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STAGE FRIGHT: AN EXAMINATION OF HORROR-BASED THEATRE THROUGH
THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

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ABSTRACT

The horror genre wears masks of various shapes, sizes, and textures in the creative outlets in which it exists. While often criticized and chastised by the craftiest of pop culture critics, the general agreement is that the genre successfully fulfills its purpose in satisfying a craving for screams while providing a sub-cultured home for a specific demographic of misfits. Although the reasoning behind the genre's ever-growing popularity and continued financial success can easily be accredited to surface-level identifiers such as these, for the purposes of horror-based theatre, I believe they can more accurately be attributed to reasons far more psychoanalytical.

This thesis seeks to examine the evolution of horror-based theatre and analyze its relationship with psychoanalytical theory. I propose that in order to push the genre forward and execute it to its highest potential, the practitioner of horror-based theatre must approach their work with a well-crafted understanding of psychoanalytical theory while also executing the three essential elements of horror: *escapism, immersion, and participation.* Julia Kristeva's *Theory of Abjection*, detailed through the theoretical research in her 'Powers of Horror' text, will act as the foundation for my research, as I find its principles and values to align themselves strongly with the tools I believe a creator of horror-based theatre should possess.

While many professionals and practitioners in our world still fail to recognize the haunt industry as a pure form of theatre, others understand its responsibility in ushering horror-based theatre into the next stage of its evolution, considering all three of the essential elements are at play within the confines of a haunted experience. I too propose that the sub-genre's next evolutionary phase will come as the result of the continued growth of the haunt industry. However, a better understanding of abject theory should work in tandem with the immersive technologies of the haunt world in ensuring that the practitioner executes the experience to its fullest capabilities. As a practical element of my thesis project, I will detail my

experience working in the haunt industry from a directorial perspective in determining if a theoretical lens, in conjunction with emerging forms of immersive technologies, can not only help reassure the continued prominence of horror-based theatre, but promote its evolution and empower its growth.

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CHAPTER ONE: METHOD TO THE MADNESS – A STUDY OF THEORY IN RELATION TO HORROR-BASED THEATRE

<u>The Lack of Abject Theory in Horror-based Theatre</u>

Horror-based theatre, in its purest form, is designed to extract a visceral reaction out of its audience; a reaction unlike any that is received through other forms of theatre. We as horror-themed creators seek to disrupt traditional theatre conventions, manipulate the comfortability of the patron, and achieve a detachment of self within our viewer. Through the application and knowledge of Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection and crafty directorial work, this reaction can be effectively achieved regardless of the intensity of the play's content. While plays of the gorier variety organically lend themselves more to the principles of Julia's work, it is of my belief that this theory can serve as an effective tool for the creation of all horror-themed theatrical productions. Tapping into the fascination of "the other" and understanding the specific concepts of abjection in all of its extensions is one of the keys in the extraction of our desired response.

However, upon conducting thorough research on the timeline of horror-based theatre since the conception of Julia's theory, I have observed that the abject is not applied as often as you'd think. Why is this particular theory, whose structure so effortlessly applies itself to the intent of horror-based theatre, seldom incorporated into the creative approaches of directors and designers? Or at least accredited to be? Often times you can recognize that a horror director, whether in film or theatre, is aware of the dark corners of the human mind they are tasked to tap into. They seemingly know what makes for effective horror-based art and what doesn't, which is reflected in the quality of their work. Yet many of these creators rarely credit the psychoanalytical work of Julia Kristeva nor claim its application. If efficiently applied and given

the chance to influence certain creative decisions, what levels can this theory heighten an already successful horror-based piece to? Can you achieve the desired response on a larger scale as a result?

While many theatre-makers may find this analytical approach unnecessary and more in line with the work of a dramaturg, I believe it serves a purpose in more effectively retrieving the desired response of the art you present. Simply understanding and having delved in the text of a theory can innovate the way you conceptualize a production as a designer or director, broadening the possible avenues you may take an otherwise single-toned story. However, the application of its principles in the staging and design of your production can prove more effective.

That being said, as previously mentioned, it's a far easier task to apply abject theory into the production of a horror-based piece with visceral macabre already woven into its text. "Evil Dead the Musical", for example, provides staged bloodshed and the unsettling sight of limb-severing in nearly every scene of its gore infested script. Others, such as "The Ghost Story of Yotsuya" by Tsuruya Nanboku IV, take a subtler approach when it comes to tangibility of its horrific story elements. This subtlety, however, can still instill the basic principles of abjection through clever design and cautiously crafted directing choices. Often times in horror what's more effective than the gore we can visually see and fully indulge is that which we don't. That which is left to the imagination, while still accentuating the core elements of what makes for abject art. The idea is still there and presented clearly enough for the average patron to soak in, while subtle and not as on the nose, and still draws the desired response as a result.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will primarily discuss in detail what the abject means in relation to Kristeva's theoretical approach, examine what the application and effects of this theory look like, and analyze how staged performances can apply the abject in presenting more effective renditions of horror-based theatre.

<center>Defining the Abject</center>

Abject [ab-jekt] – adjective
1. sunk to or existing in a low state or condition: very bad or severe
2. a: cast down in spirit
   b: showing hopelessness or resignation
3. expressing or offered in a humble and often ingratiating spirit

The above-mentioned definitions of the word abject were pulled directly from the Merriam-Webster website. Interestingly enough, none of the three entirely apply to the term referenced in Julia Kristeva's theoretical essay *Powers of Horror.* Before we continue our examination, it is pertinent for the reader of this essay to understand the difference in Kristeva's definition. As stated in her essay, abjection is a "visceral reaction to the vile, disgusting and repulsive that also encompasses the realization that the vile, disgusting and repulsive is a part of our existence as humans" (Podoshen 2). While I believe this particular explanation of the term most efficiently encompasses its core meaning, there are several layers, and modified definitions, to her interpretation of it. One thing Kristeva works strenuously to solidify in her essay is the term's correlation, or lack thereof, to the word "object". Kristeva states that "The abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire" (Kristeva 1) and that "the abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to" (Kristeva 1) . This opposition exemplifies the elements of

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horror in Kristeva's theoretical interpretation of the term. Through a newly crafted lens, she takes the term down a darker path, seamlessly connecting it to the horror genre and world of the macabre. It is the fear within the person responding to the abject that she aims to accentuate and discuss in her studies; a realization that something previously connected to our being is now an excreted substance that is terrifying, repulsive, and spine-chilling, thus making it abject.

> "*Abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady, a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you*" (Kristeva 4).

The elicitation of fear and feeling of disconnect in horror-based theatre are two key concepts we will discuss later in this thesis. Before we do so, I believe it is important that we briefly discuss the work that prefaced the *Power of Horrors* in order to better understand Kristeva's ascension into darkness.

<u>Julia Kristeva</u>

With an extensive background in the study of linguistics, particularly the application of psychoanalytical theory into language, Kristeva's contributions to the philosophy of language and semiotics are profound to say the least. Her passions and interests ranged within varying topics throughout the entirety of her career. However, the correlation between language and psychoanalytical theory was her expertise, leading her to write her doctoral dissertation on the subject (Oliver). Her studies in these subjects carried her into the professional realm of the field when she became a practicing psychoanalyst in 1979. There are two major phases in which Julia's post-doctoral work is categorized: a structuralist-semiotic phase and a psychoanalytical-

feminist phase (Oliver). The former was heavily influenced by three philosophers she greatly

admired and examined the works of: Sigmund Freud, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Swiss linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure (Oliver). Through their foundational research and professional work, she

developed a new study of her own, titled "semanalysis", that worked as an amalgamation of the

disparate concepts they each brought to the table. Through this concept, she examined the

meaning that a text has the potential to create as opposed to simply understanding the meaning it

already has.

  In understanding how these foundational aspects of Kristeva's work tie into her eventual

conceptualization of the Theory of Abjection, the key elements to examine and break down are

the intricacies of the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic, in the context of Kristeva's work,

focuses on rhythm and tone of language, associating itself with "the maternal body" (Oliver).

The symbolic, on the contrary, correlates to "referential meaning" and emphasizes grammar and

syntax (Oliver). Re-introducing this counterbalance of the two in the form of the "speaking

body" was a goal of Kristeva's, who suggested that bodily urges are released and discharged

through language. Her perspective on the human body's interaction with language and semiotics

is undoubtedly woven into Kristeva's 1980 essay titled *Powers of Horror,* to which she coined

her own interpretation of the term abjection.

<u>A Deeper Dive into Abjection</u>

  While still specific from a broader standpoint, the ambiguity in certain elements of

Kristeva's concept of abjection can sell the theory as dense and a challenge to firmly grasp. As a

result, to better break down the many avenues this theory can venture down, I have categorized

the "goals of the abject" into 5 separate branches: elicitation of fear, disturbance of identity, loss of meaning, extraction of the animalistic, and exploitation of perversion. The first of the five, elicitation of fear, is perhaps the most on-the-nose of the bunch in relation to the horror genre. In most cases, without the elicitation of fear, the objective of the horror-based creator is lost, resulting in an inefficient product of the content being presented. Through crafty post-production work and the use of special effects, horror-based cinema has the advantage over theatre in pulling this effect off. Incorporating Kristeva's theory of abjection onto the stage, however, can be an efficient tool for theatre-makers looking to instill terror in the minds of their audience.

While the visceral, gory nature of the abject may seem like enough in accomplishing this task, it isn't in the case where a piece seeks to present more than just a bloodbath on stage. I believe the answer lies in how the abject materials are presented and its context in relation to the overall piece. A pool of blood on the stage is inherently abject. What was once a part of someone's being, functioning as an essential tool to their existence, is now excreted from within them and lifeless on the stage. It is repulsive and vile, and as a result abject. However, this effect may lean more heavily towards the realm of repulsion as opposed to fear. Manipulating the manner in which this pile of blood is presented on the stage, emphasizing its relation to the human in which it once inhabited, and analyzing how that interaction relates to the audience member can add the desired element of fear. It isn't merely presenting the abject, it's how you present it. That's the key in extracting fear through abjection materials such as blood, vomit, inner organs, etc.

Disturbance of identity, consequently, goes hand in hand with achieving an elicitation of fear and should be accentuated in the presentation of abject art. Disruption of order and system

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can be psychologically terrifying to the average human. Rules, regulations, and laws are implemented into our societal structures to provide safety, security, and a governing force with which we can trust. In moments where these rules are infiltrated and disturbed, fear and chaos can consequently ensue. As stated by Kristeva in the Powers of Horror, the abject is "that what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscious, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he's a savior" (4). That which should not be, but still somehow is, is abject. It disturbs our identity and brings forth a new existence which makes us uncomfortable.

> *"The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing"* (Kristeva 8).

