

## **Sawbones 75: The Dancing Plague**

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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 plays]

### **Justin:**

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

### **Sydnee:**

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

### **Justin:**

Sydnee, I have a question for you.

### **Sydnee:**

Hit me.

### **Justin:**

I watched the Grammy's on Sunday. I didn't watch the Grammy's on Sunday. I watched some of the Grammy's on Sunday.

### **Sydnee:**

Okay.

### **Justin:**

I watched some of the Grammy's from Sunday on Tuesday.

### **Sydnee:**

This is not a great start.

**Justin:**

When will it be my turn to dance in a Sia video?

**Sydnee:**

Aw. Well, honey, I—I didn't know you wanted to dance in a Sia video.

**Justin:**

Of course I do. Kristen Wiig got to. Um, Shia...

**Sydnee:**

Shia LeBeouf.

**Justin:**

...LeBeouf got to. That little girl gets to be in like, every one. And I just want to know, when is it my turn to be in a Sia video, Syd?

**Sydnee:**

Well, um, I don't— Okay, I figure you're either going to have to be friends with Sia—

**Justin:**

Check.

**Sydnee:**

Right?

**Justin:**

Check.

**Sydnee:**

Or—

**Justin:**

Check.

**Sydnee:**

You— You're already friends with Sia?

**Justin:**

Well, I bought her first album.

**Sydnee:**

I don't know that that counts. I'm— A lot of us did.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

I did too.

**Justin:**

Fair.

**Sydnee:**

But, okay. Or maybe you could audition.

**Justin:**

I don't audition. Have you seen me move? I don't audition.

**Sydnee:**

You could be on— What is... That little girl was on Dance Moms?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Is that the show she's from?

**Justin:**

I could get on Dance Moms. That's a possibility, that's an avenue.

**Sydnee:**

If you get on Dance Moms, that's an in. Either that, or are you friends with Shia LeBeouf?

**Justin:**

I am not.

**Sydnee:**

That is a shame. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

I am bitter enemies with Shia LeBeouf.

**Sydnee:**

You are?

**Justin:**

I cut him off in traffic once. It's a long story. Sydnee—

**Sydnee:**

That bums me out. I loved Even Stevens.

**Justin:**

Everybody just wants to dance, you know? Everybody's just looking for their shot. And for a lot of people, it's in a Sia music video.

**Sydnee:**

Well, that's true, Justin. Few people get a chance to dance in a Sia video, but a lot of people do love to dance.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So many people, sometimes, that its even considered, like, an illness.

**Justin:**

Well, how do you mean?

**Sydnee:**

Well, there've been dancing plagues.

**Justin:**

Like um, Boogie Fever?

**Sydnee:**

Uh, not— Well...sure, you could call it Boogie Fever. [Laughs] Why not?

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

There've been outbreaks of Boogie Fever [laughs] throughout the years.

**Justin:**

Okay. I like that.

**Sydnee:**

So, do you want to hear some more about...

**Justin:**

Yes.

**Sydnee:**

Boogie Fever? [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Yes. Tell me all about Boogie Fever.

**Sydnee:**

So—

**Justin:**

The real thing. The real Boogie Fever.

**Sydnee:**

The real.... Not the—

**Justin:**

The dark dark side of...lurking beneath the surface of Boogie Fever lies a dark truth.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Here with that story, Sydnee McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

What is this? What, am I on Dateline, or?

**Justin:**

Welcome to Dateline.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think that's the intro to Dateline.

**Justin:**

The man of her dreams became the man of her nightmares.

**Sydnee:**

Now we're on Lifetime. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Yeah. And on Lifetime she kills him in the end.

**Sydnee:**

There we go.

**Justin:**

That's the way Lifetime makes it now.

**Sydnee:**

Okay, nobody's gonna get— Well, nobody's going to get murdered anyway.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

We're going to talk about the dancing plague of 1518.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

And then dancing plagues in general. You know, because it's such a rich vein, dancing plagues.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

I want to thank a couple people. Alexander and Ryan, who both suggested this topic. Um, and I'm glad you did, 'cause I had not heard of the dancing plague, and now that I know about it, I— my life is better.

**Justin:**

Hit me.

**Sydnee:**

So, 1518 was a rough year in Strasbourg, France. It was just— Things had been hard. There had been famine...uh, diseases were running rampant. Um, leprosy and the plague were still, you know, a big problem, as they were throughout most of history.

