystic Marie. Both graves are monumental in design and the legends on both tug at the heartstrings.

Bodie had lost almost everyone he had ever cared about: his son, his natural daughters Kittie and Jeanne, 'Mystic' Marie, Louisa Henry, and now the wonderful Isabella. Jeannie was a shadow of her former self and Bodie at fifty years of age was feeling the strain. In these modern times, Bodie's condition, both mental and physical, could fairly be described as suffering from burnout. What to do?

Even in the midst of this terrible tragedy, Walford Bodie picked himself up, dusted himself down, and immediately searched for a replacement for Isabella. Having repaired relations with the Henry family, Bodie hired the attractive Phyllis Buck, who would henceforth be known as *La Tesla.*

In June 1919, Bodie published a twenty-page pamphlet entitled *Stage Hypnotism*, a copy of which was in Peter Casson's library. I know this because he showed it to me in 1981 when I visited him at his home in Blackpool when we were still on speaking terms. [Casson's extensive library of hypnotism books passed to Eddie Burke upon his death. Note to myself – call Eddie Burke when I'm next in the UK!] The original *Bodie Book* and *Stage Stories* had sold thousands of copies and the short *Stage Hypnotism* sold equally well. The Great Bodie Trial had been forgotten, the War was now over, and so Bodie started yet again.

The population of Britain had been decimated by the War. There was hardly a family in Britain who hadn't lost someone in

the terrible slaughter in Europe and Bodie realised (as if he had a choice) that a smaller scale show was the only way forward. No 'support acts,' no entourage, just Bodie and *La Tesla*. Together they would again astonish the world! The hypnotism segment by now represented a goodly proportion of the show, and was as popular as ever. Laughter was the distraction the public now craved, and the master showman's stage hypnotism act was just the thing. Still, Bodie felt he needed something more in the show, something of substance that would add to the entertainment, something to make the evening complete.

In early 1920, Bodie met Marie Lloyd, the Queen of the Music Hall, who was by then, ageing before her time, gin soaked, manic depressive and living only for the applause. Bodie saw the opportunity Marie Lloyd's enduring popularity promised. A double act! Together, Dr. Walford Bodie and Marie Lloyd would fill the theatres once more!

In October 1922 they performed together at the Holborn Empire. Bodie performed his *Highland Laird's Birthday Party* and the popular *Fun on an Ocean Liner* ventriloquism routines and astonished the audience with hypnotism while Marie enchanted them with songs they had grown to know and love, especially the rather risqué, slightly bawdy ballads with their double entendres that had made her famous – '*I sits among the cabbages and peas'* was perhaps one of her more well-known ditties… after complaints by the church and certain government authorities, she changes the words to *'I sits among the cabbages and leeks!'* In light of the publicity she had received, It got huge laughs!

Bodie immediately became Marie's friend, inspiration and strength – theirs was destined to be the perfect partnership – and what a partnership it would be! Two of the most well-known and well-loved artistes in the country working together at last!

Left to right: Marie Lloyd in better days; The electric chair presented to Bodie by Harry Houdini; Bodie in characteristic flamboyant style.

Seven days after the champagne glasses clinked in celebration, during a performance at the Edmonton Empire, London, Marie Lloyd collapsed on stage and died within the week. In the latter part of 1920 Bodie received an unexpected gift from his great friend Harry Houdini – the famous original electric chair from Sing Sing Prison.

It is fair to say that throughout the 1920's, Walford Bodie experienced a rebirth as a respected entertainer. The general public was by now better educated, better informed and after four years of terrible and wasteful war, it would also be fair to say they were more cynical, but Bodie still had the ability to fill the stage by force of personality alone – and to entertain. Together with the ventriloquism, magic and illusion, the hypnotism part of the performance was still gaining momentum. He included the original electric chair as part of the show and this gave him a huge advantage in terms of advance publicity. But it was the increasing popularity of the hypnotism that really generated the audiences. After the misery of the First World War, people appreciated the blessed relief of laughter, and although the happy days of the travelling *Bodie Show* were now over, Bodie's popularity with the public was as as strong as it had ever been.

Above: The great Dr. Walford Bodie (centre) greeting the crowds to advertise his show.

On October 21st 1926 Harry Houdini was punched in the stomach by a student, and act which ruptured his appendix. Partly because of the parlous state of medical treatment at the time, Houdini's life came to an end a few days later.

