



CULTURE & ARTS

Braco The Gazer: A New Age Guru With Nothing To Say

The Silent Treatment: Marketing The Gazing Guru

By Mallika Rao

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Courtesy Angelika Whitecliff



ICONIC ROCKERS, KNOWS all about getting high. HIS career flamed out in the '80s when he became so addicted to cocaine, he hocked all of his platinum record plaques to fund his habit. On a recent brisk spring day in Manhattan, Podell, since reformed, led the charge to sample a drug of a different sort. The supplier, a Croatian man known to followers as Braco (pronounced Brah-tzo, the Croatian word for "little brother"), pushes hope.

"Last night, I was as high as I've ever been," Podell told a crowd gathered in the Crystal Ballroom of the New Yorker Hotel. People hollered in agreement. A leather jacket hung from Podell's skinny frame, and sunglasses shielded his eyes from the light of the chandeliers. "Eight bucks -- not bad! I wish I'd known about this 30 years ago," he continued, cackling. "I would have saved a lot of money."

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Ever since the psychic Edgar Cayce birthed the American New Age movement in the early 20th century, there's been no lack of men and women selling miracles to the crystal-pendant set. Braco, though, may be the smoothest salesman yet. His cult of personality has no personality. He's said to do it all -- everything from shrinking tumors to casting love spells -- without saying a word or touching anyone. All he does, to the delight of his followers, is gaze at them.

The cross-section of Braco believers streaming into the New Yorker lobby that weekend could have been mistaken for a United Nations tour group. The variety was staggering: Midwesterners in sweatshirts and sensible shoes, pale young Balkan men, Indian couples sporting



some were, in fact, U.N. employees, converts since 2012, when Braco gazed at them in a church down the street from their Manhattan headquarters. That time, the Croatian ambassador and his wife showed up.

Semi-celebrities were in attendance, too. In the front row sat Tracie Martyn, a self-described "facialist to the stars," and something of a magician-healer herself. Martyn's website quotes Kate Winslet and Susan Sarandon, both clients, swearing by a facial Martyn delivers with an electric wand. That day, a band of her clients joined her, among them Podell and Christine Baranski, the Emmy-winning actress from "The Good Wife." ("I felt like a dolphin swimming in beautiful water," Baranski later enthused.) They sat in reserved seats at the front of the packed ballroom.

This was day two for most, including Podell. "I had to come back for more. After all," he grinned, "I am an addict."

Podell is the type of fan Braco tends to befriend: someone who isn't a household name, but who knows a few personally. In the ballroom, he talked about whisking Braco and a few gazing A-listers, including Martyn, to the backstage of the Beacon Theater for an Allman Brothers concert the night before (the Allmans are Podell's clients from way back). "We were so lit up, you could have plugged us in," he crowed, chalking up the night of spot-hopping to "the gift of the gaze," rather than drugs or alcohol.

For most of the crowd, talking to Braco, let alone hanging with him, is the stuff of dreams. Since 2008, he hasn't spoken with anyone except those in his inner circle -- he refused to be interviewed for this story. The system maximizes the number of people he can "heal" in a day. It's also a trump card against charges of fraud.



...experienced can't be explained any other way.

AN EXTRAORDINARY TALENT

No definitive study on energy healing exists. The biggest so far, a [1999 experiment by psychiatrist Elisabeth Targ](#), seemed to show that a diffuse team of healers stalled the deaths of AIDS patients. The data was later found to be flawed, and in a surreal twist, Targ herself died of a brain tumor under the watch of an army of healers. At the time, it was popular to call her the most prayed-for person in the world.

Hope lives on though. Each year, national grants fund the study of qigong, tai chi, acupuncture, acupressure, meditation and reiki, a palm-healing technique now offered at more than 800 American hospitals. Solo healers are becoming stars. These aren't the faith healers of old, who lay hands on writhing bodies in private homes and churches. The new generation is more akin to celebrity fitness trainers, with products and regimens open to anyone willing to pay. The options are endless: If Braco's \$8, 8-minute soul-sweep doesn't do it for you, why not an embrace from [Amma, the jolly "hugging saint"](#) from India, who once wrapped her arms around Sharon Stone? Or if you prefer your healers clean-cut, there's always Dean Kraft, a psychic who wears suits.