But only recently, syphilis had kind of joined the crew, so all these people were getting this horrible thing that they didn't know at the time was syphilis, and dying and uh, there was a horrible economic depression. Bread prices were the highest they had been in years. Uh, basically it kind of sucked to live there.

So, what happened next seems, like, kind of a nice thing. This seems like, I don't know, like a Chicken Soup For The Soul story at first. In July of that year, a woman, Frau Troffea stepped out into the streets of Strasbourg, France, and started dancing.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Just going— Just dancing.

**Justin:**

I love that.

**Sydnee:**

Now—

**Justin:**

Cutting footloose.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Just going crazy right there in the stone streets, I'm assuming. I want— I'm trying to paint a picture. I'm assuming it's, like, stone. We didn't have, like, paved streets.

**Justin:**

Yeah, this is a good picture.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

I can really visualize something sort of, like, stone.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**



Oh, man, it's like I'm there.

**Sydnee:**

So, she's dancing. She's going crazy. Now, it should be noted, she didn't look particularly happy about it. She didn't look like she was just, you know, feeling the rhythm.

**Justin:**

She was just dancing because she had no other choice.

**Sydnee:**

She had— She just couldn't stop. She kept on going and a weird thing happened. By the end of the week, about 30 more people had joined in.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

In her— in Frau's dance party.

**Justin:**

All right.

**Sydnee:**

This continued, and by the end of the month, 400 people were dancing in the streets. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

See, this was...

**Sydnee:**

[singing] Dancing in the streets.

**Justin:**

This, uh, this is the problem with early flash mobs, is they took too long to start.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

You can't ramp up your flash mob that slowly. It has to be like, "Oh, is the waiter dancing? He is. Is the— those people getting off the subway, are they dancing? They are." Like, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Roll it up. One Bruno Mars song later, you got yourself a flash mob going.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

You can't take a month to get a flash mob up and running.

**Sydnee:**

And then— But I will say that what they lacked in, I don't know, momentum...

**Justin:**

[Laughs]

**Sydnee:**

...uh, they made up for in just sheer tenacity. They danced day and night.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

They did not stop. Um, which is bad, as you can imagine.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

You know, um, I don't that that's a horrible thing to say, that dancing is bad, [Laughs] 'cause it's so wonderful, but they began dropping dead from exhaustion, dehydration. Uh, people who weren't in great shape started having heart attacks and strokes. And heck, by the end of a month, even if

you were in great shape, you may have a heart attack or stroke from dancing—

**Justin:**

Right, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Nonstop. And it's July.

**Justin:**

Ugh, in France.

**Sydnee:**

So, it's hot. In France? What does that mean?

**Justin:**

In France. July in France, with those streets that may or may not be stone. Can you imagine?

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] I don't know. Is it particularly hot in France in July?

**Justin:**

Who knows? I'm trying to paint a word picture.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think so. I mean, I think it's a temperate climate, right?

**Justin:**

Oh, my god.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

What could be less interesting to talk about?

**Sydnee:**

Anyway, so city authorities got concerned because many of their citizens were dancing and nobody could stop them. People tried to talk them out of it, but they seemed to be, like, in a trance, like, nobody would answer questions.

They just kept dancing and more people were dancing. So, they started getting anybody involved they thought could help. They got doctors. They got priests. They were looking for what is this? Uh, they started with the, of course, the you know, most common culprits. The supernatural—

**Justin:**

Right. A curse—

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Well, okay, listen. Usually, I think we give people a hard time for thinking there's something supernatural. This is pretty weird. Like, if I didn't know— I mean, I'm— Right now I'm thinking "Maybe a curse." This does sound curse-esque, and I'm in 2015.

**Sydnee:**

And people thought that. There was, uh, Saint Vitus is the saint of epilepsy. I don't know if we mentioned that in the epilepsy episode.

**Justin:**

I think so.

**Sydnee:**

And some people thought it was a curse from Saint Vitus. Um, making— 'Cause they were kind of moving against their will.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

And so that was seen as akin to epilepsy. Um, they thought about "Is it something from the planets?" Is it something astrological?

