

## Sawbones 159: Ghostwatch

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**Clint:** 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 plays]

**Justin:**

Hello everybody. Welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

[singing] I wouldn't change places with anyone tonight...

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Okay. I see what you're doing here.

**Justin:**

[singing] We'll carve pumpkin faces and watch the witch's flight...

**Sydnee:**

Just skip ahead to the tambering part.

**Justin:**

[singing] Anything can happen on Halloween! A dog could turn into a...  
[mouths harmonica]

**Sydnee:**

Okay. All right. So welcome to Justin sings the hits.

**Justin:**

I'll sing this whole song.

**Sydnee:**

Your Halloween hits podcast.

**Justin:**

[singing] Has anybody seen my tambourine?

**Sydnee:**

There we go. That's what we were—

**Justin:**

[singing] I may start playing "Begin the Beguine"!

**Sydnee:**

... waiting for. How great is Tim Curry?

**Justin:**

That track is the best. There are like no good Halloween songs, just that one and Monster Mash. [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

And everything from Mickey's Monster Musical.

**Justin:**

Everything from Mickey's Monster Musical, sure.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Yeah. And, uh, Werewolf Bar Mitzvah. That's, that's the only Halloween songs that I like.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Happy Halloween, Justin.

**Justin:**

Happy, happy Halloween Sydnee. I don't know why we went into, uh, that the—

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

... the NPR bit from SNL.

**Sydnee:**

It's a delightful time of here.

**Justin:**

Halloween is here.

**Sydnee:**

The holiday season of, of Halloween. Spooky, the spooky time of the year's upon us.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Everybody's excited, costumes, crafts.

**Justin:**

People would say this show is already usually pretty—

**Sydnee:**

Tasty treats.

**Justin:**

... pretty scary.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

Usually, Sawbones.

**Sydnee:**

That's true. I think we're even listed as a, as a horror podcast.

**Justin:**

Yeah. One... At one... By, by one publication.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I don't, I don't think that's completely fair, but then I have a, I don't know, a work perspective on this, I think.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um, but I felt like in the spirit of the Halloween season, we should do something a little bit, a little bit spooky, a little bit scary.

**Justin:**

I love it.

**Sydnee:**

Tell a ghost story as it were.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Sort of.

**Justin:**

I'm, I'm, I'm ready.

**Sydnee:**

It involves ghosts.

**Justin:**

I got my, uh, Chile=i Mocha.

**Sydnee:**

I will say the word ghost.

**Justin:**

Okay. I'm... That's actually a trademark of My Brother My Brother and Me, but I think I can talk to the—them and just sort of get a, us a temporary license to talk about ghosts.

**Sydnee:**

Oh, yeah. You do. You guys do a ghost thing, right?

**Justin:**

Yeah. Just love the ghost. Just do a ghost thing, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

You do a ghost thing. It's there with your horse thing and your shark thing.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Okay, cool. Now I wanna talk about cinematic neuroses. I know that doesn't sound like a, a ghost thing, but it will get there.

**Justin:**

I heard cinematic, I'm into that.

**Sydnee:**

Right. That has to do with movies.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Mm-hmm. Okay. So most of the time when we talk about severe psychological reactions, like, like somebody having, um, mainly what I'm referencing is post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, we're causing about... We're talking about real life events causing them, right?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So, uh, somebody goes through some sort of, uh, they experience or witness or are confronted with an event that involves, um, a threat of death, a threat of serious injury, actual death, or serious injury, and, um, a threat to

their own personal self-integrity. And this causes a, a severe, um, fear reaction, they feel helplessness, they feel horror and then you get all the symptoms that result from that.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

And so when we talk about that in, in medical terms, we're, we're usually referencing, especially historically throughout different case reports and articles and how we defined this disorder, we're talking about real life events. But, since the age of media, we have begun to accept the fact that maybe those kinds of symptoms could be caused by things we see, but are not actually experiencing, so to speak.

**Justin:**

Well, it makes perfect sense, right? Like the stimu... it's the whole reason that we can engage with, with drama or comedy is that our, our brains don't necessarily parse, you know, reality versus, um, something that we see on a movie screen in completely different ways. It's still the same inputs and the same—

**Sydnee:**

And, but the question is, is that then—could that go too far?

**Justin:**

I don't know Sydnee.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

Could it?

