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HALLOWEEN HORROR NIGHTS AND/OR VISCERAL THEATRE

by

PATRICK BRAILLARD
B.A. Washington State University, 2000

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Visceral [**vis**-er-uh]

-adj

1. of, relating to, or affecting the viscera
2. characterized by intuition or instinct rather than intellect
(“visceral,” def. 1-2)

The above words speak to define far more than merely the word “visceral.” They speak to also embody and classify a previously untitled form of theatre. Visceral Theatre: A form of theatre that uses the instinctual awareness of the audience- the audiences’ perception of popular culture, societal contexts both historical and geographical, as well as their instinctual-physical aversion to danger- to cause physiological and emotional responses through the overstimulation of the senses in a non-tactile attack.

For the past eight years I have been intimately involved with the creation of Halloween Horror Nights, an annual event held each September/October at the Universal Orlando Resort. The basis of the event is the celebration of the holiday of Halloween by creating Shows, Street Experiences, and Thematic Mazes in which to fully immerse hundreds of thousands of guests in various environments.

This thesis will use the example of Halloween Horror nights to frame the discussion of Visceral Theatre. It will be presented through the lens of creator, designer, director, and

collaborator of the entertainment offerings within the experience. It is my hope to answer the question: What is Visceral Theatre, and how HHN, as it is commonly referred to, earns the right to be defined as such. What makes this experience Theatre?

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First I would like to thank the chair of my thesis committee, Christopher Niess for his advice, edits, and ideas on how to make this project everything it could be. Thanks go to Dr. Julia Listengarten, who helped me navigate the waters of this thesis process when I didn't know where I was going. I must send a hearty thanks to Mark Brotherton- who stuck with me during this long and arduous process. A big thank you to Judy Luengas at Universal for figuring out what could and could not be included in this project. Thank you to my Universal compatriot Lora Wallace for being a coffee buddy and sounding board. I would like to thank both David Hughes and Kim Gromoll, who have the unique blend of talent and passion that is so rare to find. I give a huge thanks to Michael Aiello whose guidance, collaborative spirit, passion, and drive have made me a stronger artist. I am honored to have worked alongside all of you.

Universal Orlando, who besides providing me with gainful employment, have allowed me the opportunity to grow artistically through collaboration with all of my fellow designers, directors, technicians, managers, and support staff deserves a tremendous amount of thanks. I am blessed to do the work that I do. Thanks must go to my family- especially my parents who always supported me with love and encouragement. And last but certainly not least, I would like to say thank you to my incredible wife Melissa. You have kept your faith in me beyond words. I love you dearly.

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INTRODUCTION

Each year for the past two decades, Universal Orlando Resort has invited guests- referred to as such because they are invited to come, and because they choose to enter on their own volition, to Halloween Horror Nights – or HHN as it will be referred henceforth. It is within this event that I believe a new form of audience experience has been tested and is being perfected; Visceral Theatre. I will show why HHN is unlike any theatre that has come before it. I will investigate: Is it just a culmination of all of the preceding forms of theatre, and therefore, more of a hybrid rather than its own singular form? How, as a collaborator, are my choices affecting the overall experience for the guests? How do these choices make the experience “theatre?”

Several different facets of the events’ creation will be used as a context to understand the foundations of Visceral Theatre and how Visceral Theatre is created. I will highlight the Technical and Aesthetic, and Collaborative demands placed on the creation of the event, to show how HHN finds its home among this style of event. Alongside of these elements, a personal reflection of the outcome will also be included.

CHAPTER 1: SMELLS LIKE THEATRE

A Singularity

What factors set Halloween Horror Nights away from all of the types of theatre that preceded it and therefore allows it to claim its own moniker as Visceral Theatre? It is easy enough to dismiss theatrical work coming out of theme parks and resorts as 'simply' entertainment. In order to prove that HHN can be correctly classified as 'theatre', this thesis could be limited to stating those things that HHN has in common with other current forms of theatre that are generally deemed relevant, important, and somehow more artistic. This thesis could also focus comparatively on all of the forms that came before Visceral Theatre, chronologically.

There are commonalities that exist between various theatrical styles that will be discussed. However, before beginning to analyze this 'shape', or rather break the *style* apart we must first develop an understanding of the perception of Theme Parks as Visceral Theatre and their differences from various theatrical styles in order to see where it sets itself apart.

Theatre "movements" or more precisely, the ideas and notions that germinate, grow, and finally give rise to said movements, are not usually confined to a singularity- Take for example the term- Modernism. Placing a particular starting point is difficult under the best of circumstances. In order to do that, the following

questions would need to be asked. Which form of Modernism? Modernism in Art? Modernism in Literature? Modernism in Theatre? Which sub-genre of Modernism is being searched for? Surrealism? Agitation-Propaganda?

It is a futile exercise due to the mass of material that was created under the title of Modernism and the length of the “movement.” David Krasner remarks in *Theatre in Theory* that Georg Lukacs may have written *The Sociology of Modern Drama* in the year 1909, but it wasn’t translated into German until 1914, and not copy-written in the United States until 1965, fifty-six years after it was originally published in Hungary (116.) shows that the life of a piece of criticism or idea can exist for close to six decades and not be a part of the beginning of a movement, or the end.

And yet unlike Modernism, *Visceral Theatre’s* roots (and HHN’s) are attached firmly to an exact date, place, and person. The date is July 17, 1955; the place is Disneyland in Anaheim, California, and the person: Walt Disney. And although Universal Orlando Resort is now the main worldwide competitor of the Disney brand, it, and every single themed attraction in the world owe a nod to Mr. Disney for creating the first successful Theme Park.

Halloween Horror Nights continues this idea of bringing guests into the experience, taking them out of their normal lives, and fully suspending their

disbelief in what they are experiencing until they are back in their cars headed home. But because it is experiential, and defies the concept of the fourth wall by inviting audience members to become a part of whatever story is being told it also continues to somehow be seen as a facsimile of true Theatre. It is seen as something that affects the audience, but something that isn't quite legitimate and therefore uninteresting. It is seen as a distraction; without real merit; an amusement alone.

In 1917 writer and activist Emma Goldman wrote, "we in America have so far looked upon the theatre as a place of amusement only." (Ed. Krasner 132) This comment was made while the United States was ensconced in its first of two world wars, before an economic depression in the 1930's merging into the largest burst of economic growth the world had seen up until that time; and an arms race and cold war extending into the 1990's - both making the fear of annihilation via nuclear weapons a very real one indeed. I believe that it is due to this "growing up" that Americans began looking at Theatre for more than just amusement, they began looking for escapism from the possibility of the annihilation of the species. And with the creation of Theme Parks and the rise of Visceral Theatre experiences the audience look on these reproduced/themed settings, regardless of aesthetic, as more than just a distraction.

Theatrical encounters are now being created that are meaningful and sentimental towards the building of memories with family members that last a lifetime.

Admittedly this is due in part to theme parks across the globe realizing the potential of this message and using it as their main marketing focus, but it still requires the participants/guests to show up, experience, and participate in it for themselves. Goldman is correct in her understanding of her time, but the use of bias against the legitimacy of Themed Entertainment based on a level of entertainment is shallow thinking. We as the artists that form new ways of presenting and incorporating theatrics into our art must be both cognizant of the cultural context in which it is being presented and not hung up on the attitudes of the past.

Bias and Perception Against Commercial Art

Throughout history, over-lapping styles of Theatre have created friction between one another and do so in order to propel the art form forward; to evolve. And in this way, many styles of theatre spring out of the antipathy that is bred among them. The widely documented rejection that the Naturalist playwrights and theorists of the 19th Century- like Chekov, Stanislavsky, or Meyerhold- held for Romanticism, is one such example of this evolution.