The loss of meaning that can develop within an observer of abject art can arguably be the most terrifying of all sensations that can occur. Abject art seeks to promote an existential crisis, if you will, within its viewer, using separation of self to foster questions of life's meaning and one's universal purpose (Kristeva 15). Often times, the person experiencing this feeling can't necessarily pinpoint why it's happening. It's a feeling that arises without warning, and hits hard upon its arrival. You spend your life building this high-profile idea of the person that you are; A complete and moral being. Yet when elements of your being are abjected and you take time to process the repulsive and lifeless manner in which they now exist, it makes you question those ideals. This element in particular aligns itself seamlessly with the Theatre of the Absurd, in which the meaning of our existence consistently comes into question as a result of the visuals

and verbiage we are observing on stage. The extraction of the animalistic, however, tends to veer the theory off into a different, more subjective, experience.

Elicitation of fear, disturbance of identity, and loss of meaning can push an observer of abject art into a fragile, primitive state. Whether subconsciously or not, it can manipulate our brains to revert to an animalistic state of thinking, changing the way we perceive things as a result. Kristeva states that "The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the *territories of animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (Kristeva 12-13). If the abject can trigger this inner instinct through promoting a separation of self, what fears and emotional responses can emerge as a result? Fears or emotional responses that would otherwise be tucked deep inside the darkest crevices of our minds? As a creator of visceral art and horror-based theatre, these possibilities are infinitely intriguing. Our society, in a contemporary context, is so reliant on modernity and maintaining a civilized nature that extracting a primitive response through abject art could instill a fear in them like no other.

Lastly, the element of perversion that can be channeled through certain iterations of Kristeva's theory lends itself more to the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud in which she so heavily drew influence from. Particularly, Freud's personality theory corroborates and serves as a foundational element to this element of the abject (Kristeva 15-16). Like previously mentioned, much of the animalistic qualities of the abject are anchored in the qualities of the id, while the perverse elements can clearly cover the span of the superego and ego. Everything about Kristeva's concept of the abject is perverse in nature. It develops a feeling within its consumer

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that isn't supposed to be, which is why, in Kristeva's eyes, "abject subject matter is deemed inappropriate by a conservative dominant culture" (Arya and Chare 13). Gory, R-rated horror films are often chastised and labeled as taboo forms of cinema with a niche audience base. These films are exiled into a disparate, pervasive bubble, not to be taken seriously when compared to your typical Hollywood drama. Horror flicks are seldom nominated for Best Film at the Academy Awards, and I believe that's because our society views that particular form of storytelling as atypical. There's something to be said about the inappropriateness of the abject in the eyes of those who don't fully understand it, and I believe films and theatre of the horror variety will continued to be relegated to a certain stereotype as a result.

<u>Psychoanalytical Effects of Abjection</u>

Realizing the scope in which we as horror-based theatre artists can apply Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection into our work comes as a result of understanding its aforementioned goals and the many psychoanalytical effects they can have. Exploring the disparate, yet interconnected, dark corners of the mind with which we can tap into is a pivotal key in finding success. It isn't merely taking elements of gore and placing them onto the stage as an infiltration to the story you are telling. Quite the contrary, its injecting the psychology behind the gore into your entire directorial and artistic approach. Allowing Kristeva's theoretical framework to guide you in making design choices during pre-production and recognizing what triggers these visual and psychoanalytical choices are setting off. Abject art extracts different reactions out of every person it presents itself to, fascinatingly enough. These reactions, while subjective and never

entirely the same, inherently align themselves with the desired response for a horror-themed production.

Kristeva argues that one of the strongest psychoanalytical urges horror-based artists should seek to promote in their audiences is the desire to purge through art. Providing the patron with the ability to cleanse themselves of social anxieties and self-guilt is a unique feature in staging the abject (Arya and Chare 9). Again, whether subconsciously or not, there's an element of escapism present in the minds of a patron observing horrifying things on the stage that would otherwise be considered unethical. The Grand Guignol, for example, served as a purging house for the masses during its stint in Paris from 1897-1962, developing an entirely new realm of horror-based theatre with which patrons found a perverse pleasure in attending. As noted in the article "Dark Tourism, Abjection, and Blood", many theorists present research that "suggests that humans may obtain "sadistic" pleasure by consuming violent media, thus satisfying an inherent desire for engagement with violent and death-oriented material" (Podoshen 2). Understanding the inner desires and guilty pleasures brought to the surface as a result of abject art and horror-based theatre is required before applying it to your work.

<u>The Abject on the Stage</u>

Successfully applying a particular lens to the staging of a piece and having that lens translate efficiently to your audience can be a daunting task. However, I do believe that theories of the horror variety, such as the theory of abjection, allow for more efficient execution of the theatre/theory combination in theatre. At the most basic level, as previously discussed, simply presenting elements of gore and animality on stage is half the battle. The context and manner in

which you do so will point you in a more substantial direction, however, triggering more long-term effects. The authenticity of the abject materials you present will also prove effective, as it allows for more seamless immersion and escape of reality. With precisive design, patrons can more effectively be immersed in the world you are presenting and become more subject to the abject horror as a result. As an example of this, Podoshen states that "Black metal artists and fans are known to embrace abjection relating to the reality of death and violence. In other words, instead of using stage props that simulate death, the abject or violence, the artists use authentic materials" (Podoshen 3).

Horror-based art calls for complete immersion into the illusion you are presenting. Having the effect on your audience ripped away from you as a result of poor prop and set design would be a crime that is unfortunately far too easy to commit. Staying true to this authenticity, informing your actors of Kristeva's theoretical analysis, and collaborating with your design team in grounding your choices with abject principles are some of the ways in which the theory of abjection can be presented on stage.

The theoretical framework of the abject can apply itself to so many different contexts outside of the ones we've already discussed, showing the strength and scope of Kristeva's work. I believe we've only begun to scratch the surface, as we continue to examine the ways this theory can be applied to not only horror-based theatre, but other more traditional forms of theatre as well. How can this theory reconfigure other preexisting, non-horror related works? What questions arise as a result of the incorporation of the abject into these works? Does Kristeva's theory prove more counterproductive to those not particularly seeking repulsion and fear in their audiences? Taking these questions into consideration are interesting to say the least, and prove

that this theory, and its application into the world of theatre, are absolutely worthy of detailed

exploration.

CHAPTER TWO: ELEVATING THE EXPERIENCE – ESCAPISM IN HORROR-BASED THEATRE

<u>What is Escapism in Horror-based Theatre?</u>

According to Merriam-Webster, Escapism is defined as:

Escapism [i-ˈskā-ˌpi-zəm] – noun

1. habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine.

Considering the fact that escapism is indeed an essential ingredient to theatre of all forms and facets, one may question what differentiates the experience of escapism in macabre art-forms as opposed to more traditional ones. Before distinguishing the two and examining how horror-based theatre provides a form of escapism unlike any other, it's important we first determine the common denominator found in traditional theatre escapism: *safety*. While driven by intimacy and communion in an enclosed space, there is a very clear line between actor and patron in traditional theatrical performances that should not be blurred; a heightened experience in which the theatre-goer can temporarily escape their realities and become enveloped in the world being presented, while also having the peace of mind that their personal space and physical comfortability will not be tampered with. Emotional comfortability will, without question, be targeted throughout any given performance, however. Traditional forms of theatre provide a sense of escapism in which the story and characters presented to the audience elicit an emotional response from the patron, challenging pre-conceived notions, disrupting pre-determined thoughts, and fostering an environment for new ideologies to be considered. The total package at play here presents an environment, however contemporary or historic it may be, in which the

viewer can willfully, and safely, immerse themselves in and find temporary escape. Immersed from afar, however, with trusted faith that the show will not unceremoniously break the fourth wall and invade their sacred safe space. Unless promoted as an interactive and/or immersive style of performance, its general decorum for these unspoken rules of escapism to never be broken. After considering these key points and preparing to unravel what makes escapism in horror-based theatre a beast entirely disparate to what has already been discussed, it becomes evident that those answers lie somewhere in the gray. In horror-based theatre, the boundaries in which escapism can exist are pushed beyond those previously discussed guidelines, but also refrain from trickling down into the world of fully immersive theatre. Somewhere between traditional escapism and immersive theatre lies the grayed-out void in which we are talking about here. No longer does the creator have to restrict their content from teetering over the edge of what is custom, for the content itself calls for the abject to be brought forth as an essential element of the experience. In extracting the abject, a bolder, more dangerous form of escapism comes to fruition. It is imperative to note that the form of escapism provided by horror-based content grounds itself in more sinister soil; rooted deeply into the abject. Naturally, horror-based content fosters the abject even in the realm of escapism, driving the patron to find an inner fascination with danger and the macabre presented to them on the stage. Within this unchartered territory in which it exists, horror-based escapism stands on three intersected principles: extremity, communion, and purgation. These three factors are crucial in determining how this variation of theatre-based escapism exists in an entirely different realm.

For the purposes of this initial examination, we will first focus on the historical development of horror-based escapism and discuss how experimental theater groups, such as *the Grand Guignol*, have proven that the gray areas in which they've tapped into still reside in a league of their own, and provide the horror-based creator with a plethora of tools in determining how these three principles can be used in a contemporary setting.

<div align="center">The Evolution of Naturalistic Theatre</div>

Irony did not escape the fact that the theater Oscar Metenier chose to house his upcoming naturalistic showcases was adorned by ecclesiastical architecture and interior design. Although Metenier's tenure as director of the newly opened *Theatre du Grand-Guignol* was short-lived, his initial vision was clear: create controversy to generate cash and provide an unmatchable experience to an audience craving new forms of entertainment (Gordon 16). On the cusp of the Industrial Revolution's highest peak, theatre patrons in Western Europe found themselves deprived of novel content, seeking artistic satisfaction through whatever ludicrous and absurd forms of entertainment they could find (Gordon 7). The Naturalistic movement, as a result of its dry-cut approach, was leaving many patrons with a desire for offshoot variations of the theatrical movement. Metenier sought to capitalize on that crave for more taboo-based forms of theatre and did so by opening the Grand Guignol in 1897 as a direct opposition to the Parisian Theater (Gordon 2-3).

For context before we move forward, Naturalistic Theatre is referred to as "theatre that tries to create a perfect illusion of reality through detailed sets, an unpoetic literary style that reflects the way real people speak, and a style of acting that tries to recreate reality" (Art &

Popular Culture). The Naturalistic movement grew exponentially at the tail end of the 19th century and found its rightful place at the top of the theatrical heap through its tangibility, rawness, and realism. In tapping into the naturalistic movement, Metenier wondered what its darkest crevices would look like. How morbidly realistic can we get when exploring the macabre through a naturalistic lens? In doing so, an extension of the art form was coined, "sordid realism": an extreme form of naturalism that delves into abject and macabre subject matter (Gordon 9). The darkest corners of the Parisian underworld gave Metenier a fairly large catalog of news stories, urban legends, and crime reports with which to derive inspiration from in formulating his new offshoot of Naturalism. In unison with this newly coined form of theatre, the *Rosse* play was born. Rosse plays were the most common, and popular, plays being presented at the Grand Guignol during the early years of its development. Also known as "crass" plays, these plays unapologetically chartered crude territory and presented themes of thievery, prostitution, alcohol addiction, physical abuse, and vengeance in achieving the desired result. The thrill was found in the novelty, and the cruelty, in it all. Patrons were attracted, almost in a primitive, guilty-pleasure-like way, to this new universe driven by "pure animal passion" (Gordon 10). Gory on-stage bloodbaths became commonplace in this new world that the Grand Guignol had to offer. In many ways, the theater was one of the first mainstream, theatrical haunt experiences, for the horror-based content was the primary selling point. Although Metenier found success in his niche and quickly grew his theater on a foundation unlike any previously seen before, he wanted the Grand Guignol to be "ever-changing and evolving, as he believed that the "novelty of the concepts would soon wear thin" (Gordon 7). He very much understood the evolutionary process horror-based theatre needed to embrace to maintain a continued level of efficiency.

