

Research Report

Rapport de recherche

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The Tourist Body in The Midgets Palace: The Domestic Theatre and its Performance of Other Bodies

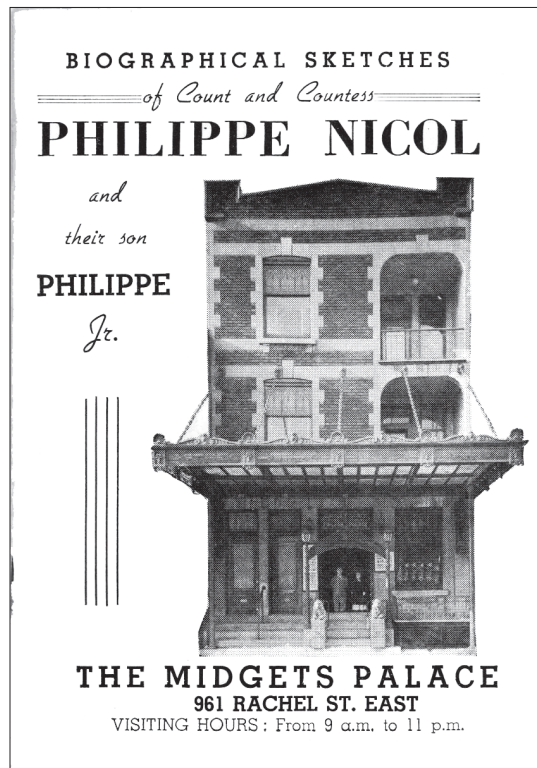
The photograph album was the television of Victorian homes... Judging by the number of freak images produced, it is safe to say that human oddities were not only fascinating, but quite acceptable as Victorian houseguests—as long as they stayed in their albums.
(Robert Bogdan 1988: 12)

This is a narcissistic delight at the shape of our own externality, which is always inaccessible to us by direct means and is achievable only if we can occupy the perspective others have on us.
(Elizabeth Grosz 1996: 65)

The home of Philippe and Rose Nicol was built in 1925 at 961 Rachel Street East, Montreal, to be a miniature “palace” that could, according to their plans and specifications, accommodate in every way for the couple’s small stature. While the three-story row house is of standard proportions from the outside, inside all ceilings were lowered by several feet except in the entrance hall, the place from which visitors of average height could take in the vast detail of custom made miniatures: from the stairway to the furniture, electrical appliances to picture frames, lamps, radios, pianos, a grandfather clock and more.¹ The Midgets Palace functioned as a home, but was simultaneously and meticulously conceived as a stage, a detailed setting for a living miniature museum and tourist attraction that would provide the family’s source of income. Drawing from analyses of the defiant histories of dime museum freak shows, this essay theorizes the site’s particular form of domestic theatre.² This analysis will explore the ways in which the Nicol’s staging and representational techniques may have worked to transform culturally embedded ideas about bodily difference through the medium of the home.

The domestic theatre choreographed within The Midgets Palace must be analyzed first in context of the exhibition and commercial strategies of P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, the institution that set the stage in the first half of the 19th century for the proliferation of dime museums that followed. The American Museum itself originated in the privately owned museum of portrait painter and naturalist Charles Willson Peale and his two sons. The Peale Museum, opened in 1786, exhibited a variety of natural history artifacts but increasingly drew from popular culture in order to survive financially—developing sensationalized scientific displays of animal and human “curiosities” (Springhall 2008: 20). Exhibits ranged from dioramas, waxworks, stuffed animals, skeletons, aquariums and obscure relics to “chambers of horror” and “curio halls” with living curiosities displayed on high wooden platforms (20-21). After purchasing the museum in 1841, P. T. Barnum maintained the basic infrastructure of the Peale Museum but added the flash that converted it into what became known as a dime museum. In addition to plastering the five-storey facade with banners and

Fig. 1
 Front of the brochure for
 The Midgets Palace.