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The idea of staring one's way to transcendence isn't new, either. Scientologists call it "confronting" -- as dramatized in "The Master," the drifter played by Joaquin Phoenix loses it while contemplating a wall. In the spring of 2010, the artist [Marina Abramovic](#) planted herself in the Museum of Modern Art for a multi-month stare-athon,



[cited](#).

A few years back there was even a flurry of "eye-gazing parties" -- "NY's hottest dating trend," Elle Magazine called it -- during which single people looking for love looked into a potential partner's eyes for a few minutes.

But Braco is unique. He may offer less than any star healer on the market: no mantras, no dictums, just the sight of him seeing you. When his ongoing tour, [Braco in America](#), launched in 2010, he became a punchline. On his radio show, [Howard Stern](#) wondered if the silent Croatian was mentally disabled. A few months later, the comedian Tim Heidecker, of the "Tim and Eric Awesome Show," tweeted a link to a YouTube video of Braco gazing at a crowd of tearful onlookers.

"I was obsessed," said Scott Jacobson, a former writer for "The Daily Show," who first encountered Braco in a video emailed by a friend in comedy.

"He looks absolutely like some guy you'd see eating at a cafe in Santa Monica, staring out and doing nothing at all. There seems to be nothing special about him, which is why the cutaways to the audience, their responses, are so wonderful."

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Jacobson wound up doing a day's worth of gazing sessions in 2011 for a gonzo article for Vice Magazine (which [he later published on his personal website](#) after a dispute over length).



L.A., drew other skeptics who found the premise hilarious. Two comics in the audience, Natasha Lejjero and Mark Proksch, upset the peace when they challenged the opening speaker, according to Jacobson. His dispatch describes the security guards, or "guardians," who linger on the sidelines of every session, asking Jacobson if he knew the duo and could stop them.

At the same time, backers began to surface. In 2011, Braco was preparing a renewal application for his O-1, or extraordinary talent visa, a three-year ticket to work in the U.S. granted to applicants with impressive references. One of his followers worked for Dennis Kucinich, the one-time presidential candidate who was then the U.S. representative from Ohio. Kucinich, who is part Croat, agreed to a private meeting with Braco. He wrote a welcome statement in Croatian. Soon, he was asking his secretary to clear his schedule and shepherding Braco on a private tour of Congress, chatting in English about world peace. When Braco's visa application went out, it was with a letter from Kucinich's office inside.

Kucinich is the highest-profile American politician to help Braco gain a visa. (While Braco staff members say former Wyoming Gov. David Freudenthal made a crucial call after Braco's first visa application was rejected, Freudenthal told The Huffington Post he can't recall doing so, saying with a chuckle, "You'd think I'd remember someone like that.")

Today, Braco is the first and only Croat to hold the O-1, a class of certification associated with Olympians and Oscar winners.

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nothing? JACOBSON, the *Daily Show* writer, talks about an "unpretentious" vibe. "He seems to live modestly, he doesn't charge much. This isn't like Scientology, where by the time you clear, you've spent hundreds of dollars," says David Bromley, a Virginia Commonwealth University professor who tracks suspect religious phenomena.

Kucinich rebuffed a question about the gazing sessions -- "I don't know anything about those things" -- but spoke glowingly of his fellow Croat in an interview with The Huffington Post. "He's a gentle, sensitive soul. Would there were more people like him."

Braco's adherents make more grandiose claims: that he hails from Atlantis; that a fallen sunbeam pierced his mentor, wiring Braco into a sort of mystical hotline to the sun. Most project his divinity onto the products hawked at every gazing session: the \$35 DVDs (also available for \$20 online), which some purchasers rub on their skin in the belief that it will ease muscle pain, or the pendants from his sun-inspired jewelry line, some priced upwards of \$5,000.

Braco's factotums won't discuss financial figures. One employee estimated that 3,000 people sat in the Crystal Ballroom over the course of the weekend this spring. An official Braco website puts his record at [10,000 people in one day](#). But because customers typically attend multiple sessions in a day, ticket sales don't translate into a conclusive head count.