A microcosm of this friction exists today between what is considered legitimate Theatre and that of "Theme Park Work." I have experienced this friction first hand. When I began my career with Universal Orlando it was as a performer, while I still maintained several different "Theatre" connections throughout the area. It was inevitable that once someone "Theatrical" discovered that I had

chosen to work at one of the area parks, the conversation would shift to an interrogation. Why would I choose to work there? Why would I want to give up my creative freedom to do Corporate Theatre? Why would I want to punch a clock instead of take the jobs that I wanted, when I wanted them? I feel as if this perception and the prejudice that is displayed by individuals who would seek a “higher” form of art are merely misunderstandings that spring from not realizing that both forms are culturally valid, but merely separated temporally by 25,000 years.

Theatre began as the Abydos Passion Play, a ritualized dance. Every student of Theatre learns this in his or her first day of Theatre History. Visceral Theatre, as I will discuss later in this piece, however, is but a fraction of this history. 250 centuries have passed since the inclusion of “theatre” and “performance” into the human experience, but as those ideas morph and grow there is always a constant resistance to that change, when it is precisely necessary in order for Visceral Theatre to remain relevant.

And eventually a newer form of theatre will arrive and declare Visceral Theatre as anathema to its workings, thereby continuing the friction and evolution of the art form. What is relevant is that Visceral Theatre is decidedly commercial and therefore is looked at as low-brow in nature. Today Shakespeare is revered as one of the, if not the greatest playwright in history and yet the one undeniable fact about Shakespeare is that he wrote for the masses to see his works, it was

how he survived, and consequently one of the best reasons that his plays survived the centuries while his contemporaries' scripts have not. During Elizabethan Theatre, the audience did not politely sit in the dark and respectfully remain silent during the performances of the actors. The majority of the audience would stand through the 5 acts of each epic story, buying refreshments from vendors who would openly call out their wares during the middle of what are now considered the finest pieces of prose in the English language. To rise above the din, Shakespeare was forced to resort to bawdy humor within his comedies. Gender-bending and lewd sexual jokes are spread throughout his entire comedic canon. In turn he resorted to gruesome deaths to entertain the crowds during his tragedies. Fifteen characters die throughout the telling of Titus Andronicus alone. That is a character having to die approximately for every 172 lines of prose spoken. His intent was to create engaging stories and to envelop a thoroughly distracted audience into the telling of his tale- a goal that is still relevant today. It is this creation of an entertainment en masse, through the sometimes use of spectacle, while still inhabiting the role of theatre in investigating the human condition that serves as a core principal facet of Visceral Theatre.

Attacking an audience member psychologically who is asking to be attacked and to have their personal emotional core rattled is seen as a lesser form of entertainment. Visceral Theatre stands shoulder to shoulder in status with any form of theatre or live performance, if not exceeding them due to its use of all of

the combined traits of “theatre” that have come before it chronologically, in order to be successful.

Yet this sort of prejudice against prior popular forms has been inflicted on every type of “new” style since Greek critics such as Plutarch once compared the styles of both Aristophanes and Menander, lambasting the former for

Coarseness," he says, "in words, vulgarity and ribaldry are present in Aristophanes, but not at all in Menander; obviously, for the uneducated, ordinary person is captivated by what the former says, but the educated man will be displeased. I refer to antitheses and similar endings and plays on words. For of these Menander does make use with proper consideration and rarely, believing that they should be treated with care, but Aristophanes employs them frequently, inopportunately, and frigidly; for his punning is applauded, (Ed. Fowler)

It is this “mass consumption” by the “uneducated, ordinary person” that delivers the most bias towards all themed attractions as being merely filler. That a show or experience cannot, nor is able to, affect an audience member simply due to the fact that it will be of limited length and repeated several times daily continues the argument that the perception of Visceral Theatre or “Theme Park Work” as “less than” is extremely short-sighted. Again, in order to not fall into a “smells like theatre...” debate of contrast and comparison of what similarities to that which has come before- comprising the finished product, I would submit that it all has to do with what the collaborator’s intent was in its conception.

Due to technological advances and the breadth of entertainment options currently available i.e. Television, Film, Internet Videos, etc., Visceral Theatre/HHN has no choice but to completely immerse the guest into an experiential world where they are transported to another place/time/360 degree environment. Visceral Theatre's objective is to immerse a participant so deeply that the "real" aspects of maze/street/story outshine those of any digital monster or setting.

CHAPTER 2: SCENOGRAPHY

From The Outside In

I ask the question again. What factors set Halloween Horror Nights away from all of the types of theatre that preceded it and therefore allows it to claim its own moniker as Visceral Theatre? As the definition found in the abstract asserts, Visceral Theatre is certainly a different medium. I was struck, when first encountering Visceral Theatre in 2007, with how it impacted the guests at such a “root” level. To understand this, a discussion regarding Scenography; a term that was coined within the last quarter century dealing with the identification and perception of modern/post-modern/contemporary theatre spaces and environments is necessary to begin to understand how the guest is impacted from the outside, in.

Although I have listed several different eras of theatre with the description above, I believe that it is important to designate the difference between these time periods and monikers as the perception of the audience, the set in which the play is displayed, and the interaction between the two have shifted over time resulting in a new style of performance/presentation.

Thus any work of art will always be a partial perspective of that observer at that historical moment, and every performance can only be that performing group’s comment on the play [...] to which the audience will add yet another level of interpretation. (Carlson, 445)

Pamela Howard, one of the progenitors of the movement describes the definition of Scenography as the “creation of the stage space.” That Scenography: “does

not exist as a contained art work [...] always incomplete until the performer steps into the playing space and engages with the audience.” (Howard, xix) This idea of a non-contained art work, existing solely on the predication of the blending of audience member and performer is precisely what lies at the foundation of everything that is created within the Visceral Theatre environment of HHN. The audience member, or guest as they are commonly referred, ceases to be a singular entity once inside the chaotic and volatile environment that is provided for them. While no two guests will “feel the same” moving through the immersive environment we have established, they all become a part of the ensemble based storytelling and are at the mercy of the environment and anything inhabiting it. The interaction between this ensemble member and their environment, and the stimuli found within, is a key to understanding the experience.

Howard’s idea of the playing space/environment as a singular piece of art not being complete until the audience is a part of the performance, is a much more vital to Visceral Theatre than other forms or styles with few exceptions. Due to the high level of interactivity that is allowed and encouraged between performer and participant, it is vital that the latter take an active stance in deciding how this form of art will be shaped. This idea of audience as performer may at first appear negative toward the goals of the Actors and Directors associated with the project; possibly seen as an infringement on the traditional process that has existed in respect to the building of a large-scale event prior to Visceral Theatre’s birth.

During the performances in Elizabethan Theatre, the group of commoners who stood the entire performance at the basest level of the theatre, were focally given the best seats in the house. As the action onstage was played directly to them rather than the elite guests who inhabited the seats placed at the rear of the theatre and were in all accounts the furthest from the stage. And yet the audience, regardless of stature, were restricted from joining the performers onstage to help tell the story. This immersion of the audience “as performer” is what the creators of Visceral Theatre hope to achieve.

I would argue encouraging the audience to have as much impact during the event allows for more freedom for both the Actor as well as Director. This freedom exists in the certainty that the audience performers encountered are more open to the experiences that will be presented to them. The choices that the participants are given during the event on behalf of the creative pairing of Director and Performer will illicit the emotional response that is sought. Simply put, the Scenography of the event empowers the creative vision and furthers the effectiveness of the event on behalf of the creators to the benefit of the participant’s experience.

