

Jeffrey Stanley's
BONEYARDS

ART CHURCH OF WEST PHILADELPHIA

6/19/15 @9pm
6/27/15 @9pm
6/28/15 @5pm



BONEYARDS writer-performer **Jeffrey Stanley** teaches screenwriting, theatre history and script analysis courses at New York University Tisch School of the Arts and at Drexel University Westphal College of Media Arts & Design. He is one of 24 writers out of 16,100 entrants to receive the first [Amtrak Writers Residency](#). His most recent screenplay is *Little Rock*, a bio-pic about artist Copy Berg, the first officer to legally challenge the US military for anti-gay discrimination, adapted from his partner Lawrence Gibson's memoir *Get Off My Ship: Ensign Berg v. the US Navy*. Stanley has appeared as a guest on *Coast to Coast AM With George Noory*, and as a guest writer in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time Out New York*, *New York Press*, and the *Brooklyn Rail*. His wartime drama [Tesla's Letters](#) (Samuel French, 2000) premiered to rave reviews Off Broadway in 1999 at The Ensemble Studio Theatre and went on to the Edinburgh Fringe and other productions. Other plays include [Medicine, Man](#), a dark medical comedy commissioned by Virginia's Mill Mountain Theatre, [Beautiful Zion: A Book of the Dead](#) which premiered in the 2011 Philly Fringe, and [The Golden Horseshoe: A Lecture On Tragedy](#) which he performed in New York City at the Gershwin Hotel and Don't Tell Mama. In the 2012 Philly Fringe he produced Bidisha Dasgupta's hit classical Indian and Modern dance show [Einstein/Tagore: Seashore of Endless Worlds](#). He was a 2011-12 PDC @Plays & Players artist-in-residence. Stanley has been a resident of **Yaddo**, a **Copeland Fellow** at Amherst College, a guest lecturer at the **Imaginary Academy** summer theatre and film workshop in Croatia sponsored by the **Soros Foundation**, and he was an editorial adviser to Boston University's Center for Millennial Studies' book on apocalypse movements *The End That Does* (Equinox Books, 2006). He holds an MFA in Dramatic Writing and a BFA in Film & Television from NYU Tisch School of the Arts with a minor in cultural anthropology. He is the principal at **Shiva3 Productions** which began as a lark during the 2011 Philly Fringe and has turned into something real. info@shiva3.com.

Solow Fest was founded in 2010 by Philadelphia performance artists Thomas Choinacky and Amanda Grove. Now in its fifth year SoLow continues to experiment with their niche of using non-traditional locations and venues, inspiring artists and audiences alike to challenge the norm of theatre and making and seeing art that may otherwise never be created. In 2015, the Solow founders handed the Fest off to a team of local Philadelphia artists including Chris Davis, Lauren Tracy, Lena Barnard and Meredith Sonnen.

The **Art Church of West Philadelphia** is a new performance space that was formerly a private residence built in 1925. It is owned and run by director and producer Cara Blouin. These performances of BONEYARDS are part of Blouin's **Body Horror Mini-Fest** including solo shows from performance artists Joy Cutler and Joseph Ahmed.

FLASHBACK...

Beautiful Zion: A Book of the Dead
Ouija Log – 9/14/11

An Otherworldly Islamic Call to Prayer



OH. No wonder we were confused. It was speaking Arabic. I started out wanting to tell you how uneventful the Ouija session was last night. We had an irascible sort. Lots of apparent gibberish and lots of NOs. As one of the Ouija volunteers said, you could just see this angry old man shaking his cane at us saying, "Get out of my yard!" But in short it was telling us to stop trying to contact the dead and go pray.

The transcript ran about like this: **can you tell us your name? NO...NAMAZ Do you know you're in a show? NO...NAMAZ. Do you have any advice for Jeff? NO...NAMAZ. Do you know the other spirits we've contacted so far with this show? YES...NAMAZ. Can we talk to one of them instead of you? NO...NAMAZ. Can you tell us where you are? NO...NAMAZ.**

In between all of the negativity it just kept saying NAMAZ over and over. As I said to the volunteers this was either gibberish or a foreign language so we may as well hang it up...

So I get home and Google NAMAZ and find out it's Arabic for "pray," as in *Namaz-e-tawbah*, a Muslim prayer meaning Prayer of Repentance. I think this a Muslim spirit trying to tell us something.

Now I wish I could remember some of the other "gibberish" it was telling us because it probably meant something, too.

-Jeffrey Stanley

**Beautiful Zion: A Book of the Dead
Ouija Log – 9/17/11**

Egypt and Israel Dominate Talks

The closing night show was so overwhelming it's taken me an extra day to calm down enough to write about the Ouija session with some clarity. After 7 evenings of supernatural dissatisfaction for me personally during the brief run of the show and having to close every evening using the nuclear option I was about ready to give up on the spirit world as being able to reach out directly to anyone.

Enter M.

M. was an eager audience member in the final show who joined in with audience volunteer S. to person the Ouija board. They were escorted away and left alone for awhile as usual to try their hands at the board, reaching out to the netherworld in the Hell Room before I returned with the rest of the audience to rejoin them and see if they'd tuned into anything. Here is the main highlight that left us all haunted, especially M:



QUESTIONER (M) (to Jeff): I'm really freaked out right now. I have goose bumps and my hair's standing on end.