**Sydnee:**

I guess it could, I'm gonna tell you about it.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So when we're talking about cinematic neurosis, which is not really a term neurosis that we use anymore, uh, this actually probably dates back to like a Freudian concept.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

When we, when we, when we talk about, I, I don't think Freud coined that term, but when he talked about neurosis and then in re... in relation to cinema, um, we mea... what we're referencing is this Freudian concept that you have this struggle with the devil, with a love-hate relationship with the devil, which I'm not entirely certain how that works, but you have control over that. And if you feel that you are losing control over that, that you are helpless to it, then it makes you... it, it connects to relationships in your personal life that you no longer have control over, and now it will make you feel helpless and alone. And seeing things that relate to the devil that have to do with losing control can trigger this.

**Justin:**

So if your relationship... This is what I understand—

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

... if your relationship with the devil gets out of control, it can have an impact on your other relationships.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. And you feel out of control of other relationships, especially if you're already in some sort of stressful relationship situation.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So this is, this is the basis of a lot of these cases that I'm gonna talk about. Now, um, a lot of this too, it tends to be more likely in susceptible individuals. So people who, like I said, are already under some degree of stress, but not necessarily some of these cases I'm gonna talk about are, are in people who previously reported no psychological symptoms or problems.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. Um, but basically the idea is that you see something in a film or a television show, or hear something on the radio and it makes you feel like you have lost control over events and that you, yourself, your own person as an entity is now kind of up to the whims of whatever.

**Justin:**

I get that from checking FiveThirtyEight a lot. So I, I—

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

... definitely understand where you're coming from.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Um, all movies can cause some disturbances in this, as you referenced Justin, like there, like you don't have to see something that severely impacts you to feel. I mean, obviously like movies make us cry—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... movies make us laugh, so they can affect the way that we think and feel and maybe like change the way that you look at something. Um, but what we're... and they can even cause like symptoms that are negative. So you can see a movie and have trouble sleeping, or have like recurrent thoughts of that. I know that for me, there are certain movies that after I watched, I, I referenced a lot *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, where afterwards, it stuck with me—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... and it was kind of like in my head, the images for a while.



**Justin:**

I had that with The Descent.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. But that's, it's less severe than what we're talking about here—

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

... okay? So let's start with kind of the precursor to this. And that would probably be War of the Worlds.

**Justin:**

Right. I've heard this story. He, uh, H. G. Wells did a broadcast of War of the Worlds and—

**Sydnee:**

Well, Orson Welles did the broadcast of—

**Justin:**

Oh yeah, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... of H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds.

**Justin:**

Sure. Um—

**Sydnee:**

There are too many Welles in the world. [laughs]

**Justin:**

... and a lot of people thought it would be, thought it was real and they got super freaked out by it.

**Sydnee:**

Now that is the story as it, as it is told, right? That they—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... caused this, this panic. So on, it was on October 30th, 1938. Orson Welles produced the piece and there were actors involved and it, and it, it was about an alien invasion, if you're not familiar with War of the Worlds, was about an alien invasion of earth. And the way that he produced it, it was like a series of news bulletins that broke—

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

... into other radio programming. And it detailed an alien invasion of a town, Grovers Mills in New Jersey. Now, the problem and what caused the, the panic that Justin was referencing was that many listeners were actually listening to a different radio program at first, that was way more popular, and so they didn't tune in immediately to hear the beginning that said, this is a dramatic piece that—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... will be presented of, of HD Welles War of the Worlds, blah, blah, blah, they didn't catch all that. So they just tuned in to hear news bulletins that sounded like aliens were invading. The other thing is that a lot of people didn't necessarily catch that it was aliens who were invading.

**Justin:**

Oh, okay.

**Sydnee:**

They tuned into a news program that talked about invaders, and this is in 1938.

**Justin:**

Oh, sure, right.

**Sydnee:**

So this is at a time when, uh, a lot of people thought this may be referencing a German invaders—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... this may be the German army. So, uh, police actually were in the studio by the time the recording ended.

**Justin:**

Wow.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, there were many, many calls that came in afterwards. But when we think of this, a lot of people have this concept of this event, that there was like panic in the streets, people screaming and running out of their homes. You know, that's actually greatly exaggerated.