It may seem that a discussion relating to Scenography will appear to be a bit premature in relation to the design of the environment when the story/theme has yet to be conceived. And while this is somewhat true, the creators of this event must also strive to understand the environments that will inevitably house their

creations. It is only practical that we know exactly what kind of spaces we are designing towards. This knowledge not only allows for more efficiency in the development of the experiences, but it also aids in the development of story. The entirety of Universal Orlando is used to create this experience for the guests, but indeed even this has limits. Soundstages are used to house the maze experiences, the production backlot works to contain the street or “scare-zones”, while one or more traditional theatre venues may house the presentations and shows that mark routine entertainment. These examples deal with the areas that will be utilized during the run of the production. To further illustrate this point Howard goes on to point out:

Space for the Scenographer is about creating internal dramatic space as well as responding to the external architectural space. To be able to create potent stage images that describe the dramatic space starts with understanding and responding to the texts that are to be played.
(Howard 6)

It should then be no surprise to discover that as limited as these choices first appear, they can become quite adaptable to whatever thematic is chosen. Using the precept that each space is not complete or that no space can attain its full potential without the action within it (Howard 15), until it is inhabited by audience and those audience members acted upon, the once limited now becomes limitless in its abilities to envelop the participant. Scenography allows those involved with the conception of the theme to now approach the event anew. This is true regardless of how many times each of the locales, dictated to the designers or by other factors, has been previously used i within the event.

This is not to say that the spaces that are involved with HHN are entirely without limitations in what can be accomplished. And yet through Scenography it is these limitations that will bear the most fruit yearly. Certainly we are constrained by the physical structures themselves and the amount of money that is put forth to that piece of the event but it is also

What also needs to be discussed is the use of Scenography in the research that is used to prepare the physical space in relation to the concept that will inevitably become the experience. Research during the beginning of the conceptual phase is imperative. This may include disturbing images that will be used in the Décor and Scenic design, strange atonal music that may be heard Event-Wide, or in one room of one experience, or differing smells that may find their way into sections of the event. Without this research the event may be hindered and the overall experience of the guest will pale if the proverbial strokes of the paint brush are not bold enough. When creating an experience over such a large area subtlety can act as a slow death. Conversely Howard warns, "Fascinating as it is, researching a piece of work can also be a trap, where the research becomes more interesting than the play itself." (Howard 48)

Avoiding such a situation is of particular need in order for Visceral Theatre to remain effective due to its now solid reputation of creating new and exciting experiences each year. A large amount of time is spent developing the various mazes and street zones, some of which are historically based. When basing a

horrific, visceral experience within a historical context, it is necessary to delve as deeply as possible into the facts of the events as they existed in the past. The resulting attention to detail is paramount if a truly immersive environment is to be created. The audience cannot help but be influenced by the authenticity of the reality that surrounds them, albeit for a short duration of time. Ironically by taking the more authentic route when designing, HHN is often able to surprise guests with a fresh take on an established historical event due to accepted perceptions resulting from miseducation, miscommunication, and bias regarding said historical events. Authenticity and Historicity are two of the most valuable facets of Scenography that are employed through Visceral Theatre.

The figure below, (*Figure 1*) appears to be a generic ground-plan that shows almost no particular features that would distinguish it from other various mazes except to the trained eye. The official name for this maze was Catacombs: Black Death Rising. Its main focal point was the examination of death through the eyes of plague victims and the doctors that treated them alike; with a Halloween Horror Nights twist.

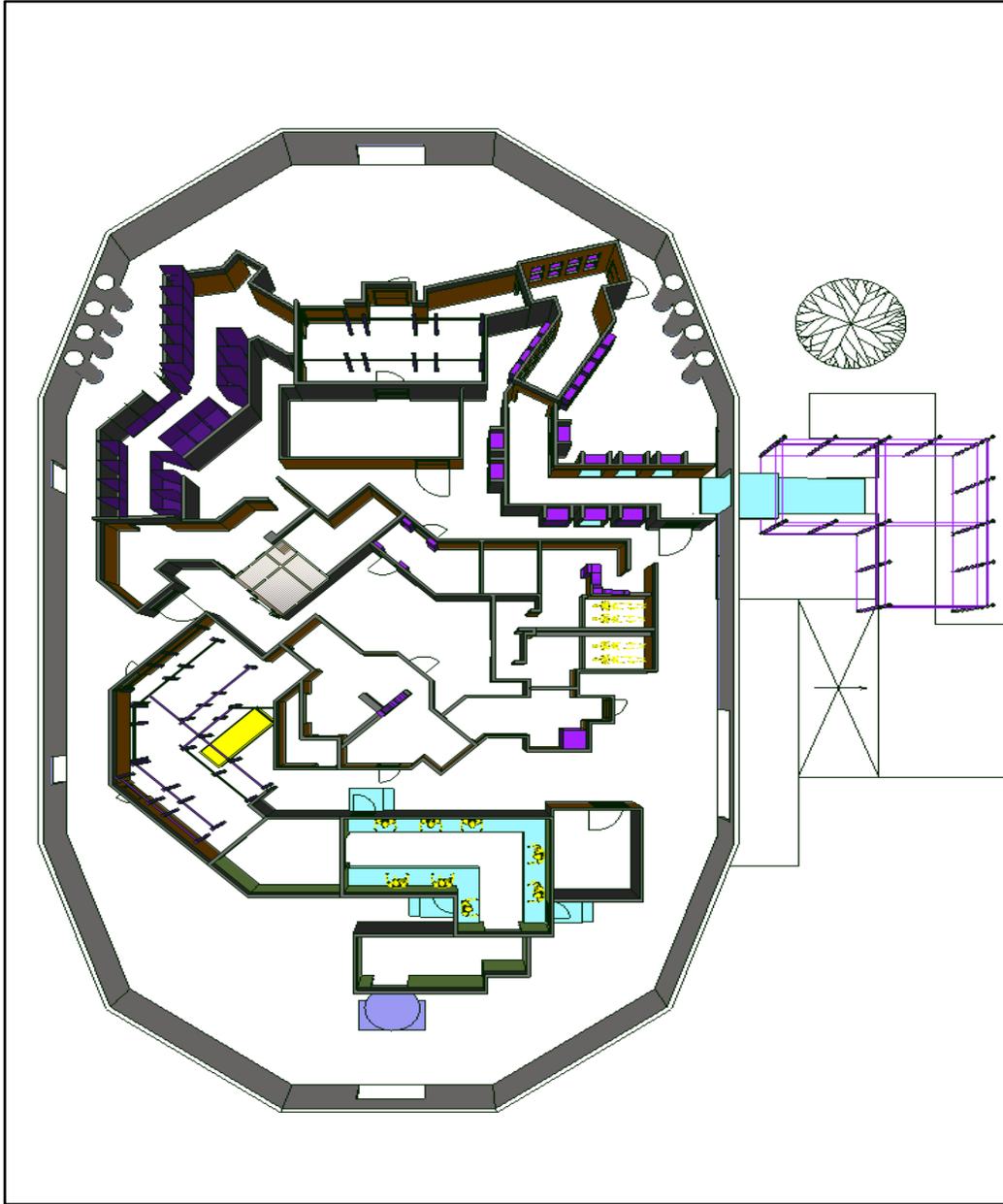


Figure 1: Ground Plan of "Catacombs: Black Death Rising"

Throughout the concept phase during the 2009-2010 haunt season, we worked to develop a story that mirrored directly the historical Black Plague's journey across Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. Historically speaking, very few of the facts listed in the stories created were direct representations of actual occurrences, but without understanding the scope of how the Bubonic Plague ravished an entire continent for over two centuries, we would not have been able to develop as an immersive environment, filled with historically accurate characters, costumes, décor, language, and as seen below, a complete storyline.

Also, in order to further the storyline found inside the individual experiences, it is necessary to create various support materials that must span the expanse of the area directly leading into each maze. This will not only allow for the audience to feel as if they have stepped into the story more completely, but it also helps to heighten the awareness of their surroundings and provide fuel for their anticipation of events to come. Increasing the tension in the dynamic between performer and artist. This can include signage such as the image (*Figure 2*) below.

