



Doug Henning and the Giggling Guru

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Because magic is my main hobby I feel a keener regret than most people over the way in which the Hindu cult of Transcendental Meditation (TM) has taken over the life of one of the best of modern magicians. In the 1970s, Doug James Henning's Magic Show ran on Broadway for more than four years. Henning followed with marvelous NBC-television spectaculars, Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe bookings, and numerous talk-show appearances.

Then something happened to Doug on his way to a magic shop. He discovered TM and became a pal of its founder, His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. "The moment I saw him," Doug has often said, "I knew that he knew the truth of life." In a few years Henning became TM's most famous convert since Mia Farrow and the Beatles.

First, some words about TM. Based on ancient Veda teachings that Maharishi learned from a Himalayan holy man, it stresses a form of meditation linked to the recitation of a Sanskrit word called a *mantra*. The technique is said to relieve stress, slow aging, and promote what TMers call "pure bliss." Moreover, TM instructors promise to teach you, after you fork over thousands of dollars for advanced courses, a variety of awesome supernatural powers known as *sidhis*. They

include the ability to become invisible, to see hidden things, to walk through walls, and to fly through the air like Peter Pan and Wendy. Doug's conjuring was fake magic. TM teaches *real* magic.

Vedic flying has been the most publicized of the *sidhis*. Photographs distributed by TM officials show devotees in a lotus position and seemingly floating in midair. The photos are misleading. No TMer has yet demonstrated levitation to an outsider. The best they can show is the ability to flex one's legs while in a lotus position on a springy mattress and hop upward a short distance. The phony photos were snapped when the supposed floater was at the top of a bounce. One cynic said he never believed the woman in a picture was actually levitating, that instead she was being held up by an invisible TMer!

The flying *sidhi* has four stages. First, a twitching of limbs. Second, the hop. Third, hovering. Fourth, actual flying. Only the first and second stages have been shown to skeptics, although devout TMers firmly believe that there are Vedic flyers in India and that Maharishi can take off whenever he likes even though no one has ever seen or videotaped him in flight.

"When you reach your full potential," Henning told a reporter, "and you think 'I want to levitate,' you can levitate." And in a lecture: "You can

disappear at a high state of consciousness because your body just stops reflecting light."

Amazingly, TMers are greatly entranced by lotus hopping. Last October a demonstration was held at the University of Toronto. Three Vedic "flyers" giggled while they bounced on their bums for five minutes, looking (said one observer) like legless frogs. I was told by Charles Reynolds, who for many years designed Doug's stage illusions, that during one of Henning's TV rehearsals he periodically halted all activity so those present could meditate and send him powerful vibes while he tried vainly to float. He actually believed he might be able to demonstrate levitation on his forthcoming show!

Several disenchanted TMers have sued the organization for failing to teach them powers that were promised. In 1987, for instance, Robert Kropinski, a former TM instructor, asked for \$9 million because he was never able to fly. He also charged that TM had caused him "headaches, anxiety, impulses toward violence, hallucinations, confusion, loss of memory, screaming fits, lack of focus, paranoia, and social withdrawal." A Philadelphia jury awarded him \$138,000.

Giggling seems endemic among TMers—something similar to the "holy laughter" currently popular in

Union, decrease traffic accidents, and cut the crime rate in Washington, D.C., and other cities. Such wonders are supported, of course, by highly dubious statistics.

A few years ago, longing for political influence, His Holiness founded the Natural Law Party (NLP) in countries that include England and Canada. Henning is senior vice-president of the Canadian party. In 1992 he was the NLP candidate in England's general election, representing a residential section of Lancashire. He finished last among four candidates. In a 1994 Canadian election he was the party's candidate from Rosedale, where he and Debbie, his wife, live. Of 55,928 votes cast, he received 839. Physicist Hagelin was a candidate of the NLP for U.S. president in 1992. The party claimed it had 40 candidates running for Congress. The Canadian NLP platform maintains that once the party takes over the government, Canada's crime, unemployment, and deficit will disappear like the elephant that Doug vanished so many times on stage.

I found the elephant simile in Don Gillmor's "Like Magic," a lively article in *Toronto Life* (April 1994), to which this column is heavily indebted. Gillmor quotes Henning as saying, in reference to his party's promises: "We never see the stars going into debt and having to borrow light from the sun. We don't see robins having criminal tendencies and stealing from each other."

Although pushing 50, Henning still looks like a youth, small, slim, with long dark hair, droopy mustache, a mild, soft-spoken manner, and bucktooth grin. Born in Winnipeg, and a graduate of McMaster University, he began his magic career working parties and nightclubs around Canada. Such skilled magicians as Dai Vernon and Tony Slydini gave him lessons. Henning met the Maharishi in 1975, and for the next ten years he studied TM while still performing on stage. By 1986, convinced that his life mission was to promote TM, he gave up show business and sold his illusions to David Copperfield and other top stage performers.

For the past decade Henning's obsession has been to build a mammoth theme park he calls Veda Land. Plans to locate the park in India, then in Orlando, Florida, adjacent to Disney World, went down the tube. In 1987, with funds from Maharishi, Doug decided to build Veda Land in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Why there? Because, Henning told Gillmor, the falls are "the greatest natural wonder on Earth. . . . Our purpose is to create wonder for nature."

