

Sawbones 37: Dr. Mesmer and the Power of Animal Magnetism

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Intro (Clint McElroy):

Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil. We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music Medicines by The Taxpayers plays]

Justin:

Hello everybody. And welcome to *Sawbones*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I am your, uh, co-host Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

Sydnee. Uh, I wanna say belated happy birthday to you.

Sydnee:

Well, thank you, Justin.

Justin:

Um, it was your, your 31st birthday and I'm 33 and I can't help, but thinking like, do you feel-

Sydnee:

We are old.

Justin:

We're-

Sydnee:

Is that what you were gonna say-

Justin:

So-

Sydnee:

That we are getting so old?

Justin:

... crazy old that we're older than anybody who's ever lived, but that's not what I was gonna-

Sydnee:

31 felt old.

Justin:

31 felt old. Huh?

Sydnee:

Yeah. 30 didn't feel old.

Justin:

31 feels old.

Sydnee:

31 feels 'cause it's like an- anticlimactic.

Justin:

Yeah. It's like 31.

Sydnee:

Now I will continue on into my thirties.

Justin:

In... Yeah, marching. I remember when I was in college, I thought people who were in their thirties were the oldest people on earth. We had one guy in our like group of friends who like secretly hit 30 and it was like a sec- It was like a dirty secret. "Did you hear he's 30?"

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"He turned 30, like it really happened." Anyway, Syd, you're 31 I'm 33. I feel like w- we are running low on time for our great invention.

Sydnee:

Did you have anything particular in mind-

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

... of what we are gonna invent, or?

Justin:

I don't have any particular areas of expertise or any specific creativity, but like, I feel like we're running low on time for our great, like, I just wanna know that after I'm gone, something will be named after me. Like, you know-

Sydnee:

Oh, like your legacy? Like the thing that-

Justin:

My legacy, like, you know the guy that invented Totino's pizza rolls? Like they-

Sydnee:

Uh-huh [affirmative]

Justin:

... named those Totino's after him, like ho- honoring him.

Sydnee:

You think that guy was named Totino?

Justin:

Yeah. Totino and they were Totino's Pizza Rolls.

Sydnee:

Was that his... Is that his first name or last name?

Justin:

Both. Totino Totino.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Are you-

Sydnee:

Like the founder of west Virginia, Morgan Morgan?

Justin:

Morgan Morgan, right. Uh,[laughing] Do you-

Sydnee:

So what, what, what do you think it will be?

Justin:

I don't know.

Sydnee:

You'll Justinize something-

Justin:

I'm gonna Justini—

Sydnee:

... or are you gonna Justin- Justinification, or?

Justin:

Justinification, Justinize. I'm having really a-

Sydnee:

Are you really Justined that?

Justin:

Uh.

Sydnee:

That sounds negative.

Justin:

That sounds negative. Doesn't it? Yeah.

Sydnee:

I don't know. Well, think about it. You know? Um, the doctor we're gonna talk about today, succeeded in this goal.

Justin:

Yeah. What'd he, what'd he get?

Sydnee:

Yeah. Well, have you ever heard of the word mesmerized?

Justin:

I have. I have heard of mesmer- mesmerization.

Sydnee:

Mesmerization.

Justin:

Mesmerism.

Sydnee:

Mesmerism perharps?

Justin:

Or mesmer-

Sydnee:

Maybe.

Justin:

Mesmerizing, right.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

To mesmerize.

Sydnee:

To mesmerize, yes.

Justin:

That's a dude?

Sydnee:

Yeah. Franz Anton Mesmer.

Justin:

Mesmer?

Sydnee:

Yep. Franz Anton Mesmer.

Justin:

What was his deal?

Sydnee:

So, uh, Dr. Mesmer was born in Germany in 1734 to, uh, his father was a master forester. I only mentioned that because I didn't know there was such things as master foresters.

Justin:

He kepted, cut, chopping 'em down and planting new ones. You'll get there someday on Padawan.

Sydnee:

How, how many trees do you have to chop down do you think to become a master forester?

Justin:

You know, here's a surprising thing. It's 50. It's not hard.

Sydnee:

[laughing] That's not that hard.

Justin:

That's a very low bar.

Sydnee:

Maybe, maybe there's quality measures too, not just quantity. Like you have to chop down 50 trees, but...

Justin:

You chop down 50 trees. But if one tree falls on you, you lose your standing for a week.