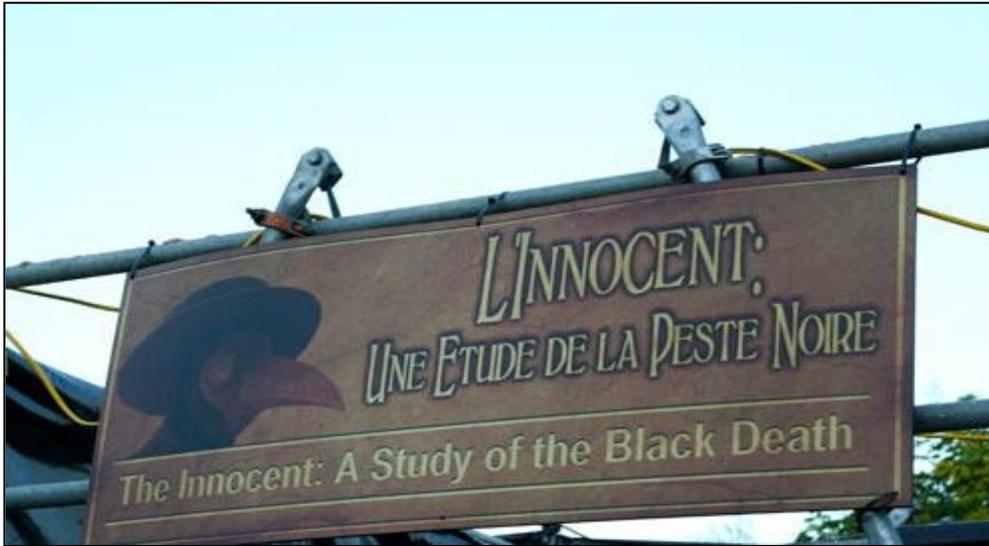


Figure 2: Queue Line Signage

To supplement the guests' time spent within the queue line for the maze, painstaking effort was taken to create placards placed along their path, educating them to what they would seemingly find inside. Framed as the entry for an open archeological dig undertaken by the Washington State and Ohio State universities, called L'Innocent: Une Etude de la Peste Noire or "The Innocent: A Study of the Black Death". Signs around the queue line (Figure 3) gave the back-story for the event, explaining the Black Death outbreak, the plague doctors encountered in the maze (Giving the participants the opportunity to speculate about the characters.), and the setting of the maze: on the ancient ruins of Carae, France.

October 1534

Carac, France: A mysterious illness, unlike anything previously seen was striking victims across political and social lines. Plague doctors ushered those infected into the local catacombs that had been filled with almost 30 generations of local people.

Local magistrates used the then new technique of “quarantine”; removing the stricken from the rest of the village. The plague doctors followed the dying into the catacombs to usher them into death.

Figure 3: Queue Line Story Exposition

So much detail goes into the creation of the individual experiences throughout HHN, that viscerally it is impossible to leave without being impacted. Everything is thought of, up to, and including the footnotes (Figure 4) that appear on all of the signage throughout the queue line:

Footnote-

L'Innocent: Une Etude De La Peste Noire (The Innocent: A Study of the Black Death)

A cultural excavation project co-sponsored by the archeological departments of:

Washington State University

The Ohio State University

in conjunction with

Paris Descartes University: Faculté des Sciences Humaines et Sociales –

Sorbonne (Paris V)

Figure 4: Queue Line Themed Footnote

But this showing of history is not enough. Research, such as suggested by Howard, is indeed a trap. Without the main focus of the characters within the maze being tuned directly to the participants as they travel through each of the experiences, and without the maze design being centered on the techniques used by the characters to exact the type of response dictated by the environment, there is no need for detailed historical information. It does provide context for the participant so that they have something that is relatable to mentally call back on during their time inside the maze. And if they are particularly observant, they will see that at times the creators include pieces of props, décor, or audio that were placed there specifically for the more dedicated participant. Research adds richness to the experience, however without knowing anything about the story, nothing about the time period, and having no pre-conceived notions prior to visiting this single maze, someone could still walk through this maze and still feel the weight of everything that is done to effectively build a visceral experience.

Other Links

How HHN can be defined as Visceral Theatre does not merely come from its connection with Scenography, but it has also borrowed from the likes of The Berliner Ensemble circa 1965. Howard, upon viewing the Ensemble's production of Coriolanus, was taken back by how they demonstrated a "new method of using colour and composition, working from the actor outwards by using indicative but imagined locales." (Howard 65) This idea radically increases the ability of those devising HHN to decide where and when characters will interact (i.e. scare) the guests. Viewing the experience viscerally from the actor out instead of merely dictating the environments we are contained within to the performer, we are able to be more flexible in changes that may need to be made to the thematic or technical elements of the event more practically.

This is not an easy task, and in fact it can be damaging to the overall aesthetic of the event if not properly balanced with the physical/architectural structures at one's disposal. Capturing the audience's attention regardless of reference point (cultural or otherwise) is essential to ensuring the event is successful in its attempts to remain immersive. In an attempt to prove this, theatre pioneer Robert Wilson developed an installation piece called HK inside Clink prison in London. This Victorian era location allowed for each part of the performance space to speak for itself, much like the mazes of HHN support the freedom of performance for each of its actors.

Through the use of an architecturally based narrative, Wilson's display was ground-breaking in its ability to capture story through geometric patterns as well dynamic performance spaces which increased and decreased in size proportionally depending on the wishes of Wilson in how he wanted the story to be told. While revolutionary, the major facet of HK, which I also consider its major weakness, was the lack of performers to help foster the physical structure. It is necessary for the counter-balance to exist between performer and space in HHN. This balance must be achieved in order for the audience to fully experience a coherent story line on a grand scale.

This is also true for the designers of the event. One of the major principles of Scenography is the blurring and blending of lines. These may include blurred lines of management hierarchy and extend as far as the delivery of the designers wishes to the performer from multiple sources. By blurring these lines of communication the entire apparatus of HHN runs at a higher efficiency which allows for a stronger connection with the participant. The hierarchy between collaborators that has existed for so long is now gone. The cold determinant boundaries that once held designers, directors, and others at arm's length from each other; blur during our collaboration to bring this event to life. It could be said that all collaboration exists then within the confines of Scenography and that the artists, designers and directors that collaborate in the creation of HHN and by extension Visceral Theatre as a whole practice Scenography unconsciously.

CHAPTER 3: DOCTRINES OF VISCERAL THEATRE

Time

Unlike most traditionally staged theatre pieces, a work of Visceral Theatre must be short lived in order for it to be effective. Its “run” must remain temporary. For the casual audience member the length of run for a traditional theatrical event means almost nothing in respect to the enjoyment provided. Broadway musical runs exceeding several thousand performances are not rare. This fact doesn’t seem to stop audiences from seeing and enjoying them time and again, (*IDBD.com*) but to the audience members that will return several times throughout a Visceral Theatre event, it is imperative.

Throughout the United States there are dozens of standing haunts. (*Americahaunts.com*) These haunted “attractions” remain open all year, regardless of the seasons. These are not to be confused with Visceral Theatre. Like the Broadway musical, these haunts, while effective in many respects are lacking the temporal fragility and the sense of urgency that Visceral Theatre needs in order to survive. It is paramount that the audience knows that once the event is over it will not return. This reminder that the event itself will inevitably undergo a “death” builds anticipation for the event. The supposition that this will be the only time an audience member will be able to participate and so they must participate is used to heighten the senses and increase this anticipation. The argument can be made that as people are buying tickets, hiring babysitters, or

organizing which of their friends will drive the evening of their attendance, they are already taking part in the ritual of Visceral Theatre.

What distinguishes these actions from those taken by people going out to see a movie, attend a traditional piece of theatre or join a group of friends at the pub is the anticipation of the *unexpected*? Each location listed above has certain rules and guidelines. Your itinerary rarely changes in respect to your entertainment selection. For example: if attending a movie a ticket is purchased possible some popcorn, sit in dark room with strangers and watch a film in silence. For a night out at the “Theatre” is is much the same: Buy a ticket, and then sit in a dark room with strangers and watch a play or musical in respectful silence, laughing when appropriate. Spending time in a public setting changes things only slightly. If visiting a pub: Walk in, talk with friends, and imbibe alcohol. In all three of these cases it is up to the participant how they are impacted.

