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THE LIVING THEATRE OF HORROR:
EXAMINING HOW CENTURIES OF WESTERN THEATRICAL PRACTICE AND
THEORY INFORM THE MODERN-DAY HAUNTED HOUSE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts,
Pedagogical Performance at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Theatre Studies, Education Minor

University of Central Florida, May 2017

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Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my husband James who supported me as much as I did him while we both pursued our higher degrees. To the faculty of VCU, and particularly my committee members, who have changed the trajectory of my thinking in so many ways in theatre and taught me not to just act on instinct but dig deeper for meaning. And finally, this paper is for the hundreds of performers I have worked with over my nine seasons as a Haunt Stage Manager. Little did they know that as I was teaching them to be better scare actors, they were teaching me as well.

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ABSTRACT

THE LIVING THEATRE OF HORROR: EXAMINING HOW CENTURIES OF WESTERN THEATRICAL PRACTICE AND THEORY INFORM THE MODERN-DAY HAUNTED HOUSE

By Scott Dittman, BA Theatre Studies, Education Minor – University of Central Florida – May 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Pedagogical Performance at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2021

Director: Dr. Keith Byron Kirk, Director of Graduate Studies, School of the Arts

This work will discuss the growing modern phenomenon of theme park and regional haunt events in the United States. In it, we will explore the history of how horror has been presented on stage, the themes within horror that creators grapple with, and how by using traditional theatrical elements creators of modern haunt events are able to make the audience a part of the story, transforming them from passive observers of the scenarios presented to complicit participants. How does the history of horror theatre inform the production of modern haunt events (and how has a global pandemic affected them), what are the fears that they exploit and/or attempt to explore, and how/do they succeed in reaching their audience?

VITA

Scott Dittman

Born June 27, 1975 – Rochester Hills, MI

Stage Manager, Busch Gardens Tampa, FL - Howl-O-Scream – Seasonally 2004 – 2013

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Managing and motivating people has been my business for many years. While working in entertainment, I have thrived in a dynamic environment that required me to oversee and direct performers and technicians while often interacting with guests and providing customer service. Directing professionally has given me a unique perspective on effective leadership. Extensive work in the Live Entertainment Industry has given me experience motivating and training teams of over 50 performers and technical crew to work together in what can be a high stress environment.

Professional profile includes:

- 20+ Years Live Entertainment Management/Theme Parks Experience
- Director of over 20 stage productions covering multiple genres of theatre
- 10+ years professional experience working in the Los Angeles Film Industry

INTRODUCTION

Throughout theatre's history, dramatists have delved into the darker aspects of mankind's psyche. Around the inception of theatre, Sophocles taught us to fear the wrath of the gods in *Oedipus*. Shakespeare joined his Elizabethan contemporaries by catering to his audience's love of violence and bloody revenge plays through *Titus Andronicus*. Even during the restrictive Victorian Era, the horror theatre cannon expanded with *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*, the first stage adaption in a long line of recreations of Mary Shelley's infamous work of a man and his creation. At the turn of the twentieth century the graphic works of Paris' Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol formed the foundations of modern horror theatre, known worldwide for graphic and shocking depictions of all types of horrors inflicted on mankind including the violence we inflict upon ourselves. Each of these productions, in their respective times, afforded audiences a safe perch from which they could experience and explore primal inner terrors universal to all mankind.

The advent of filmmaking in the early twentieth century propelled the staging of horror beyond what could be achieved in a traditional stage performance. Early horror films brought mass audiences intimately close to violence. Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho* initiated a new genre, which became known as slasher horror, elevating ghastly gore to a deeper psychological exploration of the dark side of human nature. Nearly a decade later one of the largest mass entertainment ventures ever undertaken, the establishment of Disneyland in California, capitalized on these trends with its own haunted house attraction, *The Haunted Mansion*, cementing this concept in mainstream consciousness. A new form of horror-focused entertainment began to grow, blending the traditional elements of stage production and the startling immersion that filmmaking allowed. Theme park haunt events and

stand-alone haunted houses sought to involve the audience in the story by forcing them to become an active participant in the fears and terrors they were exploring in real time.

This work will discuss the growing modern phenomenon of theme park and regional haunt events in the United States. In it, we will explore the history of how horror has been presented on stage, the themes within horror that creators grapple with, and how by using traditional theatrical elements creators of modern haunt events are able to make the audience a part of the story, transforming them from passive observers of the scenarios presented to complicit participants.

A HISTORY OF STAGING HORROR

To discuss the theatricality of modern haunt events, we must first examine a brief history of horror as it has appeared on stage, how it was staged and the reasons behind it. This is not meant as a summary of all staging of horror that has existed, simply a highlight reel to establish not only a pattern for the existence of horror in theatre, but to highlight how the trajectory of horror in theatre has led to the rise and success of the modern-day Haunt.

Some of the earliest works of known Western Theatre that survive lay the groundwork for the beginnings of Horror Theatre. The presentation of *Oedipus* by Sophocles can be seen as an originator of the theatrical tradition of presenting horrific acts on stage intentionally designed to discuss the fears of the current society. *Oedipus* tells the story of the king of Thebes who is determined to save his people when a plague strikes the city. The Gods though have spoken through an oracle: Laius, the former king, has been killed and Apollo now demands that his killers are punished. This soon leads to the tragic reveal that Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta. It was Oedipus, despite being warned of his fate, who killed his father and married his mother. Overwhelmed by these findings, Jocasta takes her life and Oedipus gouges out his own eyes. Creon becomes the new king of Thebes while Oedipus is taken away from the city and from his children.

As one of the first works of horror for the stage, there has been so much critical analysis of this early work. In the text *“The Root of all Evil”: Frank McGuinness’ Translations of Greek Drama* author Loredana Salis noted “Since Sophocles first staged his play and owing to Aristotle’s notion that it is ‘the perfect’ tragedy, Oedipus Rex has been reworked countless times. Freud’s psychoanalytic interpretation at the start of the past century, perhaps more than any other reading of the myth, has contributed to shape our contemporary perception of it. Indeed, Freud’s Oedipus complex revives

in modern versions of a tragedy that speaks of parricide, incest, hubris, contingency, the limitations of human knowledge and the necessity of fate.” (Salis)

In this early work, we see that societal and personal fears can be safely explored on stage for the public to witness while suffering no lasting harm to themselves. These early horror plays were tame by current modern standards of presentation. Much of the horror of these early works were done off stage and out of sight. In *Oedipus*, Jocasta commits suicide off-stage, and Oedipus gouges his eyes out off stage as well. Another one of these early Greek works, *Medea* by Euripides, follows the title character Medea as she loses her place as the lover of the mythical Jason, and goes about on a vengeance murder spree to destroy the family of Jason, murdering their two children as part of a bloody revenge. Despite the horror of murdering her own children, it is indicated that the Gods are involved and at the aide of Medea. Once again, none of the bloody deeds are done on stage, rather they are reported to the audience and then often the audience would witness the aftermath. This surely felt in line with a world that was large and unexplored. Unexplained tragedies would occur, seeming to be the wrath of the Gods.

