

Investigating a Playhouse Ghost

Lawrence C. Connolly of the podcast Prime Stage Mystery Theatre and the blog The 21st-Century Scop talks to Michael Brendan and his father (also named Michael) about an encounter and investigation into one of the ghosts at the Pittsburgh Playhouse.

The following is the full transcript of that interview, conducted 23 February 2023. Copyright © Lawrence C. Connolly 2023. Complete audio is available [here](#).

Hello theatre lovers and ghost story fans, and welcome to this special supplement to Prime Stage Mystery Theatre, in which we'll be discussing a first-hand paranormal encounter at the old Pittsburgh Playhouse and an investigation into the true identity of the ghost known as John Johns.

I'm Lawrence Connolly, writer of Prime Stage Mystery Theatre, and if you found your way here before catching the first installment of our latest mystery, I hope you'll take a moment to seek it out and add Prime Stage Mystery Theatre to your podcast queue. You'll find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Libsyn, and others. Or you can also check us out at PrimeStage.com, where you can learn all about the show and help support the series by becoming a Prime Stage sponsor.

If you've already listened to the March 2nd installment of Mystery Theatre, you know it continues an investigation into some mysterious tapping sounds that were introduced in our previous episodes. And you also know that our November mystery "In the Ghost Light's Glow" included discussions of haunted theatres—most notably the old Pittsburgh Playhouse on Craft Avenue and Hamlet Street.

You can read more about those ghosts at LawrenceConnolly.com, and it was in response to one of my posts there that fellow writer Michael Brendan submitted an account of a ghost encounter told to him by his father. And since that experience involved a ghost that communicated through tapping and knocking sounds—a form of communication featured in our current mystery—we wanted to hear more.

But first, some introductions.

Michael Brendan the Younger is an IT administrator, martial arts enthusiast, and fantasy writer who earned an MFA from Seton Hill University's Writing Popular Fiction Program—where I had the pleasure of working with him while serving as one of the program's residency writers.

Among Michael's current projects is a fantasy novel and a martial arts book for writers who want to craft more realistic fighting scenes.

His father, also Michael the Elder, worked as props master at the Pittsburgh Playhouse shortly after it was acquired by Point Park College and served for many years as a voluntary TD at Norwin High School. His wife Dona Jordan is an expert in genealogy, and with her help, he conducted a successful investigation to uncover the true history behind one of the most famous Pittsburgh Playhouse ghosts.

I connected with the Brendans over zoom in a session which—like many zoom get-togethers-- began rather like a séance, with each of us saying things like “Are you there?” “I hear you now?” “Yes, I think I see you, now.” You know the meme. You’ve seen it before.

Fortunately, we managed to establish a connection. Here, then, is that conversation:

Michael the Younger:

Check, check 1, 2 ...

21st Century Scop:

I hear you!

Younger:

Ah! Finally!

Scop:

Loud and clear!

Younger:

25 years of IT and it takes me this long to unscramble zoom. I'm so sorry.

Scop:

No matter. We got you now. It's great to see you ... and your father. Now it's Michel and Michael. How are our listeners going to tell you apart. What shall I call you?

Younger:

We usually refer to him as Michael the elder jokingly and I guess that makes me—

Elder:

Michael the younger.

Younger:

Michael the younger.

Scop:

So it's Michael the elder and Michael the younger. So, Michael the Younger, since we first became aware of your father's story when you responded to our discussion about paranormal activities at the old Pittsburgh Playhouse, could you set the story up for us. When did you first hear your father tell his tale, and what was your reaction?

Younger:

Well, my girlfriend is a theatre tech. She works in costuming. She's currently working on a production at St. Vincent's for *One Upon a Mattress*, and we're talking about theatre ghosts and the Pittsburgh Playhouse because she was at the Pittsburgh Playhouse for a little bit, and the subject of the ghosts of theaters came up, and Dad started relating a couple stories about his encounter with (a ghost named) John. And I think my reaction was ... Huh!?

Elder:

It's one of these things you never knew about your parents type of situation.

Younger:

Yeah, just some weird things that go on in theater. And for me, you know, ghost encounters just do not happen—although we joke about me being haunted occasionally by a ghost cat that gets into things. I hear all these amazing ghost stories, but I've never actually been through one myself. So I just remember being amazed about these encounters and the weird things that happen when the lights go down at theaters.

Scop:

So Michael the Elder, can you give us a little bit of background? What was your position with the Playhouse when your encounters occurred?