Horror Nights is something completely different. Even for those people who have never gone to Halloween Horror Nights, the anticipation that is gained merely by saying the title of the event elicits a physical/psychological response. This anticipation exists because the event itself is unexpected and so therefore, perceived as dangerous. The *ritual* of HHN is always changing, and it is the unknown quality of these changes and *how it will affect you as a participant* breeds the anticipation. No one outside of the creative staff of the event truly knows everything that a participant may possibly encounter during the course of

their experience or how each of these individual experiences will affect the participant after they have left the event.

HHN has been, since its inception, an original event. This is not an accident. Conceived/devised freshly each year with no repetition, it re-enforces this doctrine of time. Or rather, it re-enforces the fragility of time that must exist in order for Visceral Theatre to be as impactful as it is against the participants. If HHN were to be produced so that any guest that purchased a ticket to the normal (albeit still entertaining) daytime fare provided by Universal Orlando, one of the key components to the event would be missing entirely.

Each year an entire Marketing team is brought in and educated on the extent of the thematic including the overall story-lines and the characters that will be used to bring the event to life. It is imperative during this phase that the Marketing team receives all of the information possible so that they can move forward on releasing the information to the public at large in the correct manner. This is usually accomplished through easing the information out slowly over time, with increased interest in various demographics.

During the 2010 haunt season, the creative team devised a character to head the 20th anniversary edition of the event. The character was Fear--the physical embodiment of all of Mankind's phobias and nightmares brought to life within the confines of Universal Orlando. We focused the story on the history of HHN, using

the character of Fear as the main arcing villain, unseen during the last two decades until he could summon enough terror to rise personified and wreak havoc on our guests. From the press release that I helped create that year:

THIS YEAR THE THING YOU MOST HAVE TO FEAR, IS FEAR HIMSELF!

For the past nineteen years, he's been the master behind every frightened scream. Every ghoulish creature, every monstrous cruelty at Halloween Horror Nights has all been under his command. Now, for the first time ever, he emerges from the shadows to finally take ultimate control...and reign over all he's created.

The phrasing of the above information is very important. It solidifies the fact that that year (2010) is special; there is something new to experience. Fans of the event for the last nineteen years could now experience the event through the lens of knowing where everything that they have experienced thus far (through story) has come from, and that finally, and grossly more important, that it is only happening *this* year.

By creating a cultural perception of anxiety through this temporal fragility and the limited amount of dates one can experience the event, coupled with the idea that it will never return in the same way again, the audiences' excitement for and apprehension of attending is simultaneously increased. In this way, the tension that is released by the audience member through nervous laughter, screams, tears, false bravado, etc. all serve as a cathartic release and allows that participant to live in the moment. I will speak more of this later in the cruelty portion of this chapter.

New technologies allow for information and entertainment to reach us at the speed of light through a seemingly endless variety of avenues. It was due to this that I was at one time worried that the participants of HHN may eventually become too de-sensitized to the world around them and that Visceral Theatre would lose its impact. It is a truly frightening thought that texting in lieu of talking, or multi-tasking in lieu of focused attention may one day kill the ability of the audience to relate to anything outside the personal electronic environs they have set for themselves.

And to this point I can only suggest that time may inevitably prove this theory correct, in addition to finding that this type of event is as necessary as Artaud felt about Theatre of Cruelty. To combat the idea of an audience becoming too wise and cynical to be affected, Visceral Theatre seeks to create new thematic annually. Through these fresh ideas each year, Visceral Theatre forces the audience members (the participants) to remain present in this moment. By doing so, the audience members aren't allowed to divorce themselves from the stimulus that surrounds them. They cannot shut off, tune out, or escape the sensory bombardment that is provided- unlike the escapism provided by electronics such as smart-phones. Too much is happening too quickly for the audience member to remain separated from the action present. As the bombardment continues, there are far too many noises, smells, textures, and visual stimuli for the brain to process in the short amount of time available and

because of this onslaught the participant becomes disoriented and therefore prone to be hyper-sensitive. This creates a self-feeding cycle of, in the case of Halloween Horror nights- fear/entertainment.

It is true that individuals may get just as excited buying traditional theatre tickets as they would when purchasing admission to HHN. As a subjective art form, there is nothing to suggest that due to it's nature as an event centered on the base instinctual response of it's participants that Visceral Theatre is alone in increasing the heart rate of those that are in attendance. All theatre derives from the idea that an audience is choosing to spend its time communally sharing an experience to enhance their understanding of the human condition. Traditional tickets that they are buying are not placing them in an assumed "harm's way." The audiences of a Visceral Theatre event are demanding they have their senses assaulted via immersive, and often unexpected entertainments. Your response as an audience member is dictated more by memory than that of a "real" environmentally established response to stimuli. This relation to the action onstage, is therefore cerebral in nature and not instinctually driven. This cannot occur after multiple viewings of the same event without feeding upon itself and becoming a memory charged response. This is the reason that Visceral Theatre must remain temporary.

Duality

When developing a Visceral Theatre event such as Halloween Horror Nights; one that is both temporary and immersive. It becomes apparent that a creator must divorce oneself simultaneously from everything that has come before in relation to their own experiences-in order to keep the event compelling and viscerally charged for the guest. It becomes less what the designer would like to see and more about what is needed on behalf of the guest. This is achieved through the tapping into the experiences that the designers have acquired through applications of trade-craft (genres being used, intellectual properties being mined for inspiration), stagecraft (lighting, audio, etc.) or techniques gained through experience (distraction contrivances, etc.) in order for the theatrical event to be effective in implementation. Admittedly this “duality” during the creation of the event is by its very nature hypocritical. A creator (be they designer, director or performer) isn’t capable of completely divorcing himself from all of the events that have led him/her to their current state. Instead a designer must, during the conception of the event look through the lens of how it will affect the guest rather than personally establishing a touchstone of how it will affect them individually.

What I mean is that layman not connected intimately with this event- or more precisely any viscerally charged theatrical event- runs the risk of personalizing the experience. In the case of HHN, a person off the street may say “You guys should do a maze on spiders, that would be so scary!” and indeed an experience related to spiders may be terrifying for a particular niche of the populace but it

doesn't serve Visceral Theatre in the slightest. Questions immediately arise, surrounding any suggestion that is offered. What about spiders that is scary? Is it the way they move? How they eat their prey? Is it the hair on their bodies? An unending list of questions come flooding in which neither leads to a direction nor a thematic that can be used effectively on behalf of the guests' exposure to it.

Since there are many people that share arachnophobia it could be the existence of spiders alone that is enough for this person to think building an experience dedicated to spiders would be the quintessential HHN thematic. It is, however, this lack of detachment from their own personal phobias that would alienate the majority of the participants present at the event. In fact, based on their profession (exterminator, entomologist, or anyone else whose life centers around spiders and insects) this may have the exact opposite reaction to the maze that is intended. If the participant is too knowledgeable in the subject matter being shown, the expectations that they will have for their experience will never match what can be provided theatrically.

The second side of the coin deals with the practical applications that are necessary for all of the thematic, story lines, characters and creatures that will eventually be unleashed on the guests. Individuals tasked with the creation of the event must separate themselves from personalizing how the event may affect a guest, and in turn they must look instead through the lens of how those thematics will be executed in reality. (i.e. Would it scare/entertain me?) Much like a younger

brother who discovers that if he jumps out from behind a corner at just the right moment, his sister will scream thus eliciting the exact reaction that he was hoping for, HHN uses different tactics that have been gained over its 22 plus year history to effectively attack the senses of the guest. Simultaneously providing continued re-enforcement through practical effects, with the compounded knowledge and tools of the team responsible for conceiving all of the elements.