Sydnee:

So is that all it is? If you can survive chopping down 50 trees?

Justin:

Survive chopping down the trees. Don't stand where... 'cause there's... It's hard to guess-

Sydnee:

It's a low bar.

Justin:

... where are they gonna fall? I don't know.

Sydnee:

Well, I think that's part of becoming a master forester is, you know- [laughs]

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... you know which way they're gonna fall.

Justin:

You gotta get your trig out, get your graph paper and just go for it.

Sydnee:

So he did not follow in his father's forestry footsteps.

Justin:

Right. 'Cause he can't track him 'cause his dad's too good at foresting.
[laughing]

Sydnee:

I don't, I don't even think we know-

Justin:

He don't leave-

Sydnee:

... what forestry is at this point-

Justin:

He doesn't leave footsteps.

Sydnee:

[laughs] And then, um, [laughs] He instead he studied medicine.

Justin:

Ah.

Sydnee:

Boring.

Justin:

Yeah. A little more conventional.

Sydnee:

Loser. At the university of Vienna.

Justin:

"There's a whole forest out there for your son. I thought I'd leave this to you. You've let me down today, Franz."

Sydnee:

"There's so many trees still standing."

Justin:

[laughs] "I swore when I was your age, I would remove every cursed tree from this greater... "

Sydnee:

"Every tree in Germany."

Justin:

"You've let me down, Franz."

Sydnee:

Oh, Franz.

Justin:

Okay. So a Franz studied medicine.

Sydnee:

He studied medicine. He, uh, he actually, I think this is kind of interesting. His doctoral dissertation was, um, on the influence of planets on the human body.

Justin:

Hmm. Okay.

Sydnee:

This was basically, and we'll see this kind of theme echo- [crosstalk 00:05:17]

Justin:

So it was made up? [laughs]

Sydnee:

Yeah. Um, [laughs] the, the ideas that there are tides in the human body-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

... like of fluids or whatever, and that they're influenced by the movements of planets and the moon kinda like the tides of the ocean are influenced by the moon.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

I mean, it affects your health and mental wellbeing and all that.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

I, I think what the weirdest part about this is that this was probably just plagiarized.

Justin:

Good start, Franz. Good start.

Sydnee:

So it's kind of a bizarro theory and it wasn't even his.

Justin:

Oh man, that's not a good start, Franz, but keep going.

Sydnee:

I don't... And I found that mentioned in several places and it... I found two different things about it. One, it didn't seem like that big a deal. So maybe the guy who really made up the theory was like, "Well."

Justin:

I don't know. It seems dumb in retrospect, he's welcomed to it.

Sydnee:

"Let's, let's let it be that Mesmer guy's fault." And two, it was also mentioned several times that it was pretty commonplace to plagiarize-

Justin:

Huh?

Sydnee:

... your dissertation. [laughs]

Justin:

Nobody could read anyway back then. It's ca- It was practically cave man times.

Sydnee:

[laughs] I thought that was pretty. So there's the justification. So maybe you should, "Hey, if you're working on your doctoral dissertation, just plagiarize it-

Justin:

Just steal one.

Sydnee:

... and then say, I am following in a grand tradition."

Justin:

Of, of stealing.

Sydnee:

This is just what you do.

Justin:

Where was he operating out of?

Sydnee:

So, uh, at that point he started practicing medicine in Vienna. Um, he married a, a very, very or rich lady. Uh, and you know, this is always that point I feel like in our episodes where he could have just had a really rocking life, right?

Justin:

Just... Yeah, everything was going fine.

Sydnee:

He, he's a super rich doctor. He's living in Vienna. He's got a big fancy house. He's a huge patron of the arts. He's like a buddy of Mozart's. Well, I mean, Mozart was like 12, I think when they met. So, I mean, I don't know about buddy, but-

Justin:

I actually wonder if there's something too that like, if you don't have enough money, then you're basically like focused on paying the rent and keeping food and clothes on your kids' back. So you shouldn't put food on your kids' back. You know what I'm saying? Like, and-

Sydnee:

Unless that's a weird game that you make 'em play-

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... like who can get the food off of your brother's back for-

Justin:

"It's the only thing that distracts-

Sydnee:

... and that's the one that gets to eat.

Justin:

... us from the hunger most nights." Uh, I, but maybe like once you're like independently wealthy, it leaves the brain free to wander into stupid alleys where you can find dumb ideas.