<u>The Growth of Horror-based Escapism through The Grand Guignol</u>

In his examination of the Grand Guignol of Paris, Mel Gordon claimed that examinations of audience reactions to the theater's gruesome, macabre performances noted "moments of laughter, followed by panic, followed by panic again" (2-3). That laughter is a common emotional release seen in traditional forms of theatre throughout the course of history; an essential ingredient in the process of escapism and cathartic release. The panic, and its intersectionality with laughter, however, is the key observation to derive from this quote. That panic-laughter amalgamation is, in my opinion, entirely unique to escapism in horror-based theatre and is what catapulted the Grand Guignol into a realm of its own, far and away from its more-traditional theatrical counterparts. Rooted deeply beneath the surface of this outlandish extension of horror-based theatre was an outlet with which patrons could purge their darkest thoughts and emotions through a sense of communal enjoyment. The macabre in the Guignol offered patrons the ability to get lost in the horrifying art they were creating; lost in fear, lost in laughter, and lost in the unknown. If the creator of Guignolian art can capture the full attention of their audience and activate their willingness to escape in the terror, then they have successfully achieved horror-based escapism. No longer are these people getting lost in heartwarming themes and romantic narratives. Instead, in finding escape through a horrifying display of darkness and brutality, they are able to witness something they truly never thought they'd be able to see and live to tell.

"Suspense, in the guise of psychology, replaced social and cultural sophistication." –

Mel Gordon

The urban legend-like status that the Grand Guignol adopted after establishing itself as the naturalistic kingpin in Parisian scene was part of what made the establishment so successful. Parisian newspapers featured tabloids, with vivid photophraphs and gruesome posters, detailing "nightmare-inducing performances that will put your gal to the test" (Gordon 16). Along with the entry ticket to a Guignolian show came a challenge of sorts. Literary reviews and local word of mouth about the Guignolian challenge left interested patrons wondering if they could survive the horrors that awaited them. In many ways, this sense of intrigue bridged the gap between horror-based theatre and themed entertainment in its earliest ideation, as the theatre became a national attraction for thrill-seekers and theatre purists alike. In delivering the thrill-like experience that was a Grand Guignol play, non-creatives found themselves playing a role in the twisted game. Journalists described how on-site doctors at performances were "almost playing a role in the overall presentation" of the Guignolian experience, adding an additional element of fear and worry to be woven into the performances (Gordon 19). That is not to say, however, that the doctors weren't there to act in good faith and actually provide medical services to tend to patrons in need. It is common knowledge that the more squeamish of patrons, if you will, would suffer from fainting episodes and anxiety attacks at the mercy of the more intense Rosse showings. Which in turn begs the question; how far can the creator of horror-based theatre go in achieveing this heightened sense of escapism? What are the limitations with which we can test this previously mentioned gray area of playing field? Andre De Lorde, the Grand Guignol's primary playwright from 1901 to 1926, was very intrigued by putting those limitations to the test.

De Lorde in many ways was responsible for the increase in intensity in Guignolian showcases at the turn of the century (Gordon 22). It must be noted however that he wasn't nearly

just amplifying the violence in his writing. De Lorde, through his work as a dramatist over the course of his career, developed an extensive background in criminal psychology (Gordon 22). As a result, his writing was inherently grounded in psychoanalytical theory and an understanding of the evolving criminal trends in Paris. Through this knowledge, De Lorde mastered and proposed two vital principles to achieving the desired response in his plays: Creating plots where suspense builds to a gruesome climax and preparing the audience for a sense of impending doom (Gordon 22). Each of these principles align themselves strongly with abject principles and fall directly in line with Kristeva's theoretical research (Podoshen 2). Triggering a realization that the "repulsive is part of our human existence" seemed to be a common goal of De Lorde's in his crude and unusual Guignolian pieces.

The environment that Metenier, De Lorde, and their successors created through the Grand Guignol fostered a sense of thrilling danger and intrigue. Consequently, through trial and error and artistic experimentation, these creators pushed the boundaries of what is achievable in the realm of theatrical escapism. Patrons knew that upon purchasing a ticket to a Grand Guignol showcase, an imaginative variation of naturalistic theatre was to be experienced. Taboo in nature and animalistic in thematic, these grotesque showcases of the macabre promoted the evolution of whichever form of escapism was the standard before it. New territory was being chartered here with every drop of blood that hit the stage, and an interesting form of catharsis was being achieved as a result.

Catharsis in Horror-based Escapism

If there is an imaginary "Scale of Escapism" which we use to categorize the levels of catharsis provided in theatrical performances, horror-based theatre would find itself at the highest end of the scale. The heightened sense of escapism we just discussed thrives in creating an atmosphere of "what-ifs". While there is a clearly drawn out "safety line", much like in traditional theatrical performances as previously discussed, the abject nature of these performances manipulates their patrons by creating doubt. Will the rules will be followed? What if the circumstances I'm seeing on stage are actually real, and I'm doomed much like the helpless victim in the killer's torture chamber? Will I somehow curse myself for watching this and find myself on equal playing ground as the victim being bloodied on stage? Is the actress getting hacked away at before my very eyes actually being hurt? Will the practical effects go too far? It can't be. Or can it? The what-ifs, coupled with the taboo nature of the content being presented, place these particular types of performances in a realm that is inherently disparate from its dramatic and comedic counterparts.

> *"The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them."* – Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror (15-16)

The taboo nature, in fact, creates a heightened level of catharsis that tows along the line of purgation, and it is essential for the creator to capitalize on that inner human desire. There is something unbelievably fascinating about the enjoyment a patron receives from watching a performative experience of the macabre. The enjoyment is often subconscious within the consumer, driven by an inner thrill, intrigue, and morbid curiosity that is often tied to the success

of horror-based media. What is it about the taboo nature of abject content that observers of horror-based art find so uncontrollably fascinating? Grounded in reality yet soiled in horrific fantasy, macabre pieces of theatre bring humankind's ugliest urges and behaviors from out of the shadows and into to the forefront. The raw emotion of terror is one we are in a constant spar with. We know the feeling of terror is commonly accompanied by unfortunate or woeful circumstances, yet the thrill of danger excites us. It elicits a response unlike any other, in which we find it hard to refrain from watching. The sense of escapism retrieved from these experiences is woven into a larger sense of purgation. A purgation of negative thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences released through the artistic medium that stands in front of us. This purgation works in tandem with a looming sense of imminent danger. Fight or flight is triggered. Even from the safety of our cushioned seats, we feel as if we can lose this sense of safety at any moment due to the nature of the content that is being presented. Although covered in a sea of blanket, the terrified consumer of a horror film can't help but peek through the open crevice of their threaded fort. They then proceed to check all the darkest corners of their own home for monsters or unwelcomed intruders. It pushes the viewer to lose logic and fully delve into all of the elements of horror-based escapism. In a contemporary context, however, this sense of sadistic thrill found through horror-based escapism may seem elementary and even watered down considering the new levels of bizarre escapism in which the art form is being pushed.

<div align="center">How these Elements Fare in a Contemporary Setting</div>

Contemporary consumers of horror-based media have in many ways become desensitized to many of the genre's most proven and effective artistic methods. This is including,

but not limited to, showcases of gore and taboo content that match the extremities of a Rosse play. This is largely in fact due to the overwhelming popularity of the horror film in a modern society. Catching an R-rated horror film at the cinema has become ritualistic in a way for both American audiences and movie-goers around the world. The genre has transcended past its niche group of enthusiasts and well into the mainstream with the continued success of horror cinema. Filmmakers and producers alike have undoubtedly drawn inspiration from the work that was being put in by the creatives at the Grand Guignol over 100 years ago. In its earliest stages of horror cinema's development, the Universal Classic Horror films, often regarded as the godfathers of the genre, directly cited the Grand Guignol as a source of inspiration with which to base their work off of. Ironically enough, as the Grand Guignol's popularity began to fade and cinema was on the up-swing, the two became bitter rivals, with the horror film eventually taking the mantle as the dominant outlet of horror-based art (Gordon 30). Looping back to a contemporary context, the horror film has evolved and branched out in ways many thought would never be imaginable. Practical effects and makeup work are continually evolving, upping the ante with what gory masterpieces can be achieved on screen. It has become commonplace for heavy elements of gore to seep their way into your average horror film. Which begs the question, how would the Grand Guignol fare in a contemporary context considering the oversaturation of abject and taboo materials in horror cinema? The answer, in my eyes, is simple: it would thrive. While the market for controversial horror media may be oversaturated, it is continually, and increasing, effective and popular despite that fact. Popularity has not waned as a result of the oversaturation but has grown exponentially. The Theater of Fear and Horror would find success much similar to immersive forms of horror-based theatre such as *Sleep No More* in New York

City. This theatre troupe has essentially formed an extension of what the Guignol once was, proving that the dated effects and tactics of the Rosse play still prove to be effective for the horror-based creator. Therefore, I firmly believe that we as horror-based creators should continue to draw inspiration from the elements of escapism with which the Grand Guignol experimented with. When combined with the contemporary technologies and techniques at our disposal, the possibilities are endless in achieving a powerful sense of horror-based escapism in today's world despite the increased popularity of horror media.

CHAPTER THREE: PROGRESSION IN IMMERSION – THE EVOLUTION OF IMMERSIVE REALITIES IN HORROR-BASED THEATRE

Progression in Immersion

The second of my proposed three elements of horror-based theatre is perhaps the most ambiguous when examined through a broader lens. A person outside of the world of theatre may wonder why all forms of theatre and media aren't inherently immersive as is. Well-crafted lighting and scenic design, from a general stance, can and will immerse people into the world of any particular play. However, immersive theatre, in the different variations in which it can exist, seeks to engulf the audience into the world of the piece by fully engaging the senses and inviting them into the presented narrative through innovate design and technology. Through a variation of technological advances and techniques, immersive theatre can stack an additional layer of creativity and emotional engagement to the overall experience of a play, enveloping the patron in the environments that are being presented through a suspension of disbelief. What makes immersion so potent in achieving its desired results is its ability to adapt to whatever substance a particular piece, genre, or show structure a performance calls for. In his thesis dissertation, titled **"*Designing an Immersive World: Exploring Theme Parks through Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away"***, Skinner states that "Immersive design, like entertainment, is constantly transforming to the needs of its visitors" (4). This fluidity and freedom in design as a result of the technology and sensory methods being used is one of the factors that makes immersion such a powerful tool for the horror-based creator specifically. No one horror-based production or art exhibit is the same, for various crevices of the abject can be tapped into. Similarly, no one audience is going to

respond to a display of immersive design the same either. Different narratives, audiences, and theatrical logistics will call for varied elements of immersive design. As a result, a sense of fluidity in the methods and tactics that can be used is imperative for the creator of immersive, horror-based theatre to possess. How this adaptability looks in the realm of themed entertainment will be further discussed in the later chapters of my project. As a preface to that, I will dive into the intricate differences between escapism and immersion in the following section.