The spider analogy that was used earlier is also fitting in the explanation of the “duality” doctrine. In focusing on the event through the lens of how the established thematics will be brought to life, questions arise that seek information that will lead to the development of a more successful event. The questions are more pointed toward finite goals. “Is it the way spiders move that makes them scary?” is countered with “What type of armature will we use in order for the spider to remain realistic?” “How do they eat their prey?” becomes “How long should the fangs of the spider be in order for it to clear the armature and yet remain exaggerated enough to illicit the proper response.” “Is that hair on their bodies?” would inevitably lead to material choices based on the real anatomic variances of spiders or the repurposing of decor materials used in previous years that were deemed effective. This unique balancing act ensures that Visceral Theatre will feed on itself partially to become stronger with each passing year. Finding efficiencies so that it doesn’t have to expend more the next year, merely to stay at the same level of participant satisfaction as in year’s past.

Manipulation

The next doctrine is that of the illusion of manipulation and how it is utilized within Visceral Theatre to support the overall thematic(s) and help create the results (i.e. perception of danger, sincere connection to the audience, fear) that are localized within a Visceral Theatre event. To debate that the manipulation of the audience is a trait of all styles of “theatre” - and that Visceral Theatre is just the next in a long line of theatrical styles that do nothing but manipulate the audience is not my aim here. This look into Visceral Theatre is to break apart the mechanisms providing its momentum; and the use of physical, societal, even psychological manipulation as a tool.

I would like to examine the concept of illusory audience manipulation in this event, starting with the three examples of results of the manipulations cited in the previous paragraph. These include the perception of danger, sincere connection to the audience, and through that connection- fear.

Perception of Danger

The use of Manipulation in Visceral Theatre begins far before any guest has stepped through the gates of the park and into the immersive environment provided for their entertainment. It is the idea of being scared, the perception that danger will be around every corner that works on the audience member long before the event takes place. This perception is supported more through

advertisements (print, television, radio, internet, product placement, film tie-ins) than any other theatrical experience.

Examining the website that is dedicated each year to the event alone is enough to catapult Visceral Theatre beyond any marketed theatrical endeavor. Upon entering the home website to the event, the participant is automatically assaulted with atonal shifts in music and off-putting “lightning” effects. Among the spectacle within the website are also games that further the story lines of the mazes and street scare zones while educating personally to each person playing, the story and themes of that years’ event. During the haunt season of 2012, a new set of games called Horror Unearthed was begun in the hopes that it would create a place for those who, if they sought more information, they could go and work for it. Tens of thousands of individual players logged on and tested their mettle against the games that were created. This alone would not be enough to gain the loyal following of tens of thousands of players. However, by including the rule that if the participant failed the game a certain number of times, the game would lock them out from playing for a 30 minute window of time. Not only did this feature enrage several players, but due to the perception of danger that the participant faced, albeit digitally, the game grew in popularity. This perception that individuals may find themselves in danger once cultivated upon entrance to the event begins now through cyberspace and only ends when the player/participants wish it to do so. No other theatrical endeavor utilizes so many different platforms to reach out to perspective audience.

Traditional theatre is dependent on the condensed, controlled environment in order to exist. To manipulate its audience into feeling the sundry of emotions it hopes to illicit. Visceral Theatre does require a fair amount of controls and baseline safety requirements, but a condensed, controlled environment would kill the event rather than allowing it to grow. These uncontrolled controls are invisible to the audience. A participant of Visceral Theatre is willing, accepting and more importantly, demanding that the rules of society not apply. And it is this choice to be manipulated to the degree that the participants allow themselves that goes beyond any other form of theatre. There is a conscious effort to support the feeling and perception that everything has been in chaos and that no one is in charge. That it is, and hopefully will remain, reckless and scary. That implied lack of control, and the fear that it breeds is the emotional core of Halloween Horror Nights and other events like it.

The Audiences' Sincere Connection

The choice of the audience member to be engaged in a Visceral Theatre event and remain open to the attack upon their senses gives validity to the type, frequency, strength, and duration of the that attack. This does not mean that an audience member choosing to sit through a bad play, makes the plays' failures valid, it just adds validity that the art exists In addition, the choice and connection on behalf of the audience member further the validity of the various modes that

are utilized to bring that attack upon them. Street theatre, Performance Art installations, happenings, and even the occasional flash mob will attempt to work in this scope but none have found similar success due to a lack in a number of differing areas not limited to: financial support, lack of supporting environment, or merely a lack of scope to the event. Visceral Theatre, in this case HHN, while tied to the confines of a Themed Park, has no such limits.

As creators of the event, we are only limited by our imaginations. Practical elements such as budgets, schedules, administration of the event itself, and a myriad of other “real-world” facets work to support the efforts of the creative and do have a place in the dictation of resources to be used. Were it not for these constraints, structure of thematic and indeed the impact that the manipulation has on a participant, would suffer. Of course, the event as it is envisioned during the conceptual phase of development is rarely the finished product by the time these “real-world” elements have been incorporated. However, it is through this collaboration of wills that won’t allow for the creative aspects to reach the point where a participant or performer’s safety may be called into question, or become so severe as to make the event less entertaining.

Being in the public eye, a designer may frequently hear “I wish that I could have your job and think up new and scary ideas for each years’ event.” This is a truly flattering statement. The truth of the matter is that without the audience member participating and inviting the playfully benign sadism into their sphere, where they

are inevitably provided entertainment through manipulation, Visceral Theatre simply doesn't exist. That manipulation-- the perception of danger--is truly imposed by the participant upon himself or herself entering the event, but it is based on seeds of uneasiness planted by HHN long before they parked the car. It is the great, unshared truth of Visceral Theatre. The participant creates a far more vivid picture/monster/situation than we could ever hope to safely provide for them. This is the aim of Visceral Theatre's illusory manipulation- to elicit a connection with the audience and to create the full experience *with* them as opposed to *for* them. Visceral Theatre seeks to provide a novel experience that can only be found within the confines of the event for those brave enough to purchase a ticket.

And make no mistake- The participant pays for a ticket to be manipulated and by doing so, pays to have their personal space invaded- exposed to smells, décor, costumes, blood (albeit man-made), and other assorted effects that force them out of their socially expected sphere of good taste or social contract. To be emotionally invested in the communal experience that is traditionally staged theater is not a new concept, but as an audience member aren't truly living in the world that is being watched. No staged theatre can transport the audience to the worlds and realities that Visceral Theatre is capable of producing, even if it is only for a short time.

Cruelty

It is a steadfast rule within Halloween Horror Nights to never harm a guest in any way, shape or form. To this point, there are multiple signs, legal disclaimers and a rigorous attempt to keep the event as safe as humanly possible for all parties involved. That being said, the creators of the event do relish the idea of being able to garner the reactions from the participants that are received whether it is through fear, intimidation or other various physical stimuli. It is this illusion of danger; this faux-cruelty that colors all aspects of the event and it is through this that the guests perceive entertainment.

Historically artists have attempted to use cruelty to possess an audiences' will, to push the audience into action through many of the same (albeit less technical) means of encroachment. Below Albert Bermel discusses Antonin Artaud's vision of theatre. It should be noted that anyone reading this summary could describe Halloween Horror Nights in the same way.

The kind of theatre Artaud envisaged would use the classics but only after subjecting them to a radical overhaul. Lighting, sound equipment and other technical means would no longer subserve the text; they would partially replace it. The noises, music and colors that generally accompany the lines would in places substitute for them. They would be fortified by a range of human noises- screams, grunts, moans, sighs, yelps- together with a repertoire of gestures, signs and other movements. These would extend the range of the actor's art and the receptivity of the spectator. To put it another way, they would enlarge the theatre's vocabulary...they would surrender them to a performance, live through it and feel it, rather than merely think about it. (Bermel, 6-7)

The idea behind this passage- that the audience would drop their pre-conceived notions and social aloofness and react in a primal and honest way to the stimuli forced upon them- would indeed be something to behold. Stripping down material within relatable intellectual properties (in this description known as “the classics”) and re-dressing them to suit the needs of the overall thematic is essential when utilizing these cultural touchstones to support this event. And while each theatrical style (Theatre of Cruelty and Visceral Theatre) share the same basic ideology listed above, there is a significant difference. As Artaud’s main goal was a call to action on behalf of the audience, Visceral Theatre requires no such action. Visceral Theatre’s main objective is to impact the participant at a base level and affect them psychologically as well as physiologically. This is done for the sake of escapist entertainment only.