Sydnee:

Well, that's exactly what he did. You know, instead of just enjoying this really rocking life, he, uh, started experimenting with magnets. Um, he had actually in one experiment, he would have, uh, he had a patient swallow, like a, a compound that conta- contained iron. And then he would attach magnets to various places on her.

Justin:

To try to figure out where food goes when you eat it.

Sydnee:

No, just to influence her health and wellbeing with magnets.

Justin:

People are still doing that, so.

Sydnee:

People have, people have always been fascinated with magnets. We, I don't think-

Justin:

I love them.

Sydnee:

... we've ever done a-

Justin:

I love them.

Sydnee:

... we've ever done a show on this. We should do a show on this at some point, but magnets are a big thing. Um, when it was over, she felt a lot better. And what was weird about it is that, you know, this is the kind of story that you would think would lead into. And so he came up with the idea that magnets should be used in medicine. No, instead he thought, "You know what? I don't think it was the magnets. I think it was me."

Justin:

[laughs and claps]

Sydnee:

"I, I know it seems like it would be the magnets."

Justin:

What do you mean? [laughs]

Sydnee:

This is how he came up with his theory of animal magnetism. This is really what it's called.

Justin:

"There was, uh, something raw between me and Victoria. Something visceral that I think healed her was my, my personal sexual charisma."

Sydnee:

[laughs] You're not that far off.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

It's really the idea. Okay. So, uh, wellness, you know, health is, is the free flow of energy throughout the body. That's what he believed, that it, there are these channels throughout the body. And if this fluid, this, I don't know this m- ... And it magnetic fluid. I mean, the fluid is, does have a magnetic property. If it can flow freely, then you're healthy. But when one of those channels gets blocked, you get sick. So when you are sick, the only way to fix that is to transfer energy from another person into you. Or it could even be from an inanimate object, as long as it was imbued with the magnetic energy of a person who was a really great conductor.

Justin:

Okay. I got it. So he thought, "I, I'm a great conductor of magnetism energy, of healing energy."

Sydnee:

Right? So you don't need the magnets. You just need Mesmer.

Justin:

I wish more doctors did this. Like, I don't know, "I gave her aspirin and her headache went away, but I, I think there was something there though."

Sydnee:

[laughs] "I don't think it was the aspirin-

Justin:

"I'm gonna-

Sydnee:

... I think it was me."

Justin:

... I'm gonna call her. Phones haven't been invented yet, but I'm gonna give her a telegram or something."

Sydnee:

No- no- now, remember it's not just, uh, like a sexual, um, you know, personal connection kind of energy. It, it was this kind of, um, I mean you could think of it in a very platonic way. It's an energy that all, all of us need and some of us are just better carriers of-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

... and so we can pass it on, but it's not necessarily like a sexual attraction.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, so once you overcome these blockages with the help of this, you know, magnetic energy, uh, it'll restore balance to your system, um, and the energy itself, like I said, it's this magnetic fluid that's in your body. And he believed that it was made of air and fire and spirit.

Justin:

Okay. So he was still work shopping that bit of it.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Yeah. Aren't those like what Captain Planet is made up?

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Or at least part of?

Justin:

That's most of the Captain Planet team.

Sydnee:

That's most of... And heart-

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... is in there. I don't know.

Justin:

Wind, I think.

Sydnee:

Wind?

Justin:

Water.

Sydnee:

In the air? I don't know.

Justin:

Air, fire, wind.

Sydnee:

Earth.

Justin:

Earth, wind, and fire

Sydnee:

Earth, wind and fire. [laughs]

Justin:

The Temptations.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"Chicago and more this summer at Soul Fest coming out to the river bend."
We've got-

Sydnee:

You wanna-

Justin:

... all the great.

Sydnee:

You wanna talk about some animal magnetism?

Justin:

Yeah. Right.

Sydnee:

Thank you.

Justin:

Wait till Lionel Richie gets up on the mic.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Okay. Sorry.