In Macduff, Bodie's home town, he built, at his own expense, a public baths and supported the building of the Tarlair Golf Course. On the opening day, April 4th 1926, he was the first to tee off (the course is still there.) He sponsored the Macduff Walford FC football team and became a prominent member of the local Freemason's Lodge. The Laird of Macduff would remain Scotland's most well-known and respected entertainer for years to come. But in 1931, at sixty-six years of age, and after fifty-three years of marriage, Jeannie Bodie passed away.

Above: Part of the memorial fountain created in memory of Jeannie Bodie, still to be seen in Macduff.

Eighteen months later, in 1932, just weeks before his sixty-third birthday, in a quiet and very private registry office ceremony, Bodie married the pretty twenty-two year old Florrie Robertshaw, forty years his junior.

The 1930's were ravaged by the great depression and everyone suffered – especially those in the entertainment industry. Yet Walford Bodie had a distinct advantage – he was by this time a self-contained one-man attraction and although he sometimes shared the bill with other artistes, his act was now almost exclusively hypnotism and both on and off stage, he was just as enthusiastic a performer as he had been fifty years earlier. A few of the hypnosis show routines invented by Bodie are still performed by stage hypnotists today.

Nor was he short of money. He had become the proud owner of a nightclub in Leicester Square (in Green Street,) two top class London hotels and six London guesthouses. He had a prestigious home in London at 134, Gloucester Terrace, Hyde Park. He owned a pet monkey which had it's own suite of rooms, and also a parrot. [Why do entertainers do that?]

His favourite residence however was a very large houseboat which he named *La Belle Electra,* which was moored at Thames Ditton opposite Hampton Court Palace. Bodie threw lavish parties on the boat and regular guests included the future Edward VIII and Mrs. Wallace Simpson.

But by 1938, Bodie was slowing down. On the stage, he was as elegant and confident as ever, but by the time the curtain came down, he was exhausted [I sometimes think I know how he felt.] In October 1939, after a performance at the Indian Theatre in Blackpool [I think it was on what is now the Pleasure Beach], Bodie collapsed before the end of the show. Carried from the stage, he would not recover.

Dr. Walford Bodie was the last member of *The Bodie Show* to be laid to rest in the churchyard in Macduff. It is a magnificent grave. It stands on the same piece of ground as *La Belle Electra*, and both graves can be visited today.

Bodie's career in show business lasted 57 years, from 1882 to 1939. He never accepted any fees for his cures and his only stipulation was that the patient had to have been discharged as incurable and should be willing to undergo treatment on stage. Bodie was remarkably honest about the nature of his cures and this becomes clear in the pages of *The Bodie Book.*

He claimed to have carried out 900 cures on stage. This number seems reasonable, perhaps even on the low side, considering the number of shows he performed in his career, but he conducted his 'clinic' in community halls in the same town as his appearances.

Regarding Bodie's miracle cures, it was reported at the time that *"A girl of my age had never walked without irons on her left leg owing to a deformity at birth. Dr. Bodie, in full view of 2,000 people in the Empire Theatre, Longton, Stoke on Trent, took the irons from her leg, manipulated the bones, then re-set them. To everyone's utter amazement, that girl walked off the stage without her stick and irons, and has never used them since – and she is still alive and walking normally."*

Despite his wealth and his success, by the time of his death, his liabilities were nearly as great as his assets.

Florrie Robertshaw continued to tread the boards after her husband's death, but lived in somewhat reduced circumstances. She never remarried and survived on a widow's pension and always claimed that *"the age difference never worried me – he never looked or acted his age in any way… Off stage he was a very quiet man, very unassuming."*

Bodie's houseboat, uninsured, sank in heavy rain because the caretaker, allegedly drunk, failed to man the pumps.

The popular comic strip *Mandrake the Magician* was almost certainly based on Walford Bodie and his own creation *Harley the Hypnotist*. Certainly the moustache and the square jaw are there and the facial features are strikingly similar.

The final resting place of Dr. Walford Bodie at the Parish Church in Macduff, Scotland. It shares the same ground as La Belle Electra.

La Tesla was named after the Serbian inventor Nikola Tesla who discovered that a high voltage of electricity could pass through the body so long as the amperage was low.