JEFF: That's normal when you've brought someone into the room. Something's here with us. Do you want to quit?

M: No. I'm just letting you know that I'm freaked. My hands are shaking, I'm afraid I'll mess up with the planchette.

JEFF: Why don't you stop? I can take your place.

M: No, I want to keep going.

JEFF (to Ouija board): What's your name?

SPIRIT (or subconscious ideomotor impulse depending on your beliefs): KHEF

JEFF: Khéf? I bet that turns out to be Arabic or Hindi, that keeps happening a lot lately. I've seen a lot this week so let's assume it's a real language and not gibberish. Are you Khéf?

SPIRIT: NO

M: Do you know anyone here?

SPIRIT: YES

M: Who?

SPIRIT: M— (spelling out M's name)

M: Oh wow. Do you want to tell me something?

At that the planchette shot down at breakneck speed to GOODBYE and refused to budge for anyone. Game over. We ended the session and all returned to the Blue Grotto and I wrapped up the show as usual.

Afterward M. stuck around as I began to strike the set for the last time, eager to talk to me at length about this, her first mind-blowing experience on a Ouija board. She needed to unburden herself; I've been there, I know what that's like so I stopped my work and listened. She was highly unsettled. She explained to me that she's Jewish and said that in the Jewish tradition it's strictly forbidden to contact the dead. I asked why she did it and — bless her heart — she said she did it to help me find the closure that I need in searching for my biological father's ghost. That was selfless of her but I hated that the experience had left her freaked out. In the end it's only a show and not worth the trauma.

She said she has immediate ancestors who died tortuous deaths in the Holocaust and that she'd always been afraid to think about how they'd perished. Facing their cruel fate is her worst nightmare, and the thought of hearing directly from them about how they suffered has always been more than she could bear.

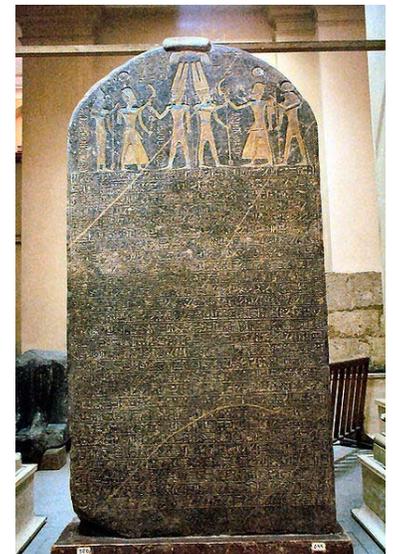
"Maybe it appeared to let you know they're there, but went to Goodbye so quickly to avoid having to tell you what it knows you don't want to hear," I suggested, "to spare you the pain."

M: That's exactly what it did. That's what I'm telling you.

Then I get home and find out that KHEF isn't Arabic, Hindi or even Urdu. **It's Egyptian.** It's the name of an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph that means "to be laid waste or destroyed." A reference to the Holocaust in our case? And this hieroglyph appears on the **ISRAEL STELE** (pictured right) of all things; the only ancient Egyptian document mentioning Israel by name. And wouldn't you know it? A stele is a **monument to the dead. A gravestone.** Yeah. You tell me.

Good luck, everyone, with your own nightmares and ghosts, and thank you for your support.

-Jeffrey Stanley



FLASH FORWARD...



On Faith

Four Pairs of Sandals as an Act of Faith

My otherworldly encounter with Allah in a Kolkata mosque

By Jeffrey Stanley

May 14, 2013

Three years ago I got married to my wife Bidisha in a traditional Bengali ceremony in Kolkata and spent three weeks touring the country. I bought a pair of sandals there which I wore throughout my trip and back home here in the States. This December my wife, our young son and I went back to India for a month to visit relatives. I brought my well-worn "India sandals" with me. A week into the visit they broke irreparably and I tossed them. The location of their demise seemed appropriate — from India they had come and to India they would return. The next day while we were out sightseeing we stumbled upon a tiny shoe store, one of a zillion in Kolkata, where I found the perfect pair of replacement sandals. They were simple but unique enough that they suited me as a souvenir.

A few days later I struck out on my own to visit Nakhoda Masjid, the largest mosque in Kolkata, built in 1926. A billboard told me with no intended irony that this was Road Safety Week in India. Still the taxis, auto-rickshaws and pedestrians were up to their usual danse macabre.

After a requisite insane cab ride and a short walk down a crowded, narrow street full of screaming sidewalk merchants selling Muslim prayer rugs and other Islam-themed souvenirs I found the mosque. It was sparsely populated at that late morning hour. The mosque is a well-known tourist destination and major pilgrimage site in India so I expected a ticket booth or at least a donation box typical of a Hindu temple, or at least a priest hustling me for a few rupees, but everyone seemed unfazed by my presence even though I was the only infidel saheb in sight. I stopped one worshipper on his way out and asked if it was okay for me to walk around. He smiled, said yes, feel free and gestured up the stairs.