With the rise of the Early Roman Empire, Roman dramatists borrowed and retold the many myths from their Greek predecessors. The presentation and staging of horror followed many of these same traits, but also served as the foundations of what was to come theatrically, as well as beginning to establish the reasoning of the theatrical effectiveness of the modern Haunt events. Nowhere do we see this more effectively than in *Thyestes* by Seneca. Seneca’s play, adapted from an earlier similarly named work by Euripides, is another revenge tragedy that pits Thyestes against his brother Altreus who is bent on being King and destroying his own brother. The play culminates with Altreus killing the three children of Thyestes and feeding the children to Thyestes at a banquet.

Once again, the horror of this is off stage and delivered via a messenger. It would be later that a certain Elizabethan playwright would change that staging.

This play touches on another type of horror that is seen in these early works and runs through the cannon to modern times. Though what is unknown is often the theme of horror, these early plays also deal with the fear of the known but unseen. What can be more terrifying than the thought of a mother, a brother, or a child turning on you and committing murder? The wrath of the Gods or the hands of fate, while being often cruel and random, invokes only a sense of general unease. The idea of the monster coming from a trusted source is much more primal and digs deeper into the psyche.

Thyestes, like Oedipus before him, establishes a pattern of our lead protagonist being the character in which the audience is to follow and identify, and thus making the audience a victim of the cruel fate inflicted upon the protagonist. In Alessandro Schiesaro's book *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, Schiesaro writes, "Thyestes begins by staging the process of its own construction. Tantalus not only wonders at the unexpected turn his punishment is taking, but also questions the very existence – the theatrical essence – of the drama that is bringing him on the scene. His questions, while ostensibly bearing on his fate as a mythic character, also look in anguish at the unfolding of the tragic action, as if he watches himself from the outside becoming a character of a dramatic text. Who dragged him from the depths of the underworld and forced him onto this stage? What is this novel situation that is worse than hell, one where, paradoxically, he is punished by being forced to punish others? Similarly, the subsequent fight between the Fury and Tantalus' shadow embodies a creative conflict between passive forces, on the one hand, which try to resist the drama's violence, and active forces, on the other, which create and further the dramatic action." (Schiesaro)

This concept explored in the early part of *Thyestes* is indeed the root of how a modern Haunt event will work. When we examine later the audience experience as a guest going through a Haunt, these posed questions will become key to the experience.

A broad overview of theatrical history in any form can hardly pass by without touching upon the Bard himself, William Shakespeare. In the great tradition of the Romans borrowing from the Greeks, so too did Shakespeare borrow from the work that existed before him. This is not simply an act of plagiarism, especially when it comes to horror. The ideas, themes and symbolism in horror are not just random ideas, but they are part of our built-in collective unconscious. The imagery that plays out inside a Haunt works because they feed on these stories and ideas that have this long history of being seen and explored before. While Seneca dealt with the murder and cannibalism of children in *Thyestes*, William Shakespeare put the horror on stage in *Titus Andronicus*. In fact, while most of Shakespeare's tragedies have their fair share of ghosts, monsters, murders and violent acts, *Titus* gained notoriety as being so violent with multiple murder, rape, cannibalism, and body mutilation (all prominent staples of the horror genre) that as the Victorian Era dawned, the play fell out of favor for its extreme depictions of violence. With the rise of horror in the Twentieth Century, it is no wonder that such a violent and bloody play has returned to prominence in the cannon and is not only seen more often on stage, but in several film adaptations as well, including the 1999 Julie Taymor directed *Titus* starring Anthony Hopkins.

This is not to say the Victorians were unwilling to explore horror. Many of the prominent characters we know of in modern theatre horror came out of this time. This is our Gothic Horror. This is the time in the rise of the Vampires. These creatures, in all their carnal seductiveness, were able to play upon the fears and secret desires of their audiences. The immortal, bloodsucking nature of the vampire from their inception was able to play as a surrogate host for many ideas that the

author wished to lay upon them. As Michael Chemers points out in his section about vampires in *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness*, “Among the cultural anxieties vampires have been employed by authors to embody are those of sexual deviance and queerness, incest, sexual repression, female sexual domination, Eastern mysticism, Satanism, immigration, racial impurity, class warfare, political corruption, Jews and other ethnic minorities, and even the artist’s relation with his own work, and much more.” (Chemers) These themes are so inherent to vampire stories, that any mention of Dracula conjures up many of these concepts for the viewer and are easy to exploit and will present themselves later when we take a walk through a vampire Haunt in another section of this work.

Another work to come at this time is Mary Shelly’s infamous creation *Frankenstein*. Like the vampire, Frankenstein and his Monster have become a template in which so many horror themes can exist. This work first hit the stage with *Presumption; or The Fate of Frankenstein* by Richard Brinsley Peake in 1823, just five years after the original Shelly novel, thanks in no small part to the loose copyright restrictions of the time. Frankenstein is a scientist bent on defying God and nature and creating life. Using pieces of corpses gained in unscrupulous ways, Frankenstein stitches together these human fragments and reanimate them into a now alive creature, one that in his own fear of what he has created, lets the creature out into the world.

The National Theatre’s 2011 stage adaption of *Frankenstein* by Nick Dear and starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller alternating the roles of Frankenstein and the Creature highlight this theme of the relationship between creator and creation effectively. The narrative of this version places the Creature at the center of the story versus the usual focus on Dr. Frankenstein, the Creator. The ability to change the focus of our protagonist helps highlight how versatile the story content becomes in probing audience anxieties and fears. This duality affords theatrical

creators the ability discuss a wide variety of subjects, much like the vampire does. Frankenstein even has informed science fiction horror. Modern day stories of androids, robots, or artificial intelligences let loose to destroy mankind are just a variant of Frankenstein's creature.

Often the creature is thought of as "Frankenstein", and indeed the word Frankenstein is often used to describe stitching together broken parts to create a new life. In the world of horror though, it is important to remember that the creature Frankenstein creates has no name. This becomes important later when we see the rise of horror in film and why horror works on the viewer.

This theatrical tradition of horror and indeed the movement of Gothic Horror reached its zenith with the opening of the Grand Guignol Theatre, opened in Paris in 1897. The name Guignol comes from the traditional Lyonnaise puppet character of the same name created by Laurent Mourguet during the 1831 silk workers' revolt. The character is meant to be subversive as he champions freedom and justice, and so too was the Grand Guignol meant to be subversive, even from the theatre origin and location. In Jack Hunter's *Chapel of Gore and Psychosis: The Grand Guignol Theatre*, Hunter explains, "Before being bought by Oscar Méténier in 1897, the Impasse Chaptal theatre had a turbulent history that, ironically, deliberately fed the imagination of the Grand Guignol's clientele. Indeed, who would have imagined that an institution run by the religious community of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (from the first half of the nineteenth century), whose chapel (thought to have been part of a convent destroyed during the revolution) would become the den in which the most horrible acts, born from the notorious imagination of various artistically disturbing playwrights, would be performed." (Hunter)

While Méténier may have dabbled in the horror, it was the next leader of the Grand Guignol Max Maurey who really created the public perception of the Grand Guignol as the true house of horror. Unlike so much of the theatrical history before it, Maurey railed against censorship to stage

plays that presented torture, rape, body mutilation, insanity, and a whole host of horrors in front of the audience for them to witness. Maurey famously hired a doctor to be on staff to deal with fainting patrons, struck down by the horrors staged before them. The plays were gleefully graphic, and attracted the early twentieth century atheists, artists, writers, poets, and the curious middle class who wanted to witness the terror first-hand.