flags and topping the building with a lighthouse lamp, Barnum focused more on the popularity and financial draw of “freak” figures. Enhancing the museum’s exhibition possibilities, Barnum included an adjoining lecture room or theatre that could accommodate not only variety acts and freak shows but also, as Barnum wrote in a letter following the theatre’s 1850 renovation, “highly moral and instructive DOMESTIC DRAMAS, written expressly for my establishments and so constructed as to please and edify, while they possess a powerful *reformatory* tendency” (24). Anticipating visitors’ hesitations, Barnum wanted to use the theatre to attract a middle-class audience through a combination of “sufficient *amusement* with instruction to please all proper tastes and to train the mind of youth to reject as repugnant anything inconsistent with moral and religious tastes” (24).

Barnum’s pairing of pedagogical theatre with popular spectacle was highly influential on other aspects of the oral and material culture of freak shows. The *spiel*, for instance, was inseparable from audience experiences of the exhibition of freak bodies (Garland-Thomson 1996: 7). Performers, both born and made freaks,³ were promoted, introduced and narrated by the exaggerated rhetoric of lecturers or *spielers*, who provided “conventional and usually fictionalized accounts of [performers’] corporeal or cultural differences” (Stephens 2006: 490). Perhaps

most essential to this world of entertainment were elements of staging, costuming, choreography and spatial relation between performer and audience (Garland-Thomson 1996: 7). Costumes, for instance, aimed to enhance the “extraordinary quality of the freak’s body,” hyperbolizing the abnormal and framing bodies as excessively different often through class-based, cultural references according to Garland-Thomson (10). The prevailing aesthetic of the dime museum freak show was one of bodily difference, exoticism and ironic juxtaposition, she notes (12). Rachel Adams describes the “sensational, formulaic qualities” of typical exhibitions, heightened by the “sweltering heat, the smells of popcorn and animal dung, abusive exchanges between carnies, freaks, and customers” (2001: 12). But Adams goes on to emphasize that the spectacle of the freak show, while framed by auditory and olfactory elements, revolved around both the visual display and its constructed distance from the audience. As she writes, “inside the tent or dime museum, the existential difference between freak and audience is concretized in the physical separation between the onlooker and the living curiosities resting on the elevated platform” (12-13).⁴

While cultural obsession with extraordinary bodies has a long and complex history, the success of Barnum’s American Museum in particular spurred the institutionalized display of freak bodies in popular exhibition spaces. In fact, the term “freak,” which by the 17th century indicated only a whimsy or fancy, did not become “synonymous with human corporeal anomaly” until 1847 (Garland-Thomson 1996: 4). Rachel Adams’s study of sideshow entertainment demonstrates that the exhibition of bodies found increasing popularity at this time due to the union of commercial and scientific interests, the birth of mass culture and notable demographic changes stemming from an expanding middle class (2001: 10). Especially in Victorian America, industrialization, the rise of urban centers, the shortening of workweeks and the growth of disposable income all contributed to a massive ideological shift towards leisure, often concentrated in the collective act of looking (Adams 2001: 11; Garland-Thomson 1996: 4). Dime museums served as the primary frame for the freak show and proliferated until the turn of the century, keeping their initial popularity until at least 1910 (Garland-Thomson 1996: 5; Springhall 2008: 48). Gradually, however, nomadic entertainment such as circuses, street fairs, world’s fairs, carnivals as well as urban amusement parks drew customers

away from fixed display spaces, and the museums that survived into the 1920s operated in diminished quarters (Springhall 2008: 48). After 1910 or so, the word “museum” would only be used by an exhibition of curiosities as a pointed reference to the past. By 1937, at least 300 carnival units were touring North America, each relying on a sideshow or midway for the exhibition of human “oddities” as a crucial point of attraction (49). These ten-in-ones (ten acts for one admission price) continued as a fixture of circus practice into the mid-20th century, exemplified by the Ringling Brothers’ sideshow, which stayed open until 1956 (49).

