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# Rocky Horror: A Study in Shadows and Flight

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# Rocky Horror: A Study in Shadows and Flight

## Abstract

“Rocky Horror: A Study in Shadows and Flight” is a creative nonfiction piece that analyzes the infamous legacy left by the cult classic, The Rocky Horror Picture Show. As a first-year in college, the speaker strings together a series of vignettes from different encounters with the film in her life, from her first midnight showing to her first performance as Columbia in a live production. In a few pages, this piece examines the meaning of identity and freedom as the speaker works through repulsion, rebellion, and all things Rocky.

## Keywords

Rocky Horror, shadow cast, time warp, Columbia, cult classic

## Disciplines

Acting | Arts and Humanities | Creative Writing | Theatre and Performance Studies

## Comments

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## ***Rocky Horror: A Study in Shadows and Flight***

A collection of faces masked in eyeliner, glitter, and lipstick turned to me expectantly, and I wondered how it had come to this. A glance from the wings of the low-budget “stage” alerted me as the second verse of the musical number—and my impending cue—approached. Nervously adjusting my crimson bow tie and sparkling top hat, I mustered every ounce of theatrical courage hiding between the marrow of my slowly melting bones. Infinity lengthened in an array of fishnet and sequins as we did the “Time Warp” again.

Fun fact #1: I wouldn’t consider myself exciting. My last off-campus excursion was a book convention, I eat the ice cream sandwiches made of soy in the dining hall despite a complete lack of dietary restrictions, and the only time I set foot in a frat house was to answer some questions on Catholicism. Fun fact #2: my friends’ favorite fun fact about me is that I played Columbia in our college’s showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* last October. A year has gone by, and their astonishment remains unabated.

I was first exposed to the audiovisual orgy that is *Rocky Horror* for my eighteenth birthday at an old, art-deco theatre in Fort Lauderdale. Despite the cultish hype surrounding the film, I was initially very disappointed: vulgar commentary, phallic props, and idolization of overt lasciviousness simply didn’t catch my fancy. As an English major, I’m still not enamored by the lack of cohesive plot, thematic content, and general significance.

Seven months later, I reflected upon my initial aversion to the film. As my first Halloween away from home drew near, an isolated ping in my email inbox had informed me that our college would be holding its annual auditions for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show 2017*.

Curiosity trumped my better judgement, and a ninety-nine cent charge was rung up on my mother's Amazon billing for a two-day rental of the cult classic. Once those unforgettable red lips began to sing on my laptop screen, I braced myself for the worst.

For 101 minutes, I watched the film with new eyes and, more accurately, new ears: admittedly, it was the first time I could actually hear the on-screen dialogue. Left to process *Rocky* without its usual peanut gallery of cult followers, I began to glimpse the appeal of the storyline, blissfully uninterrupted by the traditional stream of ceaseless expletives. The absence of an audience gave me the breathing room I needed to approach, analyze, and even appreciate.

On an unoriginally dark and stormy night, the newly engaged Brad Majors and Janet Weiss—"asshole" and "slut" respectively—seek out shelter at the nearest foreboding mansion, unwittingly taking up residence in the abode of the transsexual mad scientist, Dr. Frank-N-Furter. In Frank's domesticated laboratory, convention has no home and pleasure has no confines. An eclectic smattering of characters grace the screen with their bizarre personalities, both striking and shocking as lightning flashes of every hue imaginable.

Feeding off the overwhelming chaos, Frank welcomes Brad and Janet into his pleasure palace to witness the creation of Rocky, the perfect specimen of man, complete with Ken-doll abs and a tiny, golden speedo that dances on the grave of morality no matter what decade it makes its debut in. However, dramatic conflict ensues as the virginal couple begins to submit to absolute pleasure, indulging in the fantasy that Frank keeps behind locked bedroom doors.

What I previously regarded as sickening was now just sappy. Overly dramatic became iconic. As I hummed to songs whose notes I plucked from some subconscious memory, I

realized that there was something endearing about being so singularly memorable. *Rocky Horror* marched to its own beat; however, everyone still found a way to sing along.

In the twenty-four hours following my private screening, I went back and forth in a heated debate with myself about who I was, who I wanted to be seen as, and who I aspired to be.

None of the three definitions matched.

Kurt Vonnegut once said, “We have to continually be jumping off cliffs and developing our wings on the way down.” Though I may never be able to definitively answer why I auditioned, I think that the same basic principle applied here.

*Rocky Horror* called, and I jumped.

The director of the prophesied production was sitting idly in a rolling chair when I walked into Kline Theatre. She was joined by an amiable boy in glasses, whom I, as a first year, did not recognize as the college’s fan-favorite “Brad” for the previous three years.

“Which character are you auditioning for?” one of my two judges inquired.

