

## EXPOSING EUSAPIA

Surrounded by camera crews, comedians Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis cavorted on the Morningside Heights campus in 1984, portraying college professors investigating paranormal phenomena for the film *Ghostbusters*. Little did they know that 75 years earlier on the same campus, a group of real-life Columbia College professors had engaged in much the same activity—conducting a detailed scientific inquiry into claims of psychic ability. The object of their scrutiny was Eusapia Paladino, the most celebrated spiritualist medium of their day. During a series of séances in Fayerweather Hall, the Columbia team developed paradigmatic investigative techniques by which they exposed Paladino as a fraud.

For over 30 years, Paladino had mystified the public with spectacular séances, during which mysterious raps were heard, objects were levitated, spiritual heads and hands appeared, and cool breezes wafted through the darkened séance room, supposedly emanating from a scar in her forehead. Championed by a number of Italian notables, including Cesare Lombroso, the purported founder of criminology, Paladino's alleged powers quickly became legendary. Her proponents included leading scientists and academics who, having been hoodwinked by her

To the extent that this argument rested on the proposition that Paladino lacked a certain moral sensibility, it was supported by ample evidence. One leading Italian spiritualist noted that Paladino had "often been seen in company with individuals of a low standard." During her séances, valuable objects which traveled into the spirit world had a tendency not to return. Similarly, Paladino frequently used sex or sexual titillation to influence her Victorian-era investigators: Cesare Lombroso attributed her powers to sexual energy, supporting his theory by measurements of secretions and orgasms shortly before the production of occult phenomena.

In 1909, a group of academics led by Miller and Joseph Jastrow,\* a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin who was then lecturing at Columbia, paid Paladino \$12,500 for a series of ten séances to be held at the College's physical laboratory, at that time located in Fayerweather Hall. Their stated objective "was to secure and report on any evidence of the operation of hitherto unknown forces through [Paladino] or in her presence." After several séances, the investigators had been treated to Paladino's entire repertoire: floating tables, spirit raps, mystic drafts, etc. Jastrow noted that

# A medium well done

simple yet audacious ruses, proclaimed the effects to be genuine spiritual manifestations.

Charles Richet, a Nobel Prize-winning physiologist, coined the word "ectoplasm" in an attempt to explain the strange happenings at Paladino's séances. William James numbered among her adherents, as did Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was a sucker for all things occult and who earnestly believed that Paladino would be canonized. According to Dickinson S. Miller, a professor of philosophy at the College, "[g]roup after group ha[d] sat with her and published results. No other medium ha[d] ever absorbed so much and so prolonged a scientific attention. These learned patrons... inflated her reputation and exalted her prices."

Some investigators discovered that on at least occasion, Paladino resorted to tricks to produce her manifestations. In one case, investigators determined that Paladino had been using her teeth to levitate a table. In response, her supporters claimed that these isolated incidents resulted from the investigator's failure to properly control the medium—that, given the opportunity to cheat, Paladino would avail herself. Trickery, it was believed, was much less taxing than the psychic strain of paranormal communications.



Mystic: Eusapia Paladino, whose ghostly machinations fooled a gullible public.

PHOTO: CULVER PICTURES

"[a]ll the phenomena take place within a very short range—let us say arm's length or leg's length—of Eusapia." The professors suspected fraud.

At this point, Miller wrote, the Columbia investigators were "forced against their will to the only device that would eradicate a superstition and terminate a scandal to science—to watch from hidden places." Observers were hidden inside and atop various pieces of furniture in the Fayerweather laboratory, but they were too far from Paladino to detect her movements in the dimly lit room. R. W. Wood, a professor of physics at John Hopkins,

developed a clandestine lighting system by which a hidden assistant could observe floor-level shadows in the hopes of detecting Paladino's legs reaching under the séance table. When this method proved unsuccessful, Wood installed a machine to X-ray the bones in Paladino's legs