The Nicols and the Midgets Palace

While limited, the record of Philippe Nicol’s performance career indicates that he would have been highly familiar with the context outlined above, a knowledge that most likely played into the creation of his own type of museum. Admission to The Midgets Palace included an undated brochure (thought to be late 1920s) called *Biographical Sketches of Count and Countess Philippe Nicol and their Son Philippe Jr.* The brochure provides some details of Nicol’s early life. He was born on September 27, 1881 in St. Henri de Lévis, Quebec. He performed in the Barnum and Bailey circus from the age of three, travelling with multiple other shows such as Sells Brothers and Forepaugh and Sells by the time he was twelve years old. According to their brochure, Nicol met his wife Rose Dufresne through Mr. Champagne, the manager of Montreal local strong man Louis Cyr—a connection that indicates the couple’s active participation in a social network stemming from sideshow performance. Dufresne was born in Lowell, Massachusetts on June 17th, 1887, and the couple was married on November 21, 1906. They moved to Montreal in 1913 and started a business at 415 Rachel Street East, during the same period in which the popularity of dime museums decreased among middle and upper class audiences.⁵ The Nicols moved The Midgets Palace to the newly constructed 961 Rachel Street East building in 1926 when their son was born.

The most accessible indication of the influence of dime museum sideshows on The Midgets Palace is their “biographical” brochure. According to Garland-Thomson (1996), sideshows would also have been accompanied by pamphlets, brochures and advertisements that fabricated “the freak’s always extraordinary life and identity.” Printed biographies marked by exaggerated descriptions of

performers’ lives, accomplishments and “corporeal irregularities” were a common example (7, 10). The inflated content of the Nicol’s brochure is recognizable at a glance of the first page, which describes the couple not only as “Count and Countess Philippe Nicol” but as the “King and Queen of all Midgets,” whose son, Philippe Jr. is described as “the only child born of Midgets.” This aggrandized naming stems from the stage name tradition of sideshows, which monopolized what were considered parodic cultural juxtapositions. While the names of freak show fat ladies mocked feminine scripts—Dolly Dimples or Captivatin’ Liz—midgets were named with inflated titles from “high” society, the most famous being General Tom Thumb, Commodore Nutt and Princess Wee-Wee (10). As seen in the brochure’s accompanying depictions of the Nicols, it is known that both father and son almost always wore a tuxedo (Fig. 2), or at least a suit, and that Rose generally wore fancy dresses, jewellery, hats and a fur coat (Fig. 3). In this manner, the Nicol family dressed the part of Count and Countess, King, Queen and Prince of the Midgets. By utilizing these class and gender referents, the Nicols performed a distorted version of the normative family ideal as embodied by the classic royal form. Descriptions of similar biographical brochures from sideshows indicate that their texts, like the spiel, emphasized and embellished physical abnormality, exoticizing performers’ bodies and articulating difference. While the literary style of the Nicol’s brochure dramatized their lives “to the point of caricature,” this caricature does not entirely fit the bizarre, distanced spectacle common to what David Hevey calls the “enfreakment” process (1992: 53).

The Nicol’s *Biographical Sketches* (Fig. 1) departs from typical constructions of freak subjects by relating a familial narrative that, in comparison with the language of the freak show, verges on the mundane. The brochure is used not only to emphasize their special qualities but also to underline the basic “normality” of these qualities, and the ensuing construction of identity relies heavily on a normalized rhetoric of class, gender and the importance of traditional familial values. While Philippe Nicol’s height is mentioned several times in the text, it is almost always preceded or even diminished by descriptions of his sense of humour and pleasantness (1). For instance, the brochure describes Count Philippe Nicol as:

gay and full of natural will ... fond of traveling, highly esteemed by his employers and cherished by the crowds which he entertained daily. He was

admired everywhere on account of his small stature and also for his bright conversation, enlivened with wit and ... prompt and sharp rejoinders. (7)