Before going further I took off my sandals as is customary in houses of worship here. Mine were brand new sandals I had just bought in Kolkata the week before. I shoved them onto a shelf on the old wooden shoe rack near the front door and wandered about barefoot the same as everyone else. The mosque has

several floors, each one a vast, arched, open air pavilion looking out onto Zakaria Street, Kolkata's main "Muslim street," below. Most of the expansive, inlaid marble floors were completely empty and I had free reign of the place, feeling like a ghost quietly drifting about the serene building. At one point a neighbor on a balcony next door to the mosque smiled and waved. I waved back and he came closer to ask me the usual questions here. "Where from?"

I told him, "Amar nam Jeff," and added, "Apar nam?" He told me his name but I couldn't make it out over the din of the traffic. I gestured up at the mosque's green minarets and said "Khub shundor," very beautiful, and continued on my walk, passing the occasional Mecca-facing worshiper hard at prayer.

Living in New York City and Philadelphia I've had Muslim friends and colleagues over the years, and this was not my first time in a mosque. I have also read the Koran cover to cover, and doubtless I missed much of its deeper meaning with a dry English translation but I found it to be a moving, concise text largely misrepresented in the U.S. thanks to our politicians and mainstream media. The Koran didn't make me a convert. I remain agnostic at best but Nakhoda Masjid has a spiritually inviting, meditative atmosphere and offered a shady sanctuary on this sunny, warm day. I have no clue how to sit or pray properly in a mosque but I found a quiet corner and plopped down, making pretty sure to face Mecca, and closed my eyes, the closest I could come to meditating.

Then I came the closest I can come to praying. "Okay Allah, here's your chance," I thought. "My receiver's wide open so hit me. If you're present I'm willing to receive a communication from you." My mind went back to wandering and I tried to calm it, breathing deeply and unavoidably chanting mentally a Hindu-influenced mantra I had learned long ago in synchronization with my deep breaths. A few moments later, I kid you not, a question intruded and flashed through my mind like a neon sign in a dark ally. "What would you do if you went

downstairs and found that your sandals had been stolen?"

I answered to myself, "Well, what could I do but walk the filthy streets barefoot until I could hail a cab and head for home with blackened soles?" My mind wandered along, I sat there peacefully for a few more minutes and then got up to leave. Downstairs by the front door I was shocked to see that the shoe rack was completely empty. Yep, someone had stolen my brand new sandals. It could have been a worshiper or a beggar who darted in from the street as soon as I had turned my back.

Instead of feeling enraged which would be my usual reaction, I felt resigned to it and even amused. A typical day in Kolkata, what can you do? I looked around, wanting to file a complaint with someone on duty but there was no one around. I was about to hit the filthy streets barefoot as I'd told myself I'd do, but then I saw atop the shoe rack shoved into a far corner an old pair of sandals; dusty, upside down with soles exposed. They'd been there for a while and didn't seem to belong to anyone presently in the mosque.

I took them down and tried them on figuring I could scrunch my toes into them long enough to shuffle into a cab. To my surprise they fit me perfectly. They were exactly my size and felt form-fitted to my foot as though custom made for me. They were old, cheaply made, and didn't look like they'd last much longer but they'd do the job. I walked out into the streets in complete comfort. This is what the Arabs call kismet.

Still, I wanted my spiffy new souvenir sandals back to last me through a few years in the States. Besides, they had cost extremely little by U.S. standards. I decided to seek out the shoe store where I'd bought them the week before and get an identical pair. Flying on a wing and a prayer I started walking, feeling pretty sure I could sniff it out. As I walked down Zakaria Street, the only nonbeliever in sight among a primarily Muslim population, I was guessing at every left and right turn down strange, narrow streets and finally out onto the wider, busier avenues.

The day was getting hotter and my steps slower. I stared down at the old sandals clapping along and

thought of the old song, "Walk a Mile in My Shoes." I wondered whose simple sandals these had been, and which person at the mosque had stolen mine, and how much they'd get for them on the street. I hoped the thief was one of the poorest souls I had seen napping in there or washing up in the pools. I had gone to the mosque expecting to make some kind of charitable donation anyway, so I decided that with my sandals I had made my contribution after all.

I trudged along up one overcrowded avenue and down another for what seemed like an eternity and was about to throw in the towel when I heard the Namaz, or Muslim call to prayer—a common but hypnotic sound in this city. If you've never heard the Namaz, it's a haunting solo hymn, usually sung over a tinny loudspeaker, that draws you in like enchanted faerie music. I happily followed the melody to its source and found myself standing before the Tipoo Sultan Mosque built in 1832, one of the oldest mosques in Kolkata. Just as the Namaz stopped I looked up and there was my shoe store directly across the street.

I crossed the busy intersection with the usual daredevil darting and weaving through taxis and auto-rickshaws and stepped into the shop. I walked out two minutes later with new sandals on my feet and the old ones stuffed into my shoulder bag. My first impulse had been to chuck them into the nearest trash can but then I looked up at the mosque and got a better idea. I hopscotched back through the traffic to the other side and walked into the mosque compound.

As the Namaz had just been sung the mosque was full of men praying. All of their shoes sat lined up on the ground near the entrance. I took out the old sandals, lined them up next to the others and walked out. Hopefully they'll be of use to some other fellow traveler or needy soul one of these days.

My pilgrimage completed, from Kolkata's largest mosque to one of its oldest, I hopped in a cab and headed for home.