<div align="center">Escapism vs Immersion</div>

While horror-based escapism activates an abject sense of animalistic purgation when executed correctly, immersion invites the patron to take a closer look at the materials presented and lose themselves in them. The goal of the immersive designer is to make their audience lose sight of reality through innovation and technique; forget they're sitting in the house of a theatre facility and trick the brain into thinking it's taking part in a fabricated reality. The immersive experience in comparison to the solely escapist is clear, as the top priority of the immersive is to make its audience suspend its disbelief and lose sense of reality. Escapism, as previously discussed, focuses more on the dissection of the psyche and extraction of the abject. However, in a way, immersion can be viewed as an extension of escapism, taking the tangible factors that work best in that realm and building upon them to elevate the emotional investment in the experience. Metenier and Maurey, through their work with the Grand Guignol, understood that a heightened version of what was already being presented through their world of the macabre would one day come about. They recognized the evolutionary process in which horror-based theatre and live entertainment had to consistently take a part in, and this was evidenced by their

continual efforts to train their performers in sleight of hand trickery and practical effects to further engage the senses of the audience (Gordon 26). Had the inception of the Grand Guignol happened several decades later in unison with the birth of themed entertainment, I think Metenier and Maurey would have found Walt Disney to be an unlikely collaborator and source of inspiration, as many of the thematic principles and immersive techniques from his world could have transitioned seamlessly into their forms of horror-based escapist theatre.

Escapism in Themed Entertainment

Through the expansion of the themed entertainment world has also come the development and growth of immersive theatre. This isn't to say that theatrical immersion wasn't fully achievable prior to advancements in 3D projection and sensory effects, however. Delving deeply into dramatic history will show you that often times throughout the course of its existence, theatre has found unconventional ways to achieve illusory effects through whichever practical means the creators could conjure. However, part of what makes immersive theater in a contemporary setting unparalleled in terms of achieving an illusory experience, is the ability for certain technological effects to bridge the gaps between reality and the surreal in more sufficient and believable ways, even if just for a quick moment. In 1955, Walt Disney opened Disneyland and birthed a new wave of immersive entertainment through his groundbreaking, collaborative efforts with engineers and technicians in creating the first standard theme park experience (Taylor, "Opening Day at Disneyland"). These thematic, entertainment offerings would go on to exponentially expand the capabilities of live entertainment as years went on. Computerized technology and creative engineering grew alongside it, and eventually a heightened form of

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immersive themed entertainment was born. In their article, titled *Melting the Boundaries Between Fantasy and Reality,* Trowbridge and Stapleton claim that "the theme park is an extreme example of immersive entertainment, wherein experiential entertainment designers and scenario authors project the audience into an experienced reality, whether actual or imagined" (1). The key bit of information to extract from this quite lies in the term "experienced reality". The goal of the themed entertainment creator is to leave his audience with a euphoric feeling that they just physically entered the thematic world that was presented to them. The memory engrained in their minds is relative to a real-life one, downloaded and stored as tangible experience where fiction and reality forge into one.

> *"The art and science of immersive entertainment illusions engage all the senses in every direction and dimension" – Trowbridge & Stapleton*

Through these multi-directional means, a dark ride experience at Disney World, for example, can achieve an entirely immersive experience that will engage all of the senses, in a 360-degree environment, for the entirety of a 4-5-minute experience. The patron, through these means, pushes past the realm of escapism and enters a sphere with brand new possibilities. The most innovative offering of the array of themed entertainment tools, however, is the ability for these all-encompassing experiences to deliver their product to mass amounts of people in shortened time windows. Without the worry of the experience being compromised, hundreds and thousands of guests can experience the same immersive experience with equally effective delivery in a single day. Contemporary design technologies, such as digital projection, real-time rendering, and aromatic effects, can ensure that a large number of subjects can experience these methods of immersive designs in an efficient manner throughout an entire day of operation.

Skinner states further along in his essay that these methods "allow greater collective adaptability and fidelity in matching projected elements with their real-world physical counterparts" (4). The world of traditional theatre, while adapting and evolving in its own right, has in fact taken many of the tricks and trades from immersive themed entertainment in enhancing, and expanding, the capabiltities of their own art form.

ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter at Walt Disney World

In the unified space in which traditional theatre and immersive entertainment can coexist lies one of the first theme park attractions to successfully present an amalgamated experience of the two realms: *ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter* at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Opened in the latter half of 1994, this immersive show, created by seasoned show writers and imagineers in Disney Creative, aimed to swiftly and convincingly set the standard for all-encompassing immersive theatre performances. Housed in a circular theatre space with a seating arrangement similar to what you'd see in your local playhouse, this show relied heavily on immersive design and sensory technologies in telling its narrative. What catapulted the show into vilified territory amongst the average Disney World patron, however, was its dabbling into horror-based themes and abject materials that were certainly not suited for children and younger audiences. According to early accounts from Michael Eisner, head of the Walt Disney Company at the time of the show's conception, his early initiative in developing a show of this magnitude was to base it off of Ridley Scott's *Alien* film franchise (Libbery, "Walt Disney World's Scariest Attraction"). Thinking bigger picture, Eisner wanted his team of imagineers to create an experience that could cater to a more mature audience, something your average Disney attraction

failed to do. It's common knowledge that Ridley Scott's franchise broke the mold for the sci-fi

horror sub-genre and garnered an insane amount of revenue and popularity over the course of its

three films. With Universal Orlando Resort's *Fright Nights* event gaining steam within the past

three years, tapping into the wallets of the same demographic Eisner aimed to target, Disney did

what it needed to ensure that an experience of this magnitude would ultimately get the green

light. However, after going through a number of contrasting drafts that would ultimately change

the format of the concept from theatrical show experience to vehicular dark ride, Disney

executives decided to scrap the connection to the *Alien* franchise and instead create an original

rendition, titled *ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter,* that would circle back to Eisner's very

first conceptual pitch (Libbery, "Walt Disney World's Scariest Attraction").

The narrative for the newly formed attraction found inspiration in Ridley Scott's classic,

but also took creative liberties in order to more efficiently cater to the effects they were aiming to

pull off (Libbery). Structurally, the venue for the experience would mimic that of a traditional

theatre space, but also provide leeway in its layout for experiential effects to take place. At the

center of the space was a large, cylinder tube shrouded in fog in order to hide the monstrous alien

that lived inside of it. From the start of the pre-show, a set of characters guide you through the

story and begin the immersion process, triggering light, sound, and vibration effects to

accompany the looming threat of the terrifying antagonist. Considering the space was

specifically designed to execute these effects to their fullest extent, this experience was very

much unlike any before it. After the basic story plots are presented to the patrons and they have

an initial sense for what sensory effects are to come, the house lights shut down, shrouding the

audience in darkness. Here is where the immersion process really begins to take flight. The

startling sound of glass shatter drowns the theater in a sudden frenzy. Crew members panic and warn the audience not to do the same, when in reality the anxiety is reaching its peak. The creature can be heard unlatching from its experimental tubing and making its way into the audience space. Vibration effects begin to activate on each individual seat to accompany the hauntingly loud footsteps of the alien creature coming towards the guests. With the house still shrouded in complete darkness, the trust of the patron has been shattered, and the abject begins to formulate. As the footsteps draw closer, they ultimately come to a halt, as do the seat vibrations. The patron regains a glimmer of trust amidst the suspense, when suddenly, a warm air-effect triggers from the back of their headrest, simulating the breath of the creature seeping onto their shoulders. Sound and scent effects work in unison with the air blast to imply that the creature is not only within close proximity but making its way in and out of aisles and around the space. The combination of sensory effects and clever lighting accomplishes a variation of immersive theater unlike any seen in the world of themed entertainment before it. Audiences lose a sense of control when the house lights shut down and find themselves at the mercy of the creator. They are completely immersed in the world of the narrative as the creature enters invades their space. The ride very much leaned into the realm of horror more so than science fiction, which resulted in mixed reviews when considering that the large majority of attendants at Disney World are families.

The Orlando Sentinel reported that the earliest pool of soft-open test riders were horrified by the experience, some even sprinting to the exit once the experience was over (Debczak, "Alien Encounter: The Life and Death of Walt Disney World's Scariest Ride Ever").

This only escalated once the ride officially opened to the public on June 20th, 1995. Looping back to my previous point about the power of adaptability in immersion, Eisner guided imagineers in tightening up certain moments to enhance the overall experience and include additional effects to corroborate the already existing ones, such as strobe lights and water effects (Debczak, "Alien Encounter: The Life and Death of Walt Disney World's Scariest Ride Ever"). When looking at the specific demographic Disney was targeting with this attraction, *ExtraTERRORestrial* was a massive success throughout its tenure. As a whole, it was divisive, however, garnering a continual flow of negative reviews from younger and more family-oriented demographics. In 2003, Disney executives made the call to refurbish and retheme the attraction around the popular Disney film *Lilo and Stitch* in order to bridge that gap in demographics. Keeping many of the immersive elements that made its original rendition the powerhouse that it was, Disney formulated a plot to make it an experience kids were less likely to find pure terror in. I believe that in each of its disparate renditions, this experience worked as a huge pioneer in immersive theatre despite its lack of recognition in doing so. Through crafty design and effect execution, *ExtraTERRORestrial* demonstrated the power and capabilities of an immersive extension to a traditionally structured play/show.

<u>Bridging the Gap Between Immersive Realities and Traditional Theatre</u>

ExtraTERRORestrial ushered in a new age of theatrical performances within an immersive, themed-entertainment realm. Other shows of similar structure and theme followed suit after it, changing the artistic approach of theatre-based shows within the theme park sphere for years to come. However, it is important to note that the show, and the immersive

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technologies which it showcased, found its way to carry influence over to the world of traditionally staged theatre. To the surprise of many and the confirmation of others, the worlds of themed entertainment and theatre were able to successfully share individual elements with each other in order to cross-promote the newly formed advances in the art. Immersive Theatre, in a traditionally staged context, emerged as an increasingly popular extension of the avant-garde. Many of the immersive effects, techniques, and design elements made popular through the theme park industry could be used in the world of theatre to create a married rendition of the two disparate worlds. Projection mapping, for example, became a staple in many experimental forms of theatre throughout the world. The possibilities that can be accomplished through projection mapping in scenic design can often far surpass what a traditional set design can. It fosters an environment for more abstract ways of storytelling on the stage and circles back to one of immersive theatre's key elements: adaptability. It is my belief, however, that the creator of horror-based theatre can more efficiently extract, and execute, on the elements of immersion found in themed entertainment in creating horror-based theatrical performances. The strongest example of this comes in the form of the cult-classic musical adaptation of Sam Raimi's film *The Evil Dead*. *Evil Dead the Musical,* in my opinion, is the perfect blend of traditional theatre and immersive themed entertainment, without fully traveling into the world of participation.