The main star of the Grand Guignol was Paula Maxa, often called “the most assassinated woman in the world.” During her time at the Grand Guignol, she was “shot, scalped, blinded, strangled, disemboweled, raped, guillotined, hanged, quartered, burned alive, cut apart with surgical tools and lancets, cut into pieces by an invisible dagger, crucified, stung by a scorpion, poisoned by arsenic, devoured by a puma, impaled, filleted, drowned, asphyxiated, gored by bulls, choked by a pearl necklace, bludgeoned, cooked, infected with leprosy, and violently whipped; she even underwent decomposition on-stage, her body reduced to the foul residue of a corpse even as the audience looked on.” (Hunter) Maxa also appeared topless, a scandal that would not have been permitted at other theatres and is said to have screamed “RAPE” 1804 ½ times.

The horrors continue into the Twenty First century. Plays are still being created and staged that touch on current fears and explore difficult issues and trauma with new voices. Joining these creators of horror on the stage are a whole host of filmmakers ready to scare you too.

RISE OF FILM HORROR AND ITS IMPACT

As the Twentieth Century dawned, the horrors that began on stage in the earliest forms of theatre found a new medium to continue to reach audiences and discuss their innermost fears. Filmmakers began borrowing, restaging, and reinventing our notions of horror for the new medium of motion pictures. While certainly the argument for this thesis is that haunt events are a natural extension of theatrical history, a little time must be spent looking at the medium of film and its presentation of horror to understand some of the elements of a Haunt.

Film analysis has volumes on the evolution, meaning, and symbolism of film horror, and certainly the intent to frighten audiences has existed since the advent of filmmaking. From moustache twirling villains tying helpless women to railroad tracks to Freddie Kreuger and Jason Voorhees slashing the same type of victims, there has always been fear used to reach into the psyche of the audience. When it comes to relating film to modern Haunts, there are two ideas I want to examine in this section: the concept of the monster and the popularity of the slasher film.

Freddie Kreuger and Jason Voorhees have appeared in over 10 films each (and one together), television shows, comics, and video games. Norman Bates had four movies (and a strange shot-for-shot remake of his first film) as well as a long running television series. To our classic Gothic monsters, Count Dracula has appeared on screen over 80 times with Christopher Lee playing him 10 times himself. Frankenstein's monster has made appearances on the big screen over 65 times and countless other times on television. Clearly, we love being scared, and love our monsters. But what is it about them that makes them so often the lead in their story when they are usually written as the antagonist?

In his text on “Monster Theory”, author Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, “[The monster is] an embodiment of an actual cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster always signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval which created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.” (Cohen)

This theory helps to explain why we seek out and identify with the Monsters. They are not just creatures, but they are a semiotic body, layered with meaning beyond the physical. Frankenstein’s monster, as mentioned before, does not have a name and should not. He is an avatar for the fears of the audience, and anything that strips away identity allows more room for the audience to interpret their fears. Filmmaker John Carpenter, one of the masters of the horror genre, understood this idea of creating monsters that an audience could imprint on better than most. In making his classic film *Halloween* (1978) the evil slasher was originally written as “The Thing”, with the intention that this evil has no name, allowing the audience to decide what that evil is and what it represents to them. Carpenter took this idea again in 1982 and made a film called *The Thing*, again featuring a creature with no name.

We can also see through the camera of filmmakers that a monstrous body can be re-interpreted to give a new meaning and speak to a specific moment in time in a society. Freddy Krueger starred as the famous child-killer burned alive, bent on murdering teenagers in their dreams in the long running *A Nightmare on Elm Street* film series. On an initial reading of the first film, you would be right to read that Freddy’s evil has an already specific intent and meaning, tormenting the

children of those who burned him alive for his evil ways. When we visit him again in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985), Freddy has now changed tactics a bit. Instead of chasing down helpless co-eds, his interest is focused in this film on a young man named Jesse. Jesse is terrified by Freddy because he senses “something inside him trying to get out.” He feels sick and contaminated by Freddy’s presence, and despite having a sexually willing girlfriend, Jesse turns to his friend Ron for help dealing with what is going on inside him. The reading was quite clear back then to audiences who were looking for it. Jesse was gay and afraid to come out as a homosexual. It was also the beginnings of the AIDS crisis in the United States, and fear of contagion was sweeping the gay community. Certainly, fear of contagion is also a prominent theme in horror as seen in any incarnation of the zombie story, but this film was able to give specific meaning to that thanks to its time and place in society. While it was not as successful as other films in the series at the time, the “Gay Nightmare” as it is often known as has received a cult status today.

Film has trained modern audiences, not just to look for the meaning in image and the body, but also trained them in how and what they will see to scare them. There are certainly several subgenres to horror, but no matter where a movie falls on this spectrum, the horror comes out in both what is *shown* and what is *not shown*. The *Saw* movie franchise, falling into the slasher subgenre, often called torture porn for its very graphic nature, relishes in what is shown. The body is dissected and destroyed in these films. The victims pay with their lives in increasingly cruel and torturous ways. The horror comes in witnessing the act and seeing the carnage. This can be a double-edged sword. If a film cannot give a real appearance to this gore, it will be dismissed and fail to reach its audience. If the imagined circumstances are not accurately presented, the imagined world is destroyed.

At the other end of the spectrum is a film like *Jaws* (1975), which places as the villain a great white shark. Certainly, sharks are something to be feared to a certain extent, or at least avoided, but director Steven Spielberg is the master here of informing us of what is not shown. The unstoppable creature is barely seen through most of the movie. The fear is created in your head. Your witness to the body of this monster is one you have created, not the film. As Michael Chemers puts it, “A white shark is frightening to be sure, but it is a natural creature that inspires the monster... This caveat may seem pedantic at first, but it is absolutely crucial to our understanding of how monsters operate in cultures. The most salient danger, monsterization, is present when the material and the monstrous are confused.” (Chemers)

Films have taught us to be afraid of gore, to be afraid of the lack of gore. Silence can be as terrifying as overwhelming noise. What you see is just as dangerous as what you cannot. The monster may take his time stalking you, or he might come out of nowhere startling you before you know it. Knowing all this and bringing all this cultural baggage we all carry into a Haunt is critical to understanding why they work, as we shall see when we walk through a Haunt in another section.

TRANSITION TO THEME PARKS

Like so many things in entertainment, it might be easy to give credit to the entire Haunt genre to Walt Disney. After all, it was Disney who helped pioneer the concept of a Theme Park to begin with when he grew bored with animation. Disney wanted to create an immersive storytelling experience that transported guests to another time and place and allow them to not just witness a story passively, but be an active participant, the protagonist in the story. While clearly not a master of horror, Disney was more than willing to give a scary edge to some of his attractions, all meant in playful fun.

No where can this be seen better than in the classic attraction *The Haunted Mansion*, first opened in 1969, and subsequently getting four other versions worldwide. Though Disney never did get to see the attraction opened (he died in 1966), he was a guiding force in the attraction's initial development. Disney understood the concept of story and wanted to make his attractions a more immersive theatrical experience rather than just the cheap thrills of the spook houses that littered carnivals and boardwalk fairs. Disney, with attractions like *The Carousel of Progress*, *It's a Small World*, and *Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln*, took a theatrical approach to making attractions to reach a wide audience.