Braco's growing tour schedule tells a clearer story. This year he is scheduled to spend only two weeks at home in Zagreb with his wife and son. He'll gaze in cities across America: Richmond, Va.; Phoenix; Sacramento, Calif.; Portland, Ore. He visits Texas and Massachusetts for the first time (as well as the Netherlands, and he recently visited



live, with most multiple stops.

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Not every miracle sounds far-fetched. That a person's mood might improve under a constant kindly gaze, for instance, isn't such a leap. So too might a sick dog seem to chill out if played one of the rare recordings of Braco speaking (called "The Voice") in a soothing Croatian drone. Vanishing tumors are another thing. In response to HuffPost's requests for evidence more rigorous than first-person anecdotes -- a follow-up survey, or anything medical -- Braco's staff said they didn't have the manpower or funding to track outcomes.

On cult-watch forums, critics say his sessions are designed to create a placebo effect, squeezing Braco into 10 minutes toward the end of an hour packed with hype-men and -women. The skeptics deride a ban on pregnant women and children, whom Braco's literature warns may be "overburdened" by the energy.

"You know why kids aren't allowed, right?" wrote a commenter on the site NewAgeFraud.com. "This kinda stuff is considered 18+ ever since the Emperor got himself a new outfit. Kids *ask questions*."

BRACO IN AMERICA

Nearly every English-language factoid about Braco comes from the two U.S. employees closest to him: Angelika Whitecliff and Jane Sibbett. At first glance, the leggy blondes, both of whom live in Hawaii and wax poetic about energy fields and swimming with the dolphins, seem like twins.



campaign more or less independently, and even run similar but competing websites that sell his goods. Sibbett, an actress (she played [Ross Geller's lesbian ex, Carol, on "Friends"](#)) is linked into L.A. and New York. She can be breezy and persuasive about how Braco won over her "pragmatic mind," whereas Whitecliff, a hardcore New Age-ist, never expresses doubts. Tall and angular, she flits around sessions gripping a cup of coffee and trembling with nervous energy.

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Whitecliff met Braco first, at a UFO conference in Las Vegas in 2009. She followed up with a pilgrimage to Zagreb, where she wrote a memoir, *21 Days With Braco*, that she says was meant to prep American audiences for his arrival. In it, she details the moment Braco commissioned her help. By her account, he told her she was the one to bring him to America.

Back home in Hawaii, she hired Sibbett to film a line of DVDs, in which followers detail miraculous turns in their lives. (These can be purchased on the dueling websites: Braco.net, run by Whitecliff, and BracoAmerica.com, Sibbett's site.)

By the time of Braco's first gaze on American soil -- at a conference in Hawaii run by Whitecliff -- Sibbett and her TV writer husband had moved from L.A. She and Braco got to know each other, she says, during volleyball matches and swim trips. She took him horseback riding.

She recounts taking a walk one night and running into Braco, who was also on a stroll. The "mystical, magical meeting" stretched for hours. "He said, 'I would like you to bring me to the mainland. I think you can do it.'" He gave her a sun pendant, "different from



yellow with diamonds.

Sibbett reached out to her network, including old "Friends" pals. Three weeks later, Braco gazed in L.A. The tickets sold out, Sibbett said. "Kenny Loggins came."

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She booked up the West Coast. (Whitecliff, she says, seemed reluctant to share her contacts.) A helpful new friend came in the form of the Rev. Michael Beckwith, star of the self-help franchise "The Secret." They discussed how energy "goes beyond the boundaries of time and space." The two took the logical next step, live-streaming footage of Braco gazing at Beckwith's megachurch in Culver City, Calif., so anyone with an Internet connection and a credit card could be healed beyond the boundaries of time and space.

This sort of work is new for Sibbett. "She's a little too poised and a little too perfect for what she's doing," said Jacobson, who contacted her for his article. "The way she was kind of interrogating me and hedging her bets, giving me disclaimers: that not everyone feels it the first time, that you need to come back for more. If I knew of somebody who had mystical healing properties, I wouldn't bend over backwards to qualify the experience."