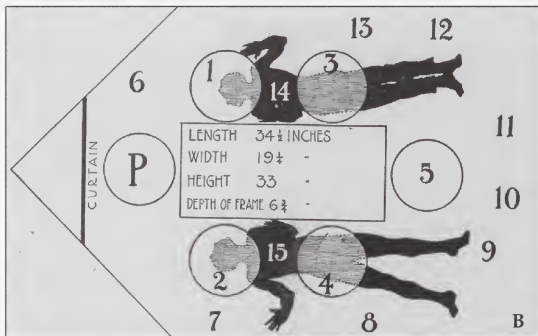
during the séance to track their position. Confronted with this equipment, the medium feigned illness and canceled the séance.

Miller recruited W. S. Davis, a former medium turned debunker, Joseph Rinn, a New York City produce merchant

\* Described by former Columbia astronomy professor Robert Jastrow '44 as "a distant relative, probably a great uncle."

*She was the leading spiritualist of her day—until some skeptical Columbia scholars saw how she made things go bump in the night.*

BY GARY R. BROWN '85



## Unmasking a fraud

Though Paladino had previously been caught cheating during her séances, it took a Columbia probe to fully discredit her. Illustration (A) depicts the session she held in the home of Professor Herbert Gardiner Lord, later Acting Dean of the College, on April 17, 1910. Those legs under the table belong to Warner C. Pyne '12, who secretly watched Paladino perform her tricks. (B) is a schematic of the participants. Paladino is the circle labeled "P," Pyne is #15, and his on-the-floor partner in covert detection, Joseph Rinn, is #14. In (C), Paladino maintains contact with two observers' feet using only her right foot; her left one remains free to maneuver the table. Similarly, in (D), she presents an unbroken circle by clasping hands with observers on either side of her. But during the proceedings, she would sandwich her right hand between the two observers' hands, freeing her left hand to produce her illusions.

PHOTOS: (A), (B), AND (C), COLLIER'S; (D), CULVER PICTURES

"deeply interested in the methods of mediums," and several magicians to assist in the investigation. Based on their advice, the investigators adopted a new strategy: the final two séances would be held under conditions that appeared quite lax, in order to encourage Paladino to attempt more daring and conspicuous deceptions. To avoid the scientific inhibitions of the Fayerweather laboratory, the final two séances were held at the home of Professor of Philosophy Herbert Gardiner Lord. The participants now included "various women to allay [Paladino's] suspicions," and the investigators provided Paladino with an interpreter to continually reassure her all was well.

The participants carefully rehearsed their parts: each was to focus on a particular aspect of Paladino's performance. Davis and John L. Kellogg, a professional magician, were passed off as Columbia professors and seated at either side of Paladino. Dressed entirely in black, Rinn and an undergraduate, Warner C. Pyne '12, crawled under the séance table after the lights had been extinguished. In this position, they remained within inches of Paladino's legs throughout the séances and were able to observe her movements.

On May 10, 1910, the results of the Columbia investigation appeared on page one of *The New York Times* under the headline "Paladino Tricks All Laid Bare."

Both the newspaper and *Collier's* magazine devoted several pages to the committee's findings and the medium's response. It was reported that despite Paladino's ability to baffle numerous scientists, the manifestations observed at her séances were the result of physical, rather than metaphysical, forces; Paladino had used unsophisticated gimmicks to create the vast majority of her illusions.

A major clue to her machinations was that virtually all the mysterious goings-on had appeared on her left side only. Six participants in the séance had sat around a table in Professor Lord's home, surrounded by eight observers. Throughout the proceedings, Paladino was supposed to keep her right foot placed on the left foot of Kellogg (seated at her right), and her left foot placed on the right foot of Davis (seated at her left). Kellogg and Davis should therefore have been able to feel if Paladino had freed her feet to physically manipulate the environment.