Jeffrey Stanley is a playwriting and screenwriting faculty member at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, as well as at Drexel University in Philadelphia.



On Faith

A Jewish-Hindu Connection

Talk about a crazy commute. After a spiritual encounter, a stranger and I spent the next 90 minutes discussing the nature of the universe.

By Jeffrey Stanley

July 23, 2013

Not so long ago after nearly 25 years as a hidebound New Yorker I moved to Philadelphia for my wife Bidisha's career needs, inadvertently becoming part of a popular regional migration known to urban statisticians as the 6th borough phenomenon. She's Indian-American and we're raising our child in a bilingual home. I'm a writer and professor. She's a scientist by day and an Indian classical dance professional by night. Religiously we are at best agnostic but culturally we are Hindus, and will identify ourselves as such when pressed, like on the hospital intake form the first time we took our baby in for a routine doctor's visit.

This identification sits well with me. Despite growing up Nazarene in the Bible Belt I had long ago developed an affinity for Hindu philosophy—ever since I'd come across a used copy of the Bhagavad Gita at a flea market in high school and realized how similar it was to the New Testament. I still remember the perplexed look on my Sunday school teacher's face the morning I brought the Gita to church. I had marked the sections that reminded me of Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount with an orange highlighter and asked him why Hindus were all going to Hell and we Christians weren't. Suffice it say I quit going to church not long after that. Christianity just wasn't speaking to me. When I met my wife-to-be years later while canoeing in Brooklyn's fetid Gowanus Canal I fell in easily with her cultural worldview. We were a match made in moksha.

Imagine my surprise when, on a recent Friday afternoon while returning to Philly on a crowded New Jersey Transit train out of Manhattan's Penn Station I came face to face with the power of YHWH. I have regular writing and teaching obligations in New York City so I typically commute between the two cities once or twice a week. The pre-rush hour train was unusually packed and it was running local but that was fine with me. In fact I had chosen the local on purpose, adding an hour to my travel time to get as much work done on the typically placid ride as possible before reaching home and hurlyburly.

Still awaiting departure from Penn I sat alone next to the window of my three-seater bench, opened my netbook, and sank into writing comments on my university students' movie scenes. This was my Screenwriting II class and the scripts weren't half bad. I had barely made a dent in my work when a rocker in a long-sleeved T-shirt, jeans and two black triangular ear studs plopped down next to me. I felt mildly annoyed by the disruption as he took off his coat and tossed it on the overhead rack along with his bag, and I was relieved when he settled into his seat, took out a paperback and began to read. Hallelujah, he'd be quiet like me instead of yammering away or playing videogames on a so-called smartphone. I continued my work in peace but couldn't help noticing that he was reading a book on Hinduism. Another time I might have struck up a conversation but I had a lot of work ahead so I kept my nose to the netbook.

The train quickly filled. A few moments later a third passenger plopped down next to us on our bench. I could guess from his dark coat and black hat that he was an Orthodox Jew. Despite his conservative dress and wireframe glasses I could tell he wasn't much older than 30. The train pulled out.

Almost immediately he started in with our mutual seatmate. "Excuse me. Are you Jewish?" A ha! A Lubavitcher. Here comes the proselytizing, I thought. I'd been a New Yorker long enough to have at least a vague understanding of the Brooklyn-based Chabad-Lubavitch movement and to know that they were some kind of Jewish mystics. I'd been there in the early '90s when their leader, the Rebbe Schneerson, had died after a prolonged illness while his followers had gathered in great numbers to keep vigil, many of them believing he was the moshiach. I had also been in New York long enough to know about their prowling Winnebagos dubbed "Mitzvah Tanks" that periodically stalked through town blasting Hebrew songs. They would pull over and set up camp on street corners all over Manhattan to go fishing, asking nearly every male passerby, "Excuse me. Are you Jewish?" Occasionally they'd snag one who nodded and they'd usher him inside their miniature

rolling synagogue. For what purpose I wasn't exactly sure other than some kind of counseling or offer of salvation. I had been tempted more than once to lie about my Jewishness and go aboard and find out what exactly went on in there and get whatever blessing they could lay on me. But they never even asked. A friend told me it's because they could look at my Elvisy Appalachian face a mile away and tell I wasn't Jewish. I refused to believe that. If they could tell just from looking who's Jewish and who's not then why go around asking everyone before launching into their spiel?

So now, sitting there on that fast-moving train I pricked up my ears at the conversation unrolling before me. How would our seatmate answer? He said yes, he was Jewish, but quickly put up his hand. "But I'm not interested, I just want to sit here and read." The Lubavitcher introduced himself anyway. His name was Lev. The reader was Dan. Dan sighed and put down his book, realizing he was cornered.

Lev wanted to know all about Dan's history as a Jewish man in New York and what led him to fall away. Had he gone to a yeshiva as a child? Yes. In fact, he had been on Long Island that very afternoon visiting a friend. He had taken a wrong train and wound up in the middle of nowhere. When he realized his error he hopped off but had no ready cash to pay for a return ticket. He took to the streets and asked a rabbi parked in front of a yeshiva the way to the nearest ATM. The rabbi instead gave him money to buy a ticket, no questions asked. Dan had refused at first but the rabbi insisted, telling him he could repay the favor by promising to do one mitzvah, or good deed, for some other stranger on the way home. Little did Dan know I was about to become that stranger.