<u>Evil Dead the Musical</u>

Evil Dead the Musical is a stage play adaptation of Sam Raimi's classic *Evil Dead* horror film trilogy. The first film of the series, simply titled *The Evil Dead*, was a low budget horror film released in 1981 and directed by Sam Raimi. The film generated much controversy at the

time for its over-the-top antics and in-your-face elements of gore. Raimi intended to shake up the horror genre and present a style of filmmaking unlike anyone had ever seen. In doing so, he created a film that was initially very polarizing within the filmmaking community. The film still proved successful, however, and was catapulted into more positive territory upon receiving a co-sign from the horror master himself Stephen King.

In 1986, Sam Raimi's pitch for a sequel of his first installment was given the greenlight, this time with a much larger budget. *Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn* was released in 1987 to much better reviews and public reception, quickly turning the film into the staple of the franchise (Geeks Staff, "History of the 'Evil Dead' Franchise"). The sequel re-created many of the moments that made the first film so great, while also adding new elements to the story to correct some of its predecessor's flaws. It is undoubtedly a cult classic littered in some of the most iconic moments in the history of horror cinema. The third film of the franchise, *Army of Darkness*, was released in 1992 and was much more rooted in comedy than its previous installments. While less successful than Dead by Dawn, it was this film that solidified the chainsaw-wielding Ashley J Williams as a bona fide icon in horror.

Evil Dead: The Musical is an immersive, Canadian-rock musical adapted from all three films in Sam Raimi's iconic trilogy. Created in 2003 by the team of George Reinblatt, Christopher Bond, Frank Cipolla and Melissa Morris, *Evil Dead: The Musical* has been produced over 200 times in professional and amateur theatres all over the world (EvilDeadtheMusical.com). The wildly hilarious book and lyrics, written by George Reinblatt, pay homage to the classic film trilogy while also taking the characters and their story arcs in

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exciting new directions. The piece was originally adapted and conceptualized by its creative team for a musical theatre class at Queen University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. As part of the project, they were given the opportunity to cast and perform the piece at a local comedy club in Kingston. Their production garnered much interest in the local theatre scene, and generated buzz within the *Evil Dead* fandom around the world given its inclusion of immersive elements. Part of what made the film series so popular was Raimi's relentless gall in presenting over-the-top gore and practical effects. The musical aimed to do the same, except through the medium of theatre and immersive entertainment. Word eventually got around to *Evil Dead* creators Sam Raimi and Bruce Campbell, who eventually gave the creative team their blessings to mount a full-fledged production of the show. In August of 2003, the show made its official debut at the Tranzac club in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and quickly began to develop a cult like following through its incredibly innovative structure and presentation (EvilDeadtheMusical.com). These creators made the most of the finances and resources they had and used their strong understanding of what makes for successful horror-based theatre in accomplishing an innovative immersive experience.

In July of 2004, the show expanded its reach by opening in Montreal as a featured musical at the "Just for Laughs Comedy Festival". Its popularity would continue to rise over the next couple of years as performances in Toronto and Montreal were continually produced. In November of 2006, the musical made its Off-Broadway debut in New York City at the New World Stages. This rendition of the musical gave the director and designers a stronger chance at enhancing the sensory effects that the script called for. Thus, the "splatter zone", a section of the house in which audience members could be dowsed in fake blood, was ultimately born.

Teetering on the line of participation, this riotous rendition of the musical delved deeply into immersive territory while still ensuring safety for the attending patrons.

In 2013, Sirc Michaels Productions opened the show in Las Vegas at the V Theater and evolved the piece into an enhanced, immersive performance titled "The Ultimate 4-D Experience". The production would go on to play for 5 consecutive years, and it was here that the interactive elements now associated with the piece were first introduced on a large scale. This production would allow audience interaction through special effects and design techniques, adding a larger, 100 seat "splatter zone" where a larger number of patrons could be dowsed in fake blood for longer periods of time. Additionally, certain sections of the house could be handed severed limbs and sawed-off organs at any point of the show. There was an improvisational element at play, where the performers could immerse guests in new and exciting ways on any given night. In a lot of ways, this rendition of *Evil Dead the Musical* largely resembles the types of experiences seen at the Grand Guignol. Think of it as enhanced version of the Rosse play, if you will, where guests can walk past the boundaries of purgation and escapism and travel into the world of immersion with each spray of fake blood.

Wolfbane Productions out of Virginia would shortly after follow suit, mounting a fully realized production with its own interactive elements, Broadway actors, and top-notch special effects (EvilDeadtheMusical.com). The production played its final show on August 5, 2017 after five successful runs. The standard had been set for *Evil Dead the Musical*, however, as contemporary renditions would go on to continually include the explosive and riotous elements of immersive theatricality. I believe that, outside of the realm of the haunt industry, these types

of theatrical productions demonstrate the strongest capabilities of horror-based theatre. The gap between the immersive and the abject is bridged through productions such as these. In fact, the immersive elements of these types of shows strengthen the abject materials within them. The more inclusive the experience, the more prominent the desired reaction. Horror, in turn, relies quite heavily on immersive elements in ensuring the strongest reaction is retrieved.

CHAPTER FOUR: INTO THE FOG – PARTICIPATION AND THE FUTURE OF HORROR-BASED THEATRE IN THE HAUNT INDUSTRY

Haunts as Theatrical Experiences

Despite an increase in literature over the last decade championing haunted attractions, and the haunt industry as a whole, as not only true forms of theatre but the most inventive in a contemporary world, the sub-genre is still so frequently looked down upon and categorized as otherwise amongst the general public. I believe the fault in that misconception lies more in blissful ignorance than malicious discrimination, however. Many people who aren't familiar with the artistic prowess and the technicalities of haunted attractions are simply unaware of the intricacies in their experiences; The theatrical foundation which these interactive, themed experiences are grounded in. Haunted house experiences, for example, exist and function as living, breathing, immersive, theatrical performances. Much like a traditionally staged production, a group of collaborators come together and design a performative experience for willing patrons to envelop themselves in. The disciplines of writing, directing, lighting design, audio design, scenic design, and stage management work cohesively to create a unified theatrical experience that engages, and attacks, the senses. The driving force of this theatrical experience, however, is the added element of *participation*. The final collaborator in the overall experience are the guests themselves. The inclusion of guests in the narrative and thematic structure of these performances are what differentiate them from any other form of immersive experience, consequently pushing them away from the realm of traditional theatre as well. It is imperative however that we understand and recognize the traditionally theatrical nature of these experiences despite the continued advancements in immersive, themed-entertainment technologies. It is also

crucial for the creator of horror-based theatre to understand how the participative element of these experiences holds the key to the advancement of the genre. Before we delve into participation as a core element of both the haunt industry and contemporary horror-based theatre as a whole, however, I would like to first discuss the haunt industry's inherent ties to the world of themed entertainment.

<div align="center">

Why Haunts are Overlooked
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Aside from the reasons previously discussed, I think the misunderstanding of the theatrical nature of haunted attractions can be attributed to the pre-conceived stigma that is attached to theme park experiences. The themed entertainment world, when examined through an artistic lens, fluctuates between vastly different creative realms due to the large umbrella with which its experiences exist under. While some experiences, such as stage shows and improv performances (ala *Fear Factor Live* and *Beat Builders* at Universal Orlando Resort) may seem more theatrical in nature and structure, dark rides and vehicular themed-experiences (such as *The Little Mermaid* at Walt Disney World), more accurately fall under the umbrella of engineering and technical show control. This wide range that we use to categorize themed experiences subsequently creates a cloud of confusion when determining where haunted attractions fall on the scale. As opposed to being looked at and categorized as the immersive renditions of horror-based theatre that they are, they are often pigeon-holed into just another "theme park attraction"; a gimmicky, carnival-like road-side attraction. This couldn't be any farther from the truth. The creators of these living, breathing, inclusive forms of theatre very often come from a traditional theatre background. It is required, and expected, for the creator of haunted experiences to bring

these previous experiences into their new work, for the foundations of these experiences lie in the world of traditional theatre. Often times, what draws creators from the world of theatre into the haunt industry is the continued innovation and growth towards enhancing immersive theatre. While many of these individuals do have a strong passion for the horror-genre as a whole, I think their drive is more heavily fueled by the high standard haunted experiences live by. I suggest, however, that haunts exist in a theatre-based realm of their own within this scope of themed entertainment experiences with a theatrical foundation. They are, in every facet of their existence, unlike any other experience you will come across in the theme park industry. In fact, the large majority of haunted attractions in the world exist outside of the theme park world. The juggernauts of the haunt industry (Universal Orlando's *Halloween Horror Nights* and Busch Garden's *Howloscream)* are without question the most notable and well-known, thus inherently causing haunts to be associated with large corporate theme parks. But the reality is that your average haunt across the world exists outside the pearly gates of a multi-million-dollar company, functioning independently through varied crowd-funding outlets and often existing solely within the confines of Halloween season. The commonality of these experiences, however, is the element of participation. Rather than looking at participation as an entirely different principle than immersion, we should perceive it as an additional layer to the immersive experience.

It is my firm belief that of the three elements of horror I argue are essential for the horror-based creator to understand and use in pushing the genre forward, participation is the most imperative in regard to the genre's future. This can be evidenced by the tremendous growth in popularity of the haunt industry over the last three decades. The haunt industry, with its theme park juggernauts leading the charge, has broken through the niche barriers placed around horror-

based theatre. Due to the tourist-attraction element attached to these experiences, haunts have crossed over into mainstream territory, drawing larger number of crowds than ever before. The problem for the creator, however, lies in the expectation that has developed as a result of this. Your average guest, who is not a frequent visitor of the world of horror-based nor immersive theatre, experiences a haunt's innovation in immersive design for the very first time and a new standard in their mind has now been set. As a result, more traditionally staged renditions of theatre may now seem like child's play to them. I do not suggest, however, that the horror-based creator should only invest their time in the haunt industry moving forward. They should, however, promote it as the genre's most innovative front-runner, taking elements and principles from it and applying them into other extensions of horror-based theatre.

While haunts as a whole, no matter the size or scale of the experience, encompass the three essential elements in varied ways as previously mentioned, I will focus on Halloween Horror Nights specifically for the remainder of this chapter as the powerhouse event currently sets the bar for these types of performances.

Participation in Halloween Horror Nights

Over the course of the last three decades, Universal Orlando's *Halloween Horror Nights*, hereby referred to as "HHN", has acted as the international kingpin of the haunt industry. The event, starting from humble beginnings back in 1991, has grown from being a small-scaled, two-weekend event into a two-month celebration of the best the haunt world has to offer, earning itself a multitude of awards throughout the course of its expanding tenure (HalloweenHorrorNights.com). While the haunt industry itself, although significantly smaller in

scale, existed and thrived many years prior to the conception of HHN, it was Universal that

catapulted it to brand new heights through the resources provided in the realm of themed

entertainment. The event, in its most contemporary format, presents a varied slate of horror-

based content, ranging from performative street experiences, referred to as "scarezones", to their

main-stage, "haunted house" walk-through experiences. Each of these experiences, though

varied in style, tone, format, and thematic structure, find functionality through the consistent

coexistence of my aforementioned essential elements of horror-based theatre. Willing patrons

find themselves immersed in the environments being presented from the moment they enter the

park gates and wade through the thick layers of fog. Escapism, in the many different forms it

may take, can be found in nearly every offering the event presents its patrons on a nightly basis.

