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Spirits Soar In ABC Special, CBS Miniseries

By WALT BELCHER
wbelcher@tampatrib.com

TAMPA — The arrest of actor Robert Blake last week might boost interest in tonight's ABC special in which psychic George Anderson claims to contact Bonny Lee Bakely, 44, who was found shot dead in Blake's car last May.

But Bakely's alleged message from the spirit world doesn't incriminate Blake, who has been charged with the murder. Her brief message to her mother and sister is like most of the messages Anderson receives: She's in a happy place, having found peace in the spirit world.

Anderson reportedly has helped police solve crimes, but in this case, the alleged spirit isn't willing to share how she died or who killed her.

Blake, who told authorities he left his wife in the car while he returned to retrieve his gun from a restaurant, had been under suspicion by police and Bakely's relatives. Bakely's mother, Margorie Carlyon, and her sister, Margerry Bakely, didn't get the answers they were looking for but seem convinced Anderson made contact. Anderson explains that sometimes the departed doesn't tell us what we want to know but what we need to know.

Dead Seek Justice

But on the upcoming CBS movie "Living With the Dead," the departed want justice. They help psychic James Van Praagh (Ted Danson) solve a crime in a fictional four-hour miniseries beginning Sunday that supposedly is based on the medium's experiences.

On tonight's special, "Contact: Talking to the Dead," Anderson relays "messages" of comfort from the late rocker John Phillips, of The Mamas and The Papas, to his daughter Mackenzie Phillips. He also chats with a deceased ex-boyfriend of Vanna

ON TELEVISION

Contact: Talking to the Dead

WHAT: Psychic George Anderson contacts the dead.

WHEN: 10 tonight

WHERE: ABC

Living With the Dead

WHAT: Ted Danson portrays psychic James Van Praagh in four-hour miniseries.

WHEN: 9 p.m. Sunday and April 30

WHERE: CBS

White and late wrestler Owen Hart, who died in 2000 when he fell 78 feet from a harness suspended over the ring.

ABC and CBS are jumping on the psychic bandwagon with Anderson and Van Praagh, who like channeler John Edward (of "Crossing Over") claim to see dead people. All have penned best sellers. All have people lined up for private readings.

Mediums have enjoyed mainstream popularity at various times in American history, including the mid-to late 1800s and again in the early 1900s, when psychic Edgar Cayce achieved national celebrity.

Gary Posner, executive director of Tampa Bay Skeptics, says mediums are on the rise again as many people are rejecting modern science in a search for comfort in the supernatural.

"It may make people feel better to hear these kind of messages, but if it's not genuine, then it's deception and that's wrong," Posner says.

Posner and other skeptics note that modern psychics use techniques that have been practiced since before the turn of the 20th century, including "cold readings" in which they toss out



ABC

Psychic George Anderson communicates with a deceased ex-boyfriend of Vanna White during the ABC special "Contact: Talking to the Dead."

ambiguous questions to which the living must fill in the blanks. For example: "I see a man, a father or an uncle, a brother; does this make sense to you?" or "I see an M; is there someone who has crossed over whose name begins with M?"

Posner says Anderson and the others would be more impressive if they could start out by saying something like, "I have your grandfather Maurice from Cleveland here," instead of playing guessing games.

"But there's no way they'll ever agree to do that," he says.

Skeptical Viewpoint

Founded in 1988, Tampa Bay Skeptics is one of many nonprofit groups throughout the world devoted to criti-



Posner
Heads up
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cal examination of paranormal claims, UFOs and medical quackery. TBS has a standing (and so far unclaimed) offer of \$1,000 to any psychic who can prove his or her claims. Those who pass the test will be referred to psychic debunker James "The Amazing" Randi, who has a \$1 million offer.

Posner, who screened tonight's special and the upcoming CBS miniseries, says the Anderson sessions appear to be heavily edited to make him look good. Posner says any good magician or psychologist could perform readings that are just as convincing.

He says the Danson movie "isn't half bad" as a fiction thriller.

"What I object to is the pretense that Van Praagh has any such genuine abilities because his transparent techniques have been exposed in Time magazine and on TV shows such as '60 Minutes' and '20/20,'" he says.