Did Dan ever go to synagogue, Lev wanted to know? "Rarely. But I'm still interested in G-d," Dan explained. "That's why I'm—" he gestured to the book on Hinduism. "My mom just brought this back to me from India." At that I was boiling to become a busybody and jump into the conversation. I've been all over India by now and had just come from my most recent trip there a few weeks before. Where in India had his mom visited? How long had she been there? Had Dan ever been to India himself? Stay out of it, Stanley, or you're not going to get a damn thing done, I told myself. I bit my tongue and kept working.

Lev couldn't understand how a hippie book on Hinduism was going to supplant the teachings of the Torah. Dan tried to explain it to him. "I believe all religions are kind of saying the same thing and all pointing us toward the same truths. That's why my mom got me this. She knew I'd like it."

Now I couldn't help but avert my eyes to his book and burn holes in it, scouring the cover to see exactly what it was he was reading. I could tell it wasn't the Gita. I

checked the fine print at the bottom and damn if it wasn't published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest, as I had learned about Sri Aurobindo on my most recent trip. Aurobindo was an Indian spiritual leader, philosopher, playwright and anti-British political activist in the early 20th century. In fact my niece and nephew attend a school in Delhi founded by one of his main devotees, and their school has a store for fundraising at which they sell handicrafts made at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. I had brought some of these items home with me to give out to friends and colleagues.

Lev tried desperately to find some commonality with Dan to get him off this Hindu trip and back on the right track. He explained that as a Lubavitcher he too believed in the oneness of things, and that he had been taught to see only the goodness in people. That mystical approach did the trick and got Dan to open up to him a little more. Meanwhile I continued doing my best to tune them out and slip back into my own world. The train was now rolling out of the dark tunnel underneath the Hudson and emerging into the New Jersey swamps speeding toward its first stop: Secaucus.

"Would you like to use the Tefillin?" Lev eagerly asked him, presumptuously unzipping his satchel.

"Um, no, that's cool," Dan insisted, seeming a little embarrassed. Lev wasn't about to take no for an answer. He was already reaching inside his satchel and pulling something out.

Tefillin. I'd heard the word before and I knew that it was some kind of Jewish religious article but that was about it. Is it the thing you hang on your door, I thought? No, that's a mezuzah. A dreidel? No, that's a spinning top used at Hanukkah.

From the corner of my eye I saw Lev take a small, dark object from his bag and insistently hand it to Dan, trying to convince him to take it. This was now getting Jewish enough that they were leaving me in the dust. I thought I was finally free of temptation to join the conversation when I heard Dan say, "Tell you what. If you can convince this guy sitting next to me to do it, I'll do it."

Peripherally I could see Lev lean out past Dan to get a look at me and think it over. "Excuse me?" He tentatively began.

"Don't ask him if he's Jewish. He's not," Dan intervened, trying to do me a favor.

I feel Lev studying my face, trying to decide how to proceed.

"How can you tell?"

“Because if he was Jewish he would already be talking to us.”

Lev continued full steam ahead. “Do you know what Tefillin is?” he asked me. I knew his mission wasn’t to save me. It was to save Dan. But this was too good to pass up. I lifted my head.

“Not really,” I said. “I’ve heard of it.”

“Do you know what the Torah—?”

Dan, embarrassed for Lev, impatiently cut him off. “Of course he knows what the Torah is, he’s not stupid.” He then turned to me. “Look, he wants me to do the Tefillin and I’ll only do it if you do it.” Dan was using me, a total stranger, as his surefire excuse to not do it. He also had something else going for him: Lev was getting off in Secaucus which was about 30 seconds away. The train began to slow as we approached the station. Time was up.

“Oh, too bad,” said Dan. “But thanks for asking.”

Lev reluctantly stood up and lingered in the aisle, looking back at me. “Will you do it?”

I slapped my netbook shut. “Hit me.” I reached across Dan’s lap and shook Lev’s hand. “My name’s Jeff, I’m wide open, lay it on me.” Both of their eyes widened, neither of them sure whether to take me seriously. “Go ahead and do him,” I said, nodding at Dan. “You can do me next.”

Lev was elated. He plopped back into his seat like a schoolboy and missed his stop on purpose. That still only gave him a few minutes to work this miracle before the next stop. Out from his bag flew both Tefillin boxes attached to leather straps. I asked to see one and he tossed it past Dan into my lap. It was a black leather cube about 2 inches square with Hebrew characters emblazoned on the sides in gold paint. One side of the box was open and covered with a white film. “That’s parchment,” Lev explained with pride. “And inside are lots of pieces of paper with verses from the Torah written on them.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sort of like a Buddhist prayer wheel with scraps of paper inside with ‘Om mani padme hum’ written on them. And then you spin it and—”

Dan smiled. Lev looked stymied. Unsure whether he was offended or confused I handed the box back to him. Dan rolled up his sleeve and held out his left arm while Lev commenced the elaborate wrapping procedure around his fingers so many times and then up and around his arm in just a certain way. To me, it looked like Dan was about to shoot up heroin. Once the wrapping was

completed, Dan held his bicep against his chest so the box touched his heart. Lev then strapped another box just above Dan’s forehead to be near his mind.