Sydnee:

Um, so okay. In Vienna, he, he didn't get a lot of footing with this theory.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

Um, he started trying to practice it. He was on faculty at the medical school there, and that was not... it... People were not down with this.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, and actually what did him in, in Vienna, as far as, you know, his respectability was where he, he kind of succeeded. I think this was really weird. What I read initially is that he tried to restore the sight of a blind musician. He couldn't do it. And he was kind of, you know, publicly shamed afterwards.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

What it, what it really was is that he tried to restore the sight of Maria Theresa Von Paradis, who was actually, she was a blind pianist. And Mozart actually wrote a piece for her.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

So k- kind of a big deal.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, he attempted... She had been struck blind suddenly at the age of three. He attempted to restore her sight. And from the accounts that I read from her family, he did partially succeed.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Now, I... Again, I don't know that this proves any of his animal magnetism theories.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

But somehow the fact that she could sort of see, actually made her unhappier than before, it made her life worse. It, it, um, she didn't rely on her f-, like her finger memory to play piano anymore. She started looking and it caused her to make mistakes because obviously her eyesight was still very poor.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Uh, and she, I mean, she still, probably by today standards would've been considered legally blind.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

But it started making her life worse. And she wrote that she was happier before this ever happened to her. And basically the family kind of blamed him for even more problems than she'd already encountered in her life. And he was shamed and kicked off faculty and-

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

... had to move.

Justin:

Wild. Okay.

Sydnee:

Kind of a weird story.

Justin:

Yeah. That is a weird story.

Sydnee:

Um. [laughs]

Justin:

And then he set out to ruin blind people across the world.

Sydnee:

[laughs] By, by partially restoring their sight.

Justin:

That's his origin story.

Sydnee:

He, uh, at that point he moved to Paris.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, and there, he was, he was met with some mixed reviews. Um, people had kind of heard of him and they were like, "Oh no, that's that weird guy. The one who, you know, hangs out with Mozart."

Justin:

Nobody likes that guy.

Sydnee:

Nobody likes him. Um, but then he recruited one follower, uh, a Dr. Charles D'Eslon, who was actually really well respected in Paris. He was-

Justin:

That's all it takes is one, you convince one-

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

... normal person to believe in you.

Sydnee:

Well, and that's, and that's pretty much what happened. This one regular doctor who everybody liked said, you know, "I actually think there's something here," and boom, there you go. Um, at that point, uh, he really started developing his treatments. So I wanna tell you about the, the treatments that he used to, you know, uh, uh, practice his animal magnetism theories.

Justin:

I'm ready.

Sydnee:

Okay. So first of all, you could just go to Mesmer or D'Eslon once he was trained appropriately to, uh, to have one-on-one therapy.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So one-on-one therapy is when you go and you go, I don't know. I don't feel good, whatever you don't feel good, you know, whatever that means. You're, um, sad or your stomach hurts or you broke your foot or whatever.

Justin:

All the above.

Sydnee:

All of the above. It's, uh, again, this would be a cure-all. So you go to Mesmer and he sits across from you and he might touch your hands for a while.

Justin:

Well, that's nice.

Sydnee:

Or maybe just put his hand right below your diaphragm, like in the area of your stomach right below your diaphragm.

Justin:

Okay. "Hey, they're hot shot. Let's slow it down a little bit. How about some dinner? What do you think?"

Sydnee:

And then just hold it there.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And then he would probably wave his hands kind of around your body, like around your head and over your sides.

Justin:

This would be the moment that I'd start to suspect my \$20 had been wasted.

Sydnee:

[laughs] And this, this could go on for hours.

Justin:

Mm, [laughs]. Wow. Just this keeps getting better and better.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Now, um, if this is too weird for you?

Justin:

It is.

Sydnee:

Maybe you wanna bring a buddy, you know, bring a friend along.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And, uh, and g- go in like a group, you know, this seems like the kind of thing where if you're not familiar with it, maybe you wanna go as like a group of people.

Justin:

Okay. That makes sense.

Sydnee:

So in group therapy, and, and again, this is probably a bunch of like rich people in Paris. You would, you'd all go in together and you would sit around a baquet.

Justin:

Oh, what's a baquet?

Sydnee:

It's like French for tub.

Justin:

All right.

Sydnee:

But a baquet was like this big, uh, wooden tub, uh, with a lid on it. And it was filled with water and iron filings and broken glass.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

But there's a lid on it, so you didn't see that.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, but he would tell you that, I mean, this wasn't like a secret, that that was in there. There were like holes in the top of the lid. And you would have like the number of holes dictate how many patients you could treat at one time. So each one would sit at one of the holes and there was like a glass bottle with a metal rod sticking out of it that would extend out of the hole.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Okay. So you kind of get the idea?

