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New interactive play promises travels to 'the other side' with Ouija board



Brian M. Kehoe, who will star in "Planchette." (Kim Hairston / Baltimore Sun)



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If the story is to be believed, a little paranormal guidance helped launch a product in 1890. That's when Helen Peters, a spiritualist living in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood, was somehow guided by the triangular device known as a planchette to pick out the letters O-U-I-J-A, thus providing a name for a board game that would soon hit the market.

This weekend, a new theatrical work, "Planchette," opens at the Carroll Mansion with a Ouija board front and center.

"I hate the word experiential, but that's what this show is," says Baltimore-based actor-magician Brian M. Kehoe, who portrays a character named Maxwell Fink.

Penned by Baltimore playwright Annelise Montone, "Planchette" draws from the world of spiritualism. The show's website provides tongue-in-cheek biographical background on Fink, a former professor at the University of Transylvania, who was fired "for his forward thinking" and whose "interest in the Ouija board as an object of serious examination represents a genius not usually found in the scientific community."

The production came about when Kehoe, who has performed in some of Montone's plays, asked her to fashion a work for him.

"I thought, what about using the Ouija board since Baltimore has such a history with it," says Kehoe, 35, who just finished a run as one of two actors tackling multiple roles in [a vibrant staging of "Greater Tuna" at Vagabond Players](#).

"Planchette," with a plot that includes an effort to contact the creators of the board, takes advantage of Kehoe's interest in acting and in performing magic. An early version of the piece had Kehoe appearing as himself.

"But I was uncomfortable with that," he says. "That's how Maxwell Fink came about. He's a little pompous, so I can be a jerk [in the play]. Maxwell believes he has come up with the method to contact the other side. He couldn't create a machine to do it alone; he realized he needed human beings. Maxwell Fink needs to find the right audience to achieve his goal."

If you're game, you can be a part of that audience — only 20 people per performance, held in the drawing room of the Carroll Mansion (which gets a portion of the ticket proceeds).

"The entire show is interactive," Kehoe says. "Nobody's safe."

During "Planchette," Kehoe will practice some "mentalism" having to do with audience members asked to write down a memory they have of the Ouija board.

"Everyone has a memory of that," he says. "My experience was that I found one in my aunt's basement, but my mother wouldn't let me bring it into the house."

That was back in Kehoe's hometown, native Rochester, N.Y., where he got his first magic kit when he was 7 ("I did living room shows") and later worked at magic shops. The acting bug also hit at a tender age.

"At 12, my mother encouraged me to audition for musical theater," Kehoe says. "I was in the boys' band in 'The Music Man.' The director was a magician, and he added some magic tricks for the Harold Hill character to do. I thought, OK, I can combine the two."

Kehoe went on to study theater arts in college and, since moving to Baltimore four years ago, has acted in

productions at several area theaters. And, along with such day jobs as operations manager for the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra and assistant production manager at the Baltimore School for the Arts, he has found outlets for his magic act.

"My background is performing in restaurants as a close-up magician, one on one, table to table," Kehoe says.

The setting for "Planchette" will allow for a similarly intimate experience, which, if all goes well, will sustain an atmosphere of mystery.

"I don't use any plants in the audiences," Kehoe says. "I want people to go home wondering. 'Was that real? Did that happen?'"

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If you go

"Planchette" opens today and runs through Nov. 7 at Carroll Mansion, 800 E. Lombard St. Tickets are \$25 to \$75. Go to whentheheadspeak.com.