**Justin:**

It actually doesn't surprise me that much, especially with, with Orson Welles being involved because he had a, a reputation as quite a, a showman who liked to play with, with reality and truth or fiction. I mean, he made a whole documentary about it called F is for Fake, which plays with that exact idea.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. And that's, I think, I think a lot of the, um, he even, I think referenced like leaving the studio and seeing the streets flooded with people and all this stuff. And, and honestly, that really wasn't true, um, because the program that ran at the same time was so much more popular [laughs] than this radio programming... Uh, most people never heard this.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, most people were confused for a minute and then figured it out and were more upset by it 'cause at the end he said, this has been a presentation. Like if you tuned into the very end, you heard again—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... that this was not real. Um, so most people were more upset by it and annoyed because—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... they felt like they were trying to be tricked. Um, there were some people who wrote in and said like, "You scared me. You upset my family. You know, this was not right, you should, you should have greater standards." Um, it was used to trigger a backlash against radio—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... and immoral programming on radio and things that could disturb children and scare people, but it really didn't do that.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So, but this was the first time where we see this idea that maybe you could hear something and it could affect people enough to, you know, change their behavior or create some sort of panic or, or, you know, mass hysteria, so to speak. Um, the first case of this actually being documented is probably 1974 in response to *The Exorcist*.

**Justin:**

Oh yeah. That makes sense.

**Sydnee:**

So after the movie, *The Exorcist* came out in the journal of *Nervous and Mental Disease*, there were four case reports published of people who reported previously not being diagnosed or treated for any sort of psychological, um, illnesses who developed what they called in the journal, an acute traumatic neuroses from watching *The Exorcist*.

**Justin:**

Wow.

**Sydnee:**

So they actually came into hospitals, went to see doctors and said, "I can't sleep. I'm terrified constantly." Uh, one man said he was convinced his daughter was possessed and he couldn't be around her anymore because he was so convinced that she was possessed by the devil. Um, there were people who had delu... obviously that's a delusion, he—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... the people believed things that were not true. Some people even experienced psychotic symptoms, you know, hallucinations.

**Justin:**

I just don't, I don't... There had to be other stuff going on, though. I just don't give credence to the fact that you watch *The Exorcist* once and, and you suddenly just like you go from 100% solid ground to hallucinations and what have you. Like, I've seen *The Exorcist*—

**Sydnee:**

Mm-hmm.

**Justin:**

... it's pretty good.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

It's all right. I think *The Descent* is scarier, but like fine, is pretty scary. I, I have a hard time believing that. But again, like, I guess you have to remind your up with cinema. I'm gonna, I guess, any new medium, but cinema is the one that I think is the most recent for us to reference. Like we don't... Our brains a lot of time have to evolve with the medium. Like, um, you hear stories of like them showing the footage of the train coming into the station and people like jumping outta the way in the theater.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly.

**Justin:**

You have that with virtual reality now too, actually people whose our brains just aren't equipped right now to process it and we have to expect that we'll get better about that but—

**Sydnee:**

It it's funny because I think that you see that a lot just anecdotally, when you... For me, The Exorcist is a terrifying movie. And the first time I saw it, it horrified me, it, it deeply disturbed me. [laughs] It took me a long time to be able to sleep with the light off at night after seeing The Exorcist. Today, if I watched it for the first time, I can't guarantee it would have that same effect over me, but that's because a lot of movies have done that and more since—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... then.

**Justin:**

Right, right.

**Sydnee:**

So you're right, it is something that we adapt to. And, and I think that's why when we talk about like movies and TV shows kind of upping the ante, they have to take it further. This is why—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... because we, we become accustomed to it. But people weren't accustomed to it when they saw The Exorcist, they found it very upsetting. And there were a lot of like reports from ERs like, "We had people come in who were very upset." But this was documented in a medical journal that there were at least four cases of people who were diagnosed with psychiatric problems after seeing The Exorcist. Now you're right, they actually draw on in these articles, they draw on the Freudian concept of, we think these individuals were already in stressful life—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... situations and that maybe this was kind of a last straw kind of thing.

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

They saw *The Exorcist* and that was just enough to push them over the proverbial edge. So sure, that's possible. But, maybe you don't necessarily have to be already kind of in a, in a stressful life situation. Maybe something could be scary enough that if you are younger, it would deeply disturb you, if you're just not old enough to comprehend it.

**Justin:**

Like what?