Bodie and Jeannie had produced three children of their own (Kittie's mother was Helen Henry); Albert, born in 1889, died in 1915; Jeannie, born in 1890, died in 1909; Samuel, born in 1896, became a 'properly qualified' medical practitioner, and survived until 1974. I'm sure his father would have been proud.

With so many tragedies in his life, is it really any surprise that Bodie carried on in show business? The 'business' is full of people who mask their own personal grief with the camouflage of comedy.

An original Dr. Walford Bodie poster recently sold at auction in the United States for $8,500.

Nothing is known of the whereabouts of the original Sing Sing electric chair. It may be lost forever.

Bodie may well have been a misunderstood genius. He was without doubt wholly original. Flamboyant to the end, he also possessed a unique understanding of the human condition.

Again, I would love to have met him.

Above: The Electric Wizard can be found at 11 New Market, Morpeth, Newcastle NE61 1PS

Much of the information for this book came from the Aberdeen Public Archives and from Jim Cain, who is Walford Bodie's great grandson, currently living in Australia.

There is a wealth of information in the Scottish Theatre Archive held in trust by the University of Glasgow, together with a treasure trove of unpublished photographs and playbills.

In the Florence Tudor articles, published in The Scotsman in the 1970's, the preface reads 'Some believe that he was a charlatan, but Florence Tudor defends his reputation, and claims that, as well as a superb showman, he was a pioneer of medical techniques'. Florence Tudor goes on to describe Bodie as a 'misunderstood genius.' I agree, although I would put it 'misunderstood eccentric genius'.

FOOTNOTES:

I was twenty-four years old when I first heard of Walford Bodie, and it was my arch nemesis Peter Casson – the self-styled *Supreme Grand Master of Hypnotism* – who told me about him. I suspected Casson had grown up in awe of Bodie because he knew so much about him, and now, with the benefit of hindsight, I also see that Casson may have modelled himself on the great man.

It is only recently that I stumbled across an article on Bodie in the Scottish Daily Record and it immediately caught my attention. So, interested in the history of my chosen profession, I decided to do a little research. The result was worthwhile, not just because Bodie's story is interesting, and tragic in its own way, but because it put a lot of stage hypnotism things into perspective.

Walford Bodie died in 1939 and Peter Casson, himself born into a show business family in 1921, would have almost certainly been lucky enough to have seen him. Maybe he even met him – perhaps even shook his hand…

In 1945, at the end of an even greater and more catastrophic World War, and as the theatres began to reopen, Peter Casson took his own show *'Hypnotic Phantasy'* around the Stoll-Moss Empire circuit, performing twice nightly to packed houses in huge theatres for up to a week at a time. He told me how he would turn up at the theatre on the opening night and be assailed by the smell of fresh paint – as Casson was a one-man show, the theatre management had taken the opportunity to paint the vacant dressing rooms!

Some of those theatres I have also performed in myself, and they have a rich history. They include the Sunderland Empire, Liverpool Empire, Bristol Hippodrome, Manchester Palace are amongst those favoured haunts of Bodie and later Casson. These are major venues, seating up to two and a half thousand and I played them (again to packed house) many times in the 1980s and early 1990s.

In *his* day, Casson earned the right to call himself *'the Supreme Grand Master of Hypnotism.'* Like Bodie, he also carried out free hypnotherapy sessions, setting up a clinic in London's Harley Street. I wondered if Bodie had named Harley the Hypnotist after the famous street with all its private doctors, specialists and medical practices. I took a room at No 1-7 Harley Street myself for a shot time.

But Casson never had Bodie's humanity or the same public love and respect. Bodie's light shines across the decades as someone who genuinely cared about his fellow man and was pleased and proud to offer help wherever it was needed – Casson on the other hand

was a cold and selfish man who was obsessed with ‘the medical profession’ and their imagined opposition to hypnotism, which by the 1970’s had all but evaporated.

By the time I sold out my first theatre at the fifteen hundred seat Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool, ‘the doctors’ as Casson habitually referred to them, had lost any and all interest in stage hypnosis, and also in hypnotherapy for that matter. In fairness, Casson was closer in chronological terms to the culture and controversy of the Great Bodie Trial and the Medical Defence Union, which by then had ceased to exist. But he continued to harbour an obsessive paranoia about ‘the doctors’ whom he was convinced were out to get stage hypnotism banned for once and for all, when in fact they weren’t.