If you will forgive the expression, visiting a theme park today is a Universal experience, and I mention *The Haunted Mansion* here because it is such a beloved, well known attraction it's even had its own movie adaption. The concept of a haunted house was not new when Disney green lit the project for his theme park, but as you will see later in our walkthrough that the modern Haunt works on a very similar template to *The Haunted Mansion*. For this attraction, the approach to the house is already telling you a story of a run-down southern plantation house (if you are at the

Disneyland version) and pre-show information tells you that you are about to visit a home with 999 happy haunts, but there's room for 1000. You board your ride vehicle, the doom buggy, and you are brought through the winding halls of the haunted manor. The environment is immersive. The set surrounds you; the characters can come from any direction. Most are set on their own story, but some seem interested in coming for you. It is playful fun, meant to delight not scare like a Haunt does, but the process is the same as you will see. You are put on a forward trajectory through a story, encountering characters and stories along the way, with your motivating force to survive to the exit.

While Disney may have set the template for what theme parks worldwide would strive to be, it was his neighbor, friend and rival Knott's Berry Farm in Anaheim California that can be truly credited with starting the theme park haunt event. Originally started on Halloween of 1973, Knott's Berry Farm began a yearly tradition of turning themselves into Knott's *Scary Farm*. Originally a few ghosts and monsters lurking around the already themed Ghost Town area of the park, as the popularity of the event grew, so did its scope and time frame. From a one-night event on Halloween, Knott's now runs the event most nights starting in mid-September through Halloween to accommodate all the thrill seekers.

Knott's success did not go unnoticed by the theme park industry. Other parks began following suit creating special ticketed events bent on scaring their guests. Universal Studios began their *Fright Nights* in 1991, later renamed *Halloween Horror Nights*. Busch Gardens got into the horror game with *Howl-O-Scream* in 1999. As the years went on, more regional theme parks got in on the scares, creating their own special event for Halloween. These events continue to grow year after year, increasing the number of houses, scare zones, and visitors in the park year after year.

No matter the budget, no matter what they show or do not show, theme parks and Haunts are now in the business of telling stories. They must; thanks to popular media and theatrical tradition, that is what an audience expects. It is not enough to have a scary creature stand there. It is not enough to just build a spooky house to walk in. It is not sufficient to have loud music and weird lighting. Haunt creators and performers must use the long tradition of theatre to pull all this together, craft a story that puts the guest, casts you as the protagonist of your own horror movie. The question is, will you survive?

THEATRICALITY FROM A PRACTICAL SENSE

Now that the groundwork of theatre, film and theme park experiences has been laid, let us now discuss what goes into producing a haunt event simply from the sense of any type of standard practical production. Any major show that you may have seen in your local theatre, or one that works its way through the Broadway and National tour market is going to be a product of years of development. A concept for the show will have been created. A script will have been created that tells the story of the show as well as guides the creative voice of the production. Talented designers will be brought in to create the look and feel of every aspect for the production. The lighting designer will create a lighting plot for every bit of light that you see.

So too with any major haunt event, these departments will have an equal (if not more) designers working behind the scenes for a year before the event might start. Theme parks will employ Show Directors to gather a creative team together to help design the overall look and effect of the various haunted houses and themed areas planned for any given year's event. The major players in the theme park haunt world (Knott's Berry Farm, Universal Studios, Busch Gardens, Cedar Fair and Six Flags) yearly host anywhere between six to ten haunted houses and often just as many scare zones. This can mean seasonally for Halloween any given theme park will hire on 500 to 1000 performers and technicians just to run a Haunt event.

Every single one of these haunted houses will have some form of script written for them. While not a traditional "dialogue" script, a story is written out for each one so that the audience passing through can follow the story. Every character you see is themed to be a part of that story, and while many times their dialogue is improvisational, each performer will have strict guidelines for what they can and cannot say. They will be given suggested dialogue lines to use as part of their

startle on guests. While we are discussing dialogue, I can tell you from years of working haunt events, you will not ever (or at least should not ever) hear an actor at a professional haunt event yell “BOO!”. Many in the industry consider such a thing as unprofessional as it is generally in opposition to any given story. If you were truly trapped in Dracula’s Castle, why would one of his henchmen yell “Boo” at you. In this intricate place of world building, nothing will more quickly pull you out of it than an actor or dialogue that does not fit the story.

Let us break this down further to understand that at a theme park haunt event, you are oftentimes witnessing several scripts working separately and going on at once. From an overall perspective, the entire theme park event is going to have a script often culminating in an Icon, or Main Character for the event. Universal Studios has become famous taking the lead in this effort. With their extensive budgets and access to film Intellectual Properties (IP’s) they will often feature a famous horror film character as their Icon. Universal Studios in the past has featured the likes of Freddy Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* series, Chucky from the *Childs Play* series, Imhotep from the Universal *The Mummy* films, and Norman Bates from the *Psycho* films. Universal Studios will often create their own Icon for the event to be the driver of the story. For instance, at the Orlando resort (their flagship event) they have one Icon known as Jack the Clown who has been the Icon for multiple years. Other parks follow suit, creating these Icons that are the driving factor for their event each year.

Now we break down further to scripts for the houses and scare zones. Each of them is designed to invoke a mood, create a story, and most importantly scare the audience. As previously mentioned with Universal Studios, their access to IP’s affords them opportunities to create haunted houses based on current or classic horror films. For the past ten years, they have tried to keep their event at an equal balance of Original Houses and IP Houses. The IP houses are much easier for

them to develop since the script is already there for them to follow. They will go so far as to bring in people from the original work to act as a consultant on the project. In 2013 Universal Orlando premiered a house based on the horror classic *An American Werewolf in London* (1981). For this house, they brought in the film's director John Landis to serve as a consultant for the look and feel of the house. This house became so popular it was brought back for 2015, a rare thing since Universal is strict about not repeating their haunted houses.

This has not stopped other parks from getting in on getting filmmakers to create content for their haunt events. In 2015, and repeated for several years after, Busch Gardens and Sea World Parks presented a haunted house called *Unearthed*, with a story and design created by Robin Cowie, who achieved great success producing the 1999 smash horror film *The Blair Witch Project*. Similar versions of this house ran for several years across multiple parks. This is often a cost saving measure for the smaller regional parks. They will reuse haunted houses for several years, giving their story a refresh or a new twist from year to year to add new interest and scares. They can also use this refresh as an opportunity to incorporate the larger parkwide story into individual houses. For instance, in 2012 Busch Gardens Tampa premiered *Zombie Mortuary*, a trip through a funeral parlor infested with zombies (that year's overall theme with *Dark Side of the Gardens: Zombies Live Here*). In 2013, the house returned and in one key scene of the house the Icon for the event The Trickster made an appearance, tying the house into the overall event.

Along with the scripts for the overall event, the houses and scare zones, most major theme park events also feature one to two live traditional stage shows. These shows are usually staged as a kind of musical revue, featuring current pop music as well as jokes about current events. Universal Studios Orlando featured from 1992 to 2017 *Bill and Ted's Excellent Halloween Adventure*, based on the characters from the *Bill and Ted* films but often featured newsmakers of the year. The script would

change from year to year, keeping up with and often mocking the current social trends. The Busch Gardens parks have a similar long running fan favorite show called *Fiends*, a parody of the characters from the film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and featuring their naughty nurses. Originally a small group of female dancers, in 2012 to meet with changing attitudes to gender, they added male dancers to the naughty nurse lineup for the show. While the show started as a parody of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with the changes made year to year to keep up with adjusting social attitudes, the show no longer seems much like the original work, showing how these are storytelling works that are adjusted and reworked, just as any traditional stage show might be.