**Sydnee:**

Let's talk about *Ghostwatch*.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Now being from the United States, Iya was not familiar with *Ghostwatch*. Had you, have you ever heard of—

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

... this program?

**Justin:**

No, no, no.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. I imagine that some of our listeners who are from the UK may have... may already know this story may have heard of this before. So on Halloween in 1992, BBC One, which is like the serious one—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... they're like they do the news. [laughs] This is important to the story.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

BBC One took this concept of, of something that might, you know, terrify people, they took it a little further. Uh, there was a horror mockumentary that was written in pr... that was written by Stephen Volk. And his original idea was that he wanted to do like the six part series leading up to Halloween where he would do all these kinds of stories and it would all culminate in a live broadcast from a haunted house on Halloween and it would, you, you know, it would be very popular.

Um, that all, after he pitched that they were like, "Well, we don't think that's a great idea. We'll let you do one show [laughs] And you can say it's live, but it's not gonna be live. You can record it ahead of time, but you can... we'll put it out on Halloween as like this big special program."

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

They did it at like 9:25. So it was just late enough, I guess it's after what they call the watershed hour. So it's late enough to be like nighttime programming. Don't we have a term for that when you can start cursing on TV?

**Justin:**

Uh, safe harbor.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Is that it's... for us, it's after 10, from 10:00 PM to 6:00 AM.



**Sydnee:**

So this was, this was 9:25. So this, I guess maybe nine is when the, the cutoff is. So it was, it was past the kids are watching TV but still early enough that probably some kids are gonna watch it, it's a Halloween special. Um, it was aired as part of Screen One, which is a, which was a, is a drama series. So it was aired as part of what is clearly a fictional series of programming. Um, it was directed by Leslie Manning and the plot of it was that there were some BBC actual reporters—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... people who actually were reporters on BBC One so that the—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... people watching at home would recognize them and already know them, who were going to go to what was being called the most haunted house in Britain, in London. And they were going to report on the haunted activities in this house.

Uh, the reporters involved, uh, Sarah Green and Craig Charles were two who were going to the house to investigate. And then back at the studio where Mike Smith and Michael Parkinson, um, and they were going to be tossing back and forth and doing news reports from there, interviewing the children and the mother involved, interviewing neighbors, and then getting calls in the studio about the house to get background on it.

Um, these were all well-known public figures and Green actually appeared on children's programming—

**Justin:**

Hmm. Okay.

**Sydnee:**

... on the BBC. So there were some parents who may have been more inclined to let their children watch because, "Oh, we know her. She, she does kids shows." So, so anyway, it, it all was, you know, kind of framed as here are people, you know, reporting on events that are happening.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

And they advertise the live broadcast, um, somewhat ahead of time, even though it was actually, it, it wasn't live—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... they recorded it a couple weeks before it happened.

**Justin:**

So, so what happened?

**Sydnee:**

Well, Justin, I'm gonna tell you what happened next right after we go to the billing department.

**Justin:**

[sighs] Let's go.

[theme music plays]

**Justin:**

So you were saying that they had been advertising at leading up to it. They were kind of pretending, maybe sort of like it was a live broadcast, but it had been pre-taped.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly.

**Justin:**

So, so what happened?

**Sydnee:**

So as viewers tuned, as viewers tuned in on Halloween, 9:25 on Halloween, 1992, uh, what they saw were Green and Charles at the house of the early family, Pam and her daughter, Susan and Kim who had been reporting strange noises going on in their house. Initially, the daughters heard these

strange noises and asked their mom, "Well, what is that sound? What is it?" And she said, "Oh, it's probably just the pipes." Now, as a result of this, the ghost became named Pipes, which is a really scary name for a ghost—

**Justin:**

That's a scary name.

**Sydnee:**

... on a side note. So, uh, they interviewed the family, um, they interviewed neighbors and they also had a, a fake expert along with them, Dr. Lynn Pasco, who was actually played by Jillian Bevin. Um, and then as I said, in the studio, they had Smith and Parkinson taking calls from viewers. And the calls from the viewers were important too, because all of this is scripted.

**Justin:**

You're right.

**Sydnee:**

And as you are seeing the disturbances that are happening in the house, you're getting background information from callers who are saying, "I know who lived there before. Have you heard the story of what happened to them," and that kind. So you're building the ghost story that way.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

So, uh, the ghost, um, named Pipes we learn is, is this entity that is ancient. It is like this malevolent spirit that has been around for a very long time and it's very angry and it's very scary. Now it has taken many forms and through the, through the callers and the neighbors, we hear about people who have lived in the house before.