Along with these glowing descriptions of his personality, the brochure portrays Nicol as a successful businessman to the point of excess, with notations of his proficient business sense found on every page. We are told that by the age of three Philippe already “received a very large salary” which apparently doubled each following year (3). By age fifteen, he managed his own commercial affairs entirely and, “with such natural gifts” for business success, operated for fourteen years out of Manchester, NH, as head of a firm called Philippe Nicol, which “enjoyed a world wide reputation under his management” (5). Similarly, Philippe’s “progress” with The Midgets Palace is described as “so rapid”

very lively and normal in every respect but size, just as his parents themselves” (11). The young Philippe, then, serves to articulate the family’s apparently “normal” qualities, in particular the value placed on masculinity:

his education training will be that of a real business man; he will endeavor rather to make of him a man like his father, always inclined to teach others the way of progress ... nothing will be spared in time, efforts and money to make Nicol Jr. a real he man. (13-15)

An analysis of *The Midgets Palace* must also include the staged images of the family presented on every other page of the biographical brochure, as well as the souvenir postcards sold on-site. These photographs further tie the performance of the site to the material and economic culture of sideshows, which relied heavily on the production and sale of drawings and photographs of bodies on display. As explained in the Nicol’s brochure, when Philippe worked for Barnum and Bailey circus he “had the privilege of selling his photo to his personal benefit, which brought him a larger sum than the salary itself” (3). Many authors have pointed out that souvenir photographs of freak shows emphasized the tableau-like qualities of the exhibition of living bodies, further disseminating “an iterable, fixed, collectible visual image of staged freakishness that penetrated into the Victorian parlor and family album” (Adams 2001: 113; Garland-Thomson 1996: 10). Many of the Nicol’s portraits can be similarly understood, as they present family members frozen against a vague, painted background, as a static element of the miniature domestic scenery, or caught in a contrived mid-action gesture of a daily routine. In some ways, these examples of collectible imagery participate in the tradition of constructing freak identity through tourist economies, enhancing “the freak’s Otherness because [they] facilitate a gaze unfettered by confrontation with another living person and the feelings of guilt, responsibility, or pleasure that might ensue” (Adams 2001: 113).

Freak photography is not the only point of departure and/or contention for the Nicol’s representational strategies; the development of clinical photographs used to document corporeal abnormality also provides a necessary comparison for the family’s souvenir photographs. The first generation of medical photographers was attracted, along with the majority of the public attending dime museum freak shows, to physical disability and apparent abnormality. Literally stripped of the clothing, adornment and setting provided by portraiture, the

Fig. 2 (left)
Count P. Nicol and his son (CP 57620). Source: Collection of Michel-Bazin, *BAnQ*.



Fig. 3 (right)
Philippe and Rose Dufresne Nicol, undated. Source: *Biographical Sketches*, 4.

and “prosperous” as to be “envied by the largest cities of the world” (9). While his career as a circus performer is certainly discussed in the brochure, it is consistently represented as the foundation for his following business ventures, those which allowed him to graduate from nomadic performance work to the property-owning class. Even the success of his courtship with Rose Dufresne, whom Philippe met through a business associate, is framed through his “aptitude” and “fitness for business,” and their wedding is likewise described as so important to the community that “many business houses as well as numerous factories closed their doors while the ceremony lasted” (7).⁶ In keeping with the gendered norms which figure feminine subjects as mere aspects of the masculine, Rose herself is described very rarely, and only ever in relation to her marriage with Philippe: she “agreed with our Midget’s desire without the slightest hesitation, knowing that the record of his past life was the best guarantee of his future behavior” (1). As might be expected, the family narrative hinges on the couple’s reproduction of an “heir,” a son who was “perfectly constituted,

medical photograph put bodies on “unmediated” display to be “diagnosed in terms of recognizable pathologies” (Adams 2001: 118). The impact of clinical photography on the popularity of the souvenir *cartes de visite* sold at freak shows represents a historical tension between the performative and taxonomical modes of displaying of abnormal bodies.⁷ While the confirmation of authenticity that mass-produced photography bestowed upon freak bodies also conferred celebrity, promoting its subjects as unique and memorable,

the clinical photograph employed by correctional institutions depicts the same subjects as case studies intended for professional eyes only. Whereas portraiture establishes the subject’s belonging within a particular class and historical moment, clinical photography aims to track and catalog those who do not belong by virtue of illness, criminality, or poverty. The freak portrait confirms the presence of deviance within social order; the clinical photograph is part of an institutional apparatus that attempts to document it then push it to the margins. (115-17)