“Columbia,” I answered, calling the character’s garnett pixie cut and dainty tap shoes to mind. With a quirky disposition and gracious dearth of sex scenes, Columbia seemed like the optimal end goal of my already hesitant decision to audition.

A YouTube link to “The Time Warp” clip was pulled up on the projector and fast-forwarded to 2:06, a timestamp branded into my memory from many times revisiting its contents. I dragged a nearby chair to the center of the room without prompting and awaited further instruction as the sound of clicking keys slowed to silence.

“Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied, settling into both the seat and my second skin simultaneously. Almost of its own accord, my right leg crossed fluidly over its partner, and my shoulders rolled into place atop my spine, proud and playful and belonging to someone who certainly was not me.

*Well I was walking down the street, just a havin’ a think—*

An obnoxiously high caricature of the screen actress came from my vocal cords, and I was surprised at how annoyingly good the imitation was in time with the recording. As if from a distance, I felt my voice exude confidence that I hadn’t realized I possessed. Perhaps some part of me knew and had been saving that morsel of bravado till now. The more I thought about it, the more obscene my smile became, a coy turn of my mouth widening into a full-on Cheshire grin.

*When a snake of a guy gave me an evil wink—*

Impishly, I flirted with the concept of sporadic eye contact and actually *winked* at the boy, complete ignorance of who he was transforming my typical timidity into unabashed boldness. My body was possessed by phantom marionette strings that knew no sense of the word stillness. I had previously regarded sitting as a prime example of Newton’s first law: a body at rest will stay at rest until acted upon by some external force. I never stood up once, yet the driving music shattered my inertia, sculpting my presence into a series of continuously moving limbs.

*He shook a me up, he took me by surprise—*

They often refer to actors as those who play roles onstage, emulating a fictional persona. In this instant, I felt that my character played me. The body has always been the primary instrument of theatrics, so I allowed Columbia to feel the music and play on accordingly. A giddy sense of

utter freedom washed over me in surprisingly powerful swells that only pushed me to perform harder, beam wider, and shine brighter. I was a living positive feedback system in action.

*He had a pickup truck and the devil's eyes—*

For a split second, I realized how uncharacteristic this was of me and that I should probably feel some sort of remorse for my actions. I truly hadn't done anything wrong, but the lack of guilt was what weighed on my soul. The feeling of being freed was burdensome in overanalysis.

*He stared at me, and I felt a change—*

I dared to glance at the directors again, finding their eyes plastered to me with a range of emotions. Shock, excitement, and pleasure all glazed over the light in their eyes. Their astonished approval catalyzed my final metamorphosis, and one indulgent look from the character I had become sealed the deal at the close of my fourteen-second solo.

*Time meant nothing, never would again.*

My poor imitation of sleep mimicked the waning moon that October: it slipped away from me like creamy milk spreading to the edges of a teacup, blending lunacy and caffeine, dusk and dawn. For four nights—and four nights only—we rehearsed in the basement of Kline Theatre. The old Panasonic projector suspended from the ceiling was our true director, its constantly running film reel as authoritative as any clapperboard call for “action!”

Thus, the circus began.

Over the course of a week, my life became a series of polaroid photographs, recollections specializing in a new take on depth of field where background and foreground were erased, fused

together by sheer will. In this lucid dreamscape, two seemingly perpendicular plains lay upon the same axis, melding screen characters and living actors into one flesh.

In these midnight hours, we surpassed the experimental feats of true mad geniuses. Without the aid of lightning storms and operating tables, we developed our own medical miracle. Victor Frankenstein may have breathed life into being, but Dorian Gray much more aptly suited our tastes as 1975 and 2017 collided in the “Time Warp,” defying the laws of physics and aging. We sustained an atomic energy and vitality for three decades; *Rocky Horror* refused to die.

Most kitschy posters with the image of the red lips advertised us—the collectively fearless who dressed in drag to extend life expectancy—as the “Shadow Cast” of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The callback lines, gestures, and choreography I memorized were surface level apprehension and imitation. “Shadow cast,” however, was an epithet that prompted my curiosity to contemplation.

By some far stretch of the philosophical imagination, one could compare *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” Humans chained inside the cavern only glimpse the shadows of puppets projected by firelight, artifice which they adopt as their version of reality. Brightness at the mouth of the cave is the blinding enlightenment that they prefer to remain ignorant of. Perhaps *Rocky Horror* embraced that concept of blissful ignorance, casting shadows of outlandishly wild fantasies that we were all too willing to be conquered by, sick of the ill company that reality and the mundane provided.

Yet, our “shadow cast” hardly generated any shadows. The projector filtered images in at such an angle that allowed us to mimic the screen while demarcating it from ourselves. No trace



of our corporal reality was left in black smudges upon the incredible tale unfolding behind us. We preserved the lucidity of the imaginative film in a dust-covered box marked “movies that really shouldn’t have meant something to us but still did.”