Through the use of audio, video, lighting and several other avenues of technology at our disposal we can attack the audience in ways that thirty years ago would have seemed like science fiction. Text message story building to increase the audiences’ knowledge of a particular experience, RF frequency transmitting, High-definition LED panels with fully realized green-screen produced video components highlighting themes and aesthetics, or narrative based descriptions of each attraction placed on highly advertised websites dedicated to the event and its traditions (*Figures 5, 6*)--all take a part in this barrage against the participant. Outside of listing these as examples, I will

discuss each of these later in this chapter in part to demonstrate their relevance towards anticipation and immersion.

And so this vision would appear at first glance to be as close to a mission statement for the creators of Halloween Horror Nights as we are likely to come across if it weren't for one glaring loophole. Where inside this description do the words entertainment, pastime, enjoyment or escape live? They don't. Artaud was so concerned with getting the reaction from the audience- opening the receptivity of the spectator and having them feel the experience- he never questioned whether the spectator could, through this event, increase his receptivity to it, and thereby enjoy the experience of imposed cruelty. Artaud sought to engage his audience and call them to action. This is not the intent behind HHN or Visceral Theatre. Instead, Visceral Theatre is more concerned with the quality and enjoyment of the the cruelty that it impresses upon the guest, rather than incitement.

The participants at Halloween Horror Nights are expecting to be oppressed and pushed to their limits. They expect to be confused, shocked, surprised, disoriented, even challenged on what they consider the breaking point for decency. To a certain extent the success of the event can be measured by the guests' satisfaction in being treated as inhumanly as possible. It is through this escape via punishment that they are released from their "normal" lives and are able to let go of tensions and worries that might otherwise restrict them from

enjoyment. And the reason behind this vulnerability is that the audience is fully aware that none of the horrors that they might experience are real. The social contract between participant and performer remains intact as long as the guest remains “safe” while being abused. Therefore Visceral Theatre acts as a conduit from which cruelty is transformed into pleasure.

I have often said the following when I am asked to name my favorite aspect of Halloween Horror Nights: It is the screams. But this is not because I am a sadist, or enjoy inflicting mental trauma on a subject. In fact the reason that the participants screaming in fright during their entanglement with Halloween Horror Nights, has everything to do with what immediately follows that scream.

Laughter. Either from the individual who just finished screaming, or the members of their party, a laugh is shared as a release from the tension of being frightened. Behind every scream is a laugh. I would like to posit a theory that it has to do with the release of tension long ago when a member of, say, a Paleolithic tribe was almost killed during the hunt of a mastodon. It is the release of gratitude that we are still alive, the release and receptivity that is gained by living through such an experience, the release of endorphins pumped into the nervous and circulatory systems when the instinct of flight or fight is triggered. These feelings and reactions were provided cultural relevance by Artaud as he pressed his audience to change their environment if not satisfied, and are utilized by Halloween Horror Nights as a main facet of Visceral Theatre to entertain

HAVOC: DOGS OF WAR

Ten years ago the Shadowcreek Enterprise was tasked with developing an elite corp of soldiers. They succeeded. Through an inhalant that includes a compound of testosterone, adrenaline, and other anesthetics, Shadow Creek's latest run of volunteer test subjects are ready for inspection. The project name: HAVOC. The subjects are known simply as the Dogs of War.

HORROR NIGHTS: THE HALLOW'D PAST

Halloween Horror Nights. The name brings with it millions of tales, each filled with thousands of screams. Tonight, you have the opportunity to travel into a realm where Horror Nights isn't just an event, but a reality.

CATACOMBS: BLACK DEATH RISING

During a plague of Paris and Marseilles in 1534, thousands died due to an undisclosed viral outbreak. A group of doctors took it upon themselves to quarantine the most infected citizens of the city. They had no way of knowing that the townspeople would betray them, sealing them into their doom. They have been unable to escape for almost five hundred years. Now that the dead inside have found a way out, they are rising to take their centuries old vengeance on any living being that dares to enter the Catacombs.

THE ORFANAGE: ASHES TO ASHES

Ashes to ashes, forever now dust. For years she has existed in the shadows, never getting her due. Misunderstood by all around her, she has had enough of her playthings at the Good Harvest Orphanage- now is the time for vengeance. This burned out shell contains the souls of the forgotten and the lost who all scream one name: Cindy.

ZOMBIEGEDDON

It is now Zday +6months. The United States government has re-taken the continental United States. The government also licenses and sanctions private companies to capture "un-live" subjects and use them as practical targets during these training sessions. Dozens of independent training consultant "companies" spring up, promising the best training that money can buy...and then there's ZAP...The Zombie Awareness Program.

HADES: THE GATES OF RUIN

Hades bids you welcome. Make your way into the Underworld, and come face to face with the most terrifying creatures of legend as you cross through the Gates of Ruin.

Figure 5: Maze Narrative Descriptions

Psychology and the Pursuit of Taboo Thematics

The people that are responsible for understanding and responding to the text created and used for the overall aesthetic are referred to as scare-actors. They are trained and rehearsed several nights leading up to the beginning of the event. Throughout the event each scare-actor becomes highly attuned to the nature of their character and their place among the various story-lines that dot HHN. Depending on location, the scare-actor in question may have several different actions that they will be required to repeat several thousand times within a night- all for the effect of creating a visceral response. Others will be free to roam the scare-zones mentioned above in search for their character's "prey" so to speak. These scare-actors are given intense training in physicality and tactics of how best to approach a participant and affect them. A great deal of time is spent training safety protocols for every member of the cast. This is an important facet to the event to be considered. Both the participant and the performer must remain safe during their experience or the entire illusion of control-loss will be destroyed.

Comedy exists within farce in lieu of severe physical pain artificially inflicted by characters against characters because of the illusion of that pain. It is funny because on a base animal level to watch characters that we can relate to, go through that pain. So too does it go with Visceral Theatre. A vast majority of the acts committed by the characters as they perform their roles would normally, in the light of day, or in the courts, be seen as socially taboo at best. At worst, the

acts that Visceral Theatre asks the participants to become a part of could be seen as immoral, and highly illegal. This raises several philosophical questions about the moral flexibility of the guests given a socially acceptable platform of expression. And asks whether Visceral Theatre provides a service on behalf of those guests' welfare by accommodating their short-lived vicarious existence via these thoughts and feelings while immersed in the event.

The outward expression of anger, wrath, murder, humiliation, subjugation, punishment, and fear are used as a tool to illicit the response necessary to impact the participant and force them to face internally, feelings that they may be too afraid to face in any other situation. Every major culture on the planet exudes this feeling though the use of rituals that pacify, explain, or celebrate the death of individuals. For the safety of the participants and the performers alike, during such a situation, it is imperative that clearly defined safeguards are put into place. This usually begins with what is deemed as acceptable material for use in the event. To stand watch, Visceral Theatre is shaped internally by those that create the themes and the content. It is the judgment of those responsible for the actions that will be portrayed to find serviceable stories that place participants in uncomfortable positions mentally while avoiding any injury physically.