It has to be borne in mind though that the Medical Defence Union’s objection to Bodie was really because of his use of the letters M.D., which they considered fraudulent. Had Bodie not insisted on using them, there would not have been a Great Bodie Trial and nor would there have been any student riots. Casson’s mistrust, his fear of the spectre of ‘the doctors’ was more likely a result of the passing of the 1952 Hypnotism Act in Britain, an Act that for the first time was used to regulate performances of stage hypnosis.

The 1952 Act was brought in because of an incident involving an American hypnotist, Ralph Slater. Slater had allegedly been unable to awaken a girl after one of his shows at Earls Court in 1948. With the benefit of hindsight and today’s greater understanding of hypnosis, it is obvious the affair was blown out of all proportion, although Slater had handled the problem very badly. The girl was hospitalised and for nearly a week was kept under observation, regularly lapsing into periods of unconsciousness – which happened to coincide with the normal passage of night and day. After less than a week, she was discharged. Slater was sued and to cut a long story short, sailed for America on the first available transatlantic liner. Questions were asked in Parliament and the result was the Hypnotism Act, passed by Parliament in 1952 and now regarded by most as an arcane and toothless piece of almost redundant legislation no longer fir for purpose.

Nonetheless, Casson’s obsessive fear of ‘the medical profession’ and ‘the doctors’ became a monkey on all our backs. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, I cannot but help wonder if his was a genuine fear, borne of memories of the Medical Defence Union, or a device employed by *The Supreme Grand Master of Hypnotism* to keep ‘lesser’ hypnotists in their place.

In 1979 Casson founded the Federation of Ethical Stage Hypnotists (FESH.) All the professional hypnotists joined, about a dozen people in total. Those present included the ‘names’ of the day – Tony Sands, Johnny Hillyard, Nigel Ellery, David and Patricia Canova and the ludicrous amateur Gordon Delavar. Those that couldn’t make it to the inaugural meeting at the Danum Hotel in Doncaster because they were working were Edwin Heath, Martin St. James and Robert Halpern, but they sent their agents.

Casson ran FESH as if it were his own personal fiefdom and often used it as a blunt instrument with which to object to other hypnotist’s licences. The mantra was always the same tired excuse that we were all living in fear of ’the doctors’ who would stop at nothing to get stage hypnosis banned – they were the enemy who must be thwarted at all costs!

The inconvenient truth of the matter was that Casson was a jealous, envious, manipulative, bully of a man who, despite claiming he had the ear of the Home Office, had nothing of the sort – the Home Office regarded him a something of a nuisance. Like Will Goldston’s treatment of Walford Bodie, Casson expelled members of FESH on a whim – those expelled were the ones he considered a threat to his own position in the hierarchy – first

Robert Halpern, then David Canova (over a dispute about where a poster had been put up!) myself, Peter Powers, Ken Webster…

The fact is, Casson had no power or influence whatsoever… but he convinced us all he did! Some hypnotists lived in fear of him. Admittedly, he was big in his day, but never on the scale of Walford Bodie.

I saw Peter Casson in action in the autumn of 1980 and considered him to be a fine technician – the best I had ever seen in fact. He had remained the leader in his field up to the late 1960's and one must acknowledge that, but he seemed unable, or unwilling, to move with the times. His 'act' remained stuck in the 1950's. For the sake of completeness, I have included his obituary at the end of this book.

Ken Webster has for more than thirty-three years, occupied a position on the Blackpool Pleasure Beach that once played host to Walford Bodie.

The days of the twice-nightly variety shows which were the mainstay of the British summer season and where most of Britain's star entertainers made their mark before moving on to host television game shows, have likewise gone forever, along with the lines of dancing girls, the speciality acts, the ventriloquists, the jugglers, the multi-instrumentalists… and the hypnotists. The summer shows would bring hundreds of performers to the seaside resorts where they would live and work for ten or twelve weeks, all members of an exclusive, albeit temporary, club. The new motorway networks mean that families no longer stay in the seaside guest houses and hotels and three million people a year now head in completely the opposite direction, taking cheap flights to drink themselves stupid and behave disgracefully in the guaranteed mediterranean sunshine.