**Justin:**

Jupiter in alignment with—

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, is the moon causing us to do this? They decided not that. I think because it lasted a month, so whatever was causing it, you know, it was continuing and finally, the best that the doctors came up with was, "I think it's hot blood. I think they got hot blood." [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Hot blood.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Yeah. Uh, I think it might be hot blood. Well, check and see.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Yep, got a fever of 103.

**Sydnee:**

Now, typically when there's a problem with your blood, especially in the year 1518, what would people do?

**Justin:**

Get it out.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. Usually bleeding is the cure. Um, it's not the cure. But that's what, you know...

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

...usually would have been done.

**Justin:**

Is the treatment, is what you meant to say.

**Sydnee:**

Treatment. [Laughs] What's strange is that they didn't decide to treat this with bleeding. And this was all pretty well-documented from multiple sources. So, this is really what the city decided to do. The only cure was to keep them dancing until they just decided to stop.

**Justin:**

But they— People were literally dying. So, that wasn't going to happen.

**Sydnee:**

No. But they wanted to encourage them to keep dancing.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So that— This is the way that they attempted to treat this dancing... this outbreak of dance. They started opening dance halls in public spaces. In, like, the grain market and other places that typically weren't used for dancing. They just opened them up and kind of herded people into them and said "Here, you can dance here." Uh, they built a stage in the city square.

**Justin:**

What?

**Sydnee:**

They constructed a stage upon which one may dance, should one choose— I guess if they were doing, like, the circle thing where one person gets in the middle and everybody's like "Go—"

**Justin:**

"Go Jacque, go Jacque."

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

What— How do you get them there? I mean, will they take long enough dance breaks to, like, be herded onto a stage? Or is it just like, natural human compulsion like, "Oh, there's a stage. I love to dance. I got to get up there."

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] I think that they were just depending on that. Like—

**Justin:**

"I'm going to share my gift. "

**Sydnee:**

People could not resist...

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

...the stage. They even paid. The city paid. This came out of the city budget, which is my favorite part. For a band, to play some music. 'Cause, I mean—

**Justin:**

Well, it's just irritating people, that, like, at least get into a rhythm...

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

...or some sort of beat, or time, or something. Like, this kid over here is doing the Jitterbug, and this lady over here is waltzing. You're killing me.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Which I like about that is that—

**Justin:**

You're Dougie-ing. That won't be invented for 500 years.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] People were inventing dances left and right. So, they started music. Nothing helped. In fact, I think when they started playing music and, you know, opening up dance halls, more people started dancing, was the problem.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and then after about a month, people just stopped. Either that, or they died. But, a lot of them just stopped.

**Justin:**

How weird.

**Sydnee:**

And nobody knew why they did it. Nobody could explain what happened. They just had to dance and then they didn't. The rhythm got them. We knew it was going to get them and then it got them.

**Justin:**

And then it got them. Yep.

**Sydnee:**

So, this was called uh, dancing mania, or choreomania, and it was actually named by Paracelsus, who we talked about recently.



**Justin:**

Sure, yeah, very.

**Sydnee:**

He was the one who called it the dancing plague, which is what it has now been known of, uh, as. And it was also called Saint Vitus' Dance. Because of the association with Saint Vitus.

The question we have now, you know, a lot of people, is "why did this happen?" And there've been a lot of theories as to, why did a bunch of people in France in 1518 decide to just dance themselves to death for a whole month. Some had the theory that it had to do with the accidental ingestion of, uh, a bread mold.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

There's a specific mold, and it can grow on bread. And it can cause ergotism. Which is, um, you can get seizures. You can get strange movements, you can hallucinate. Uh, like psychedelic kind of state. Um, and they thought, "Well, maybe they all accidentally ate that and so they all started dancing." But, typically it doesn't cause you to just dance.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

Like, a seizure is pretty distinct from dancing.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

For the most part. Um, there were theories that it was just a religious ecstasy. Like, that they all— It was around the time of the Feast of Saint Vitus. Everybody was just really into him at the time, and so, religious fervor

struck them, they started dancing. Um, some thought that this was the work of a dancing cult.

**Justin:**

Mmm.

**Sydnee:**

And that they were, like, seducing everybody.

**Justin:**

Oh, okay.

**Sydnee:**

That they—

**Justin:**

I got you. Like, like Footloose, basically.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. Like Footloose.

**Justin:**

Basically the plot of Footloose.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] So, some people thought that this was the original Footloose.