Most recently there was a Raymond Tunstel who may have been a child predator, someone scary already, who was already disturbed and then was possessed by the ghost, Pipes or the spirit, the entity, um, and had hung himself under the stairs. There was an area under the stairs—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... and then had not been found and had maybe been eaten by cats. So we get this horrifying story. Uh, they talk about the spirit that inhabited him was probably this older spirit that, um, they called Mother Settin, who was a baby farmer from the 19th century. Do you know what that is?

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

Have you heard of baby farming?

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

No. I had to look this up. So baby farming was a horrible practice. Uh, it was, it was supposed to be—

**Justin:**

Babies in little tiny overalls... [laughs] Just getting, they could only do like shallots and, and turnips, 'cause they're so little, right?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] That's... Tell you what? Uh, if you don't wanna hear about what baby farming is, that's what it is, and just skip ahead about 30 seconds or a minute or so [laughs] If you really wanna hear what it is, baby farming—

**Justin:**

How do I skip ahead Sydnee?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] It was, it was supposed to be what would become like later the idea of fostering or adoption, but that's not what it was back in the 19th century. Uh, women who for whatever reason would have a child and then couldn't raise it or didn't want to, or it wasn't proper, maybe it was out of wedlock, whatever reason they shouldn't have... they, they didn't want the child would, would give it to someone else who was a baby farmer who would care for the child for some, a lump sum of money. Uh, and you could either do that for a while and then give them back to the parents maybe when they're older, easier to—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... take care of, or you would keep them forever, or you would give them to someone else who wanted a child, whatever. The basic idea is they were responsible for the baby. Um, and like I said, this should have been a precursor to fostering an adoption and certainly in some cases it became that, but many of these people who were baby farmers were poor and would get this big lump sum of money to take care of the child indefinitely. Well, it was better—

**Justin:**

Uh—

**Sydnee:**

... if the child...

**Justin:**

I gotcha. Okay.

**Sydnee:**

... didn't live very long.

**Justin:**

Yeah. Okay. I'm with you.

**Sydnee:**

So most famously there was the, the murderer Amelia Dyer, who was responsible for the deaths of many, many, many, many children. And there were also other evil people who took advantage of this practice. So that's a really scary ghost, is what I'm saying.

**Justin:**

Yeah. It's a very scary ghost.

**Sydnee:**

That's a very scary ghost. Whoever the ghost is throughout the broadcast, we see more and more evidence. We hear noises at first and then we start to see like apparitions of the ghost throughout, we get more gruesome details of the history, the I... the presence of the ghost is becoming more obvious and the newscasters are becoming scared. Everybody's getting

upset. Like what, what started off as this like fun Halloween like, "Oh, we'll go to a haunted house," broadcast is becoming something—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... very intense and, and terrifying. Um, at this point, the doctor and the, and the reporters realize that the entity, the ghost is becoming stronger and they're seeing the ghost and they're seeing more of its activity, probably because of the television audience viewing at home. They say that it's sort of like a national séance. As they are all watching and believing in and participating in these events, they are making the ghost stronger.

**Justin:**

Weird.

**Sydnee:**

And that now maybe they can't stop it, it's too late. They've channeled this energy of the... as, as an entire nation, it... they've channeled their energy into this ghost and the ghost has become too powerful. And as the show culminates, the ghost actually drags the reporter, Sarah Green under the stairs into that area where the person had died—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Presumably, she is now killed.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

We do not see her again. And then it escapes through the cameras, into the BBC studio—

**Justin:**

Ah, great.

**Sydnee:**

... where it takes control of the studio and possesses the host Parkinson. And it ends with a shot of him being possessed by Pipes, the ghost, and then presumably the ghost escaping out to wreak havoc throughout. Wonderful.

**Justin:**

So what, what was the reaction like to this?

**Sydnee:**

Okay. So the reaction was not great. There were lots of complaints. A lot of people were very upset because really there was the, there was the... when they aired it, there was the credits ahead of time. And it was clearly part of this drama series, but there really was no other indication throughout that it was fake—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... um, because they wanted it to be scary, and that was their defense. "We wanted it to be scary. We didn't wanna tell people it was fake. So we didn't tell people it was fake at the end."