Justin:

Yeah. You had me grab a picture before we got started. So I'm, I'm looking at what I assume is a baquet now.

Sydnee:

That is a baquet.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Okay. You go and you can look this up if-

Justin:

It kind of looks like a Mr... Uh, no, not a Mr. Bucket. The, the crazy, uh, water, like the octopus water toy that you'd hook a hose into and it sprays-

Sydnee:

It does in like a-

Justin:

Water everywhere.

Sydnee:

... little, the little metal thing sticking out of it would start squirting around in the air-

Justin:

Yeah, right.

Sydnee:

... and spraying water all over the place.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

It did not do that.

Justin:

It looks like if a spider got super fat and its legs could no longer reach the ground.

Sydnee:

[laughs] It does look like a big-

Justin:

with a roulette wheel on top.

Sydnee:

... a big fat spider.

Justin:

Like a big fat spider.

Sydnee:

Uh, there were also some ropes hanging off of the device that were mainly like to attach you to the device and to attach-

Justin:

In case things just got like so cray.

Sydnee:

And to attach each other, you to each other. So you like, you'd kind of all like either hold hands or tie yourselves together in a big circle. Um, and then you would like set the metal rod, like on your body somewhere.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Like you could hold it or it could like rest on your shoulder or your stomach probably wherever you were having a problem.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Okay. So once everybody was in place, Mesmer would take over. And this is why... I think this more than anything is why mesmerized means all the things it does now.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

So you gotta understand, you would... He would do these treatments in his home. So you'd come with all your rich friends, all your fancy rich friends to his very fancy, you know, Parisian home. And it was, I mean, just the, you know, decadence and opulence, just gorgeously outfitted. And you would be led through these beautiful rooms to the room where you would, you know, sit around the baquet. It was all dimly lit. There would be this like slow, beautiful trans like music plane. And he was, you know, elaborately dressed. And he would-

Justin:

Okay. *So wait a minute. I hate to stop you. You are basically describing the plot of Rocky Horror Picture Show.*

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

That is basically what is happening here. Dr. Mesmer is basically Dr. Frank N. Furter. And he is basically, basically exactly *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is what you're describing to me right now.

Sydnee:

That's pretty much it.

Justin:

Basically a bunch of rich people doing the Time Warp-

Sydnee:

That's all it is.

Justin:

... thinking of those moments when.

Sydnee:

And, and that was a big, a big part of it is that these people would come in and they were-

Justin:

It's the Time Warp?

Sydnee:

The Time warp. Is it. Then they would do the Time Warp. And then I always figured it must... Uh, when I read about this, it must break out into one of those like eyes wide shut orgy scenes-

Justin:

Oh, no question.

Sydnee:

... afterwards, right?

Justin:

This is all orgy pretense. Like that's obvious to- totes- tot sobs. Very nice try old timey people. But we here in 2014 are onto you. This is total orgy pretense.

Sydnee:

We know what you're doing. We know what's up.

Justin:

We know what you're doing. We know your game.

Sydnee:

So you picture all of these-

Justin:

We have the Internet.

Sydnee:

... all of these gorgeously dressed women wearing they're big wigs. And everybody's like sitting around this thing and they're listening to this music and it's, it's dark. And it's, you know, everybody's like, "Oh, uh, oh my gosh, the luxury." And they're holding these things and they're waiting for something amazing to happen. And then Mesmer starts wandering around

the room talking, 'cause there, there could be three of these going at the same time in the room, talking in this quiet voice, encouraging everyone to whisper. Don't talk out loud, whisper if you must. And, and basically working them into kind of a trance.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And he would carry a wand and touch them with his wand periodically. And then he would wave his hands around them and wave his hands around the baquet as a way of kind of controlling the fluids inside, he would say-

Justin:

What is-

Sydnee:

... "I'm controlling the fluids."

Justin:

What is, what are they supposed to be getting out of the baquet? Like, what is, is it, is there heat coming from the pipes? Or is there water-

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

... or nothing, right?

Sydnee:

No. There's nothing about it that's... No, it's not doing anything.

Justin:

It just looks like a big, stupid ice cream maker.

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

Like, with like metal rods coming off.

Sydnee:

No, the... Because again, it was coming from Mesmer. These were conducting fluids. Like yeah, they've got iron and they've got water and we... They we're kind of vaguely like mimicking something that sounds like science-

Justin:

This guy is so awesome.