The feeling of "imminent danger" is what this type of event feeds off of.

Participation, however, is the lifeblood of *Halloween Horror Nights* and everything the

event represents. Haunted house experiences, while living, breathing, theatrical structures that

stand on their own in achieving the first two elements of horror-based theatre, thrive primarily

off performer-guest interactions. Having guests physically enter the environments, play a role in

the overarching story, and share a sense of morbid intimacy with the characters of the narrative

helps bring the experience full circle. Without the participant there is merely a static canvas, or

stage if you will, waiting for its final participant to arrive. Yes, the elicitation of fear is the

surface-level indicator that makes these experiences so unique in their presentation and

execution. However, when examining the varied layers that go into these experiences, you will

quickly realize that there is an amalgamation of theatrical practices in play, both traditional and

avant-garde in their format. While coexisting in the same realm as immersive stage shows rooted

in cathartic escapism, haunted attractions differentiate themselves within the sub-genre of horror-based theatre through this core element of participation. These experiences are living, breathing beasts, waiting ever so patiently for the participant to fully envelop themselves in the world being presented, both physically and emotionally.

In his thesis dissertation, titled "Halloween Horror Nights And/Or Visceral Theatre", Patrick Braillard discussed in great detail the visceral nature of the haunt industry and *Halloween Horror Nights* specifically. He too understands the importance of participation in championing the haunt industry as the strongest form of horror-based theatre in a contemporary context. He suggests, through his research, that an element of "illusory manipulation" exists in this realm in which creators of visceral theatre seek to "elicit a connection with the audience and create the full experience *with* them as opposed to for them" (Braillard 44). The premise of illusory manipulation circles back seamlessly to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject and abject media.

<div align="center">The Haunt Industry's Execution of Abject Art</div>

Having discussed what makes for an effective execution of abject art in the first chapter of this project, one can argue that the group of artists in the haunt industry present the most intriguing, and effective, application of this theory in a theatrical format. Before we dive into this discussion, however, it is important that we define several key terms that will be discussed in relation to the performative elements of this world:

> **Scareactor** (noun) – performers in immersive, haunted themed attractions
> **Boo-hole** (noun) – performance space for a scareactor in a haunted house
> **Trigger** (noun) – a foot pedal utilized by the performer of a haunted attraction to perform their scare, setting off lighting and audio effects to accompany their movements
> **G.A.T.** (noun) – guest activated trigger, to be used by the guest of a haunted attraction

Haunted experiences, unlike many of their traditional theatre counterparts, require an all-encompassing attack of the senses in order to achieve its intended capabilities. While some forms of immersive theatre will envelop their participants in particular ways while leaving other elements untapped, haunted attractions will invade the space of the guest in every way logistically possible. As a result, a haunted experience, while a fraction of the length of a traditional staged piece, can accomplish all of the elements of horror-based theatre in a reduced amount of time. I credit this feat to the innovation in the structural design of these experiences. While many creators of haunted attractions may not have a rich understanding of abject theory in relation to Kristeva's work, they do have a thorough understanding of what principles make horror media effective in the world of entertainment. In having that understanding, abject theory can consequently come into play without the creator even fully realizing it.

The extraction of fear in a haunted experience is accomplished upon a person's first interaction with the scareactors that call these performance spaces home. Each performer's boo-hole is structurally designed to guide them in achieving the biggest scare possible with every menacing hit of their trigger. While the costuming, makeup, and physical placement of these performers and their scare moments can be considered abject in their own right, there are also abject materials within the vicinity of a scareactor's performance space that can serve as tools in achieving the desired response. For example, at Universal Orlando Resort's Halloween Horror Nights 25 event, a haunted house titled *Body Collector's: Recollections* had a scare moment in which the scareactor performed a spine-ripping sequence with a bloodied dummy laying a top a table. This effect presented a physical showcase of the abject in motion, as guests witnessed a gory, visual display of a literal "separation of self". One of the most potent elements in executing

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horror-based art according to Kristeva is "triggering a realization that human anatomy can exist

outside of ourselves as a result of a heinous act" (8). This scare, to no one's surprise, garnered

some of the strongest reactions in the entire event, enhancing the level of disgust, fear, and panic

in the psyche of the guests. In a similar vein, many of the other haunted houses throughout the

course of the event's history would present faux animal corpses within the context of any

particular narrative. In any given scare moment where these pieces were within the vicinity of

the scareactor, the corpse would face a similar fate, losing innards and body parts as part of a

performance that was being presented. Blood and human organs are two of the more prominent,

and effective, elements of visual gore with which haunted attractions can present tangible abject

materials.

Another abject opportunity, deeply rooted in the element of participation, that is

presented within the context of a haunted attraction is the guest activated trigger, also known as a

GAT. These triggers are stationed solely for the usage of the guest walking through the

experience, giving them the unique opportunity to execute a scare moment of their own. A

haunted house based on the cult-classic film *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* at the 2019 event,

for example, gave guests the opportunity to participate in the experience by pushing GATs that

would consequently spray the person behind them with a water effect. Scenic designers and

show directors at HHN, and the haunt industry as a whole, continue to find innovative ways to

immerse, and include, guests in the execution of their abject elements, resulting in a consistently

successful execution of the art they present.

Considering that haunted experiences consist of 360-degree environments with incredible

detail in design, there are infinitely more options in presenting Kristeva's principles of abjection

as opposed to a traditional theatre piece. Hence is the reason I believe immersion and participation are such pivotal elements in the successful execution of horror-based theatre through a theoretical lens. To better ensure that the majority of patrons feel a sense of existential crisis, repulsion to a separation of self, and an uneasiness to primitive and animalistic feelings, the creator of the haunted attraction invites them to physically enter the world they are presenting, making these abject materials immediately tangible and consequently more effective.

CHAPTER FIVE: PUTTING THE HORROR INTO PRACTICE – AN EXAMINATION OF THE PRACTICALITY OF THE ABJECT

<u>Finding Practicality through my Work in the Haunt Industry</u>

Having performed at HHN the two years prior to joining the Show Direction team in 2019, I experienced firsthand just how imperative this performer-guest interactivity was in successfully achieving the desired response, especially in the context of a haunted house experience. Without the participant walking through the experience and interacting with the environments and the characters, the haunted house, and the performers inside of it, patiently wait for the experience to truly begin. Yes, the atmospheric elements are live and active before the participant enters, contributing to the execution of the overall theatricality of the performance. However, even those elements require the sensory reaction of the participant to find their effectiveness and work as tools for the scareactors to complete their scare. Upon entry of the first guest in the haunted house, the scareactor can commence their performance and find their flow of "scare-reaction-setup-repeat" in achieving consistency. Like a well-oiled machine, the participant acts as the final cog in the wheel to keep the functionality of a haunted experience rolling at a steady pace. Having this foundational understanding heading into my role as a Performance Coordinator for the 2019 HHN event was not only pivotal to finding success in the job itself, but in determining how I could tie the practical exploration of this project into the work of a haunted experience.

When given the offer to work as a Performance Coordinator for the event's Show Direction team in 2019, I saw this as an incredible opportunity not only to put into practice what I've learned in my years working the event as a performer, but to also inject theory into my

general artistic approach when directing performers at the event. To what extent I would be able to do so while adhering to the guidelines of my position was undoubtedly going to be a challenge. At the very least, I planned to have my theoretical approach act as a guiding force in my artistic perspective to explore what effects, however minute, it could have on both my performance and the performance of my actors as well. To my pleasant surprise, I found tangible moments of success throughout the event run in threading this research into the fabric of my artistic approach. As a creator and contributor of horror-based theatre, I found having an understanding of abject theory and the psychoanalytical impacts of the macabre incredibly helpful in finding prolonged success.

<div align="center">The Three Elements at Play</div>

Through my role, I was tasked to work as an extension of the Show Direction team that creates and executes the content put forth at any given HHN event. The Show Directors themselves are the creators of the narrative experiences that are being presented in the haunted houses and scarezones, while the Assistant Show Directors and Performance Coordinators assist them in implementing their creative direction throughout the two-month run time of the event. Having already worked the event two years prior to this as a performer and having attended as a guest many years before that, I was very in-tune with the theatrical nature of both haunted house and scarezone experiences at the event. Each realm presents its own set of performative challenges and disparities. While street experiences very much channel the three essential elements or horror-based theatre in their execution and could benefit from the application of an abject lens, they tend to gravitate more towards the realm of improvisational theatre and

heightened escapism, as they can't entirely enforce the participation of a guest. As an example, there are a multitude of different paths a guest can take when making the rounds through the park during an operational night of HHN. Should they feel uncomfortable, uninterested, or simply unwilling to participate in a particular scarezone, they can quickly bolt through it, or opt to walk on the sidewalk away from the controlled chaos of the performative space. With haunted houses, the experience presented to the guests is vastly different. More participatory in nature, our haunted houses relentlessly transfer entering patrons into the world of the narrative, activating a sense of immediate danger as the guest becomes enveloped in the scenic and detailed environments. There is a single path that they must follow in order to complete the experience, unlike scarezones which provide the participant with varying options in which to explore. Before the willing patron of a house can even adjust their eyes to the darkness of the void in which they've entered, they've already been turned into a participant of the experience; the last essential component of the haunt performance. Considering escapism, immersion, and participation are all very much in play within the context of a haunted house experience, I found it would be most efficient to center the practical examination of my work around my experiences I had managing the 2019 houses I was involved with.

<div align="center">Methodology</div>

The three primary questions I sought to find answers to in my experience working HHN were the following:

1. How does an abject lens affect the artistic nature of a directorial position in the haunt industry?

2. Does a more intricate understanding of psychoanalytical theory help the horror-based director in more efficiently guiding their actors in retrieving the desired response?

3. How does theory work in tandem with the three elements of horror-based theatre in the overall execution of a haunted house experience?

The biggest thing to note in retrieving these answers is the length of the event run itself. From opening day to closing night, the 2019 event consisted of 42 total nights. The event hours on each of these nights varied as we inched closer to Halloween but averaged at about 7 hours per night. Consequently, as an added layer to my research, I had to consider how each of these three questions, and their subsequent answers, changed throughout the entirety of the performance window. Did some ring true during the first few weekends of the event run? Did others not become abundantly clear until the event ran its course? All interesting things to consider when formulating my research and practical approach.