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, the studio was flooded with calls. The BBC release... received tons of criticism, all of the tabloids the next day were published saying, you know, "BBC horrifies the nation, terrifies everyone." Everyone's scared, everybody... there's a general uproar. To try to dampen that, Green appeared on a children's show, the following Monday to say, "Hey, look, I'm still alive. It's fine. I did... Don't worry kids—

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

... I didn't die. That was all fake." Um, but the damage was already done. There were so many complaints to the BBC that they had to apologize, the producers had to apologize for it and they put a 10 year ban—

**Justin:**

Whoa.

**Sydnee:**

... on the program. Now, why are we talking about this in a medical sense? Well, after the show, there were 35 complaints to the Broadcasting Standards Commission that not only was this inappropriate and scary, and we don't like that our kids saw this, but it had severe psychological effects on members of their family. That this was more than just a scary show. "Your show damaged me, my husband, my mom, my child—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... whatever." Mostly children. Uh, there was one case that, that caught national attention and, and got some headlines where, um, a family blamed the suicide of their 18 year old son on the program.

**Justin:**

Oh my gosh.

**Sydnee:**

He killed himself five days after the show aired. And while they couldn't directly link it to the show, the parents felt strongly that maybe that was what had pushed him over the edge.

**Justin:**

Geez.

**Sydnee:**

And so they, there was an, a, a headline that ran, "Ghostwatch killed my son," you know. So, so this of course got a lot of attention from the broadcasting standards commission, um, along with all of these other complaints, basically they answered this with the 10 year ban and the apology—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... no other, no other real action was taken 'cause you could, you couldn't prove...



**Justin:**

Well, it's a hard, you, it's a really tricky legal precedent to draw, right?

**Sydnee:**

Mm-hmm.

**Justin:**

Like that, you're the... uh, and I don't know anything about the, uh, about UK law, I don't really know anything about American law there. I said it, but like, it seems like a really sticky wicket to say like, "Your show made me mentally ill," you know what I mean? Like caused mental illness with me, like that seems like a real dangerous precedent.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. Well, and that's what they said they could not prove, um, I mean there was no way to find out was it the show that caused the problem? And, um, can a show... the other bigger issue is, can a show do that?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Which like I've referenced, we have War of the Worlds who upset some people and we have The Exorcist where there were some scattered case reports, but we don't really have an established, at this point, like in the medical, in the medical sense, we don't have an established precedent for like, what is cinematic neurosis? How intense can it... can you get PTSD from watching a movie? From watching TV? Can you really?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

I... You know, can, can it be severe enough that you become suicidal? I mean this is still all up in the air, at this point and I think today, even, we wouldn't know 100%, if we could answer that question. Um, what did follow this though, after these kind of like news reports and anecdotal cases, in 1994 the British Medical Journal, so we're talking big time, a real—

**Justin:**

Real stuff.

**Sydnee:**

... real deal journal, the British Medical Journal published two case reports about diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder in two 10 year old boys as a result of watching Ghostwatch.

**Justin:**

Wow.

**Sydnee:**

They said that they had 12 month history of sleep, difficulties, nightmares, fear of the dark and couldn't sleep alone, fear of ghosts, intrusive thoughts, panic attacks, that it had all onset suddenly while they were watching and immediately after they watched Ghostwatch. Um, they couldn't go upstairs because it reminded them of the house in the, in the, in the program. Um, they had had to stay over at their aunt's house because it reminded them less. Um, and that neither of them had any symptoms before, and now they do after.

**Justin:**

I have a hard time believing the, like I said, the, the... a single event like that could bring on mental illness. But I do see how I think, if, if they had any anxiety leading up to that, like that can be for people who live with anxiety, like that can be triggers like that are a big deal because you can be keeping the ship afloat for a while and like, something like that can be the, the triggering factor that sort of brings it down on you.

**Sydnee:**

Which I actually think is what, you know, know there in, in response to this, a lot of letters were written and published in the British Medical Journal saying, you know, there were similar cases, there were four other children that they identified specifically in reaction to Ghostwatch who had these same symptoms between the ages of 11 and 14. And then they even mentioned a case of one eight year old boy who was very upset after watching Casualty, which is a, I guess, a British Medical Drama.

**Justin:**

Oh, wow.