The medical gaze demanded that the exceptional body be seen not with awe, but as a case for “genetic reconstruction, surgical normalization, therapeutic elimination, or relegation to pathological specimen” (Garland-Thomson 1996: 4). Between 1920 and the 1940s, as The Midgets Palace was emerging, medical discourse became more widespread and common, and the bodies of sideshow performers were increasingly understood by their dwindling audiences in terms of disease (Springhall 2008: 53). As Adams remarks, the visual technologies that added greatly to the widespread popularity of freaks “also hastened their decline” (2001: 115). From this perspective, one can understand The Midgets Palace in context of an era when middle-class desire for the commercial exhibition of unusual bodies was declining rapidly, in large part due to the increased understanding of disability as pathology through the spread of clinical photography.

Working against the vision of their bodies as disabled or diseased, the Nicols drew instead from the familiar framework of the dime museum, but created an altogether different type of tourist experience by rooting their exhibit in a home made entirely accessible for little people. This move can again be understood in terms of the relationship between the Nicol’s souvenir images, clinical photographs and freak postcards. The Nicol’s images maintain aspects of the tradition of freak *cartes de visite*, in particular the use of these mementos for gaining celebrity status through recognizable

names and images, as well as their adoption of “the conventions of expression, pose, and setting dictated by portrait photography” (Adams 2001: 115). But the Nicol’s positioning within a miniaturized domestic context did not necessarily enhance “the freak’s wondrous features,” distancing the family from normality to the same degree as traditional *cartes de visite* (115). While the context of the domestic background works to resist the dehumanizing, analytical gaze of clinical photography, its thorough miniaturization simultaneously functions to resist the awe or fear inspiring qualities of the freak portrait.⁸ While tourists may have collected the brochure for its spectacular qualities, even the most tableau-like images, like their accompanying text, in actuality capture something more mundane than expected. As opposed to exoticizing the Nicols, these images normalize their bodies in a recognizable space. With these photographs, it is possible that the tourist’s “more sustained contemplation of the static image, absent the jarring frisson of a live encounter, might also lead to increasing comfort with, and acceptance of, the freak’s unique form of embodiment, and hence an acknowledgement of her humanity” (113).

Daily Life at 961 Rachel Street

While I have found few archival records of the architectural construction of The Midgets Palace or first-hand accounts of the “live encounter” that took place within, it is possible, nevertheless, to piece together some assumptions regarding tourist experience from the collection of souvenir imagery, depictions of the interior architecture as well as images and text from newspaper articles. Open from 9:00 AM to 11:00 PM each day, the Nicol’s richly decorated domestic environment, along with their daily lives within this sphere, were made open and visible to the paying public. The Palace occupied only the first floor of 961 Rachel Street East, with the upper floors rented out to various other occupants. The entrance hallway was the only space on the first level in which the ceilings were not lowered.⁹ Upon entering the hallway (which is not directly depicted in any of the photographs), it is likely that the tourist was able to look into at least the living room, if not multiple other rooms. The Nicols themselves could be observed going about their daily lives, acknowledging and welcoming the presence of visitors. Through the movement of the Nicols, and the tourists, the choreography of the site and its integration of the viewer immediately

distinguish their home from the dime museum's traditional arrangement, in which performers are displayed on elevated platforms. It seems fair to assume that interactions in The Midgets Palace would have taken place at a close range, and in a more calm and congenial manner than evidenced by the freak show's "abusive exchanges" between spieler, performer and audience (Adams 2001: 12). Even if the Nicols themselves took admission payment and handed out brochures, the Palace's presentation would have been a peculiarly comfortable spectacle, composed of the everyday banalities of domestic life.