Paul McKenna was also sued by someone he had hypnotised on stage in the late 1990's. Again, the matter was blown out of all proportion, and like Ralph Slater, McKenna initially handled the problem badly, probably hoping it would go away – which it didn't. McKenna won the case, but the real result was that not only did the cost of public liability and professional indemnity insurance skyrocket, it changed overnight the public perception of hypnotism from being a fascinating entertainment to being dangerous and not something we want in out theatres.

A new generation has now started to rediscover the hypnosis show. The problem with the new generation of stage hypnotists is the disappointing lack of originality in their repertoire. Most of what I see now being performed was being done forty years ago and in some cases over a hundred years ago by none other than Dr. Walford Bodie. Most of the material just isn't that funny any more. With the exception of myself and Ken Webster, stage hypnotists today perform in pubs and at private parties or in bars in Benidorm. Absent is the excitement and specialness of the theatre, and in most cases the ability to entertain.

There are other things that haven't changed. There are at least three stage hypnotists in the UK who are using the title 'Dr.' when they have no right to do so. The most famous offender is of course Paul McKenna, exposed by the Daily Mirror who discovered his Ph.D. was in fact a phoney and not worth the paper it was written on – purchased from a dubious American Internet diploma mill run by a convicted fraudster. Then there's the curious 'Dr.' Jonathan Royle Ph.D., whose mountain of fake credentials and ludicrous self-importance has seen him become a figure of ridicule. There are others who have pulled this kind of scam, but they all get found out in the end.

Hypnotists no longer travel round with their own subjects, although to be fair, this was a common (and accepted) practice before the War. I can however understand why, with stage hypnotism in its infancy, Bodie felt the need to use a stooge to encourage others to rise from their seats and make their way onto the stage. I have experienced 'slow' nights where there has been a pregnant pause before anyone moves and there's often a worrying moment when your heart momentarily stops beating and you wonder if you're going to have an early night! But once one person moves, more will follow, and that was Bodie's reasoning. Realistically, the practice ended after the Second World War.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Robert Halpern would encourage people who had been hypnotised [by him] on previous occasions to volunteer again and again. In his three month long summer seasons at the Pavilion Theatre in Glasgow, there were 'audience favourites' – that is, subjects who Halpern knew would not only perform well, but were extremely funny in their own right. Halpern gave nicknames to these audience favourites that they would recognise. In South Africa, it is accepted practice to call for people who have been hypnotised before to come up onto the stage. I have never indulged in this practice because it has the potential to attract accusations of fakery.

The 'shop window stunt' where a subject is left to slumber in full public view has been replicated many times in Australia, New Zealand, and in the UK. Likewise the 'hypnotising' of animals as a publicity stunt. In 1979 at Scarborough Zoo, Robert Halpern tried to hypnotise an agoraphobic elephant. A photographer from the Scarborough Evening News was there to record the event, but on the day, the elephant forgot it was agoraphobic and nearly crushed Halpern against the railings of the enclosure. Peter Casson often began his act by hypnotising a chicken, a stunt copied more recently by Derren Brown. And Derren Brown (another fan of decorative facial hair) titled one of his tours *Svengali.*

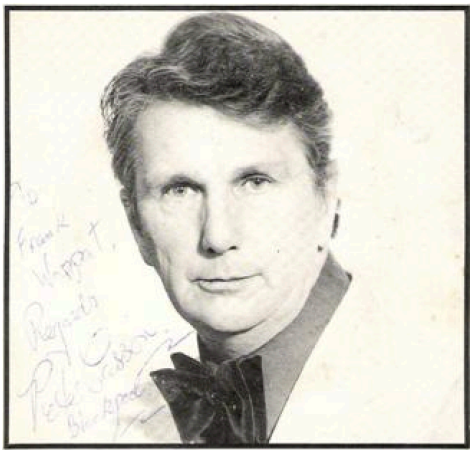
Robert Halpern sold out three consecutive three-month summer seasons at the fourteen hundred seat Glasgow Pavilion Theatre from 1980 to 1982, and coupled with his appearances at the Caley Picture House in Edinburgh, took home over half a million pounds a year, thereby at least coming closer than any to Walford Bodie's success, at least in Scotland. In various acts of astounding generosity, Halpern donated most of it to the Casino and snorted what was left up his nose.

