

Seeking:

The Travels and Travails of a Peripatetic Skeptic

Taking a critical look at the other side

In which Richard Saunders celebrates his ascension to the Skeptical hierarchy by touring the psychic, paranormal and pseudo-scientific fringe-lands

Psychic fair (go)

On October 20, 2002, the two Richards, Lead and Saunders, made their way to the NSW central coast to visit the Psychic and Alternative Fair held at the Mingara Club near Tuggerah.

It was the usual line up. New age this and that, alternative health mumbo-jumbo, a woman doing Reiki in the style of a flamenco dancer, frantically clicking her fingers all over her 'patient', lots of crystals, numerology and more tarot cards than you could poke a chakra at. One of the things that struck us almost immediately, was the number of crude home-made signs for 'readings' or whatever. At \$20 per 20 minutes, we figured they could do a great deal better.

We soon found ourselves at the Dianetics stand where we sat through a 40 minute video on the

subject. Yup, L. Ron Hubbard was a science-fiction writer and it showed. I then tried out the famous 'E-meter'. It took me all of 5 seconds to discover how to make the needle in the dial move around to where-ever I wanted. The operator, just a kid in his late teens / early 20s, soon became confused when the needle stood still when it should have moved and vice-versa. The strange thing was, we didn't see the word 'Scientology' mentioned anywhere.

Next we attended a lecture on numerology. It was given by an older lady who really believed she had found the secret to understanding people. We added up the numbers in our birthday and worked out our birth number. These numbers were the key to our personality. Unfortunately the personality traits were nothing more than a string of generalisations and strange logic. OK, it was harmless fun until she told us that we could and should use this system to screen job applicants and decide whom not to employ!

Drifting around the other stalls, I came across a large iridology chart,



Richard Saunders is President of Australian Skeptics (NSW) and a persistent investigator of crackpottery.

which is something I've always wanted to buy, and so I did. "May I have a receipt?" I asked. A look of confusion appeared on the face of the man behind the desk. "Err, we don't have any paper here, sorry." It made us wonder how many psychics and such like don't give out receipts. Something the tax office might also care to wonder about?

The Amazing Valda ...wasn't

Then, after a nice lunch in another part of the club, it came time to see the stage show of the "Amazing Valda", the clairvoyant who claims to be able to provide audience members with 'messages from loved ones'. We sat down among an audience of about 500 and wondered what she might have up her sleeve. We are always on the lookout for a new trick or angle and who knows? We may even find a real psychic.

Valda began her act by telling us that we should all buy her books. Then we were informed that a 'young lady' would be dancing on stage throughout her act. We looked — no-one else come on stage. Ah Hah! It was a spirit dancing on stage! Valda told us that only clairvoyants could see her, and sure enough, a few hands went up. Over the next hour, this invisible dancer would bump and prod Valda without warning. How rude!

Here are a few, I hesitate to say 'highlights', from her act, and yes, 'messages from loved ones' means talking to the dead.

Valda tried to get a hit by using the initial 'D' with a man in his late 50s. She kept at it until it was apparent that the man knew of no one

The come-on

that fit. OK, how to get out of this? Ah! 'D' stands for 'Dad'.

The initial 'H', to a lady also in her late 50s, also met with a blank. "Who is 'H'?" Finally Valda said that 'H' stood for 'Helper'! "They're telling me that you're a Helper!"

What is it about ghosts and letters of the alphabet?

Another lady was asked, "Who liked to cook ... scones? She's on the other side?" Again, no hit. Cooking scones quickly turned into eating scones which turned into reading books which turned into eating scones while reading books and so on.

"Who was it who liked gardening? Is it you? Was it someone else? Was it anybody?"

Although Valda's promotions says "(she) will answer questions from the audience" it was in fact Valda who asked all the questions. And asked and asked and asked:

Who is..? does this..? who is the initial..? is she on the other side..? can you relate to this..? what was..? is it you or the person next to you?

It seems Valda has picked up her cold reading technique in dribs and drabs rather than from any attempt to study the art, and it really showed, in the low standard of her routine. It was a clumsy mixture of meaningless, new age double talk, channelling and appeals to universal love.

I wish I could say the rest of her act was better, but Valda continued to flounder from person to person, spirit to spirit, rarely getting a 'hit' and at times I almost felt sorry for her.