This is not to say that the Nicols and the site itself did not orchestrate a live performance; The Midgets Palace emerges as a domestic theatre through its character as a hybrid space, both public and private. A sense of the Nicol's influence on the hybrid design of the Palace can be drawn from Philippe's architectural "specifications and plans," mentioned (if not elaborated upon) in both newspaper articles and the tourist brochure. Philippe originally envisioned his museum in the center of Montreal's Park Lafontaine and—though it produced no tenable agreement—submitted proposals and underwent "reiterated negotiations" with the Executive Committee of the City, according to André Viau writing for *Journal de Montréal* on July 24, 1980. Although the question of the Nicol's understanding of their daily interactions with tourists necessarily remains open, these plans and negotiations reveal an investment in organizing a particular kind of public view of a strange, if strangely familiar, private space. Recalling P. T. Barnum's "moral and instructive" domestic dramas, it is likely that the Palace's stage served a pedagogical function, housing a performance which

could "please and edify, while ... [possessing] a powerful *reformatory* tendency" (Springhall 2008: 24). Because of the public aspects of the site, and in particular its connections to dime museums and freak shows, visitors may have come to the site with the assumption that "the price of admission buys permission to gaze at another's body, and with the expectation that this look of curiosity will be met by the 'blank, unseeing stare'" (Adams 2001: 7). The private, domestic nature of the Palace would have worked to disrupt this pattern of looking, returning the tourist gaze in a reciprocal environment and confronting presumptions about the Nicol's bodies and their place in society.

Signs of the Palace's choreography of the tourist gaze can be found in the later tableau-like photographs of Rose and Philippe Jr. included in the brochure. From the direction of the Nicols' gaze, the shifts in angles and the relationships revealed between the site's various spaces, these images give the sense that the rooms occupied by the Nicols stemmed off of the entrance hallway that the tourist would generally occupy. The family's attention to the camera, which takes the position of the tourist, is emphasized by the posture of Philippe Jr. depicted at the piano, whose upper body twists around to face forward (Fig. 4). The right-hand side of this photograph shows that the living room was split into two sections by a wall with a large opening in its center, framed by dark wooden panels and columns (Fig. 5). Though at first this threshold may appear to be a massive mirror, with a table placed in front bearing a doily and several framed photographs, a second photograph shows the same furniture in the foreground of a room that projects beyond the opening. This image shows the Nicols sitting in the second room, looking actively ahead through the

Fig. 4 (left)
Rose and Philippe Jr.; undated. Source: *Biographical Sketches*, 12.

Fig. 5 (right)
Rose and Philippe Jr.; undated. Source: *Biographical Sketches*, 14.



partition wall and into the piano room at the camera. The impression given is that when a tourist entered the piano room, the Nicols would be on the other side, looking out at a framed image of the tourist's body. This effect is enhanced by the accumulation of framed photographs in both rooms—many are souvenir photographs—set on the walls at different heights and on every flat surface available. The framed images depict the Nicols' family and friends, some of whom worked in various circus acts with Nicol Sr., as well as other celebrity little people such as General Tom Thumb. All of the photograph subjects seem to look forward, to return the gaze collectively with the Nicol family. The layering of framed spaces and bodies, as well as the juxtaposition of the live and the photographic, supports the impression that the physical rooms of the Palace choreograph ideas of looking and being looked at, and speak to both the display of a body in a frame and what it means for that body to move and interact with the voyeur.

