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## Let the spirits move you - on your television set

VIRGINIA ROHAN 4/21/02

I see dead people -with a definite future in television.

Psychic mediums who claim to communicate with those who have passed on are ever-controversial, but there's one point on which skeptics and believers would have to agree: TV has discovered them in a big way.

People claiming to have a real "sixth sense" are no longer confined to the realm of wee-hours infomercials. Several of the nation's most famous psychic mediums are now headlining high-profile and seemingly credible projects.

Leading the avant garde was John Edward, the red-hot psychic medium whose "Crossing Over" debuted on cable's Sci Fi Channel in July 2000 and became such a phenomenon, it was spun off into a syndicated daytime series (on WCBS-TV locally) as well.

"I think he was really the groundbreaker in the format," says Stacey Lynn Koerner, senior vice president and director of broadcast research for Initiative Media North America, a media buying and planning agency. "He's the pioneer, and he opened up the field."

The title "Crossing Over" - an allusion to Edward's forays to the "other side" - has become an apt description of the mediums' invasion into the mainstream.

At 10 p.m. Monday, ABC will present "Contact: Talking to the Dead," the first in a possible series of ABC specials featuring another noted psychic medium, George Anderson. He appears to communicate, impressively, with the lost loved ones of Vanna White, Mackenzie Phillips, wrestling champ Bret "The Hitman" Hart, and now, most notably, with Bonny Lee Bakley, the late wife of actor Robert Blake. The segment was taped well before Blake's arrest Thursday in connection with Bakley's shooting death. The production company said





Friday morning that it plans to include the segment in Monday's telecast.

And next weekend, CBS kicks off its two-part miniseries, "Living With the Dead" (April 28 and 30), in which Ted Danson plays psychic James Van Praagh—who, like Edward and Anderson, grew up on Long Island. (Is there a connection? Van Praagh isn't sure, though he does note that water is a "conductor of energy," and Long Island is, of course, bounded by the Sound and the ocean.)

Van Praagh also has a half-hour daily daytime show on tap for September. (WPIX-TV will carry it locally.) "Beyond With James Van Praagh" will feature psychic readings, and investigations of hauntings and missing persons. Syndicated by Tribune Entertainment, it was one of the hottest sellers at this year's National Association of Television Programming Executives convention.

Why is TV so taken with psychic phenomena?

First, a skeptic's view:

"I think there's such a proliferation of these programs now for the same reason there are millions of clones of the 'Survivor' show and why all the sitcoms and movies are the same as one another. It's so expensive to create a TV series or a movie, and producers want to go with a formula that they know from experience works," says Dr. Gary P. Posner, founder and executive director of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, who has participated in a number of talk-show panel discussions of this topic.

"And right now, talking to the dead, just as it was hot before Harry Houdini exposed the trickery involved, is hot again."

Danson believes "Hollywood sees a good thing and tries to make a buck." Programming executives, he says, have taken note of the success of movies like "The Sixth Sense," and best-selling books by psychics like Edward, Anderson, and Van Praagh.

Van Praagh says the publishing world wasn't too interested in the topic before his 1997 "Talking to Heaven" became a bestseller.

"They thought it was morbid and saw it as a risk," he says, on the phone, noting that the initial printing was only 6,000 copies. "I said, 'it's going to be a No. 1 Times bestseller. They said, 'every author says that,' and I said, 'You've got a psychic here.'"

As for the larger societal fascination, Patrice Keane, executive director of the American Society for Psychical Research, says interest in unexplained phenomena has actually been "fairly consistent" across time - William James co-founded the New York-based ASPR in 1885 to investigate spiritualists' claims - and most of the world's cultures.



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But the public's attention does spike at certain times, she says.

"Certainly, since Sept. 11, we're all asking deeper questions about the nature of our lives," Keane says. "At any point in history where lives are lost in an unpredictable and untimely manner ... people ask the obvious question: Is there life after this?"

Others cite such additional unsettling factors as the economic downturn, shaken faith in religious institutions, and the fact that many baby boomers are losing - and missing - their parents.

The work of Dr. Gary Schwartz, a University of Arizona psychology professor and author of "The Afterlife Experiments: Breakthrough Scientific Evidence of Life After Death," also may be bolstering the trend.

The Harvard-trained Schwartz, who appears in Anderson's ABC special, conducted experiments over four years with psychic mediums, including Edward, at his Human Energy Systems Laboratory.

Schwartz's conclusions: "What these mediums are doing in the labs is real. It's not fraud. And when you look at the totality of the data, the best explanation is the survival of consciousness [after death] hypothesis."

"People ask me what do I believe. It's not important what I believe. It's important what I know scientifically," he says.

In Anderson's one-hour ABC special, which is anchored by Jim Moret, the psychic medium sits across from his guests, whose identity, he says, he did not know in advance. (Posner, the skeptic, questions this. And, having seen a preview tape of the special, he believes it was edited in a way to "showcase [Anderson] in the best possible light.")

Anderson insists that ABC kept him "far away" from the participants before the show, and everyone testifies on camera that they've never met. On the phone, Anderson says he did not recognize the celebrities who came before him. "When I sat down across from Vanna White, she is stunningly attractive in person, I remember saying to myself, this lady must be a former Miss America." Anderson concedes that he doesn't, figuratively speaking, get out much.

Making a scribbling motion in the air above a pad with his pen, Anderson relays what he says are messages from his guests' departed loved ones. During the Bakley session, he presents her sister with a picture of St. Joseph, at the urging of the dead woman, he says, "as a sign that all is well." Her sister confirms her devotion to this saint.

Of Bakley's death, Anderson tells the relatives, "It was terrifying at first, and then a very strong calm came over her."



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Bakley's mom wants more information about the unsolved murder, but the message he conveys from Bakley is "You already know what happened." In the segment with her family, there is no specific reference to Blake.

Anderson said during a telephone interview, a few days before Blake's arrest, that souls appear to be less interested in how they died than "in their loved ones here being comforted and going on with their lives."

Nevertheless, the main thrust of CBS' miniseries on Van Praagh is his crucial role in the solving of a fictional murder mystery. The victims are motherless boys who urge him to provide closure.

Van Praagh, who grew up in Bayside, says the story was "loosely based" on work he used to do "clandestinely" with the police, specifically a case of a 2-year-old kidnapped girl in New Orleans. A number of other details of his life story also were changed to accommodate Danson, 54, who is three decades older than Van Praagh was when he struggled with accepting his unique abilities.

"I said, 'I understand you have to have the dramatic part and the entertainment value in there. That's OK with me, as long as the message of my book comes through,'" says Van Praagh, who makes a cameo as a church organist. "The whole theme of the movie is hope and forgiveness."

Coincidentally, Danson and his wife, Mary Steenburgen, who plays a detective in the miniseries, had gone to several of Van Praagh's sessions before this project came along.

"I won't tell you the specifics of my experience. It involved my father, who had died about six months beforehand," says Danson, who believes he had a "literal communication" with his dead dad. "Before talking to James, I woke up every morning depressed. There was a longing for, a missing, my father. After that evening, ... I woke up with a laugh and a giggle from that day on."

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