



Idyll Banter

Nothing like hypnosis to find a new you

By Chris Bohjalian, Burlington Free Press, Sunday February 1 2001

Phillips Exeter Academy, the elite boarding school in southern N.H., demands a lot of from its students, faculty and staff -- and from the hypnotists it brings to the campus as entertainment. Nevertheless, it was a little disconcerting for Kelly McGahie, the school's assistant director of student activities, to learn from a group of frenzied teens that one of their peers was still under hypnosis after a performance was over and convinced that she had a different name.

"The kids came racing up to me, and they were all saying, 'We have to find the hypnotist, we have to find the hypnotist!'" McGahie recalls. Fortunately, the hypnotist, Steve Taubman of Burlington, hadn't left, and he was able to break the spell and remind the girl of what her name really was. And even if Taubman had (as they say) "left the building," my sense is that Exeter would have found him pretty darn quickly, and moved any mountain necessary to bring him back and return to the girl her rightful name. The irony? McGahie believes the student might not have been among those volunteers Taubman had brought to the stage, hypnotized, and taught new names. The girl might have been sitting happily in the audience, and was completely unaware that she had been hypnotized -- which was why Taubman hadn't thought to awaken her from her trance.

Taubman, 47, is a magician as well as a hypnotist. He is also a former chiropractor, who changed careers a decade and a half ago because he was growing bored. "I'd get into the office at 8," he recalls, "and realize that I had looked at my watch a dozen times by 9 o'clock. That's no way to live."

The first time I saw Taubman work was at the Basin Harbor Club, where some evenings during the summer he will stroll through the dining room, entertaining the guests at their tables. It's very accomplished sleight of hand: He will transform a quarter into a piece of change the size of a coffee cup saucer, or tell you precisely which card you were pondering in a deck.

What elevates Taubman's work beyond mere card and coin tricks, however, is his patter - which, it is clear, is more than just babble to divert you from his fingers and hands. Without irony, Taubman will quote Einstein, Danish physicist Niels Bohr or a Zen patriarch.

Some of his favorite passages served as backdrops for the show he performed last month at the FlynnSpace in Burlington with his partner, Roderick Russell: "Stop thinking and talking, and there's nothing you can't know." "Millions of people long for immortality but don't know what to do with a rainy afternoon."

Or the classic observation from Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Taubman's show with Russell includes magic, escapes, and sword-swallowing -- though Taubman says with no small amount of relief that the escapes and the sword-swallowing are handled entirely by Russell. Much of the show focuses upon the element Taubman seems to enjoy most: The hypnosis. He never humiliates anyone while they are in a trance, or encourages them to do anything that later will come back to haunt them. It's pretty G-rated stuff. (Exeter's McGahie says Taubman is one of the few hypnotists she trusts enough to actually drink with in a bar.) The point of the show, after all, isn't to embarrass anyone: "I want the performance to be a metaphysical joy ride -- to show people what's possible when you really clear your mind," he says.

It's a terrific experience, and I don't simply believe that because I've been hypnotized. At least I don't think I have been. In any event, I have to go now and ask my wife my first name.

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