I’m telling you right now there’s no way anyone can sit on a commuter train at rush hour and do Tefillin and not have everyone and his sister noticing, because notice they did. The entire car was listening in on our conversation by this point. I had never seen so many people sneaking peeks at me in my life. Lev coached Dan through reciting a prayer in Hebrew, most of which Dan remembered on his own from his yeshiva days. Then it was my turn. I waited while they worked together frantically to beat the clock as the train rolled on, untying the works from Dan and strapping me in for a beautiful trip that would leave me craving more. Finally everything was in place. “I don’t know Hebrew! What do I say!” I blurted as the train decelerated.

They hesitated, looked at each other. We were pulling into Newark station. Dan finally spoke. “Just say you believe in the oneness of the universe and why,” he said urgently. Lev eagerly nodded.

The train doors opened. I thought for a moment and said slowly and thoughtfully, taking all the time in the world, “I believe in the oneness of the universe because of this thing with two total strangers that is happening to me right now.”

“Great.” Dan tore the Tefillin off me and thrust the boxes back at Lev who shoved them into his satchel, shook both our hands and bolted off before the doors slammed shut to wait in the cold and backtrack home.

Dan and I sat back and chuckled. “That was really cool of you,” he said.

“You’re not going to believe me,” I told him, “but I’m a Hindu.”

“I know you are,” he said, beaming.

“Okay now how on Earth can you possibly know that?”

“Because you knew about Buddhist prayer wheels and you believe in the oneness of the universe. And because I saw you staring at my book.”

He had me there. I smiled out the window thinking how I couldn’t wait to get home to tell Bidisha all about my ride. Talk about a crazy commute. Dan and I spent the next 90 minutes discussing the nature of the universe. Turns out he’s a biologist like my wife so we had much to talk about as we delved into a deep blend of science, philosophy and mysticism en route to post-industrial Trenton where I would make a final transfer to the City of Brotherly Love. At one point around Princeton Dan fell

back into his seat looking suddenly drunk. "Whoa. I feel high, like we just took some powerful drug." I knew what he meant.

Surprisingly for such a short time we had come to some pretty definite conclusions about G-d, or Brahma, and the meaning of life, but I'll keep all these things and ponder them in my heart. You wouldn't believe me anyway. You must experience it yourself, not read about it. I'll let you in on this much though: a week later I stumbled upon this verse from the Rig Veda that summed up our conclusions:

*Man, shining light in the City,
Has a thousand heads, eyes, and feet,
He covers the earth on all sides,*

Rules supreme over inner space.

We both got off in Trenton and went our separate ways. I considered asking for his email address and I suspect he had the same fleeting thought but we both skipped it. Some people you're only meant to meet once and glimpse briefly, like trains speeding past each other in the darkness.

Shabat shalom.

Jeffrey Stanley is a playwriting and screenwriting faculty member at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, as well as at Drexel University in Philadelphia.



On Faith

Supernatural Skeptics Don't Know What They're Missing

I try contacting the spirit world before live audiences to keep an element of hope simmering on the back burner of my mind.

By Jeffrey Stanley

October 31, 2013

I like Ouija boards. I've used them since I was a teenager. More recently I've messed around with electric spirit boxes, also known as Frank's boxes after their inventor Frank Sumption. They're radio receivers which allow you to listen to and record voices of the dead, also known as EVPs (Electronic Voice Phenomena) or Raudive voices, after one of their early discoverers. Over the past two years I have frequently used Ouija boards and spirit boxes in my performance art, attempting to conjure up the dead as my co-stars before a live audience. At one of the universities where I teach playwriting and screenwriting part-time I am also the faculty adviser for a student-led paranormal investigation club. Friends and fans assume I am a true believer but the truth is that I am not. I am a healthy skeptic. And that's depressing for me because it means that on some level I feel certain there's nothing out there. I try contacting the spirit world before live audiences to keep an element of hope simmering on the back burner of my mind.

Given the many millions of religious folks in the world (surveys tell us time and again that the vast majority of us believe in an afterlife) I am not alone in my desire for proof of a promise made long ago. I don't want to be told it by a clergyman or a book or a website. I want to see it. Because of the world's overwhelming belief in an afterlife I am always amazed at the number of people who are absolutely petrified of Ouija boards. Shouldn't we be elated when the pointer, properly called a planchette, moves and spells out things? Shouldn't we jump for joy when a spirit box calls out to us? Instead we flee in terror at the most innocuous of communications. I'm reminded of my good friend Steve who received a strict Catholic upbringing. Once as a teenager he played around with a Ouija board and it spelled out his dog's name: HOB0. He ran shrieking from the room, convinced he'd made contact with the Devil himself. Several years later he became a teacher in a Catholic high school. He laughs now when recalling that he used his experience as a way of convincing his young charges not to dabble with the supernatural. "Mark my words, Ouija boards are evil. I

once played with one and it spelled out my pet's name." Cue The Exorcist theme song. Psychologists tell us that what makes the planchette move on a Ouija board isn't a ghost, angel or demon. The movements are caused by subconscious ideomotor impulses. Let's roll with that for a moment. If it's true, I remain fascinated because it means the average human mind is far more perceptive and imaginative than we realize and perhaps even telepathic. When two strangers sit at a Ouija board and it spells out detailed facts about a third party standing in the room with them, or creates a character with a full name, birth date, death date, personality, home, family and street address, fluency in a foreign language, science starts to seem but one more belief system with as many holes as any spiritual sideshow.