But then came a new low. If you remember, the 20th of October was designated as a "National Day of Mourning" for the victims of the Bali bombing.

Earlier in the day, we had all stood for a minute's silence. At that time I told Richard that if Valda tried to contact the dead from this recent tragedy, I would need to be restrained in my seat. When the moment came, I was too sickened to move.

We got to do this because the spirits just said. Join hands, as the people who have 'gone over' from Bali have been trotting around here. They just said 'it's a sea of love' and your love is getting them to be accepted on the other side. with those from the American tragedy.

Valda ended her act by telling us that we should all buy her books.

I'm afraid The Amazing Valda is simply the worst cold reader I have ever seen. I could only recommend she buys and studies *Full Facts Book of Cold Reading* by Ian Rowland. She is also to be strongly condemned for twisting a day of mourning for a national tragedy into her act. The insult to the dead and grieving of Bali (New York and Washington) was nothing short of appalling and in the worst possible taste.

Do I think Valda really believed in what she was saying? I doubt it but I cannot be sure. If she did, she is in need of professional help.

What did I learn? The only new trick I picked up from Valda was the way she trained the audience to applaud after each 'reading', no matter how pathetic it was. We were "clapping to encourage the spirits" she said. The result was to have the hall full of applause every four minutes for so. Very clever Valda. I also learnt that someone who is rotten at cold reading can easily get away with it.

Cold reading is an art anyone can learn and the people who perform cold reading are rightfully thought of as artists. As with any performance art, there are good performers, great performers and then there are those who should just give up and find another outlet for their creativity. Valda, it's time to move on. You are an embarrassment to the art.

Another view from Richard II

Richard Lead offers his thoughts on the same exhibition.

My first impression of this gathering was its cheapness and tackiness. 'Psychic' after 'psychic' sitting at their booths, with signs "Psychic Readings, 20 minutes \$20" hand written, literally with a blue biro on a torn scrap of paper!



Sign of the times?

The second impression my trained eyes conspicuously failed to observe was the (GST) tax invoices and receipts required to be issued by the 'psychics' and other purveyors of merchandise. Section 12-190 of the Taxation Administration Act 1953 requires an Australian Business Number (ABN) to be quoted on all invoices and receipts. Where no ABN is quoted, and the fee exceeds \$55 (including GST), the payer is required to withhold 48.5% and remit this sum to the ATO. I doubt if any of the people attending this Psychic Fair were aware of this tax-evasion requirement, just as I doubt if any GST and income tax will ever wend their merry ways to the ATO from this cash-only event.

My third impression was, as always, of the fellow travellers. At a Mind Body & Wallet festival several years ago I spent some enjoyable time toying with a group of Creationists, who had set up shop alongside the clairvoyants. Ignore the Biblical prohibitions against necromancy — business is business. And this Psychic Fair was no different.

Apart from the Scientologists Richard has mentioned, there was the get-rich-quick-with property "Investors Club". Believe it or not, gentle reader, you can retire wealthy in 7 years, and from today until your dying day you will never pay income

tax again. How is this possible? Just buy residential real estate. Every year, buy another residential property. Keep borrowing additional funds against the increasing values of your properties (banks are such sweeties, aren't they!). Real estate always goes up in value, and it never, ever falls. You will never have to pay for repairs, nor will you have vacancies (tenants are such sweeties, aren't they!). Land tax? What is that?

It was indeed a day for losers, and my gorge is still buoyant from the experience.

My esteemed colleague Richard was too kind on Valda. She was much worse than that.

Mind Body \$pirit - one more time Less than a month was to elapse before, undeterred by the Valda fiasco, Richard S once more sought enlightenment among the spirits.

Every six months, Sydney plays host to the Mind Body Spirit festival at Darling Harbour and members of Australian Skeptics usually end up attending for one reason or another. November 2002 was no exception and this time it was the turn of Skeptics Richard Saunders, Peter Bowditch, his daughter Belinda and subscriber, Chris Guest.

There is much at any 'psychic' fair to make a skeptic sigh and this was the second one I attended in the space of 3 weeks. It's largely the same old clap-trap with clairvoyants, UFO nuts, Reiki, 'alternative' health of every description and so on, but this time I did notice an increase in legitimate operators. By that I mean people simply selling all sorts of products, mostly interesting types of food. (Although Peter and I were persuaded at one stage to try out some very agreeable massaging arm-



Zappers very much in evidence - but for how much longer?

chairs.) A few things did however raise my hackles.