As the old saying goes: Clothes make the man, so too a talented costume designer will pull together costumes to tell a story for each character. A sound designer will go through the script and pull out every sound needed to build the world of the play you are watching. All this work can go on months or years before a production might ever set foot on a stage. So too does this happen with any Haunt event. Months, if not years of planning, design and construction goes into every major theme parks yearly Haunt event.

Just based on a technical sense, we can see that the haunted house becomes not only the stage, but the auditorium for the audience. The building it is built in becomes the theatre. Instead of seating an audience in a traditional proscenium stage and presenting the show in front of them, Haunt events and particularly haunted houses present an immersive theatrical experience that you, the audience, gets to walk through and experience. Some stage productions will employ tricks to immerse the audience in the world of the show by having cast members walk into the aisles or seating audience members on stage, but they fail to reach the level of immersion that a Haunt can provide. As the audience, you walk forward through the set's construction teams spent months building. Unlike a traditional show, you can get up to the set, touch it, interact with it in ways no

stage play would ever want you to. Lights are hung so to be hidden while revealing as much or as little as desired by the production team. Costumes and makeup that were previously designed are now worn by actors, who must perform in the location set for them. A post-modern zombie would look as out of place in Frankenstein's castle as Bombalurina from *Cats* would look on stage with the cast of *Hamilton*.

As you can see, these elements are months, if not years in the making. All this preparation, planning, building, and rehearsing culminate into a Haunt. All it needs is a willing guest to step into the role of the protagonist of their own horror story and see if they can survive.

HOW IT WORKS AS A PERFORMANCE

We have looked at the technical and production aspects of a Haunt as it relates to a traditional theatrical event but let us now look at it from the audience perspective, the performance.

Envision yourself entering your favorite theme park to go to the yearly Halloween event. As you arrive and park, you are already feeling the same anticipation for the show as if you were an audience member going to see a show on Broadway. You have dressed for the occasion, but this time you are in your most comfortable shoes for all the walking you are about to do, or you are decked out in your favorite horror movie shirt. Like putting on your best dress or sharpest tie when you go to Broadway, your vintage *Halloween* T-shirt is transmitting to the audience around you that you belong. You have a special connection to the performance you are about to see. You have made that special bond between event and spectator.

You walk through the gates of the park, and like passing through the front doors of the Winter Garden or the New Amsterdam, you are transported to a different world. A world that has its own park map to help guide you through. You take this playbill and move forward, eager to take your place and see the show. As we saw from looking at the technical aspects though, you are already in the show, you just do not fully realize it yet.

You have always been a fan of the Dracula legends, and watched the many variations of films that have been created, and now your playbill tells you there is a house called *Bitten* and it is waiting for you. The show is ready to start. Eagerly you make your way across the park to get to the line. You must wait in line, perhaps for a long time, but this only helps build your anticipation. What awaits inside? How will the vampires you are about to encounter come after you? As you wait in line you can hear the music and screams coming from inside the house. It is a loud pulsing mix of

industrial and heavy metal music, beating all around you like a quick heartbeat, which is ironic since vampire hearts do not beat.

You get to the front of the house, and a park attendant, much like an usher invites you and your group inside. You walk the path to the front door and head inside. All around you are crypt doors. As you move forward in the dark hallway, spiderwebs seem to brush over your face, adding to your unease and discomfort. The walk seems too long to have encountered no one, but where are the vampires? Suddenly, a crypt door to the right drops down with a loud thud and a vampire hisses at you. Before you can finish screaming, the door is closed, and he is gone. Somehow you have survived your first encounter, but you know there is more to come.

The hallway ends and you are put into the front parlor of an old mansion. A coffin sits on one side of the room, with a grandfather clock across the room. A vampire lurks near the coffin, her dress and lips drenched in blood. You can tell she has been feeding, but she seems hungry. Suddenly from behind the grandfather clock another vampire bursts out at you for the attack. You understand the story from all the visual clues around you. They are here feeding on and attacking outsiders. Without any dialogue, they have already told you the story. Your survival instincts kick in, and you understand your part of the story is to flee from the terror, and you push forward, trying to escape through the curtains in front of you.

You push through those curtains and emerge in a library. The discomfort builds more. The show is heightening your senses. Your anticipation is building even more as you now frantically search out the next vampire. As you move through the library, a bookcase swings open and another vampire attacks. This one is dressed in his Victorian best. He seems a bit paler than the first two, and your understanding of the collective knowledge society has of vampires tells you that this one has not fed. He is aggressive and hungry, and you are not just the audience, but you are the entrée.

All you can do is race forward through the next open door. Now you are in a long hallway lined with nothing but blood red velvet curtains. There is nothing and no one else to be seen, other than the massive red curtains surrounding you, so much like the curtains of a theatre. You are both in the theatre and onstage a part of the show. Centuries of theatre tradition are telling you more of the story now.

According to Whaleys Stages UK, there is a long history of red curtains in the theatre:

Many European theatres and opera houses had red in their colour pallet. Theatres had mainly wooden interiors which were always at risk of fire. In 1794 the Drury Lane Theatre, London introduced the first iron safety curtain, which would eventually become a statutory requirement in all large theatres. A thus, the theatre curtain was created. Taking the inspiration from Europe, red curtains were then often used, and the red colour suited the grandeur of the theatrical environment, the trend stayed. The colour red, is also associated with royal patronage. Theatres have a long history with the monarchy, and as such, red was the ideal colour to be used, and the grand style and aesthetic of theatrical tradition still stands today. (UK)

There is also a practical sense to these red curtains. Red does not absorb light as much as other colors, such as blue or green. This means that if the production team want to cast a spotlight onto the stage, having a red background will help to make it stand out. And in this room, there are spotlights in several places. You try to rush though this hallway without being attacked. The anticipation builds once again and is released in a scream as the vampire you knew was going to attack finally does, but from a direction you did not quite expect.

You push through to the next room and emerge into a wine cellar. Broken dusty bottles are still racked on the wall and broken on the floor. It is clear this area has not been cared for by the vampires because they do not drink wine. Trapped in cages on either side of the room are people

dressed in modern clothes that are torn and dirty. They are pleading for you to help release them and warning you that the creatures are everywhere, coming for you. Your mind wonders for a moment if these are other members of your audience who got trapped, or are they part of the show. It is clear though that the vampires are after you, so you are part of the show. You are at the same level as the two trapped teenagers in this wine cellar. The story tells you why they are trapped here. The teenagers in the cages are the wine, and this is all to make you the next source of food.

You make another hard right turn into a different room, another long hallway. You have been going through the house now for a while, but the story is not finished. It is here where you begin to realize that all the plot twists and turns as you have hurried through the story of this house is beginning to leave you feeling disoriented. The build of any good maze, as discussed before, is not just the physical practical twists and turns to optimize space for a haunted house and to allow backstage areas for a cast to hide, but it also acts as the plot twists of a good stage play. These twists and turns, either on stage or in a Haunt, keep the audience guessing about where they are going, where the story is going. If the intention of a play is to be one step ahead of its audience, the intention of the physical layout of a Haunt is to stay ahead of the people passing through it and allow the cast to stay ahead of them as well. This leads to a parallel experience between Broadway and Haunt. In the Broadway theatre, general proscenium staging requires the audience to be seated facing the stage, and the actors are on stage facing out to the audience. When you are the audience in a haunted house, you are facing one direction, moving forward through the event. No matter the twists and turns, you are always being moved forward, and the set is laid out with your forward gaze in mind. The performers in the Haunt though are facing you, the audience, with their backs to the set as you see generally on Broadway. The performers gaze is set upon you. They may look back, make entrances and exits, use the set as is prescribed by their character and story, but their gaze is always to you, the audience.