Thanks to all the ghost hunting shows the big craze for true believers these days is spirit boxes. Imagine an AM/FM transistor radio stuck on permanent scan. Now imagine you can control the scan rate and that you set it to, say, 250 milliseconds, or 1/4 of a second. It automatically scans through the dial, stopping not just on radio stations but on every frequency on the band, for 1/4 of a second, before skipping to the next frequency. 88.1, 88.2, 88.3... Most of these are static. Every so often you get a blip of random audio as it scans past a broadcast. You turn on a video or audio recorder to document your session. You now ask a question into the air and await a response. Sometimes the responses are immediate and crystal clear. Others are difficult to understand beneath all the static and only come to light during amplified playback. Some responses have to be slowed down and have their volume boosted to improve clarity. In my experience, a five-minute recording might contain 20 or 30 audible "responses." Only about 10 of these will be easily understandable to the average listener. So while the results are not as instantly gratifying or dramatic as using a Ouija board in front of an audience, the results after post-production can be quite stunning and difficult to explain away. Skeptics will try, though. I chuckled when I first Googled "EVPs debunked" and read various naysayers' biased

conclusions. They generally start from their subjective presupposition that listening to the dead is impossible, then loop to their own self-gratifying conclusion that spirit boxes are indeed not receiving voices from the dead. They postulate that the voices are entirely composed of snippets from radio stations or bleed-through from neighbors' cell phones, neither of which they seem to have bothered to verify firsthand, and neither of which explain how a single voice could complete an entire sentence over a stretch of several quarter-second frequencies, or how these voices call out names of people in the room at that moment.

Next they'll tell you that gullible spirit box users are simply victims of a psychological phenomenon called pareidolia, a fancy word for seeing faces in clouds. In other words, with EVPs you're only hearing what you want to hear. If I was hearing what I'd want I'd be hearing Granny saying, "Hi, Jeff, it's me, Orelia, and I'm fine. My emphysema's cured and feel great." I'd hear Jesus Christ telling me that I'm blessed and definitely going to Heaven. I'd hear next week's winning lottery numbers. I have never heard any of these things. In fact I have sometimes heard things I do not want to hear, like "go to hell" or "leave us alone."

The naysayers also have a habit of ruthlessly ridiculing true believers; so much for objectivity. When your only way to combat an idea you don't like is to resort to sarcasm then you haven't got a leg to stand on. Many of them enjoy pointing out that if the dead really are able to speak to us they sure don't have much wisdom to pass along to us if all they can do is call out names and random words. Again these skeptics are arrogantly, and I might add lazily, drawing self-serving conclusions. A little research would have pointed them to some pretty phenomenal ghost whisperers. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet James Merrill's epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* was written over a period of many years via a homemade Ouija board that he used regularly with his partner David. Rosemary Brown, a British housewife in the 1960s, regularly took dictation from, and performed original musical compositions by, the ghosts of Mozart, Bach, Beethoven and other dead composers. Some of these original works were conducted by Leonard Bernstein for the BBC. Brown always insisted she was not the writer of these works but merely their transmitter. In the 19-teens a Ouija board spirit named Patience Worth dictated several novels and a number of poems to St. Louis neighbors Pearl Curran and Emily Hutchings. The ghostly Patience Worth's works were published under her own name and well-reviewed in national publications. Apparently the dead have plenty to share with us. During my stage seances I usually make a point of asking spirits if they have any advice for us, the living. The most memorable answer I have gotten to date came from the spirit box calling out to the audience in crystal clear voice, "have courage."

The Tibetan Book of the Dead explains that after death some spirits become terrified and confused by the choices presented to them, and rather than transmigrating into their next incarnation they wind up

hiding in forgotten, swirling eddies along the river of time. They are lonely, frightened, sad, happy, sarcastic, sincere, faithful, and sometimes angry. This Tibetan view sits well with me. After years of contacting the dead (or subconscious ideomotor impulses depending on your beliefs) my own conclusion is that they — at least those who are in a place where they're able to communicate with us — are pretty much like you and me. There are nice ones, mean ones, sociable ones, loners, even ones who seem suspicious of me at first rather than the other way around. Some know more than others but they are not omniscient. You do get the occasional sarcastic or even hostile (note that I did not say evil) presence but that only spices up the show. I have never felt a reason to fear them outright so let me say something loud and clear: fear the living. Ever been mugged by a ghost? Ever been shot at by a ghost? Ever been conned out of your money by a demon or seen a ghost driving drunk the wrong way down the interstate killing an entire family in a minivan in the oncoming lane? Right. Fear the living and give the ghosts a break.

Indeed my audiences and I have had far more positive and uplifting experiences with the so-called dead than we have had terrifying or negative events but I am not here to convince you of my beliefs. It's Halloween time and I know why you're reading this article. You want to be spooked, so rather than sharing one of my heartwarming Ouija accounts I leave you with the following recollection from my teens that I often recount during my shows. It's autobiographical and happened in the presence of four other eyewitnesses. It's the story of the New Year's Eve when Jimi Hendrix's ghost possessed a kitten and made it play a guitar, then set fire to a Christmas tree.