We found one stand offering treatment using a Hulda Clark zapper, the very thing the NSW Minister for Health used in his press conference

as an example of utter quackery. (See full story of NSW Health initiatives in this issue, also <http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/Cancer/clark.html>)



Zapper in close-up

I felt like an undercover agent as I quickly snapped a photo of the zapper. We moved on to another stand selling Hulda Clark books and treatments. Belinda noticed a bucket of brownish water on the floor, sort of a footbath. "Is that as poisonous as it looks?" she asked the attendant. The attendant did not treat this as a joke and proceeded to tell us that, "All cancers are alike. They are all caused by a parasite. A single parasite! It is the human intestinal fluke. And if you kill this parasite, the cancer stops immediately." There is no point in arguing with people like this, but it does point up the dangers afforded the unwary from listening to unqualified quacks.

Another stand was that of a homoeopath who, when asked, told us of the wonders of homoeopathic vaccine and how we could bring our children and pets to her for treatment!

Last was an old favourite, the Aura Camera. This device has long been exposed and there can be now no excuse this blatant fraud being tolerated at any fair whatsoever. I think the organisers should take a hard look at this 'miracle of modern science'.

Despite all the 'woo-woo' going on, I must say that Mind Body Spirit is actually not as bad as it once was. I think this is partly due to all the legitimate operators jumping on a lucrative bandwagon. I even picked up a pack of very nice tea and some hot sauce!

In my opinion, Mind Body Spirit is worth a visit. It gives the skeptic a 'hands-on' experience and a chance to see how people form the other side think. This is best achieved by using good manners and asking only a few questions. The danger lies in trying to argue a scientific or skeptical point and I would avoid this. You could end up in a real ding-dong battle.

Last thing, watch out for the Freudian Slip of saying "Mind Body Wallet" while talking to a believer.

UFOs once again under the spotlight
And then, only four days later, a change of pace.

What's this? UFOs? Ah yes, it's all coming back to me. I'm 13 again and wearing my self-make "Watch the sky" t-shirt. Those were the days and I was happy, along with Ian Bryce and other keen

skeptics, to revisit them in 2002 as we attended a talk given by Australian UFO researcher Bill Chalker at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Bill Chalker is no stranger to the Skeptics as I discovered with a quick search of the Great Skeptic CD. But Bill, I'm delighted to report, is not your average UFO believer. Here is a man who actually spends the time to research reports of UFO sightings, rather than just accepting anything that supports the notion. He was even of the opinion that most of the literature on the subject is fanciful.

During his talk, Bill recounted many testimonials of close encounters with UFOs and showed a video he made of interviews in England. I must admit that I became a little fuzzy on when 'UFO' meant 'Unidentified Flying Object' and when it meant 'Alien Spacecraft'. He told the audience of about 25, that he thought that Australian Skeptics and CSICOP were more interested in debunking than investigation! I took exception to this and informed him that we never set out to 'debunk' as such, rather our aim is to seek information that is rational derived from the evidence.



Ian Bryce with Bill Chalker

Bill claimed new data on the 1954 UFO sighting near Nowra by Navy pilot O'Farrell, as the Navy and Air Force have given Bill access to their files. Unfortunately the more significant Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) file still remains classified.

We are not holding our breath!

thought this could very well prove it once and for all.

Ian Bryce opined that unlike amateur astronomy, which makes real discoveries every night, UFO investigators have provided absolutely no real results, for all the time, money and effort. To pour in more taxpayer funds would be wasted because zero times ten is still zero.

That is not to say that aliens don't exist, of course. Extraterrestrial life and space travel are all consistent with science, and may be discovered in the future.

The Skeptics asked lots of questions during and after the presentation and Bill seemed quite willing to answer them and even joked with us over tea and bikkies later on. We laid down the \$110,000 Challenge to Bill for any real evidence he might find.

All in all, it was a fine evening and I hope Bill gained a better impression of Australian Skeptics. A review of Bill's book *The OZ Files* will appear in the next issue of *the Skeptic*.



Visitors came from far afield to attend