Sydnee:

... like there's, uh, an electricity thing. But really, I mean, the idea is that it's coming from Mesmer is that he is able to steer the fluids in the container, which are helping to steer the fluids in you and what he's working you towards, and what many people would have during these sessions is a crisis.

Justin:

[laughs] Good, good.

Sydnee:

So if when the treatments finally worked on you and again, a lot of people in the room would have this crisis during these treatments. Uh, you could... This could manifest in a variety of ways. You might throw up, you might start coughing, you might start spitting things. Um, you may enter like a hypnotic trance-like state and just become very calm and still, or you may become insane for a minute.

Justin:

Just a bit. That's-

Sydnee:

Just briefly.

Justin:

... very common. It will pass.

Sydnee:

Whatever happened, it was only temporary. And in that moment, when you entered crisis, the belief, his belief is that you could look through your own body and see the source of your own illness and correct it. So find that blockage and fix it.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And in these group therapies, he took it a step further and say, and said that in that moment you could also see inside the people around you in order to help them understand their illness and fix it.

Justin:

If you did it exactly right. You'd see the Matrix. What I'm telling you is when you're ready, you won't have to dodge.

Sydnee:

This was, this is also how you see things in like those 3D pictures, you know, with the squiggly lines?

Justin:

Right. [laughing] Where you had to slightly cross your eyes. Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, a lot of people would leave convinced that whatever was wrong with them was better. At least for the time being.

Justin:

Yeah. Like after that, it's either that or tell people what happened. I think you just want to go with, "Oh yeah. It's way better. Mhm."

Sydnee:

It was, it was also a very like trendy thing. It was very like the well-to-do enjoyed it. And a lot of women would go back just for like a diversion. Like it was a fun thing to do.

Justin:

Was that being mesmerized? Like, was that what the...

Sydnee:

That is, uh, today? Yes. That's, that, that is where that would've come from.

Justin:

Now, I-

Sydnee:

I mean, at the time they weren't saying like, "Oh, you were mesmerized," but yes, that is what we're referencing

Justin:

My problem with this hard to franchise.

Sydnee:

[laughs] No, you need Mesmer.

Justin:

You have to have Mesmer there.

Sydnee:

And-

Justin:

Good for him, bad for, you know, the Mesmer, Mesmer incorporated.

Sydnee:

Which is probably why it didn't catch on that hugely is that he, I mean, he trained, he had a protege, um, Charles D'Eslon, but I... You don't read about his treatments being like this.

Justin:

Oh, and D'Eslonized is like, doesn't exactly trip off the tongue.

Sydnee:

No. Um, during this time period, as he was gaining some, you know, popularity, he did write a book. So there is a book where you can read about all this, if you're interested and where he outlines animal magnetism and practices. He did win some favor, Marie Antoinette was a huge fan.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

Um, but, uh, and, and there, there were some societies of harmony, they were called, that were springing up around France. And there were basically groups of followers of Mesmer who, um, would have somebody kind of be the leader in the group who would learn the techniques. Uh, and then they would have like little meetings, different places around France and probably other places in Europe to be fair. It, it eventually spread somewhat to

England and to the US. Um, and you could pay and become a member of these little weird societies.

Justin:

So he did do some franchising. He knew he had to get it out there a little bit.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Yeah. There was some limited, you know, interest in it, but it, there was a lot of controversy. This was not something that was widely accepted. Um, there were people who thought it was good. And then there were plenty of people who criticized it. Uh, there was actually a play written about it. So if you're ever interested, Elizabeth Inchbald wrote, uh, Animal Magnetism, which was a farce of the practice and, and a, and a huge send up of it at the time.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

Um.

Justin:

I bet that'd be, still be, uh, just a total gut buster today.

Sydnee:

[laughs] I, I was thinking we should do it with our children's theater.

Justin:

We'll reenact it. Yeah.

Sydnee:

Don't you think? I, I can't think of anything better than a bunch of 12 and 13 year old girls-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

... acting this out.

Justin:

I, yeah. I'd pay to see that.

Sydnee:

Um, so this sounds like, you know, this is the kind of thing that could have just kept going. You know, it, it had a modest following and rich people liked it and he was, uh, you know, an attractive cool guy, but Louis XVI stepped in and, uh, said, you know, I think I'm not a big fan of this. For whatever reason, he made... upset him. It made him mad. And he said, uh, "I want an independent commission to investigate this. And find out if there's any truth to any of this," not so much, he was not, and this is very important. He was not seeking to prove that Mesmer was a quack, so to speak.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

He just wanted to find out if this whole idea of like animal magnetism and this magnetic fluid that may or may not be in the body if any of this was true.