**Sydnee:**

Which kind of soap opera medical drama thing.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Um, but what they said in all these cases... and then they also had some scattered reports of symptoms in the elderly as well.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

But what they said in these cases is that exactly what you're alluding to, uh, some of the children were reported as being sort of anxious, not being diagnosed with anxiety, but ahead of time, their parents said, "Well, they've always been kind of anxious children."

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and that the symptoms resolved so quickly afterwards and they did, they did require some therapy, but it was such a quick resolution and without kind of the chronicity of PTSD—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... that many people said, "You know what? I think these are more like acute anxiety reactions."

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

As opposed to post traumatic stress disorder, which is a whole other entity. So maybe these were children who already had anxiety and this was a trigger for them, that makes more sense.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, either way these reports are continually referenced. I think what's interesting is as I was reading about this, about the British Medical Journal article, they are referenced today when we have the, the bigger conversation about violence in TV and movies and video games—

**Justin:**

Having an impact.

**Sydnee:**

... you hear, you hear these case reports referenced, as look at what this one TV show this one time did to these children. How are you saying that, you know, something that they play on a daily basis anyway. So this is added to kind of that conversation. What effect does this media have, especially on kids? Um, just as a side note, Ghostwatch is referenced on Dr. Who, I forgot about that in the episode Army of Ghosts in 2006. And there was like a linked up website that the BBC created between—

**Justin:**

All right.

**Sydnee:**

... there was a tie-in website between Ghostwatch and, and—

**Justin:**

Which one was—

**Sydnee:**

Dr. Who.

**Justin:**

... Army of Ghosts? That was.

**Sydnee:**

There was a show on TV that was called Arm... oh, that was called Ghostwatch—

**Justin:**

Uh, okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... that they said appeared so many times on TV. Um, there was a documentary that come... that, that covers all this and everything is called

Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtain that came out in 2013, if you're interested in the history of this. Um, and I guess, and I don't know, this is one of those things where you read, and then you have to wonder here, living here in West Virginia in the US, is this really true? I don't know.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

But they say that starting in 2010, um, there is something called The National Séance where they encouraged fans of Ghostwatch to... they didn't, they didn't show it on TV, it's that they, at 9:25, encouraged everyone to start their own private recording, however, they have access to it, YouTube or whatever, at home, on Halloween at 9:25 in the evening and just know that the entire your country is watching it [laughs]—

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

... even though it's not really being broadcast. I don't know if people really do that, it sounds really cool, I kind of want to.

**Justin:**

That sounds awesome.

**Sydnee:**

Except the time difference. I don't even know what time we would be watching it, but—

**Justin:**

Yeah. I need to see it. Is it, can you get on DVD or whatever? Probably—

**Sydnee:**

Oh, I'm sure we could, I'm sure we could find it.

**Justin:**

Um—

**Sydnee:**

I'm sure we could access it.

**Justin:**

I found it on YouTube, but it's a weird distorted version to keep the, the bots at bay. Um, 'cause they've got scanners that look for copyrighted contents, people distorted it. You know how sometimes we watch Canadian Dragons Den that looks weird?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

Uh, that's fascinating Sydnee, um, and very spooky.

**Sydnee:**

So be careful what you watch this, this Halloween—

**Justin:**

That's right.

**Sydnee:**

... season, um—

**Justin:**

Don't, don't just pop in Hocus Pocus all higgledy-piggeldy, you gotta make sure that you're in the right head space for it.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. That's [laughs], that's exactly what I was thinking of, was Hocus Pocus.

**Justin:**

Was Hocus Pocus? Um, uh, folks, that's gonna do it for us this week. Um, thank you so much for listening. Thanks to Maximum Fun network for having us as a part of their, uh, extended family. There's a lot of great, uh, podcasts there at maximumfun.org for you to enjoy. Um, I, uh, I wanna say

quick congratulations to, uh, beloved Sawbones listeners, uh, Teresa McElroy and her husband Travis—

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

... on the, uh, the birth of their, their baby girl this week.

**Sydnee:**

Yay.

**Justin:**

Yay.

**Sydnee:**

Congratulations. Welcome Bebe.

**Justin:**

Welcome. Uh, and uh, thanks The Taxpayers for letting us use your song Medicines as the intro and outro of our program and, uh, believe that's gonna do it for us. So, uh, until next week, my name is Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

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