When the Nicols looked back at the tourist, they would see a body out of place, a body oversized for the space it was trying to occupy, a body framed as abnormal by domestic architecture. The lowered ceilings and miniaturized setting of The Midgets Palace projected the body of the "average-sized" tourist as suddenly anomalous, and through this process the tourist became a "giant" on display. As reporter André Viau wrote in the *Journal de Montréal* on July 24, 1980:

Dans ce monde miniature, nous, les géants, nous sentons mal à l'aise, un peu décontenancés. Il faut, par exemple, se mettre à genoux pour se regarder dans un miroir. Et tout a l'air si fragile; il ne faut pas songer à s'asseoir sur une chaise, celle-ci s'écraserait sûrement.¹⁰

The translated text reads:

In this miniature world, we, the giants, feel ill at ease, a little incapacitated. For example, one must fall to one's knees to look at oneself in the mirror. And everything seems so fragile: should one sit in a chair it would surely be crushed.¹¹

The tourist not only saw its own body as gigantic, but was consistently rejected from the space that it had paid to see: the mirror would not reflect its image and the thought of occupying the furniture became threatening. After reading Viau's description, the title of his article, "*Au palais des nains, n'importe qui est un géant!*" (In the Palace of Dwarves, all are giants!) appears misleading, because the architecture positioned only the *tourist* body as a giant, disabled from using the space. The

tourist bodies that were accustomed to accessibility found themselves in an inverse position spatially and socially. In light of the Palace's play of perception, scale and space, the tableau-like qualities of the representations of the Nicols in their home also take on new implications. The Nicols appear as a static part of their domestic environment because they belong there and claim the space for themselves, but also because the space allows them to assume the role of audience and voyeur. The Nicol's domestic theatre, through this reversal, asserts the performative agency of bodies considered to be different. In creating a space that literalizes the fact that throughout history "the exceptional body ... exists socially in a realm of hyper-representation," the Nicols reveal the able tourist body as not merely "a false quantitative ideal ... but rather as an aesthetic product of cultural forces that *oppress* those categorized as disabled" (Garland-Thomson 1996: 3; Snyder and Mitchell 2001: 375).

Conclusion

The Midgets Palace was taken over in 1972 by Huguette Riou-Bastien, also a little person, and was maintained as a home and tourist attraction with the additional function of being a doll hospital until 1992.¹² In an interview for Plural World's website, Riou-Bastien describes the Palace as "a fairy tale and a theatre stage where the illusion of having a normal height was prevalent."¹³ While I agree that the site appeared to temporarily mask the Nicol's difference, I cannot imagine that its miniaturized construction was geared towards the illusion of "normalcy" alone. In reflecting on the continued challenge posed for disability studies to theorize and historically trace the difference that physical variation actually makes, I do situate The Midgets Palace in a lineage of constructed landscapes of voyeurism, related to the history of "freak show spectacles and objectifying photographs in medical textbooks" to quote Snyder and Mitchell (2001: 381). The Nicols, however, choreographed this landscape in such a way as to foreground "the instability of the body's meaning" within a hybrid public/private exhibition space, providing a social situation in which "new possibilities and different accounts of such bodies have the space to emerge, unfixing the narratives by which they have historically been bound" (Stephens 2006: 496). Much like Elizabeth Stephens's conclusion with regards to the ambivalent possibilities of freak shows, I argue that The Midgets Palace provides a domestic theatre

that can reinforce certain normative values of class, gender and family, but that can also challenge, subvert and de-essentialize mainstream conceptions of the “normal” body (494).