Justin:

So he got together a crew.

Sydnee:

Yes. So he got together, get together a crew actually that included Benjamin Franklin.

Justin:

He was in town, if he went out.

Sydnee:

And it, it actually, the, uh, the commission met at Franklin's house, um, because he was older and sick at the time. And it was just easier for him.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

Um, Mesmer in a very clever move did not go himself, he sent D'Eslon.

Justin:

Ugh. [laughs]

Sydnee:

And said, "Hey, why don't you go, you know, answer all these questions 'cause you're such a good... You know, you understand this as well as I do, good buddy."

Justin:

[laughs] 'Ol pal.

Sydnee:

"Don't you wanna, don't you wanna meet Ben Franklin?" [laughs]

Justin:

He could Imagine it. He-

Sydnee:

"He invented bifocal."

Justin:

"He'll tell you the kite story I bet."

Sydnee:

"Go check it out." So D-, so D'Eslon went and they, he walked them all, this commission through the theories and explained everything to them, showed, I'm sure showed them the baquet and all of the different things they did. Um, and then they put him through some tests. And one of the tests, um, that I thought was a great example of, of what this was. So they asked him to magnetize something.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

He said, "Okay." So you, you were a follower of Mesmer. You have this ability to transfer energy through yourself. So magnetize a tree-

Justin:

All right. Now see, even I know that this is going to be problematic.

Sydnee:

Find any tree on the grounds, go magnetize it with your hand waving, and then we're gonna blindfold this 12 year old boy that we've got hanging around-

Justin:

Sure. Okay.

Sydnee:

And we're gonna have him go find the tree, uh, by feeling the magnetic forces that you have, you know, imbued the tree with.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Okay.

Justin:

How did that work?

Sydnee:

So he magnetized a tree, they blindfolded the kid, uh, and he wandered around the yard and he continued to wander further and further away from the appropriate tree. Uh, saying, "I think I'm getting closer. I think I'm getting closer. I'm feeling the, the magnetic force," and then he passed out.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

So.

Justin:

Not a great showing for animal magnetism.

Sydnee:

No. So it didn't work. Um, that was not, I would say not a successful test.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Now to be fair, I don't know all of the other, uh, magnetic kid Olympics that they, that they tried.

Justin:

Whatever test some skill that they had.

Sydnee:

I don't know if this was just like a school field day that happened to overlap and they were like, "We'll just kill two birds with one stone here."

Justin:

And, and almost kill one kid.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Uh, I have no reason to think that the kid wasn't okay. If anybody's worried by all accounts, the kid was fine-

Justin:

He see- he seemed fine.

Sydnee:

... he just passed out from wandering the yard aimlessly blindfolded, looking for a magnetic tree.

Justin:

So I'm assuming that was pretty much the end of, of mesmerism.

Sydnee:

That pretty much was, uh, they, at that, at that point they wrote up a report and basically said if there are any effects it's imagination.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And that put an end to, um, Mesmer practicing a lot in Paris. He actually, after this left France, which was probably good for him because this is right before everybody started getting guillotined.

Justin:

Ah, okay.

Sydnee:

Right before the Reign of Terror. So it was probably a good thing that they, they did him a big favor. Um, he was exiled though, after that, uh, he still lived out the rest of his life rich, I should say.

Justin:

Oh, thank God.

Sydnee:

Now what exactly he did? I don't know. He was still a patron of the arts. He still loved music. Um, but I don't think he did much in the way of medicine after this.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Now the great thing about people like this is that no matter how bizarre their theories and practices, ugh, there's always gonna be somebody to pick that, pick up that ball and keep running with it.

Justin:

Sure. Right.

Sydnee:

So the legacy he leaves behind other than obviously the word mesmerize, which, you know, we all, know now where that comes from is that there were people still practicing this throughout different parts of Europe, and then again in the US, uh, until the 1920s.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

So we're talking about the [crosstalk 00:29:41] late 1700s to the 1920s.

Justin:

Yeah. Like 150 years or something like that.

Sydnee:

Yeah. That these, uh, after, long after he died, uh, people are still practicing mesmerism. Um, the, if you remember from our phrenology episode, we talked about the Fowler brothers.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

Uh, they got into mesmerism as well.

