

TRIALS

Sirhan's Trance

The Embassy Room lobby was crowded, the lights were hot and blinding, and Sirhan Bishara Sirhan—transfixed by his own image rebounding to infinity in the walls of mirrors—slid from a half-drunk high into some hypnotic twilight all his own. And suddenly he was in the serving pantry between ballrooms at Los Angeles's Ambassador Hotel, with a triumphant Bobby Kennedy bearing down on him at the head of a crowd of followers. He wants to shake hands, Sirhan thought dimly. But when Kennedy got close enough to touch, Sirhan—too entranced to know what he was doing or why—yanked a pistol from his belt and yelled, "You son of a bitch!" and fired again and again . . .

Even Berkeley psychiatrist Bernard L. Diamond, who ventured this hypothesis as the star defense witness at Sirhan's long-running murder trial last week, had to agree that it sounded "absurd and preposterous . . . a script which would never be acceptable in a Class B motion picture." The defense, trying to save Sirhan from the gas chamber, had spent the previous two weeks making the far more conventional psychiatric case that Sirhan was too sick with paranoia, or paranoid schizophrenia, to plot the assassination rationally (page 94). Diamond quite agreed. But he carried the anatomy of a murder a giant step farther with his suggestion that the lights and

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the mirrors had thrown Sirhan into a robotlike "dissociated state" and transformed him from a harmless bystander into an automaton wired to kill. Implausible? Perhaps. But, two witnesses later, the defense rested and in effect staked Sirhan's life on Diamond's diagnosis.

Diamond himself told the jurors he had come to the case expecting something far more ordinary as assassins go—"a paranoid fanatic with dreams of glory and violent death." And sure enough, though Sirhan insisted he couldn't remember the actual killing, he told Diamond freely that he regarded Kennedy as an enemy of the Arab people and that he had killed him to keep him from winning the Presidency. Paranoid fantasy, Diamond concluded—but he gradually reshaped his theory after spending 20 to 25 hours with Sirhan, hypnotizing him six times



Associated Press

Diamond: Anatomy of a murder

and quizzing his family. Sirhan's mother told him that Sirhan had a history of spells dating to his boyhood in Jerusalem during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. And he discovered that Sirhan was dabbling with mail-order courses in mind power, setting out candles and staring into a mirror until he hypnotized himself.

The clues began falling together when Diamond discovered how easily he could put Sirhan under—a tip-off that he had been hypnotized before. And the lapse into confusion in the mirrored lobby began to emerge when, in one hypnotic session, Diamond led Sirhan through an almost too realistic psychic re-enactment of the murder. Sirhan was blank on what he was doing in the pantry but not on the act itself. Jumping up from his bunk, Diamond related, Sirhan "pulled an imaginary gun out of his

belt . . . and he fired it convulsively. It was very dramatic, very real . . . You son of a bitch! A momentary pause and then he started to choke. He was actually re-experiencing the choking when they took away the gun . . . He was gasping for breath, actually turned blue a little bit. I became fearful myself." But Sirhan at last fell into a deep sleep.

'RFK Must Die': But the real breakthrough, by Diamond's account, came when he got Sirhan writing—an experiment that roughly reproduced Sirhan's murderous scrawlings in the series of spiral-bound journals he kept at home. "Write about Kennedy," Diamond directed. Sirhan, robotlike, started scribbling, "RFK RFK RFK must die . . . Robert Kennedy is going to die." Struck by the similarity to Sirhan's journals, Diamond asked: "Were you hypnotized when you wrote the notebook?"

"Yes yes yes," Sirhan wrote.

"Who hypnotized you when you wrote the notebook?"

"Mirror mirror my mirror my mirror my mirror my mirror."

For Diamond, everything came together: the boyhood spells, the home adventures in hypnosis, the mirrors at the Ambassador. Sirhan, he theorized, had been gazing into his bedroom mirror "thinking thoughts of love and peace"—as his correspondence lessons directed—and only discovering afterward that he had been filling his notebook with "incoherent threats of violence and assassination." Without knowing it, Diamond summed up, Sirhan was "gradually programming himself . . . for the coming assassination . . . The mirrors in the hotel lobby, the flashing lights, the general confusion—this was like pressing the button which starts the computer. He was back in his trances . . . Only this time it was for real and this time there was no pencil in his hand. This time there was only the loaded gun"—and, at point-blank range, Robert F. Kennedy.

Who, Me? Even one defense lawyer fretted lest Diamond's testimony come across as "too much of a monologue," and in a sharp day's cross-examination, the state succeeded in making the doctor look curt and quarrelsome. Among the state's first rebuttal witnesses, moreover, was a handwriting expert who disputed the notion that Sirhan's journals were written in a trance. And Sirhan himself had never liked or trusted Diamond; once, when the doctor testified that he was "not a normal individual," Sirhan's face darkened and he muttered, "Naaah."

And therein lay the irony of the affair; Sirhan plainly far preferred the state's psychiatrist, Seymour Pollack, who argued at the weekend that the assassination was the calculated political act of a lifelong Arab nationalist. "That's me," Sirhan grinned. Was it? Or was Diamond's Sirhan, muddled by gin and entranced by mirrors, the real assassin? The question was expected to go to the jury late this week or early next—and Sirhan's life could depend on the answer.