**Justin:**

The first Footloose.

**Sydnee:**

Do you think Kevin Bacon was there?

**Justin:**

Yeah, he is always anywhere there's mass dancing.

**Sydnee:**

Certainly there is some way we can— Okay, real quick, link Kevin Bacon with Frau Troffea. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Real quick. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Okay, well, let's see...

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Usually, I go somewhere Morgan Freeman.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

So, Frau Troffea maybe... I don't know.

**Sydnee:**

Is Paracelsus something?

**Justin:**

Is that a thing?

**Sydnee:**

Is there something there?

**Justin:**

Is it a thing? We've talked about both of them on this episode. Does that count?

**Sydnee:**

I don't know.

**Justin:**

I don't know. It should be.

**Sydnee:**

Anyway. Um, but it was probably none of these things. It was probably a mass psychogenic illness. Uh, this used to be called mass hysteria, but as we talked about in our episode about hysteria, hysteria is a word that's kind of falling out of favor for that.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

Because it's not a real thing. Uh, but mass psychogenic illness, meaning that for some reason, this is the way somebody was stressed. They were in a time of, like, you know, like I said, famine. Things were really hard, it was a harsh environment.

People were very, um, kind of at their wit's end, and they were starving and maybe a little confused and weakened anyway and so they manifested it in this odd way, dancing.

And then a lot of other people started doing it, because... sometimes it's because of, like, the cultural milieu at the time. Like, it is acceptable to get possessed or this is something we accept happens sometimes.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So, maybe this is the way you kind of show your stress and anxiety. By dancing.

**Justin:**

So, you got chicken pox, now I want chicken pox. That kind of deal?

**Sydnee:**

Sorta, yeah.

**Justin:**

Like little kids wanting to be sick because other people are sick. That kind of thing?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, yeah. Kind of like that.

**Justin:**

Like, it's okay. It's cool.

**Sydnee:**

It's okay. And like, this is the culturally acceptable way to display stress. For whatever reason, when we get stressed we're not allowed to just say, "Man, things really suck right now in France. Like, bread's really expensive and I have syphilis." Like, you can't say that. You can go out in the street and dance.

**Justin:**

[singing] Got to dance, got to dance, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

And then blame it on Saint Vitus.

**Justin:**

Uh-huh.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and as people started looking into this, we figured out that this has happened before.

**Justin:**

What?

**Sydnee:**

So, the most famous dancing plague is 1518, and it's because it was so many people and it's really well-documented. But, there have been dancing plagues. The earliest one we know about was in 1020 in Bernberg, Germany.

And it— All we really know is that it was around Christmas Eve. There was, like, a church service going on, you know, probably like a Christmas Eve Mass, very solemn. And everybody's you know, in contemplation and very serious and a small group of peasants just started dancing. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

I love it.

**Sydnee:**

And completely disturbed the Christmas Eve service.

**Justin:**

Yeah, they got it rocking, you mean.

**Sydnee:**

Yes.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

No, it was the best Christmas Eve mass ever. [Laughs] Um, but that's really all we know about it. And it was probably only documented because it disrupted this church event and so we know that the— And I don't know what happened to the peasants, I shudder to think. Probably something bad...

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

...would be my guess. Um, in 1237, something similar and also small happened. There was group of children who started dancing and kept dancing all the way from Erfurt to Ehrnstadt, Germany.

**Justin:**

How far away is that?

**Sydnee:**

Okay, I had to Google Map that, 'cause I had no idea what that meant. And basically, that would be about a four hour and two minute walk.

**Justin:**

[Laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Or, a four minute and two minute dance.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

If you're dancing at walking speed, which is typically the accepted, uh, conversion rate.

**Sydnee:**

Is that— Do people dance at walking speed? I would have thought that maybe they got there a little faster.

**Justin:**

It's— Well, you know, sometimes you— If you get like a little uh, Saturday Night Fever strut going, sometimes you can cover some more ground. But every once in a while you're going to have to like, put some cardboard out and do a B-boy spin on the ground...

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

...and you're not moving anywhere then. You're just getting a fresh spin going.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] It's not documented how many times they had to lay cardboard out and—

**Justin:**

Do a B-boy spin?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, or if there was cardboard, for that matter.

**Justin:**

If they even invented cardboard. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think so. Um, this actually, it's kind of similar to the Pied Piper myth, here. 'Cause a bunch of kids just dance their way out of town.