Whitecliff, meanwhile, who lists her interests as [UFOs, telepathy and angels](#) in one online profile, seems right at home. Opening speakers at gazing sessions recite the life story told in her book: that before Braco was Braco, he was Josep Grbavac, the son of wealthy parents in Zagreb. He accompanied his mother to a psychic, Ivica Prokic, who claimed to see the future by peering into a mirror. The young Grbavac, with his master's degree in economics, was a doubter. But



foretold his powers, saying he would use them in America after a great shift (Barack Obama's 2008 presidential win, according to Whitecliff). A year later, in 1995, Prokic died. Braco took his place at his center in Zagreb.

Prokic's demise is put down to a freak accident, a "rogue wave" that swept him away off the coast of South Africa, where Whitecliff says he had gone on holiday with Braco. (The story raises the antennae of skeptics, who see something more sinister in two people going off somewhere together, but only one returning.)

By 2008, Whitecliff says, Braco's fans were so great in number -- and his critics so irritating -- he came up with the idea of simply standing and staring at whole masses of people.

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"There's a profoundness to him," said Martyn, the high-wattage facialist. "We all speak too much and waste our energy and words. He doesn't speak that much, and when he says something, it's very potent and purposeful."

On the night of the Allman Brothers concert, she recalled, "Someone said, 'Oh, it's so late.' And he said something to the effect of, 'What is time? It's just a number.' We were all like, 'Did you hear what he just said?' There is a profoundness to him, and not in the normal guru way."

Sibbett calls Braco a "real man. He eats everything. He doesn't drink, but he does smoke. There's a lot of spiritual people who do."



YouTube of people fainting and screaming during Braco events, and realizing that Braco needed to change his image. In the DVDs she produces, his gaze is often directed at the Pacific Ocean, his hair floating on the breeze.

The first YouTube video released for the Braco in America campaign.

Sibbett's first session was in Whitecliff's living room. She and her husband couldn't stop giggling, stuck in what she calls a "bliss bubble." Soon, she says, she saw Braco, gazing via Skype, "shape-shift into a Native American man with feathers in his hair." More sessions transpired, and she became sure that her allergy problems, brought on by the moist Hawaiian climate, were getting better.

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"Believe me, if I were to hear myself, I would think it's crazy, too," she said. "But it happened."

ONLY THE BEGINNING

Braco's friends want him to blow up. They talk about seeing him on Oprah's couch, the seat where gurus are made. They cite role models such as Eckhart Tolle, the German spiritualist who vaulted into bestseller lists after Winfrey gushed about his book, "The Power Of Now." If Braco gives only one interview, he couldn't do much better.

"We're a connected group of people," Martyn said. "If I can tell someone who can tell someone else -- I mean, that's how things happen."



weekend. By the time he was on stage priming the crowd, he'd agreed to consider a request from Braco to introduce him all over the country. That day, he wrapped up his first try in the standard way. After asking the crowd to stand, he paused, then said gravely, "I now present to you -- Braco."

Instrumental music filled the air, operated by employees and volunteers sitting stage right at a long table covered in laptops and binders.

On cue, a slight man appeared from the opposite side of the hall. He climbed the stage without moving his arms and pivoted to the audience. Grey hair fell onto sloped shoulders clad in a silky white shirt. His features looked soft, almost melted. This was Braco. He may as well have stepped off the life-size poster in the hotel lobby.

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He slowly scanned the room. Some in the audience held up photographs of loved ones, images of sick humans and pets. A man swayed precariously, as if he'd fallen asleep standing up. People of both sexes shed tears.

And why not? There was no denying the thrill, especially in a city where making eye contact can feel like a provocation.

A few loaded minutes of silence, and Braco was gone. The crowd shuffled, resumed their seats, put away their photographs. The floor opened to volunteers. A middle-aged woman with thinning hair raised her hand.



me, that's what Braco does. I've been carrying, like, a heavy sack of stuff on me for ages now, and it started to drift away. Of course, I started to analyze it, but I told my mind, 'It's going to be okay. You can feel as light as you want.'"

Clarification: Language has been amended to reflect that Duane Allman, while at one time a client of Podell's, is no longer, having died in 1971. It has also been updated with additional information about the price of Braco's DVDs.

This story appears in Issue 54 of our weekly iPad magazine, Huffington, [in the iTunes App store](#), available Friday, June 21.