Notes

1. The grandfather clock built for The Midgets Palace is now part of the Canadian Clock Museum’s collection.
2. I compare The Midgets Palace to the history of freak shows despite the fact that the Nicol family themselves did not use the term “freak.” While this is probably the case for a variety of reasons, associations with freak shows would, especially from the 1920s to 1950s, have had negative implications in the eyes of the Palace’s middle class tourists. From a contemporary perspective, however, freak can be understood as an identity constituted through a stylized repetition of acts that “serves both to reinforce that identity and to destabilize it through the introduction of slight, but potentially consequential, differences” (Adams 2001: 6).
3. Freaks were generally classified by both exhibitions and audiences into five categories: born or natural, such as midgets and giants; self-made, who “cultivated their status, such as tattooed people, bearded ladies, or living skeletons”; novelty act artists, including snake charmers and fire-eaters; non-Western, who were promoted as exotic curiosities, “savages” or “cannibals”; and faked freaks (Springhall 2008: 38).
4. Adams further notes, however, that despite their differences from the raucousness of earlier carnivals as more produced and controlled spaces of exhibition and display, sideshows and dime museums are “hardly spaces of restraint or decorum, and things seldom go as planned: freaks talk back, the experts lose their authority, the audience refuses to take their seats. Spectacle relies on a degree of submission that has little consonance with the rowdy, undisciplined clientele that most regularly attended freak shows or the behavior of performers enduring uncomfortable and exploitative working conditions” (2001: 12-13).
5. The Nicol’s business was listed publicly under the family name until 1924, when it also appeared as the Palais des nains. Although Lovell’s Montreal Directory mentioned the sale of tobacco and candles, it can be assumed the Nicols always incorporated a degree of performance into their business.
6. Although I read this description of the Nicol wedding as a claim to community importance and thereby to middle class privilege, it is possible that this part of the brochure would have had implications for contemporary readers relating to what is called the “Tom Thumb Wedding.” While these miniaturized plays, highly popular throughout the first half of the 20th century, are usually enacted by children, they are known to have been named after the highly publicized wedding between P. T. Barnum’s celebrity performer Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren in 1863. As Susan Stewart writes, “of all bourgeois rituals, [the wedding] is the most significant, the most emblematic of class relations; and perhaps this is why ... it has been the ritual most commonly chosen for exaggeration within the realm of the imaginary” (1993: 117). In Stewart’s view, while Tom Thumb weddings may seem like an inversion of normative values, they are often seen as *model* weddings that constitute a “general celebration of the bourgeois domestic” (123).
7. While many authors writing on the freak show trace a historical narrative that ends with the medicalization of anomalous bodies towards the mid-20th century, there is also ample evidence that medical discourse had been in a constant tension with the commercialized display of bodies since at least the Enlightenment (Garland-Thomson 1996: 4). As Garland-Thomson notes, the “monstrous body” was consistently addressed and rationalized through the inter-related Enlightenment practices of collection, display and scientific inquiry (2). The impact of this scientific discourse on exhibition practices can be traced through the roots of dime museums in the curiosity cabinets created by and for scientists from the 17th century onwards. Influenced by, but departing from, the Renaissance tradition of *Wunderkammern*, in which elements of “natural” history were organized primarily by their ability to inspire awe, the later curiosity cabinets were marked by increasing separation, organization and classification of their objects (Olalquiaga 2006). Moving from palaces and churches to mansions of the nobility and, later, bourgeois salons, the development of this type of cabinet display represents a mounting tension between the performative and the taxonomical exhibition of collections and bodies.
8. Adams observes that even the most exoticizing freak portraits belong “to an era when a greater array of human differences were at least partially incorporated into the social fabric,” particularly in contrast with clinical photography’s “tendency to segregate and institutionalize abnormality” (Adams 2001: 120).
9. Denis Masse, “À l’échelle de Lilliput: le Palais des Nains,” *La Presse* October 19, 1981. Located in the Archives de la Ville de Montreal; File vm6 – r3283.2-961e.
10. Archives de la Ville de Montreal; File vm6 - r3283.2-961e.
11. Thanks to Dr. Ian Brodie at Cape Breton University for French to English translations.
12. In 1992, the site changed ownership a third time and was refashioned as a men’s only bathhouse called Sauna du Plateau, which expanded to include the upper floors of the building. While there is not space in this paper to do so, the layers of occupation at 961 Rachel East offer further possibilities for spatial analysis.
13. http://www.pluralworld.com/article.cfm?lart=412&change_langue=2 (retrieved June 25, 2009).

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