Down on the floor, though, Rinn and Pyne saw that Paladino had subtly maneuvered her right foot so that her heel remained on Kellogg while her toes rested on Davis. With only one foot providing the tactile illusion that both were occupied, Paladino was able to slip her left foot under the leg of the table and lift it, giving the appearance of levitation. Moreover, she had used her left foot to sound a number of sharp raps, maneuver a small stool to her left as if it had a life of its own, and rustle the curtain of a cabinet situated behind her. Paladino had also used her left hand to slap open the curtain, covering her left arm with it. In this fashion, in the dim light, she was able to present her unobscured left hand as floating and disembodied.

Perhaps the most brazen of her chicaneries was the cool spirit breezes, which blew locks of the hair on her forehead around and which thus seemed to emanate from a scar near her hairline. But these enigmatic drafts actually came from her pursed lips. As Kellogg related, "The attention of all being directed to the scar, they do not notice that she slyly holds her hand close to her chin, almost over her mouth, from which the breath is directed upward. Many a little girl can do this and blow a contrary lock of hair or curl back from her face even without the use of the hand."

The committee issued a joint statement indicating that "no convincing evidence of supernatural phenomena was

obtained" and that there were "[m]any indications... that trickery was being practiced upon the sitters." However, the investigators differed as to the conclusiveness of their study. One investigator, Associate Professor of Philosophy William Pepperell Montague, refused to sign the report, noting that although he was not convinced that Paladino possessed supernatural abilities, he did "not feel that the methods and conditions of our experiments were of such a kind as to warrant the rigorously scientific verdict for which we had hoped, or even to justify the degree of emphasis expressed in the majority report." By contrast, Professor Jastrow wrote that the investigation yielded "actual observation, for the first time, of the complete machinery by which Paladino performs the typical feats which have led famous men of science in many countries of the world to regard them as indicative of unknown forces."

The investigators also differed on their impression of Paladino. While Dr. Charles Dana, a professor of nervous diseases at Columbia P&S, found that Paladino "impressed [him] as resourceful and alert, not at all like a common charlatan," Walter Boughton Pitkin, a philosophy lecturer, believed her to be "a conscious, clever and aggressively determined fraud." Miller described Paladino as "a kind of incarnation of specious evidence, a symbol of sophistry [whose] art is to obtain credence under false pretenses," by which she "degrades" her "fatuuous dupes."

Confronted by a reporter, Paladino greeted the results of the Columbia investigation with "fire in her cold, gray eyes." Although Paladino vowed that she would disprove the findings before some "real scientists," she rejected a proposal to perform a séance at the *Times* Tower "with a choice array of Neapolitan explosives... for which the English language offers no equivalent."

As a result of the Columbia séances, the *Times* opined, "the greatest of spiritualistic impostors in history was unmasked." The Columbia investigators effectively destroyed Paladino's reputation: although the medium continued to give séances until her death in 1920, she lacked credibility with all but the most fervent believers. In a seminal exposé on spiritualism, Harry Houdini described the techniques employed at the Columbia séances, citing them as "the only way" to successfully evaluate the claims of mediums.

That is not to say, however, that the professors necessarily got the last word. In the decade that followed Paladino's unmasking, relatives and friends of the millions killed in World War I swelled the ranks of spiritualism and created a vast market for a new generation of mediums. In 1923, *Scientific American* launched a well-publicized investigation of spiritualist claims, offering \$2,500 for the production of genuine psychic phenomena. On December 21, 1923, at a sensational séance given at the Woolworth Building by Nino Pecoraro, a young Italian medium competing for the prize, Paladino's ethereal face and hands were seen, and her ghostly voice heard. "I who used to call the spirits back, now come back to be a spirit myself," moaned the now deceased Paladino. The participants were informed that Paladino "knows that you are skeptical and wants to show that the phenomena are genuine." Even in the afterlife, however, Paladino failed to persuade; the *Scientific American* prize money was never awarded.

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