Mallika Rao

Arts Reporter, The Huffington Post

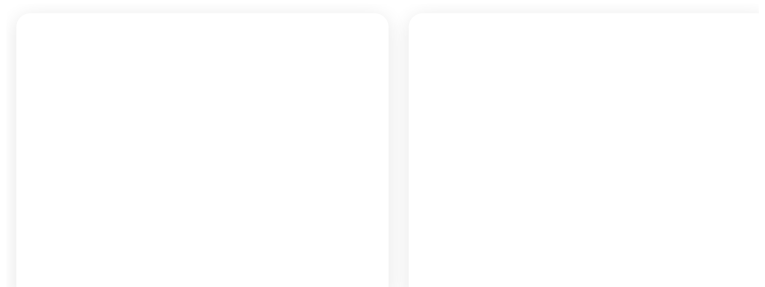
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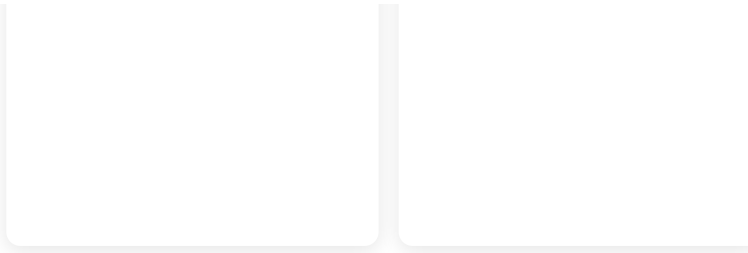
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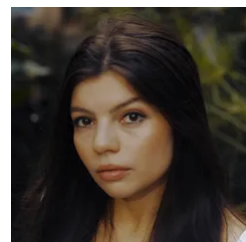


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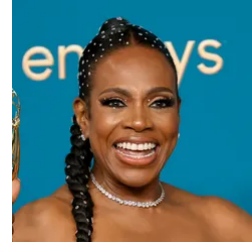




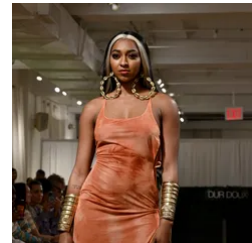
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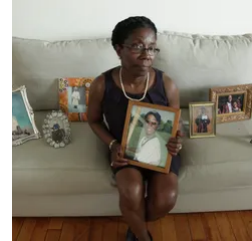




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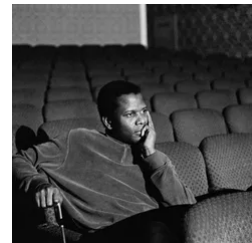
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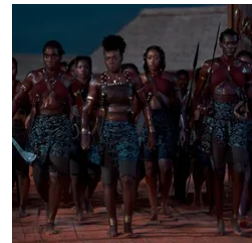
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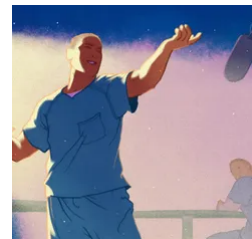
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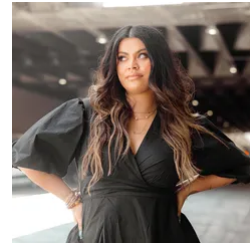


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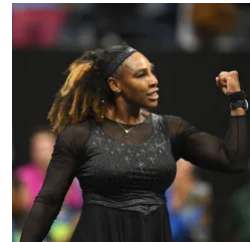




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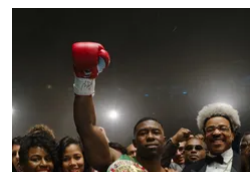


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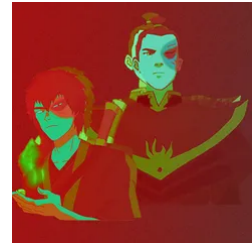


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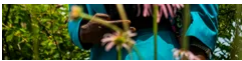


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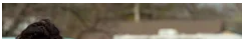
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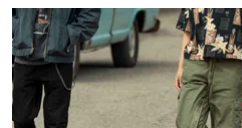


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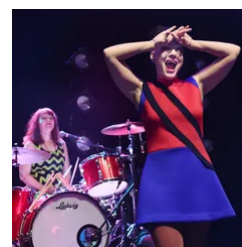
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