Every good story contains obstacles for the characters to overcome, and the Haunt is no different. Just as you leave the wine cellar, you enter a hallway filled with hanging mummified bodies, clearly previous residents of the wine cellar. There are so many, you are literally forced to push your way through them to get past. You are forced to touch these victims, make physical contact with them if you wish to get through. As you do, they swing wildly, bumping you on all sides as you move through the narrow passage. This is one of those moments that exist in so many Haunts that transcends the classic theatre/spectator relationship that exists in traditional theatre. So much of our Western theatre has worked to transport the audience to a given place, make them part of the narrative while leaving them placed as distant spectators. While pushing through these mummified corpses, you are not an idle spectator. You are engaging with what the story tells you are dead humans, victims of the ravenous vampires you are trapped with. Their blood could quite literally be on your hands. It is important to remember this physical interaction for later, as it does have drawbacks that will be discussed later.

When you get to the end of the hallway of hanging bodies, you are confronted with what seems to be a mirror, but there is no reflection of you. The story is telling you that perhaps it is already too late, that you have been transformed into one of the creatures. As you ponder the mirror, it drops out of sight and a vampire hisses at you from the void behind where the mirror was. Your scream and leap of fright at the sudden attack is just enough time for the mirror to slide back into place and the vampire is gone. You are left to ponder if that image was you, the audience, or another of the residents of this place.

You are forced to round one corner and then another, pushing through curtains as you go, until you are faced with the façade of a gothic cathedral. Giant pointed stained-glass windows greet you from high above. A large, pointed arch doorway invites you inside. You realize this is what you

expected to find all along. As we have explored earlier, so much of modern horror is born out of these early gothic works, so a Gothic cathedral feels right at home in this story. Despite the knowledge in your head that you are a guest at a theme park and a full Gothic Cathedral could fit into the small building you walked into, you as the engaged audience member enter what you believe to be a full Gothic cathedral as the victim of the vampires, seeking refuge in what should be a safe place, a church. So many of the stories that exist for us are stored in what can almost be seen as a collective unconscious. You know that a church is supposed to be a sacred place, a sanctuary from evil forces. You also understand that this is a story, and there is little hope that this will be the safe place from the vampires. Like so much of what horror does so well, this room subverts your expectations. It allows you to explore the darkness in what should be safe places and trains our senses to learn to detect primal dangers in places where we may not suspect them.

When you enter the cathedral, there are coffins laid out all over the room, guiding you in a specific snaking path back and forth through the large space. If you are not being guided by the coffins, there are pews laid out to continue to force you on one predetermined path. Though there seems to be other exits to the room, the physical barriers in your way force you down one path, to one doorway on the far side of the room, forcing you to race past several vampires awakening from their coffins. Though not spelled out, you understand that these physical barriers are much like the character decisions and outside forces that act upon a script of a play. When you witness a narrative, you realize the characters are making choices along the way that guide the action of the story. Like Oedipus at the dawn of Western theatre, the lead is being guided to a seemingly predetermined ending. Despite seeing possible avenues of escaping the fate determined for the lead character, he must continue to move forward to that inevitable end. This room makes you realize you are the lead in this story, and the universe around you is forcing you to make choices that guide you to just one outcome.

The outcome here is not what the fear inside you hoped. You enter a small crematory at the back of the cathedral. On the slab ahead waiting to go into the incinerator is a dead body being fed on by a blood-soaked ravenous vampire. This may be a spot where you might be prone to make some analytical observations of these vampires. “If vampires feed on blood, why does it seem they are always spilling it all over themselves. I don’t spill half my chicken dinner all over myself, why do the vampires waste so much food?” Clearly, these thoughts are another defense mechanism to the fear induced as you are going through the experience. You are consciously trying to separate yourself from the fear you are feeling, trying to remind yourself that this is just a show, that it is not real. The very battle inside your own mind as to what is real and what is not only helps the Haunt, because while you are lost in these thoughts trying to defend your mind, the dead human leaps up, screaming for help before being snatched again by the vampire for another bite. The victim shakes you from thinking analytically and does what the plot continues to do, drive you forward.

You emerge from the crematorium into a small garden behind the church. There are stone benches, planters and a fountain that seems to have blood red water flowing in it. Overhead, trees obscure the sky from you while long vines and Spanish moss dangle down in your face. Again, you are forced to physically interact with the set, with your environment, and push aside these vines. The act is infuriating and distracting as it is meant to be. It does not give you an opportunity to look for the dangers you know are close. You are forced to go around the fountain to get to the only sign of exit when a vampire bursts out from the back side of the fountain, lunging once again at you. The attacks have the pattern of what we understand our lives to be. Relentless attacks, coming from different directions, some expected, some unexpected, but each one we must learn to navigate safely to survive.

Moving through the next set of curtains (again with the physical interaction with the space) you come into a portrait gallery. There is a building feeling that you are approaching a climax or finale. The pacing, like the pacing of much of theatre, is picking up. The story is moving faster. The music that started like a beating heartbeat when you first entered also feels more aggressive. Faster. Portraits drop with a bang as you hurry through. You round the corner, and you see a large room. Inside this room is one coffin, more ornate than any you have seen before. This coffin is surrounded by golden glowing candelabras on stands, and opposite this coffin in the room is a large throne on a raised pedestal. There is a well-dressed vampire standing on this platform, watching you come in. The story tells you that you have arrived, our shared history telling you what this elaborate room with the raised station means. This is the Master's Lair. He has been waiting for you, and he is drawing you into his gaze. His gaze is just a trick, as one of his women emerge from behind the coffin and lunge at you. You have reached that point that exists in every story, the climax. You are a part of the Master's Kiss of Vampires now, and there is no escape to your fate. Resigned to this, you move forward, stepping beyond the throne room.

In story theory, there is a point beyond the climax known as falling action. Falling action is the section of the plot following the climax, in which the tension stemming from the story's central conflict decreases and the story moves toward its conclusion. For instance, the traditional "good vs. evil" story (like many superhero movies) does not end as soon as the force of evil has been thwarted. Rather, there tends to be a portion of the story in which the hero must restore regular order to the world, clean up the mess they made, or make a return journey home. This is all part of the falling action.

A Haunt will often have this kind of room or area for the end of the house. For this house, during the falling action you enter what seems like a barn or old wooden structure. Slat walls are

everywhere around you, and beyond them are stacks and stacks of coffins you must navigate through. Vampires come at you from every direction now, more than ever before. You are surrounded by them, but worse still, you are one of them. Your story is over, and the vampires have won. This is the falling action of the story, but the intensity has only increased. This may be the one standard deviation most Haunts take from the traditional narrative story. There is usually an effort in every Haunt to make this last moment in the house as intense and terrifying as possible. Just as you begin to believe it is your fate to live amongst the stacks of coffins for all eternity, you spot one last doorway and you race through it, and with the brushing aside of a few hanging vines, you emerge back out into the theme park. You walk through some vine covered lattices, but you can see you have emerged safely from the house, intact.