**Justin:**

Oh, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

It's not documented if there was a guy with a flute or anything, leading them.

**Justin:**

Hmm. Maybe some guy with a flute just took credit for it.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Like they always do.

**Sydnee:**



You know those guys with flutes.

**Justin:**

You know guys with flutes.

**Sydnee:**

You know how they are.

**Justin:**

Flutists. Yeah right.

**Sydnee:**

In 1278, there was a slightly larger event. Uh, near the river Muse, in Germany. A lot of these are in Germany.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Germans love to dance.

**Justin:**

Love to dance.

**Sydnee:**

I guess.

**Justin:**

Surprisingly.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, there you go.

**Justin:**

Maybe they're not allowed to and they have to blame it on a disease.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

"Oh, I don't know."

**Sydnee:**

I think they're allowed to do whatever they want now.

**Justin:**

Well, now, yeah. But— Well, no, I mean, now as, like, societal just norm—

**Sydnee:**

'Cause they're a stoic people.

**Justin:**

They're a stoic people. You're probably late for something. Like, that kind of thing.

**Sydnee:**

Oh, okay. I got you.

**Justin:**

By the way, I have one European accent, so—

**Sydnee:**

I was going to say, I'm trying to egg you into—

**Justin:**

Zut alors.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

You know it's gonna—

**Sydnee:**

I'm trying to egg you into doing more so you can express how bad it is.  
[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Okay, well that's nice. That's a good supportive safety net of a co-host.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Tell me more about this dumb thing you're talking about. Whatever. Ugh.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Why are you so mad?

**Sydnee:**

So, 200 people started dancing.

**Justin:**

Uh-huh.

**Sydnee:**

Near this river, and ended up on a bridge. And I guess bridges were not built to sustain the weight of 200 dancing Germans and—

**Justin:**

Regular Germans.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

200 stationary Germans who would never be dancing. They'll stand still, right? We don't need to build it for dancing.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] What?

**Justin:**

It doesn't have to be dance load-bearing. Just stand load-bearing.

**Sydnee:**

What is this accent?

**Justin:**

I made it more of a trace. Now it's more of a hint. He was in Germany for many years and then he's lived in America for a year—

**Sydnee:**

You've got some Schwarzenegger in there, I think...

**Justin:**

It's, uh, some—

**Sydnee:**

Like, there's a little bit of—

**Justin:**

Okay, Sydnee, give me your German accent versus your Austrian accent.

**Sydnee:**

Oh, I can. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Please.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Please, tell me the subtle differences between those two accents as you would replicate them as a speaker.

**Sydnee:**

I don't try to do accents. I can't.

**Justin:**

Then— I don't either, Sydnee, but it's the only thing I bring to the show so I'm just trying it. Okay?

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Okay, well, keep—

**Justin:**

I'm just doing my best.

**Sydnee:**

Keep—

**Justin:**

Geez.

**Sydnee:**

You'll have some more chances. Keep working on accents. Let's look at—

**Justin:**

Zut alors.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] So basically, the bridge collapsed.

**Justin:**

Yep.

**Sydnee:**

From dancing.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Which, I'm assuming ended the dancing plague. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Nope. Nothing stops it.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Um, in 1374, that was probably, other than the one in 1518, the next largest dancing plague. Uh, it started out in several different small towns all over Europe. Again, started out in a German town. Um, but then it popped up all over in these tiny little places. These isolated outbreaks of dancing.

Which is weird, because they were all like, not related. I mean, maybe somebody was traveling around spreading it, so to speak, but as far as we know, they were all isolated events and they started in 1374 and kind of continued for the next decade.

But in Germany, in France, in Luxembourg, Italy, Holland, um, in— There was a monk that died in Schaffhausen. A bunch of women started a dancing frenzy in Zurich. Uh, it just continued for decades. People just, in little teeny pockets, just pockets all over Europe having these little dancing plagues.

They related it to, at the time, there was a great famine, because there was a huge flood. I guess the Rhine had flooded. And, uh, there was a lot of destruction. A lot of people's homes, there were— I read one description of, like, dead horses floating in the streets and things.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

And so, like, it was a really gross time, I guess, to be alive. And so, a lot of people took to the streets and danced. Um, when we look at all of these different uh, dancing plagues, we kind of see some common elements. Again, they all danced.