Justin:

Oh God.

Sydnee:

That was part of their business. Um, where you would, I mean, and this is essentially the same kind of thing. You would sit down with a practitioner and they'd wave their hands around you and put you in sort of some kind of trance-like state and then you were fixed.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

Um, and what's even more interesting is that because this is, as you may have gathered kind of closely related to hypnosis, some would call Franz Mesmer, the father of hypnosis.

Justin:

Oh, huh.

Sydnee:

So although the two theories are hardly identical, um-

Justin:

Hypnosis being sort of real-ish.

Sydnee:

Yeah, yeah. Us actually having some like evidence that there is something there with hypnosis and there are certain ways to practice it, and, um, you know, there are certain, certainly very many people who are trying to do studies on hypnosis now.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

Sydnee:

Um, mesmerism kind of led people in that direction and those, uh, those ideas inspired what was later known as hypnosis.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, one other thing I thought was really interesting. I read this on a, a psychology website about, uh, kind of the history of psychotherapy is that this was also known as the first secular psychotherapy.

Justin:

Huh?

Sydnee:

Um, up until that time, any kind of therapy was very much based on the teachings of the church and was told from a religious perspective, um, and while there certainly was some kind of spiritualism you may say to this, uh, to this therapy, it was not based on any kind of traditional, you know, Judeo-Christian or any other kind of religious background, uh, which opened the doors to, um, the, the, I think I saw it phrase the great, um, unchurched, uh, to inter therapy, which was a good thing.

Justin:

So good news, nobody got hurt too bad, save for a few well off folks and a poor disgruntled blindfolded 12 year old, and maybe a blind pianist-

Sydnee:

Maybe. I don't know.

Justin:

Perhaps, the [crosstalk 00:32:01] is still out.

Sydnee:

I don't know. I, that was, that was pretty interesting. And obviously today, this isn't practiced.

Justin:

Oh, yeah.

Sydnee:

Hypnotism is, but mesmerim- mesmerism is not.

Justin:

Uh, well, thank you so much for listening to our episode here about our, our, our new friend and personal idol, Franz Mesmer, uh, uh.

Sydnee:

He's a pretty cool dude.

Justin:

He seems like a cool guy. I kind of dig it, um.

Sydnee:

So, so maybe that's the, the, uh, end of the, you know, the moral of the story, Justin is that you don't actually have to invent anything that's useful.

Justin:

Just name something after-

Sydnee:

Just make something up-

Justin:

Run with it. Huh?

Sydnee:

... and be really cool about it. And then we'll name it after you,

Justin:

Uh, thank you to everybody who donated to our program in the Max Fun drive. We had a record setting year and it was, it was just so fantastic to have everybody.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Thank you guys so much.

Justin:

Uh, thank you to folks tweeting about the show like Felicia, Vanisha, Brianne, Joe, Dennis, uh, Donald, Halley, Evan, uh, G, McKenzie, Daniel, uh, Travis, Jonathan, uh, Ns Asher, Mike, so many others. Uh, Cory Doctorow. Thank you so much for tweeting about our program. It's awesome you listen, uh, and so many others, uh, that is the best way we have is spreading the word, we don't advertise or anything. So if you could tell somebody about the show, uh, send 'em a link to our iTunes page or just Sawboneshow.com. Uh, that, that is all great by us. Uh, and while you're at our iTunes page, if you leave us a review and subscribe there, that is also massively, massively helpful.

Sydnee:

Yes. Thank you. I, I read all of those and I really appreciate you taking the time to tell us what you think.

Justin:

Thanks to the Taxpayers for letting us use their song, Medicines at the beginning and ending of our program. Uh, they're the Taxpayers on Twitter, so you can go follow 'em if you want to do that and buy all their music and, uh, be sure to head over to maximumfun.org. That's our network, and there's a lot of other great shows you can enjoy there like Judge John Hodgman, *the Goose Down*, *Jordan*, *Jesse*, *Go! Bullseye*.

Sydnee:

My brother, My brother and Me.

Justin:

Thank you so much, sweetheart. And many, many more, uh, go on over there and head over to the forums. You can talk about this episode and all the other, uh, programming we have. Uh, that's gonna do it for us this week, uh, and be sure to join us again next week for another episode of *Sawbones*. Until then, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

As always, don't draw hole in your head.

[theme music plays out]

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