<u>Finding the Abject in a Haunted Experience</u>

On its surface, haunts in general seem to ooze abject elements of Kristeva's work through their every pore. The act of the scare itself is perhaps the most abject quality of a haunted attraction. If the performer and the patron are sharing a communal experience within the confines of the haunted house, almost fostering a false sense of trust between subject and the opposed, then the performer is consequently tapping into abject energy when popping out of their crevice, setting off their trigger, and performing the blocking of their scare. It's a betrayal in the manner in which its executed; unexpected, sneaky, seemingly from-out-of-nowhere. That sense of control that the performer is capitalizing upon, and the manner in which they betray the false

sense of security which the patron is holding onto, is abject in its unpredictability and unnatural qualities. Thus, the more strongly that trust is shattered, the more unexpected the jump scare is, and the heavier the proceeding reaction is from the patron, the more abject the entire performative moment is. Having a strong understanding of this perspective from Kristeva's work guided me in giving one of the direction notes I found to be most effective throughout the course of the run. This particular note that I would often give my performers is to find, and amplify, the intensity in the initial moment of your scare. That initiation of the scare will either heighten the performer-patron experience in order to achieve the desired response or will leave the interaction feeling a relatively flat. However, how far the performer can go with this ultimately depends on what the nature of their scare consists of, what character is being portrayed (antagonistic monster or helpless victim), and the location of their boo-hole. Scare moments that play out a specific moment from a film, for example, may call for a less intense entrance and subsequent performance moment so that the guest can have time to process, and observe, the character from the intellectual property and the iconic lines they are spewing through their trigger. In a similar vein, a performer playing the role of a creature, a stalking slasher in a hockey mask, or a blood-thirsty vampire, will undoubtedly find more intensity in their entrance due to the hostile nature of their role. The costume and audio work that accompany those monsters also align themselves more heavily with the abject through gore and unpleasant sensory triggers, thus giving them an added layer to stack on top of their already intense moment. Additionally, scare crevices angled from a higher position above guest path will almost always call for a more aggressive entry from the performer, thus resulting in a larger and more effective initial scare moment. Consequently, I found that certain roles called for a stronger "shattering of the trust", if you will, while others had

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to find their connection to abject material through other means. It very much varied from character to character and moment to moment.

Of the tangible moments in which the abject could be accessed from a directorial and performative standpoint, however, I found the element of betrayal to be most effective. Often times, the more unexpected the scare, regardless of entrance intensity, the more effective the result from the guest. Having performers collaborate with their scene partners in achieving a "tag team scare" moment made achieving this element of betrayal a far easier task. In keeping this note a consistent one, myself and my performers found continued success in not only the long-term effectiveness of their individual scare, but also the energetic flow of the entire haunted house experience. Performers at our event very much feed off of each other's energy. If the very first performer in the house executes their scare effectively through aggressive entry and exit and consistent timing, a domino effect will occur in which their scene partner will typically do the same, channeling that initial energy throughout the house for the patron to experience from start to finish.

Steering away from the urgency of scare initiation, the abject nature of the scenic design in HHN haunted house experiences also proved to be an effective tool for performers to work off of in order to achieve a consistently positive response in their scares. It is commonplace for the design of these houses to include overtly gory and visceral decorative pieces, including but not limited to: severed limbs, decaying bones, the fabricated corpses of victims hanging on to dear life. While abject in the most overt way, these decorative pieces can work as a collaborative tool for performers to manipulate in their favor. How can I, as a director of haunt experiences, help a performer block the movements of their scare to also draw the attention of the guests to the

abject décor around them? I wondered early on if doing so, and intentionally molding particular

scare moments to bring attention the abject materials in the scene, could result in a more

dramatized reaction as a result. This in turn resulted in being true. As an example, one of the

haunted houses I worked on, titled *Graveyard Games*, included a number of dummies simulating

dead bodies throughout the course of the experience. There was one dummy in particular in a

later scene of the house that was the victim of a horribly gruesome death, leaving their jaw a

twisted and disjointed mess. Their eyes, large and protruding, captured the victim's final glare of

fear before they met their ultimate demise. Simply put, the dummy was horrifying aesthetically

and abject in nature as a result. The performer that was assigned to this scene, through direction

and their own creative experimentation, found innovative ways to incorporate the dummy in their

scare moment. I observed, throughout the course of the run, that this particular performer found

success in doing so. Guests would cover their eyes at the sight of the tortured dummy, but in

activating his scare and interacting with the dummy, the performer took the control away from

the guest and drew their attention back to the gruesome nature of the abject. In specific moments

such as this, I found having this base understanding of the abject and knowing how to activate it

an incredibly useful resource in executing certain scare moments to their fullest potential.

The Effectiveness of a Theoretical Lens

Adopting a theoretical lens to not overpower the approach to my work within the haunt

industry, but act as an underlying resource with which to pull information from, proved to be

incredibly effective for me in finding prolonged success. From a broader perspective, having an

understanding of what intricacies tap into the psyche of consumers of horror-based media gave

me an edge in knowing what to pour more energy and directorial effort into. For example, in their examination of consumerism in horror media, Lin and Xu state that "Empathy could be an important determinant of an individual's cognitive and affective response to the characters who are threatened or victimized in horror media" (5). I found this particular analysis to transfer over to the world of HHN pretty seamlessly, considering the role of the victim in the narrative of a haunted attraction is typically an important one. Very commonly you will come across a scare in which a helpless victim is brutally slaughtered before the eyes of the patron. Of the experiences I was charged with supervising, there was at least one scare moment in each with this exact set up. What I found to be so effective in triggering this sense of empathy in the mind of the patron was the fact that their guard is temporarily let down. When this guard is let down as a result of the elicitation of empathy, a perfect scare opportunity arises for the performer.

Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection, upon conducting thorough examination, seems to perfectly align itself with the form of horror-based entertainment presented through the haunt industry and *Halloween Horror Nights* specifically. While dense in its contents, the theory and its concept of the abject can be channeled through various principles and factors within the structure of a haunted experience; presentation of gore as a means to elicit a visceral reaction and trigger syntactical passivation, simulation of an impending threat through performative displays of betrayal, and the destruction of system and order upon activating the element of participation. The effectiveness of this theoretical application to my directorial work in the haunt industry begs the question: how can other theories of differing principles and ideologies modify or enhance the approach of the haunt contributor? While other theoretical frameworks may not align themselves as seamlessly to this particular line of work as the theory of abjection, perhaps they find

commonality through other, more complex, means. It is a fascinating question to consider as the creator of horror-based themed experiences and motivates me to add more theoretical lenses to my toolbelt in testing their effectiveness in the future.

<div align="center">Theory in Unison with the Three Elements</div>

I found early on that a theoretical lens worked quite handedly with each of the three essential elements of horror-based theatre in this context. This of course has been corroborated in the previous chapters of this thesis, where I detailed how each of the elements coexist and work off of abject theory. In the world of haunts specifically, I found this to be the same. The experience of a 4-5-minute haunted house demonstrates escapism, immersion, and participation happening in conjunction. Escapism, while existing in a smaller time window within the context of a haunt, finds more immediate effect when considering that the participant of these experiences is thrown into the environment upon entering the performance space. The purgation of horror-based escapism can be experienced here as well, as the least-jumpy of a group of participants has the ability to watch their friend and/or family member succumb to the horrifying environment around them. The panic-laughter-panic triad of emotions is a pivotal part of the HHN experience as well. Similar to the Grand Guignol in retrieving this emotional response, the experience creates a cycle of abjection, if you will. A guest sees something horrifying, experiences a sensation of pure terror as a result, temporarily escapes the immersion to reassure themselves that they are okay, then release a laughter to coincide with the joy of the thrill. At this moment, the guest is most vulnerable to be sucked back into the cycle through the abject nature of a scare, triggering the sequence to restart. While creating a sense of pure fear is an obvious

goal of the horror-based creator, ensuring an overall sense of enjoyment in the immersive experience trumps that. Helping my performers understand the part they played in keeping this cycle moving at a steady pace proved effective in ensuring continued efficiency in their scares. Consistency and stamina distribution play a huge part in ensuring every guest that comes through a haunted experience can experience this cycle through the myriad of scare setups in the performance. As a performance coordinator, it was my responsibility to act as resource for my performers to ensure that this consistency remained strong throughout the grueling two-month time window of the event.

Immersion and participation work hand in hand within the context of a *Halloween Horror Nights* experience. Approaching my work as a performance coordinator with a theoretical base in my toolbelt was tricky in trying to find tangible results, however. This part of the creative process in a haunted experience lies more notably in the hands of the designer, the technicians, and the writer themselves. The designer and the writer of a particular haunted house, for example, collaborate to choose which immersive elements will go where, how they will be executed in the context of this narrative, and how they will work to enhance the participative experience for the guest. I, as someone working on their behalf, can only help deliver this information to our performers as opposed to having a hand in what immersive elements can benefit from a more abject-centered lens. The technicians of any given experience, even scarezone experiences, are held directly responsible in ensuring all of the sensory effects of the experience are technically sound and ready for operation before the night gets started. In working on behalf of the creators, I can team up with the technician to ensure that all of the required elements are show-ready, and relay that information to our performers before they begin their

work. I believe that approaching this particular part of the experience with a theoretical lens would prove more efficient from the stance of the creator as opposed to my particular profession as performance coordinator.

Questions to Address Moving Forward

From a broad perspective, I found that having a profound understanding of abject theory was efficient in helping me find success in this particular context. While I do believe that the more tangible aspects of theoretical application are better suited for a more hands-on position in the creative process of these experiences, having a theory-based lens work as a foundation for your approach will help anyone involved in creating these types of experiences. Perhaps on this level, it may only help broaden your understanding of the psychoanalytical perspective of the consumer/guest, but even possessing that can prove effective in fortifying your work approach. Knowing the ins and outs of abject theory and the motivating factors to horror-based consumerism can guide you in the decision-making process of your work; find confidence in directorial and managerial choices; help spread that knowledge to the people that you work with. Horror as a genre relies so heavily on achieving the specific emotional response you are aiming to extract from your consumer. In doing so, the horror-based creator must equip themselves with as many tools possible to arrive to that destination. Like a magician holding their audience in the palm of their hands with every trick added to their arsenal, the horror-based creator must find every advantage they can hold over their consumer. If this sense of control is lost in horror-based theatre, the art form you are presenting can quickly slip out of the realm of true horror and into something it was never intended to be.

That being said, moving forward, I wonder how this theoretical approach would fare in a more traditionally staged context. How would an abject theorist differentiate a production of *Evil Dead the Musical*? What specific design or directorial choices would be made as a result of a deeper understanding of purgation and horror-based catharsis? Would this particular extension of horror-based theatre call for a more tangible application of these elements? On the completely opposite end of the spectrum; how would a theoretical lens change the approach of a filmmaker in the horror genre? I hope to delve into these questions moving forward in my directorial career, as I believe they could expand the scope of this examination even further. I do, however, stand strongly by my claim that the future of horror-based theatre lies firmly in the hands of the haunt industry, for they exemplify the current evolution of the genre at its strongest peak.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Letting Theory Guide the Horror

The effectiveness of adopting a theory-based lens as a director of horror-based theatre was made evident to me as a result of the research and practice conducted through this project. As detailed in the previous chapter, the directorial perspective in this context allows for theoretical application in blocking, actor coaching, and general creative oversight. It does, however, come with its set of limitations depending on the outlet in which you are working in. A corporate event, such as *Halloween Horror Nights,* organically places some restrictions on how experimental the director can get in their theory/practice approach, while others in the realm of more traditionally staged theatre may foster more freedom in trial and error. Additionally, how much control you possess over the content you are producing is a major factor as well. As evidenced by the research I conducted on *The Grand Guignol*, Andre De Lorde, as the theater's key playwright at the height of its popularity, found himself comfortably in the driver's seat of the team's creative process. Consequently, he had a stronger ability to implement his knowledge of psychoanalytical theory into the very fabrication of the content that was being pushed out to the masses. In different contexts, particular creative roles in the theatrical process will allow for more tangible application of theory.