Uh, they tended to happen in times and places of stress. Something that

caused everybody a lot of hardship. And then they danced. But you see different elements depending on where you are and what happened.

Like, some say that people seemed, um, to be completely in a trance, didn't know what they were doing, and weren't enjoying it. In other places, people, like, got naked and ran around the streets dancing naked. In some, they went and put on brightly colored clothes and put garlands in their hair..

**Justin:**

Love it.

**Sydnee:**

...and came out and danced.

**Justin:**

Love it.

**Sydnee:**

Which is a very...like, that's intentional.

**Justin:**

Okay, that's a little bit more—

**Sydnee:**

That's a very intentional—

**Justin:**

You're really dialed into the experience to be, like, if that's just a trance, like, putting on some velour and getting ready to shake it.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] In some cases, people were described as screaming while they danced. In others, they were singing. In some cases, they were just laughing hysterically. Uh, some people had sex in the streets. Sometimes the people dancing would try to get other people to join in and would become violent if they didn't.

**Justin:**

Holy crap.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and—

**Justin:**

Sounds like the Electric Slide in middle school.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Wait, your friends became violent if you wouldn't Electric Slide?

**Justin:**

Yeah, and I'm like, "I don't know how." You know?

**Sydnee:**

Oh it's so easy.

**Justin:**

Uh, teach me. Teach me. Teach me. Teach me the Electric Slide.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] In some cases, there were people who, it appeared, had traveled long distances to join in these dances. Which does make me wonder if the idea that there were just these guys going around like, "Let's get the next town going."

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

"Let's get them dancing."

**Justin:**

Dancing Johnny Appleseeds.

**Sydnee:**

There were a couple where it was just one—



**Justin:**

Johnny Applegroove.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Where it was just one guy dancing.

**Justin:**

Okay, that's not a plague.

**Sydnee:**

Which I don't—

**Justin:**

Nope. Not a dancing plague.

**Sydnee:**

Which I don't think that's a dancing plague. Just that one weird guy who's been out in the street dancing all week.

**Justin:**

"I got to nail this." No you don't. Stop it.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

You're embarrassing yourself. You just love to dance. And I mean, you look fantastic. You—you're amazing, but like, you don't have an illness. Sydnee, what the heck— pardon my language, but what the heck was causing this?

**Sydnee:**

Well, Justin, I'm going to tell you a little bit more about dancing plagues. But before I do, why don't you head on down with me to the billing department?

**Justin:**

Let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

**Justin:**

Okay, Sydnee. Please. I have to understand. Dancing plagues.

**Sydnee:**

Again, as we're trying to understand what would cause this, we start to look towards some similar events throughout history. So, a couple things that are also examples of these mass psychogenic illnesses, and specifically dancing plagues. There's something called tarantism. Have you ever heard of that, Justin?

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

So, it occurred in southern Italy. Started in about the 13th century and continued until the 16th century.

**Justin:**

But I would guess that it is spider related.

**Sydnee:**

It is. It is spider related and—

**Justin:**

Cause it's the same root as, like, the tarantella and tarantula.

**Sydnee:**

Right. Well, now, the tarantella is not a spider.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm. It's a spider-based dance.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Spider-based dance?

**Justin:**

Yeah, you move like a spider. It's the same root.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. Well, it's kind of related, yes.

**Justin:**

I'm saying it in that tone of voice I use sometimes when I don't know if I'm right. But I'm saying it with enough confidence that you're going to buy into it for fear of being wrong.

**Sydnee:**

No, you don't. Okay, the tarantella's not named because you move like a spider.

**Justin:**

Okay, what's it named for?

**Sydnee:**

It's named because it was the dance that would cure you if you got bitten by a spider.

**Justin:**

So, it's all kit and caboodle.

**Sydnee:**

So, tarantism. There was this belief that somebody would get bitten by a spider— and I say that and I'm saying it with quotes, you can't hear them, but there are quotes around it. Because there's little evidence that people actually got bitten by spiders.

I mean, they— I mean, sure, they did. But not all the people who had tarantism. And the only way to cure it was to do this dance. And you also had to have the right music or you would die. So, you did the dance. You

would have to have the music. It would cure the spider bite. And then you would dance.