Elder:

Well, I was hired in December of 1969 as a props master. That was the year that the Playhouse had been acquired by Point Park College, and there was a lot of change going on. The prior props mistress had lost her job for a very simple reason. She couldn't drive a stick shift, and the Playhouse van was a stick shift and that's what was needed to go around and collect props and things like that. So they hired me in December. I worked through the spring there at the Playhouse. And they shut down for the summer season, and I ended up getting a job somewhere else.

Scop:

And while you were at the Playhouse, you had some encounters with the ghost known as John Johns. Tell us what happened?

Elder:

Right. Well, the first time we had been doing the show "Wait Until Dark" in the Craft Avenue Theater ... no, excuse me, the Hamilton Street Theater. And I had walked out into the house after the show came down, and there was one person sitting at the back. And the audience was supposed to be cleared by then because we wanted to lock up and go home. And as I walk over to the doors to the lobby to lock them, I said, "You're going to have to leave now, Sir." And I got to the door, and I turned around, and he was gone. So I locked the door, and I walked back to the other exit to the theater [which] was the backstage exit into the hallway where the dressing rooms were. And there were a couple cast members and crew members sitting on the steps. And I said to a friend of mine, "Marianne, did you just see the guy walk did you just see a guy come through here?"

And she said, “No we've been here for about 15 minutes.”

I said, “Well, there was somebody out there. I went to lock the doors, and turned around, and he was gone so I assume he came through here.”

So we went back into the theater, looked all over, couldn't find anybody. So we shook our heads and just brushed it off.

About four or five days, maybe a week later, I'm sitting up in the costume shop doing some work, shooting the breeze, doing some plans, things like that ... and the wardrobe master brought out an old scrapbook. And we were leafing through that, and I said, “Whoa! Wait a minute. Back up a page. That guy! That's the guy I saw in Hamlet Street!”

And said, “Oh, that's John Johns. He's dead.”

And this was the first I'd heard of John Johns.

And he told me about John and another ghost he called Alma. I just remembered her name just now. And I don't remember what exactly he told me about them, just that they had been actors at the Playhouse and that they had died and that their ghosts—among others—were reputed to haunt the complex. You have to remember, the Playhouse was a real mishmash of at least three buildings and maybe parts of old tenements that had all been incorporated under one roof.

Scop:

Yes, it was made up of conjoined buildings, much like the theatre and studio buildings in our mystery stories. And the way Michael related your story to us, you became aware of some mysterious tapping or knocking sounds while doing some carpentry work backstage. So ... Michael the Younger, could you share the version of the story that you shared in response to one of our prompts last November? The one when your dad and John began communicating with tapping sounds.

Younger:

The way you told us you were cutting some lumber and you were tapping the sawdust off. And you tap-taped the board to get the sawdust off and you tapped like three times and you heard a knock somewhere in the in the distance. Three knocks. And you go back to work, tap some more sawdust off. *Knock! Knock!* You look around. *Tap! Tap-tap!*

Elder:

It was almost like an echo, but not an echo but an echo effect in that I would tap three time and I'd hear three taps. They sounded like they were on the ceiling or above the ceiling. I'm not sure what was over that portion of the carpentry shop. But when it happened the second time, that's when I started testing it, just doing, *Tape Tap Tap!* And there was a repeat in the same cadence, and that's when I said, “OK, John. We hear you. You can cut it out.” And nothing after that point.

Scop:

So he's not a belligerent ghost, and yet one might wonder what compelled him and the other spirits to haunt the theatre after all those years. Michael the Younger, what do you think?

Younger:

I think a real basic motivation is, you know—love of the theatre and wanting to be a part of it still, and maybe not letting go and just making sure that people remember. Because not all haunts need to be driven by some sort of revenge or some sort of trauma. It's just—

Elder:

Seeking affirmation.

Younger:

Seeking affirmation, wanting to still be part of that community. I know that after my own departure from Seton Hill, I still love being part of the community. And maybe that might happen to me to some degree. I'll be one of the haunts at Seton Hill. Who knows? I know that place has some ghosts of its own.

Scop:

Good answer. Now as you know, part of what we do here at Mystery Theatre is exploring the story potential of things we encounter in the real world. Whether those things are stories we've heard or things we've experienced, our central characters are always being challenged to weave those things into a stories of their own. So here's a question. Consider it a writing prompt if you will, but now that the old Playhouse has been razed and all that remains on Craft Avenue and Hamlet Street is a parking lot between a hotel and medical center, where do you think his ghost is now? Any thoughts? Either of you?

Elder:

I don't know. Maybe he'll inhabit whatever gets built there next. And then he'll wonder, "Where did this come from?"