However, Julia Kristeva, through her masterful work in *Powers of Horror*, has created a blueprint for all participants of horror-based theatre to base their work in. Abject theory should act as a foundation, if you will, for every layer of the horror-based creator's work. In the many monstrous forms it may take, the theory of abjection taps into the psyche of horror-based

consumers and attempts to explain why, and how, inner urges and desires for purgation are triggered through abject materials. The ambiguity of what falls under the umbrella of abject materials is quite convenient to the creator. Whether it be in the energy of an action or the gore elements of a scenic display, the abject accomplishes a momentary separation of self, and reality, within its consumer. To some creators who dabble in the macabre, this premise may seem aimlessly convoluted; pointing out circumstances and ideologies that read a bit on-the-nose at first glance. However, a failure to grasp a deeper understanding of the elements at play in the consumption of horror media can prove detrimental to the creator. I believe, from my experiences and research on the matter, that we should allow the theory to exist as a collaborator in our work, helping guide us in making the most effective decisions. Upon enveloping myself in the abject and equipping it as a theoretical tool, I found that it informed my every decision and gave me an earned sense of leverage, whether consciously or subconsciously. A magician can't fully know which effects or tricks will garner the largest reaction from their audience if they don't know what technicalities will trigger the desired emotional response.

The Amalgamation of the Three Elements

Connectively, having a deeper understanding of the proposed elements of horror-based theatre, and the individual perks that they possess, broadened my perspective on which direction the genre should move going forward. At the start of this project I suggested that the future lied firmly in the hands of the haunt industry, considering that world's ability to combine all three elements in a singular experience. After examining the functionality of a haunted experience from the viewpoint of a director, I can confidently confirm this proposition. The functionality of

the haunt experience is truly in a realm of its own. These immersive experiences have taken all of the disparate elements of horror-based theatre and seamlessly blended them into a singular experience. Consequently, when pit against differing horror-based presentations, they offer a heightened experience in which all of the senses and inner-fascinations are engaged. While the traditionally staged performance finds strength in their activated escapism, the haunt does so as well while also immersing the patron in a 360-degree environment and inviting them to play a part. What's important to note here, however, is that not every rendition of horror-based theatre needs to be a three headed beast when it comes to the essential elements. It is undoubtedly acceptable for a particular experience to only engage in one of three elements; the presentation, and elicitation of the desired response, is still effective in the confines of what is being presented. Can innovation still be found in the singular experience? Absolutely. Much of the gray areas in which escapism, immersion, and participation have tapped into still remain to be fully explored. Performances of the like can, and will, discover new ways to execute any of the three essential elements and dig into some undiscovered crevices as a result. However, I believe that the all-encompassing experience of the haunted attraction presents the most innovative and enthralling rendition of theatre that the genre has to offer; this is evidenced by the ability of juggernaut events such as *Halloween Horror Nights* to cross over into the mainstream.

<div align="center">Questions to Address Moving Forward</div>

Left mostly uncovered in the process of my research was the world of horror cinema. As a filmmaker and screenwriter, I found myself continually wondering how abject theory and the principles of purgation fared in the context of the silver screen. At first glance, having full

control over what your audience consumes through the magic of editing and cinematography may seem easier for the horror-based filmmaker to achieve the responses they desire. However, I believe the audience that this art form caters to has a higher tolerance for abject materials, thus potentially making it harder to find innovation and heightened success. Horror purists take pride in working as all-encompassing encyclopedias of the genre; acting as a useful resource for their friends to come to when seeking information in the realm of horror cinema. Connectively, the art of practical FX in cinema specifically has reached significantly higher ceilings than that of horror-based theatre, consequently making it more difficult for your abject materials to live up to these pre-determined standards. As an additive element to this thesis, I would encourage the horror-based creator to deeply examine the effects, and application, of Kristeva's abject theory in the world of horror-based cinema.

Circling back to the world of horror-based theatre, I plan to eventually apply the previously mentioned theory/practice approach into the directorial work of an immersive staged performance. Having the ability to tackle a production, such as *Evil Dead the Musical*, with a more potent knowledge of abject theory and the three essential elements will undoubtedly yield some interesting results. How can an abject lens help build upon the already successful world of staged, immersive theatre? How can the element of participation be added as a supportive layer to the traditional theatre format? Would an immersive, participatory pre-show experience enhance the effectiveness of the forthcoming staged experience? These are questions and propositions I hope are eventually examined further along after the completion of this thesis project. Finding the answers to these questions could prove imperative in building the case for the evolution of the genre and determining where it may lie.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gordon, Mel. *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror*. Amok Press, 1988.

Mel Gordon, through his thorough research and in-depth analysis of The Grand Guignol, masterfully highlights both the beautiful innovation and horrifying insanity of the theatre's sixty year "reign of terror". Although Gordon doesn't necessarily apply a specific lens into his research approach, he provides a wide base of information, both statistical and historical, as to the increased interest of this bizarre form of theatre in the 1800s. A narrowed focus of this text, however, falls in the category of "primal taboos", and the guilt that plagued many patrons of The Grand Guignol after witnessing such visceral and graphic content on the stage. This portion of the book's analysis very much aligned itself with the theoretical and psychoanalytical approach I will be taking in my cross-examination of horror-based theatre and the theory of abjection. Additional elements to the text that I found to be extremely useful were the inclusion of a large array of photos, ranging from play bills to production shots, and two popular Grand Guignol play scripts for readers to digest in discovering how a typical show would operate.

Braillard, Patrick. *Halloween Horror Nights And/Or Visceral Theatre.* MA Thesis. University of

Central Florida, 2014. Web. 7 April 2019.

As a show director of creative development for Universal Orlando Resort, Patrick Braillard, in his Master of Arts in Theatre Thesis, provides incredible insight into the world of "visceral theatre" and the marquee event *Halloween Horror Nights.* As a seasoned creator of haunted attractions, Braillard argues that the popular theme park event has, through its continued growth and evolution over the last 28 years, created and heightened a new realm of theatre focused on visceral elements of immersion and audience participation. He addresses the fact that many patrons, whether unknowingly or through misinterpretation, fail to recognize haunted attractions as a theatrical experience very much aligned with traditional forms of theatre. The research and theoretical lens seen in this thesis provides great insight as to the varied elements of design and technique that are applied in creating this event, and how they both mirror and differentiate the production process of traditional theatre. In terms of thorough research in the field of haunted attractions and their relation to world of theatre, the available catalog is fairly scarce, and this Masters thesis does an incredible job making up for a lack of examination in this particular field.

Podoshen, Jeffrey S. "Dark Tourism, Abjection, and Blood". *Tourism Management*, vol. 64, Feb. 2018,

p346-356. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2017.09.003.

In the peer-reviewed article titled "Dark Tourism, Abjection, and Blood"*,* Jeffrey Podoshen deep dives into the world of "dark tourism" and examines its relationship with theories of

abjection and social-psychology. He argues that, while Dark Tourism is an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of attractions/experiences that can be categorized as taboo or visceral, a common thread can be found in the continued, inherent attraction of its patrons and pursuers to its gruesome content. Podoshen does a fantastic job covering dark-tourism attractions of varying attributes, from Holocaust visitation sites to interactive haunted experiences. He finds interest in the continued prominence of atypical attractions shrouded in darker/heavier themes and uses interview data to pinpoint what exactly is drawing so many willing patrons to "dark tourist experiences". The implementation of the Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection is critical to Podoshen's analysis, and he uses it in unison with research methods such as the attribution error and the perseverance effect in hopes of receiving the answers and evidence that he seeks.

Arya, Rina, and Nicholas Chare. *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*. Manchester

University Press, 2016.

With a more in-depth breakdown of Julia Kristeva's Theory of Objection, *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture* is a text rich in theoretical information and exploration as to the relationship of abjection and contemporary forms of art. Arya and Chare provide an innovative extension to existing research on the theory of abjection by intertwining it with the works of Georges Bataille and Judith Butler in understanding its influence on contemporary theatre artists and filmmakers as well. The text does a wonderful job providing an extensive pool of artistic contributions with which it examines in applying its theories, including Chilean Australian and Indigenous Canadian forms of art. To further expand the horizons of this field of research, Arya and Chare provide insight on Kristeva's long-term theoretical influence on areas of the world often overlooked and rarely considered during research of abjection-influenced art. Although leaning more heavily towards the world of visual arts, this text still delivers on applying its themes and theories to the world of theatre and provides an interesting perspective on the theory of abjection and its influence on a contemporary artist's approach.

Hoedt, Madelon. "Staging Hell: Performance and the Horror Genre." *Interdisciplinary Humanities*,

vol. 33, no. 3, Fall 2016, pp. 9–24. EBSCOhost,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hus&AN=124564943&site=eds

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With a heavier focus on dramaturgy and a focused look on the horror genre's presence within the world of theatre, *Staging Hell: Performance and the Horror Genre* is a scholarly article that provides a strong foundation for the coexistence of horror and theatre with an in-depth examination into their inevitable amalgamation. Hoedt's passion for the horror genre seamlessly

shows in this article, as he examines successful methods for converting infamous horror tropes (such as zombie apocalypses and serial killer slashers) into theatrical compositions for the stage. While there isn't a specific theoretical lens which aligns itself with my area of focus, the discussion inevitably steers towards the world of themed entertainment and the advancement of theatrical technology, which provides some very interesting insight as to horror-based theatre's continued growth amidst technological advances.

Clasen, Mathias, et al. "Horror, Personality, and Threat Simulation: A Survey on the Psychology of Scary Media.*" Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, Nov. 2018. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1037/ebs0000152.

Horror, Personality, and Threat Simulation: A Survey on the Psychology of Scary Media takes a focus more centered on horror media and the psychological attraction of its consumers. The article does a great job examining a variety of theories in relation to horror thematic, including but not limited to: threat simulation, Freudian psychoanalytical theories, and benign masochism. The writers seek to uncover the reasons why inhabitants of the pop-culture world continually expose themselves to forms of media that elicit fear, shock, and a sense of danger. They argue that religious backgrounds and personality traits play a huge role in determining which type of people aggressively, or subconsciously, seek forms of horror-based media, and conduct a survey to support their claims. Other factors included in their findings include intellect, gender, and age, all of which were found to correlate with a desire for threat simulation. The emphasis on a "desire for emotional and intellectual stimulation" depending on biological and societal factors is quite intriguing, and this article presents a strong claim as to how this plays a heavy role in the desire for horror-themed content

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