And, like, other people would want to join in with you. And so there were these events of tarantism where, like, people were all dancing. But they would say, like "No, no, no, it's cool. It's just that so-and-so got bitten by a spider and they've got to dance to this music and maybe since I once got bitten by a spider in the past, if I don't also dance, it'll come back up in my blood, so I better join in just to be on the safe side."

**Justin:**

Got it.

**Sydnee:**

You know, just to make sure. But when you look at the other cures that were listed, in addition to doing the dance and listening to the music, and the music was vital, uh, there were some other things you could do to help get rid of the poison from the spider. Uh, you could drink large amounts of wine. [Laughs]

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

You could jump into the sea.

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

You could, if there's two of you, you could tie each other up and whip each other, with vines.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

You could pretend sword fight.

**Justin:**

Okay. All right.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

Okay. Okay. Okay. All right. You just want a day off work. You and your buddies just want to take a day off work. So you have made up this crazy, crazy disease.

**Sydnee:**

There is a feeling that, perhaps, unlike, uh, the dancing plagues, where people were not enjoying the dancing. They danced themselves to death. That maybe tarantism was in response to an oppressive time period where you weren't allowed to do some of these things.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

And maybe you were under stress, you know, financially or illness, whatever. And so this is how you kind of act it out. It was a cure, but it was also— it was a cure. It was a cure for the blues.

**Justin:**

For the blues. Shake those blues away.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Um. There was also more recently another example of a mass psychogenic illness. There is, in 1962, it was called the Tanganyika laughter epidemic.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

And this happened in a mission school in what is now Tanzania. There was a weird epidemic where three girls in the school started laughing and then everybody else started laughing too. Just the students. It was not the faculty. It was just restricted to the students. But they laughed so much and so long and couldn't stop that they had to shut the school down.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

It lasted, for some, up to 16 days and it spread to many nearby villages and schools. All in all, 14 schools were affected. Had to be shut down for some period of time, and over a thousand people got this.

**Justin:**

I know you don't mean to, right now, you sound like a Nickelodeon ad. Like, "Breaking news, kids across the country have had to shut down school 'cause they're laughing so hard. Haha. I love you Ren and Stimpy."

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] I— I—

**Justin:**

Oh, that takes me back. I feel like you're about to tell me when Snick starts.

**Sydnee:**

Wow, man. I wish I was. No, unfortunately this was a real thing where they had to— I mean, it really disrupted, like, village life and school because the girls could not— I say girls, there were male students as well, but it was mainly female students, could not stop laughing.

It lasted over a period of six months, all in all. Um, and if you look at the other symptoms, I think this is interesting, in addition to the hysterical laughing, there was pain, fainting, flatulence—

**Justin:**

[Laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] Respiratory problems, rashes, attacks of crying, and random screaming.

**Justin:**

Okay, so just being a teenager, basically. You're just being a young person in the world.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. Yeah, I know. That was kind of— They just described middle school, I think.

**Justin:**

Yeah, that's just all middle school. Uh, are those basic symptoms.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, you could also uh, in this same line, you could consider some of what happened during the Salem witch trials a time of mass psychogenic illness.

**Justin:**

What is a mass psychogenic illness?

**Sydnee:**

Uh, like I said, it's basically when a lot of— So, it usually starts with one person. And the idea is that there is some, like I said, some time of stress or strife.

Um, so, like, in the Salem witch trials, it was a time when a lot of the people who were involved, for instance, had had family members who'd had negative interactions with the Native American population, who, you know, they're—

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

They'd either been killed or had been involved in fights and people had been killed as a result or been captured. Um, so it was a stressful time, uh, for those people. So something to that effect.

And the way that you experience that stress is consistent with the cultural beliefs of the time. So, if you think about a Puritanical society, if somebody is acting improper, a good way to explain that would be possession, right? Or that they— That the devil had entranced them.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

As in, like, the Salem Witch Trials. And so that is the way that that expresses in that culture. Does that make sense?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Do you see what I'm saying?

**Justin:**

So, it's basically... It basically explains our national obsession for Jersey Shore. For like, three months there when everybody was really into Jersey Shore. Same basic principle.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. Exactly. That was a mass psychogenic illness. They usually have symptoms like that. Like, fainting and nausea.

**Justin:**

[Laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Which I definitely had a lot of nausea in response to the [laughs] Jersey Shore epidemic of— What year was that? Two thousand—



**Justin:**

Two thousand some.