The story is complete...

Then the last vampire jumps from behind a hedge to get you.

This finale comes from the influence of the films previously discussed, how the rise of film changed how people view horror, and the expectations that come with it. An audience now knows that the monster is never truly dead. Even when it seems safe, he will come back for one last attempt at you before the show is truly over. The exit of most Haunts now re-creates this moment where you see the relative safety of the theme park just outside the house, but the monster still finds a way to get you.

WHY DO WE EMBRACE FEAR?

A Haunted House works as a theatrical event because it combines the traditional practical effects of immersive theatre, stylistic choices of modern horror film media, and the first-person immediacy of a theme park experience and combines them into one single event. Despite the general desire of most people not to be in a life-or-death experience for real, putting yourself into a simulated version of that horror is now a billion-dollar industry. According to Hauntworld.com in 2016, “The typical haunted attraction averages around 8,000 paid guests. A major amusement park such as Universal Studios and or Knott’s Scary Farm can gross \$250 million by themselves. On a busy night, the major haunted attraction can attract over 10,000 guests in one night while a mega amusement park like Universal might do over 40,000.” (HauntWorld)

So, you could ask, why do we embrace fear and what kind of fear does the Haunt evoke? We have previously examined the psychological reasons that horror theatre works on an audience, lets now answer the question by examining now how the Haunt works from a practical approach on a guest. The reason the Haunt works to invoke fear is because the immediacy of being in the situation of the protagonist of the horror story plays upon our primal instinct known as “fight or flight”. According to an article from the Cleveland Clinic:

“The fight or flight response, or stress response, is triggered by a release of hormones either prompting us to stay and fight or run away and flee,” explains psychologist Carolyn Fisher, PhD. “During the response, all bodily systems are working to keep us alive in what we’ve perceived as a dangerous situation.” Without you even telling it what to do, your body is assessing what’s going on around you and determining your options on how you most likely could survive the event. During the fight or flight response your body is trying to prioritize, so

anything it doesn't need for immediate survival is placed on the back burner. This means that digestion, reproductive and growth hormone production, and tissue repair are all temporarily halted. Instead, your body is using all its energy on the most crucial priorities and functions. The stress response can be triggered in a single instant, but how quickly you calm down and return to your natural state is going to vary from person to person (and it will depend on what caused it). Typically, it takes 20 to 30 minutes for your body to return to normal and to calm down. (Clinic)

In the moment of that visceral fright, the body will react. If the body's reaction is to fight, as an audience member you might lash out at the attacking object or creature. Unfortunately, this leads to countless assaults on Haunt performers every year from overly aggressive guests or carelessness of the performer by getting too close to their victims. While getting too close is rarely a skill most actors are coached on regularly, for Haunt performers learning to keep out of reach of guests, particularly in small tight spaces is critical to their safety.

More often than fight, flight is the stress response of choice for most guests in a Haunt. As mentioned before, Haunts are designed to follow a single traffic pattern of always moving forward. This design is not simply based on making it easy for the guest to follow the story both literally and figuratively. Guests are given that forward path because it also serves as their route of escape from the attacking monster. With a guest generally knowing where they are going, they will by instinct follow that same path to escape when their fright is heightened. This is aided by designers of the house and the performers in them by placing the source of the startle scare to one side or the other of the guest. In the Haunt world this is known as "Scaring Forward." Performers are trained to come at a guest not directly from the front or directly behind, but from either one side of the guest or the other. This gives the guest an opportunity to escape while maintaining safety for guest and

performer. If you ever wish to see the flight response in a continuous active form, stand directly outside the exit of any Haunt on a crowded night. A good Haunt will generally have many guests literally running for the exit.

There is one other stress reaction that is commonly seen at Haunt events that is not generally discussed in the “fight or flight” response. In the Haunt world, its often commonly known as “fight, flight or freeze”. For many guests, simply freezing in place is their response to the startle scare of the actor. This reaction is more typical than you might expect. The logic of seeing a monster and then freezing so it does not attack you might escape the rational mind, but the reason the Haunt is working on you as an audience is because you no longer have access to your rational thinking mind. You have entered the narrative so completely that you can no longer process effectively what is happening to you, and you are making choices without thinking through the logic of the situation and only dealing with the imagined circumstances you have put yourself in. Ibsen and Stanislavski could have only dreamt of an audience embracing such realism.

This freeze instinct has both positive and negative impacts on the Haunt and the performers and guests inside. A Haunt depends on the continuous forward movement of a flow of guests. The story unfolds because of the movement of the guest through the space. If a guest freezes and interrupts this flow, it can cause a backup throughout the house. The rhythm of the story and the performance is interrupted. One would not expect to watch a play on Broadway and see the cast of *Rent* just stop and stare at the audience for a while, nor would you go to a movie theatre and expect the image to freeze on screen. During this moment of freeze by a guest, it is critical for a performer to make an informed decision about how to handle their situation. If the path is clear and there is no danger to surrounding guests, they might try once more to scare forward the guest to get the show going again. Sometimes it is best for the performer to retreat, escaping away or out of sight of the

guest to allow them to continue their forward movement. Either way, a performer in a Haunt is making decisions about their performance not just based on their own rehearsal and training, but the immediacy of the response of the audience. Just as an actor in *Noises Off* must learn to hold for a laugh, the Haunt performer must anticipate and respond to their audience as well.

The Cleveland Clinic also lists some symptoms of the stress response. Here is what can happen:

1. *Your heart rate and blood pressure increase.* This means you are breathing more quickly, helping to move nutrients and oxygen out to your major muscle groups. This helps give you the endorphin rush so many Haunt guests crave and enjoy.
2. *Blunt pain response is compromised.* Like an injured person in a car accident, an injury by a guest running into a door, wall, or set piece in a Haunt is often not felt until the guest has calmed down. Unfortunately, performers in Haunts also suffer these self-inflicted injuries, though responsible events do train performers on how to avoid these injuries.
3. *Dilated pupils.* You are already in a low light environment, and your eyes will be trying to seek out the dangers. Lighting designers of Haunts usually take this into account and strategically place lighting effects to alter this perceptive state and keep the guest off balance. Though, not too extreme when it comes to light changes since they would not want to risk the afore mentioned blunt force injuries.
4. *You're on edge.* You are more aware and observant and in response you are looking and listening for things that could be dangerous.
5. *Memories can be affected.* This is often a response to a visit through a good Haunt. Cries of "They were EVERYWHERE!" (They were not) or "They grabbed me!" (They did not) can often be heard from guests leaving the Haunt.

6. *You're tense or trembling.* Stress hormones are circulating through your body, endorphins are pumping to keep you alert. A body will react giving you those “chills” you feel when frightened. Unfortunately leading to...
7. *Your bladder might be affected.* It does happen. And Haunt performers love it when it does.

HAUNT EVENTS DURING COVID-19

As discussed before, horror is so often used as a metaphor to discuss a sensitive social topic in a new context and analyze the human condition. What happens though when the world itself becomes a horror? In March of 2019 it became apparent that the story in so many apocalyptic films and a staple of haunted houses became reality as a viral pandemic swept across the globe. While not as virulent as often portrayed in these venues, the loss of life and social norms became a real-life horror.