Younger:

Or, maybe he has found out through other folks at the theater where their activities are moving. So he might just be hanging out at where the new Playhouse is but just hasn't gotten enough energy because his anchors been destroyed to be able to manifest yet. But with time and maybe after a few more shows ... a few more seasons of theater, he might start manifesting again.

Scop:

So it is the undying allure of the stage. But Michael the Elder, I understand you and your wife have recently done some detective work and have come up with some interesting

discoveries that refute some of the stories that began circulating at the Playhouse many decades ago. So tell us, what was the legend then, and what have you discovered.

Elder:

Back then the legend was that John Johns had died on the stage, and if you just Google “John Johns Pittsburgh Playhouse,” you'll get these stories about how he died on stage or how he had a heart attack on stage and he asked to be taken back to his dressing room. His favorite dressing room was Number 7. And just before they went through the door, he died.

That’s the story. And I also I saw, in several of the articles, somebody claiming that they had never been able to find an obituary, so they wondered whether he was real.

Well, my wife’s a genealogist, and I picked up a little bit from her, and I said, “No obit? That doesn't mean a thing.” Many people don't have obits. Reporters don't go out there hunting the funeral homes looking for dead people to write about. Instead, the family calls the newspaper, and the stories are assigned to a copywriter who writes whatever the family will tell them and prints it and bills them. So, if you're not paying for an obit, then it's not going to be in the newspapers.

The second thing is: what newspaper? We only have two now. The *Trib* and the *PG*. But back then there was also the *Pittsburgh Press* and the *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*. And there were also small newspapers that weren’t real important, at least on the overall scheme of things, within the city and in the surrounding communities. Penn Hills had a paper. Wilkinsburg had a paper.

So my wife the genealogist goes online real quick. She says, “He may not have had an obit, but he had a death certificate. That's required.” She pulls up death certificates for 16 people between 1906 and 69 with the name John John, narrows them down to three who died in the right range, picks one, looks at it, and it says he died at the cafeteria at Westinghouse on Braddock Ave. She looks him up in the 1950 census, finds him living with his mother in Penn Hills, discovers that he was born in Latrobe. And from the death certificate she knows that he was buried in Latrobe, so she says maybe he's in a Latrobe paper.

She doesn't know the names of papers, but she goes to newspapers.com and doing her genie magic, she comes up with an obituary published in Indiana, PA, because he had gone to school in Homer city just South of Indiana. And, no, he did not die at the Pittsburgh Playhouse, he died while giving a speech acting as a postmaster for a meeting at Westinghouse in the cafeteria. And he was he was born to Latrobe and was buried back on Latrobe in a family plot.

And it does say here that his greatest claim to fame was his sterling performance since 1934 in plays at the Pittsburgh Playhouse. His last role was of a tramp in *The Caretakers*.

Younger:

That was his last performance.

Elder:

So he did exist. The legend has it wrong. He didn't die at the Playhouse, and yes there is an obit if you got a genealogist working for you.

Younger:

So there really was a John Johns and that could still that could have been his ghost. So we found some truth to the legend.

Scop:

Yes you did. Great stuff. And amazing detective work!

So in the minute we have remaining, is there anything else you'd like to share? Final comments before we sign off.

Elder:

Just one shameless advertisement. My wife is more than happy if anybody wants to talk about genealogy and false trails and things like that and the things that occur when you're looking for the answers you think you know about and really don't. Her name is Donna Jordan, and you can reach her at jacktowngeneologist@gmail.com.

Scop:

Well gentlemen it has been great talking to you both.

Michael the Elder, great meeting you and thanks so much for that terrific investigation into the mystery of one of the Pittsburgh Playhouse's most famous ghost stories.

Michael the Younger, it's been great seeing you again, and I hope our paths cross in person sometime soon ... possibly out there at your alma mater Seton Hill. No point waiting until we are a couple of ghosts haunting those hallowed halls.

Younger:

Yes. Thanks, Larry. Take care.

Scop:

This has been a special supplement to the March chapter of Prime Stage Mystery Theatre, which you can hear at pretty much wherever you get your podcasts or at primestage.com/podcasts.

And if—while listening to any of our past and current episodes—you decide you have a story to share or an urge to investigate one of our mysteries on your own, we hope you will share your results by reaching out to us at PrimeStage.com/contact or at the social media contact buttons you'll find at Prime Stage.com.

You'll also find plenty of supplementary material and more discussions at my website, which you can find at [Lawrence Connolly.com](http://LawrenceConnolly.com). that's Lawrence C O N N O L L Y.com.

Check it out. I'll meet you there!

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