Unusual rides and exhibits will dramatize Veda Land's central theme—the mystery and beauty of nature. There



will be a convention center, a university, and a Tower of Peace, where world leaders can meet to settle disputes. A Magic Flying Carpet will carry 120 passengers onto a rose petal, plunge into its molecular and atomic structure, then finally come to rest in the flower's "pure consciousness." A Corridor of Time will display the history of the universe from the Big Bang to the far distant day when Shiva will dance the universe into oblivion. A preventive-medicine center will sell herbal remedies. Hotels will serve veg-

etarian and health meals, and there will be a Heaven on Earth housing project.

"Heaven on Earth" is Maharishi's favorite phrase for the world utopia that TM will eventually bring about. As he stirringly put it in the *Maharishi International University News* (Winter 1988), there will be "all good everywhere and nongood nowhere."

In keeping with the Hindu belief that all is maya, or illusion, Veda Land will abound with magical special effects designed by Roy Field, who once worked on the Superman movies. A large building will appear to float 15 feet above an artificial pond. Doug won't reveal how this great illusion will be accomplished, although presumably not by real magic. On the opening day a helicopter is expected to move a gigantic hoop over the levitated building the way Doug used to pass a hoop over floating ladies.

Asked if Veda Land will resemble Jim Bakker's fallen Christian theme park, Heritage USA, Doug replied: "It's more like, Wow! Isn't enlightenment great!"

TM recruits are given a mantra so secret that they are forbidden to disclose it to anyone, not even a spouse. The mantra is to be repeated silently while they meditate for 20 minutes each morning and late afternoon or evening. In the 1970s they were assured that their mantra was carefully selected from thousands to fit their personality. A skeptical investigator was puzzled when he joined the movement in three cities under three different names and was always given the same mantra. It turned out that there were just 16 mantras. The one given was determined solely by a person's age. Today's mantras may be different, but in 1977 if you were 26 to 29 your mantra was *shivim*. If over 60 it was *shama*, And so on.

Magicians who perform what the trade calls mental acts were quick to take advantage of the secret list of Sanskrit words before their linkage with ages became widely known. They would ask TMers in the audience to state their birthdate, then pretend to

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divine their secret mantra by ESP!

In 1994 the cost of a basic TM course jumped from \$400 to \$1,000. Officials insist that for decades the price has been too low to meet expenses. Besides, they argue, the new price will winnow out dabblers.

Does mantra meditation relieve stress more effectively than praying or just sitting quietly with closed eyes? In 1976, a study of this was made at the University of Michigan and reported in *Science News* (June 19). A group of trained TMers were compared with a control group of subjects unfamiliar with TM. The TM group meditated

for a half-hour while the control group merely closed their eyes and relaxed. Blood samples were taken and measurements made of chemicals indicating stress. The researchers concluded that TM meditation failed to induce a metabolic state distinguishable from one achieved by just sitting quietly and possibly dozing.

Similar studies have shown that focusing on a Hindu mantra is no more effective in calming the mind than focusing on any other word, such as *peace*, *one*, or *banana*. Psychologist David Holmes, at the University of Kansas, could find no physiological difference between meditation and relaxing for 20 minutes in a reclining chair.

For a while, Henning threatened to take Veda Land away from Niagara Falls unless the city fathers refused to allow a gambling casino to open in town. Gambling, said Doug, always brings a plague of hookers. When the city refused to bar gambling, Doug changed his mind. After all, could not Veda Land's Vedic flyers counter the evils of betting and prostitution by their sidhi powers? "Darkness," declared Doug, "cannot show itself in the face of light."

Will Veda Land and its floating building ever get off the ground? It's possible, but my crystal ball tells me it is no more than a fantasy in Doug Henning's field of consciousness. □

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remote-controlled camera in Dianne's residence to capture the frequent kidnappings on tape? Apparently not.

STOP. FAST FORWARD. PLAY.

It's the day after Christmas and Sally Jessy Raphael's topic is mystical visionaries. She's brought in Michael H. Brown, journalist and author of *The Final Hour*, to help her "investigate" various reports of people seeing God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary.

Brown, asked about the authenticity of such apparitions, sounds as if he's reading from the same playbook as John Mack when he declares, "I have no doubt because of the consistency and detail" from place to place and from person to person.

Raphael shows a videotape of a

young diabetic boy telling his father that he has just seen the Virgin Mary at Medjugorje, in the former Yugoslavia. But the words on the tape are so muddled, the producers superimpose the child's reputed words on the screen. If the child did see Mary, it didn't cure his diabetes. His mother claims the need for insulin dropped for about a week, but in the end the youngster has not been healed.

Among Raphael's other guests are "Estela," who says that the Virgin Mary visits her monthly. Estela reveals that Mary looks exactly like the photograph she had been looking at just before the apparition appeared, an odd coincidence Raphael never questions.

Then there's "Jim," who has repeatedly spoken to God and Jesus. Raphael doesn't think to ask why these divine

beings don't offer the specific dates, times, and locations of devastating earthquakes or other unpredictable natural phenomena so skeptics can believe.

Raphael introduces a man whose rosary beads supposedly turned to gold after a visit to Medjugorje. Has Raphael or her staff had the rosary analyzed to check if gold is really there? Apparently not. Have Raphael or her staff done their homework and discovered that people often rub off the silver plating to reveal copper or brass beneath, or that tarnishing caused by repeated rubbing can give silver a golden hue? If they have, Raphael's not telling her viewers.

PAUSE.

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