Traditional theatre was shut down globally. Theme parks shuttered their gates to help stem the contagion. The horrors once depicted in these haunted houses soon became part of the everyday fabric of our lives. As weeks passed into months and it became clear social distancing was going to become the norm, it was posed on haunt events that were in areas allowed to open the question: How can you present a haunt event, a traditionally intimate, up close, and crowded experience in a safe and socially responsible way?

When we look back at how a Haunt works as discussed previously, the audience is on stage with the performers. Audience and performers physically interact with the same sets, touch the same walls, doors, and other physical barricades. These close quarters lead to damage to the sets, either unintentional or intentional damage done by the guest or performers as they interact in these close quarters. This requires a team of technicians to be constantly on the lookout to make repairs to sets and lights. Costumes might need to make quick repairs. As you can see, these are hundreds if not thousands of up-close interactions that would be difficult to monitor. There might be nothing so ironic as a Haunt about a viral outbreak serving as a Covid-19 super spreader.

How though will the new normal effect Haunt events in the future? At HauntCon 2021, the nation's biggest Haunt Industry Trade show (held virtually this year because of the continuing pandemic) a group of the Haunt Industries leaders got together to have a virtual discussion to cover this very question. Scott Swenson, former Director of Production for Sea World Parks and Entertainment said that Covid-19 "upended" the entire industry but stressed that the solutions to the problems laid withing the relation between story and audience, turning the focus even more on the guest experience.

Alex Crow, Director of Entertainment Productions for Zoo Tampa agreed, stating their event had "refocused on storytelling". In doing so, they had to find a way to incorporate real world issues without calling attention to the Covid reason, but the story they were trying to tell. Haunted areas in theme parks were suddenly much more open path areas. Guest capacity was greatly reduced, having the effect of making the atmospheric terror of monsters lurking around feel even more real with a lack of other audience. It is a much more intimate experience when you are one on one with the monster.

CONCLUSION

Even as this paper attempts to prove the theatricality of Haunt events, it is understood that the definition of what is “theatrical” can be such a broad term as to not only become undefinable but meaningless. After reviewing the research on this work, I turn to a passage by Tracy C. Davis to help define theatricality as it applies to this work:

Just as theatricality has been used to describe the gap between reality and its representation – a concept for which there is a very good and specific term, mimesis – it has also been used to describe the “heightened” states when everyday reality is exceeded by its representation. The breakthrough into performance helps to distinguish theatre from other kinds of artistic types or media as well as from the more pervasive utility of role playing. A breakthrough into performance may involve impersonation, but it may just as easily be the continuous presentation of one’s customary persona. When the spectator’s role is not to recognize reality but to create an alternative through complicity in the “heightening” of the breakthrough into performance, then both performer and spectator are complicit in the mimesis. This complicity can be exhilarating, but it can be deeply disconcerting. It means that mimesis may not mislead, because when caught up by it the actors and spectators agree to forgo truth. This “mimetic conundrum” implies that performers and spectators are still true to themselves, though paradoxically the representation may lack truth. (Davis and Postlewait)

This is what is truly going on when you attend a Haunt. You are what Jacques Rancière considered an Emancipated Spectator. You are part of the show, yet still free to make your own choices as you explore the narrative of the Haunt. As you go through the experience, you can relate to the experience in many ways either separately or all at once.

Think back to the walk-through of *Bitten* and recall moving through the red curtained hallway. This is the perfect moment of this argument for the theatricality of Haunts I am discussing. In that moment, there are five theatrically inspired experiences you could have as an audience member.

- Placed as the protagonist of the story, you may embody the reality of the false world around you, embodying a lost traveler who has stumbled into a horde of vampires and is frantically looking for an escape.
- You might step outside the narrative and notice that mimetic gap and understand that the monsters are simply performers playing a role.
- You could notice the sets, costumes, make-up, and lights that are creating this imagined world around you.
- You might get lost in the semiotics of the world presented, analyzing the symbolism that you are witnessing. What do the red curtains mean in here? What is the music saying about sex and violence?
- You could have several or all these reactions at once.

Like any piece of theatre, there are good Haunts and there are bad Haunts. Even the Haunt itself can change or be interpreted differently from night to night, just like a Broadway play. Each guest is going to have a different personal experience with the Haunt, bringing in not just the collective consciousness we all share with horror, but their own personal fears and tastes. A couple might come out of the Haunt with one person loving it and another hating it. They might hate it because it scared them, or they might hate it because it did not scare them. Some may walk through and be attacked by every monster and some might miss most of them. Try as you might in performance, even a good performer cannot reach everyone.

What constitutes 'good' theatre has often been left to the scholars and critics. For centuries, their word was the final say on what was high art and what was to be dismissed. With the great rise in social media, new ways of critiquing what was commonly thought not to be 'high art' has emerged that has given new thought and respect to these art forms. It is my hope that this essay has put the Haunt into a new perspective.

Respect and admiration should be given to the work of thousands of artists, designers, and performers that put in the countless hours of work, energy, planning, building, and performing a Haunt for their audience. It is time to thank the demons, zombies, ghouls, vampires, and creatures that these Haunts have to life.

Want to thank that monster? You do not have to look far...its right behind you.

RUN!

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APPENDIX A: HISTORY OF THEATRE HORROR CLASS

As part of the research on this paper, I began to develop a course on the History of Horror Theatre. Clearly, I am not the only person fascinated with this topic, and I am grateful to Professor Michael Chemers of the University of Santa Cruz and his book *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness* for being an invaluable resource in this endeavor. Below is my list of sample reading and potential course projects for my version of this course.

History of Horror Theatre

Readings:

Greeks: *Oedipus* by Sophocles *Medea* by Euripides

Medea given preference as Euripides was an inspiration to Seneca.

Romans: *Thyestes* or *Hercules* by Seneca

Thyestes preference as the origin of Elizabethan & Jacobean Revenge Plays to come after.

Medieval Cycle & Mystery Plays: *Everyman*

Morality play – horrors before God – only theatre allowed performed at the time.

Elizabethan Period: *Titus Andronicus* by William Shakespeare

Early revenge plays hinted at by Seneca.

Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe

Echoes of Cycle plays and use of comic relief.

'Tis Pity She's a Whore by John Ford

Unflinching taboo topics – condemned at the time not revived until the 20th century.

19th Century Horrors: *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* by Richard Brinsley Peake

What happens when creation is let loose on the world.

The String of Pearls by George Dibdin Pitt

Early Sweeney Todd.

Grand Guignol: *Le Laboratoire des Hallucinations* by André de Lorde

Staged Graphic Horror & Psychological torment – early precursor to slasher films.

Live the Horror: Universal Studios 30th Anniversary Horror Nights – Regional Haunt Events

Modern Works as Callbacks: *The Mystery Plays* by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa

Sweeney Todd by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler

Potential Projects:

Analyze and present a proposal for a production of a horror play not covered/read in class.

(Fall Class) Attend a Regional Haunt event and analyze a specific haunted house in the event for how it works structurally as a theatrical play.

Compare/Contrast a classic horror play as read or discussed in class to a modern film adaptation of the same work.

Analyze the effectiveness of the portrayal of violence on or off stage.

Group Projects:

Design a modern haunted house based on one of the plays read during the semester.

Research an era of horror history covered in class and discuss other plays of the era. From their research, students will prepare an oral presentation which might include power point or a short performance.