I was 19 and capping off my coming-of-age years in southwestern Virginia. It was the year before I moved to New York City to go to film school. I was at my friend Robin's New Year's Eve party with a bunch of people. We were stoned and drunk and sitting around her candle-lit kitchen table in the dark. The mood was right for the conversation to turn toward séances. Someone said, too bad we don't have a Ouija board. Somehow, instinctively, I knew what to do! I asked for a blank sheet of paper and Robin brought me one. On it I wrote the letters A through Z, YES and NO and the numbers 1 through 10. For a planchette we used—I had just the thing—a credit card. Turned face down the raised letters gave it a very small surface area. One corner of the card we designated as the pointer. My friends Adam, Mary Etta, and Scott sat around it and each of them put just one finger gently on it. I stood aside as the Questioner and said: 'We come in a spirit of peace to make new friends. Is there anybody out there who'd like to speak with us tonight?' The planchette moved purposefully back and forth from A to Z, A to Z, over and over. I am the Alpha and the Omega. The first and the last. "Oh really?" I asked. "You're Jesus Christ?" YES.

Now, I've been through this enough times to have learned a thing or two about spirits, or subconscious ideomotor impulses depending upon your beliefs. You throw open the door and they rush in like rioters raiding a dressing room, and they don whatever costumes they find there. Mark Twain. Jesus. Satan. You never know who you're going to get when you open the Pandora's Box that is your dreamworld. Do you think a Hindu gets Jesus and Satan and Mark Twain on the board? They don't. I've checked. The next question to ask the spirit is, 'Where are you now?' Nine times out of ten the answer I get is ZION. And they're not talking about Israel. They're using an old Christian term for Heaven, borrowed of course from the Hebrew Bible.

*We're marching to Zion,
Beautiful, beautiful Zion;
Marching upward to Zion,
The beautiful city of God.*

So anyway the board's really cookin' now. I'd point to Scott and ask, "How old is Scott?" and the board would get it right. "How old is Adam?" The board would get it right. Pretty soon we start getting bored with watching it guess ages so I up the ante and ask, "Are you in the room with us now?" It moves to YES and starts coyly circling the word.

"Can you see us?"

YES

"Can you see our...underwear?"

YES

"Alright. I'm wearing white boxer shorts. They have stripes. What color are the stripes?"

RED

I nearly faint. I pull up the waistband of my underwear to show everyone that my stripes are indeed red. Everyone laughs. I point to Adam. "What color underwear is Adam wearing?"

WHITE

Adam pulls up his waistband and sure enough he's wearing your basic Fruit of the Looms. Everybody laughs again.

"What color underwear is Mary Etta wearing?"

BLUE

She pulls up the waistband of her panties. Yep, they're blue.

"What color is Scott's underwear?"

UGLY

"Ugly?" Scott pulls up the waistband of his boxers and they're black and orange plaid! Everybody howls with laughter. Our guards are down, we're embracing the spirits. Inviting them inside...

Next Adam wants to talk to Jimi Hendrix. Adam's a guitar virtuoso. In fact his acoustic guitar's right there on the floor sitting in its open case. He'd been playing it earlier. He and I had sung Blue Christmas, me doing my best Elvis impression.

I'll have a blue Christmas without you

I'll be so blue just thinking about you

Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree--

I didn't know then that that line was a macabre

foreshadowing. You'll see what I mean. Adam asks the

spirits if they can put Jimi on, and the board says YES.

We change places. I sit down and touch the planchette now, and Adam stands and asks the questions.

"Is that you, Jimi?"

YES

He asks a few biographical questions. Sure enough the board gets them right. Adam is amazed. I mean obscure questions like what year Jimi was born, what year certain albums came out, who sat in on certain sessions.

Jimi's getting every question right. Then Adam drops

the bomb. "Jimi, can you play my guitar?"

We all fall silent.

YES

"All you have to do is pluck one of my guitar string, Jimi. Can you do that?"

And the credit card starts circling YES. I mean with such force that it flies off the paper sometimes and we have to put it back on and touch it again, and it shoots back to YES and starts circling it, faster and faster in tight little loops.

We're all chanting, "Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

And then, out of nowhere, I kid you not, Robin's little

black kitten comes running in from the darkened living

room and makes a beeline for that guitar and starts smacking at one of the strings. Everybody freaked. Mary

Etta's running around flipping on all the lights and

blowing out the candles. Robin's screaming at me

going, "I hate you, Jeff Stanley. I was never scared of this house before and now you've made it haunted!"

And in the middle of that we smell something

burning. And we're like, sniff sniff, what is that? It smells like a fireplace. Only Robin ain't got no fireplace. And

we run and look in the living room and the freaking

Christmas tree is on fire. They had this red scented candle that had somehow been knocked over, and all of

this molten red wax was dripping in a steady stream off the table onto the Christmas tree and setting it

aflame. Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree.

We got it out, but after that I marched into that kitchen, balled up that sheet of paper and chucked it in the trash, vowing vowing never to play with homemade Ouija boards again. From then on, strictly store bought.