Halpern was, like Bodie, charismatic, sported unusual facial hair, was a profligate spendthrift, and for many years a legend in Scotland. Like Bodie, Halpern also had a gruesome crowd-pleaser – he would fake his own hanging at the end of his show. It is impossible not to be reminded of Bodie's remark, or at least the remark attributed to him; *"I've got a living to make, to put it plainly; there's more money in shocking and terrifying than in edifying."*

Having met Halpern in the mid 1980's and had the opportunity to talk to him, I can vouchsafe that he fully understood that concept. He described to me the idea of the hypnosis show as *"a Grotesque, in the same mould as the freak show of times past."*

OBITUARY – Peter Casson

The Independent – Saturday 28 October 1995 by Stephen Amidon



In 1952, the BBC tried to film Peter Casson's remarkably successful stage show at their Alexandra Palace studio. It was to be a defining moment for the pioneering stage hypnotist, an opportunity for him to introduce his skills to a whole new medium. In the event, he proved to be too good. During filming he not only hypnotised his volunteers, but also inadvertently mesmerised several engineers watching on monitors in the control booth. Worried that Casson would have home viewers nodding off by their thousands, a skittish BBC abandoned the project.

Although Casson continued to sell out 2,000-seat theatres with regularity, he never really gained the wider recognition enjoyed by other, safer performers, whose conjuring tricks or comedy routines could be easily stomached by Auntie and her timid charges. There was an element of mystery about his remarkable ability to hypnotise people that lent Casson's act a sublimity not often encountered on variety stages. Peter Casson was born to a working-class background in Yorkshire in 1921.

An early interest in psychology led him to discover his skills as a hypnotist – he was able to put his first subject "under" at the age of 16. During the Second World War he served as a radar operator in the Royal Marines, where he honed his hypnotic skills by performing for fellow servicemen. When an overbearing drill sergeant accused Casson of fakery, the young private soon had the entranced officer drilling through the mess hall, to the delight of the squaddies.

After a world-wide tour with ENSA, Casson stepped out of uniform right on to the stage. In 1946 he was headlining at the Palladium; by 1948 he was among the first performers to have a one-man show, playing seven nights a week to full houses throughout the thriving variety circuit. People had literally never seen anything like his show, during which he would lead a group of hypnotised volunteers through a series of alarmingly unselfconscious activities such as performing on phantom musical instruments or weeping at imaginary films.Noisy sceptics were invariably invited on stage, where they were quickly transformed into the most willing subjects.

Casson also began a lifelong application of his unique skills into more serious fields, lecturing in psychotherapy, painless childbirth and natural anaesthesia. He devoted one week in three to a free clinic during a time when he was among the top earners in British entertainment. Although his abilities were occasionally treated with disdain by a clannish and bemused British medical community, he was asked in 1948 to give the annual lecture

by the Hunterian Society as well as later serving as an adviser to the Neurology Department of Wake Forest University in North Carolina.

With the winding down of variety, as television became predominant, Casson built his own theatre night-club in Barnsley to foster stage talent as diverse as Paul Daniels and Sandie Shaw. He also continued to perform his “Hypnotic Phantasy”, selling out cavernous venues such as New Theatre, Cardiff, and the Sunderland Empire to fanatically loyal audiences.

A passionate traveller, he also played in countries such as Morocco, Iceland and America, as well as being a regular on the QE2. He was still going strong at the age of 70, when he gave a magnificent final performance at the London Palladium. Alarmed by the rise of “cowboy” hypnotists who would use the craft to induce people to perform degrading and dangerous acts, Casson recently formed the Federation of Ethical Stage Hypnotists, an act which brought him into occasional conflict with younger practitioners.

He became a leading debunker of such sham hypnotic practices as past-life regression. It was wholly characteristic of the man – Casson’s act was a model of circumspection. He inspired awe rather than giggles; wonder rather than ridicule. Anyone lucky enough to see him would come away with a deeper appreciation of the uncanny potential of the human mind.

Peter Reginald Casson, hypnotist: born Bridlington, Yorkshire 13 December 1921; married 1952 Magda Bain (one daughter; marriage dissolved 1986); died Wakefield 24 October 1995.

For more information on stage hypnosis, you can download the eBook ***Inside Stage Hypnosis*** which is available from this website. www.newtonhypnosis.com.