On the night of October 21, 2017, I walked through a sea of garters, lace, and lipsticked Vs on foreheads as anticipation crackled tangibly in the air like static electricity. Only then did I realize exactly how much this meant.

Rumors had been circulated among the cast that *Rocky Horror* was consistently the most well-attended theatre event at our college. The doors flooding with students didn’t seem to argue otherwise. A couple hundred kids had come to witness the famed show on that Saturday night, clad in a variety of themed garb and taking up space wherever it could be found. Those who did not arrive at least thirty minutes in advance seemed just as happy to stand as empty seats rapidly vanished from sight—our first magic act of the evening.

After the pre-show “virgin games,” the cast gathered in what passed for a pseudo-dressing room in West Building. One of the girls had just finished accentuating our Rocky’s abs with a paintbrush dipped in a creamy brown liquid, and my thickly rimmed eyes stared back at their reflection on the mirrored wall.

The makeup was like a superhero mask, and the charcoal wings that extended from the corners of my eyes would help me fly. However, the first step in flight was to jump off the ledge.

Bottles were passed around me as everyone took one, two, or more swigs of alcohol, but I savored the sense of going in sober. I wanted to remember all of it.

We huddled together in a circle of comradery that only came from sacrificing sleep together and wearing costumes that no one else would. I was prepared for an opening pep talk, perhaps a quick toast of adrenaline and alcohol; however, I was floored by speeches delivered with such passion that I began to question just how waterproof my eyeliner was.

The senior *Rocky* veteran spoke first, beginning his final and fourth run as Brad with a goodbye. It was likely the only time I would ever see a fraternity brother cry as he grew teary-eyed in his homage to the film, declaring, “There’s nothing else like this.”

Clad in a corset and eight-inch heels, our star transvestite, Dr. Frank-N-Furter, made a heartfelt gesture to the safe space that *Rocky* created for the LGBTQ community. I’d never considered it, but the gratitude reflected in many eyes was all the confirmation of truth I needed.

I took a stab in the dark at vaguely inspirational when my turn came, saying, “Exude sparkle wherever you go!” with a colorful intonation. I hoped that my quick flash of jazz hands looked more confident than I felt as nerves built up height and magnitude throughout my body.

Approaching the ledge was easy enough. Stepping off was the hard part.

As I made my debut of fishnet that night, the audience roared with an unparalleled enthusiasm surpassing Woodstock’s. For college students who were a generation removed from the film’s original fanatics, they were extremely well-educated. Shameful silence could not find residence in the room. The audience kept singing, screaming, and shrieking with delight as we put on our best show for them.

I felt the pressure to perform evaporating in time with each repetition of the ad-libbed lines that I knew all too well. It didn’t matter that I looked nothing like my red-headed character,

that my tap dance solo was faked, or that my corset nearly slipped off during the finale. *Rocky Horror* gave me rose-tinted glasses to realize just how little I cared what others thought of me.

In a crimson and ebony explosion of glitter, we played some of the most iconic roles in Hollywood history but still brought ourselves—our messy, unapologetic, and true selves—to the stage. Adrenaline, laughter, and song collided in a rich spectacle like unrestrained fireworks that no one could bring down.

After my character's dramatic death by laser gun, I rose from the floor at the first note of the epilogue anthem. The twinkling tune was a reprise of the opening melody, bringing back the singing lips in a lilting lullaby that produced a haunting variant of closure. An idyllic detachment from time and space floated through the sheer satisfaction of this stunningly surreal moment.

One by one, photographs of our characters came into focus during the ending credits, and we individually stepped out to claim our applause, a glittering reward for our daring display of moxie. When the time came, my modest patent leather heels clicked forward, and a rapturous cry from the crowd met me before I even reached center stage. A fierce blush blossomed in my cheeks, already colored with rouge and confidence and someone else's lipstick.

Upon those wooden floorboards bestrewn with toilet paper, pink latex gloves, and red and black feathers everywhere, I took my greatest bow. As I inclined my head, more plumage fluttered down from the boa around my neck and joined the wonderful collage of chaos at my feet. These wings were superfluous appendages to me now: I had already learned to fly.

Arms adorned by satin gloves clasped one another as we came together in a semicircle, serenading the audience, who sang all the lyrics back to us with equal fervor. I couldn't help but

smile sentimentally at the costumed misfits around me, and aforementioned words came back to me in a swell of pride and love: there really was nothing else like this.

This arrival of liberation via indifference towards others' opinions and celebration of those who dared to be different—this was something I never felt until the night that I gathered scraps of leather and lace around me and flew the nest.

Why would anyone fathom participating in this madness? Awakened by inquiry, treasured memories resurface in a warm haze dotted by golden sequins, and the answer comes to me in an instant: everyone deserves 101 minutes to be free.