**Sydnee:**

2002? Something like that. Um, there is— Now recently, there have still been outbreaks of things like this recently. A lot of them have to do with, like I said, fainting or stomach pain. Like a whole school, everybody gets stomach pain and passes out or something. Um, which isn't as exciting to talk about as dancing. There is an epidemic that occasionally strikes parts of southeast Asia, where people believe that their genitals are retracting into their bodies.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Um, if your genitals go all the way in, you will die. Is the belief. So you have to stop it by any means necessary, which could mean putting like a peg through your penis in order to prevent it from—

**Justin:**

Going all the way back into your body.

**Sydnee:**

Yes.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, which has been known to happen. Um, and then, again, it happens the same kind of way. Like, one person has this fear and then a whole like, community will have this belief that this is happening to them. Men and women. Um—

**Justin:**

Women think that their penises are going back in their body?

**Sydnee:**

No, that— Their vaginas.

**Justin:**

Okay. Got it. Wait, aren't they already—

**Sydnee:**

Well, we'll spare you the lesson on female anatomy and we'll talk about this another time.

**Justin:**

Okay, thank you.

**Sydnee:**

Um, similarly—

**Justin:**

I will spare you the accent I was about to do, so it all comes out in the wash.

**Sydnee:**

Thank you. The southeast Asia accent?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. That was definitely going to offend someone.

**Justin:**

It was either going to be Russian or I don't know, Polynesian? One of those accents. Kind of a blend.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. Good. We won't have you teaching geography to anybody either.

**Justin:**

Sounds good.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, similarly, in West Africa, there are epidemic beliefs that someone is trying to steal your penis.

**Justin:**

Mr. Steal your penis.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs] And there have even been, uh, cases of penis thieves who were murdered in different parts of Africa, because there was a belief that...

**Justin:**

Well, I mean, you gotta—

**Sydnee:**

And again, as far as explanation for this—

**Justin:**

We need a Tarantino movie that's about a group of penis thieves. They turn on each other. It's called Reservoir Dogs 2.

**Sydnee:**

[Laughs]

**Justin:**

They're back and they're stealing penises.

**Sydnee:**

Again, it's one of those weird things. This is our best guess. We don't— We have a lot of records of what happened in 1518 and these various other dancing plagues, but we don't know exactly why, but we do know that, um, that this is something, you know, that we see even today. Where people kind of react to a stressor in a strange way.

And like I said, it usually has to do with what the culturally accepted way of acting out is at the time. And if, you know, at the time it was, uh, not acceptable to dance in the street, that's what you did. So. I get it. I mean,

uh, except for the whole dancing until you die thing, it sounds like a pretty benign—

**Justin:**

Yeah. It doesn't seem that bad, except for if you get killed for being a penis thief. Uh, but until that happens, you're fine.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. This was almost, uh, like, we were going into like, Buffy the Vampire Slayer the musical episode.

**Justin:**

[Laughs]

**Sydnee:**

I was getting really close to entering into the dancing demon thing, but.

**Justin:**

Thank you for sparing us.

**Sydnee:**

I did my best.

**Justin:**

Thank you so much for listening to our program. We hope you had a good time. Thanks to the Maximum Fun network for having us on their family of programming. A lot of great shows to listen to, uh, The Flop House is one I want to recommend this week.

I was listening to that with my brothers, uh, this past weekend. Uh, very funny. Bad movie review podcast that you will very much enjoy. But there's a ton of other shows on there like Jordan, Jesse, Go, Judge John Hodgman, Bullseye, One Bad Mother, uh, Memory Palace, Risk—

**Sydnee:**

My Brother, My Brother and Me.

**Justin:**

Thank you, dear. So much. And we have another My Brother, My Brother and Me type product called The Adventures Zone where we play D&D with our dad. So, uh, the new episode of that comes out uh, on Thursday. So, get there. Um. Thanks to the Taxpayers for letting us use their song Medicines as our intro and outro, and uh, thanks to you at home for listening. We sure appreciate it.

**Sydnee:**

And thanks for all of your emails and tweets and subject suggestions.

**Justin:**

We're @sawbones on Twitter and sawbones@maximumfun.com is our email address. And that's gonna do it for us. Until next Tuesday, I'm Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

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

[theme music plays]

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