Through the experience of creating the event for a number of years, it is possible to become attuned to the level of acceptance that particular forms of debauchery hold within society. This does not account for any random event that may color

the participants' views of certain acts of true horror. Mass-shootings, bombings and acts of depravity that move entire cultures due to their tragic and abhorrent nature are not good candidates for use within Visceral Theatre. To tastelessly re-create the illusion of such an event occurring would be to instill true panic among a populace, thereby creating a situation that cannot be controlled and by extension placing that group of participants in genuine danger. For lack of a better term; Visceral Theatre is sensitive. During the fall of 2001, as the last maze was being built in preparation that that year's event, the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred, claiming the lives of 2,977 individuals, most of whom were civilians- shocking the country and changing the perception of our culture in terms of safety. The creative team at Universal decided consciously that during that particular haunt season, that HHN would have no blood shown anywhere on property. Throughout all of the thematic mazes, green paint was spilled to look like ooze. Even the marketing of the event differed radically in those last few weeks than it had for the entire summer leading to the event. Posters and billboards no longer showed the chainsaw wielding maniac Eddie holding a severed clown head with the tagline "No more clowning around."- in reference to the idea that Eddie had killed the previous years' symbol or icon- Himself a demented psychopathic clown by the name of Jack Schmidt. Instead they were changed drastically to reflect just Eddie's eyes, which were also changed to make his character seem very alien in nature. This was the reason behind the green ooze; alien blood. It was an attempt to remain faithful to the idea at Visceral Theatre's core- Entertain people, while at the same time, remain

sensitive to the needs of a country so desperately hurting. Evidence that the impact felt between those that attend the event and those that design and perform in the event is mutual.

It is not however a moral compass pointing due north that leads the decision making process in total either. To create the illusion of deplorable acts that will frighten and convince (albeit temporarily) someone into believing that they are in danger is also something that must come from a place of passion for the genre. The creators of this type of theatre must be zealous in the execution of presenting that which others would spend their day avoiding. It is their duty to consciously consider situations that individuals would spend their lives attempting to avoid, and look for ways to simultaneously upset an audience while entertaining them.

For example, during the haunt season of 2010 a maze was conceived that placed an orphanage full of children at the center of a debate. The maze was entitled "The Orphanage," and I was tasked with writing all of the supporting materials for this experience. One of the pieces that I wrote ended up being used as a thematic example for the maze in all publicity, but not before it was altered drastically based on decisions that were made due to the nature of the story. Few people saw this piece internally before the choice was made to alter it, however it was leaked online within the code of the event's marketing for those that were curious enough to search for it.

The reason the piece was changed was its intent. The victims in this story are children, and that was seen as taboo to many of the people whom have final say over how this content is distributed internally, and ultimately publicly. I do not have reservations as an artist for the softening of the story that was created. The public never saw the original intent and therefore never had the opportunity to object or applaud our choice. No matter how terrifying the event, we are not as artists tasked with being offensive.

Shocking a group of people with how morally depraved we can set our aesthetic should not be our main objective. Attaining a moment of pure visceral reaction from them is and should remain our goal. We do not shy away from making the participants uncomfortable within the environments prescribed, but there are topics and boundaries that we will not cross. Burning scores of children happens to be one of them.

Leveling

Kim Gromoll, a senior scenic designer, and one of the collaborators responsible for the event's creation, and I were once at a question and answer session with several bloggers during a press junket for HHN. The question was asked of Kim, "Why do you [Universal] go to such lengths to make sure that every piece and part of the event feels full and rich? Wouldn't it be just as effective if you didn't treat all of the walls scenically and left some blank walls in their place? Who is going to notice that?" Kim's response was as follows.

“I’m a big movie buff, and so I like to watch a lot of the special features that come on the supplemental disks. Well, the other night I was watching the Lord of the Rings special features and it showed footage of the metallurgists and the leather smiths working on this ornate armor, and all of the patch work and stenciling. And it occurred to me that all of the individual armor that they are preparing will never be seen by anyone unless the character that is wearing it is in the foreground. Here is a group of people that are hand-crafting thousands of tabards, and tunics, and leather shirts that are going to go under something else and therefore are visually considered useless to the film. I mean, who would know the difference?” And then Kim paused and said, “It’s not a question of knowing, its a question of feeling. The answer is *everyone* who watches the movie would *feel* the difference. And I guarantee that you would *feel* the difference if we didn’t go to the lengths we go to in all of our mazes. Yes, it would be more efficient, and more cost effective, but we aren’t interested in making it easy, we’re interested in making it the way it needs to be, to tell the story.” (Gromoll)

Because of the time taken by all of those people working diligently to create vast arrays of weapons, armor, etc.- and that they took the time to do it right, means that all of the characters in the scene have the same weight to them regardless of their name, rank, or role. It was a conscience decision on behalf of the filmmakers to create that visceral connection through a thorough “leveling” of their work. Some would simply call it good story telling, but it moves beyond that. This leveling presents the viewer with something that is solid, and although complete fiction, more real than it could have been.

Visceral Theatre strives to push this “leveling” beyond that of film. You, the participant, are a part of the story. You, the participant are walking through the remains of an ancient temple about to be turned to stone by Medusa. You, the

participant are an archeologist studying the Black Plague who gets trapped in the catacombs with hordes of the vengeful undead.

Everything that is seen and felt within a maze has a long line of conscious decisions behind its existence. The columns that are strewn visually throughout the ancient temple look haphazardly displayed, but if examined closer, you would see that they are all in the Doric style because that is the style that befits the Parthenon and the Greeks at the height of their civilization. The effort that was taken to research the type of clothing and colors of robes that priests wore in the 17th century in France, so that a particular character could look as authentic as possible as he climbs out of a grave attacking the participants. By using historically accurate dates and events (as talked about in the chapter on Scenography) to support the thematic found within a maze, the creators of the event give the guest the opportunity to be entertained viscerally on several layers. The participant's experience is heightened because of the leveling that is done to create the "worlds" that are encountered. We, as the designers, strive to level the information in a way that makes it possible to travel through the event and never see everything, never experience everything, and to know that there is always more out there to explore. And due to the event's temporal fragility, it heightens a guests' experience because they at some level, are aware of the fact that they will never see everything.

Wildcards

Outside of the tools that are used to impact the participants physically within the event (auditory, visual, olfactory) there will always be those in the minority who will unequivocally refuse to allow the environments, lights, characters, etc. to impact them. They either demand too much from their entertainment and refuse to yield up control in this particular instance, or they take a skeptical stance and dare the event to prove to them how scary it can become. Whether it is out of some instinctual need to appear strong, or some other complex issue personally, it doesn't matter. These people are wasting their time and energy fighting the very people that seek to entertain them. As this is neither a clinical study, or a paper destined for a medical journal, I will concede that is something for a psychological study rather than a treatise of Visceral Theatre. These individuals are not for whom this event is created.

Just as there is that small percentage of participants who are unyielding, there is another small electorate that cannot control the response of fear that they feel within the environs we produce. This "wildcard" effect, this involuntary fear reflex *is* something that does impact the way in which the event is created, however the greatest product of this response is that it feeds the fear and anticipation of those around them, fulfilling the goals of Visceral Theatre intrinsically.

This loop, as it were, established by this small group of participants who cannot help themselves, guarantees a fearful response during the event from a certain

percentage of the participants without us, the creators being involved at all outside of conceit of the event. Using all of the other doctrines listed above, these target participants do not stand a chance, and indeed become a facet unto the event itself. The question can be raised then, that at what point have we gone too far? An ethical question for any artist, and one for which I refuse to answer here. Were I to forfeit the goals of Visceral Theatre by editing the product of my creativity the end result would dishonest and fraudulent to the ideas behind them. If I were however to say that there is no boundary then I have taken the event from a place of entertainment to one of actual horror and tragedy, thereby ensuring that it is no longer a theatrical event.

There is a way beyond this ethical paradox, a loophole if you will. Since all theatre, regardless of the style is and will remain a subjective art form, than isn't it the responsibility of the patron/participant to not place them self within harm's way. Even if the "harm" in the case of Visceral Theatre is actually quite benign? None of the actors are allowed to touch a guest, minimum safe distances are required of our performers at all times, and the blood is fake. The "Wildcard" that attend our event are indeed our favorite participants because we know that they will remember the art as it stood, and most likely with a far greater clarity than most, regardless of how damaging the experience.

CHAPTER 4: THE ART OF THE SCARE

Targeting

It is standard practice for any live theatrical experience within the themed entertainment industry to possess some element of audience participation. Interaction between guests and those performing in Theme Parks worldwide is seen as commonplace. It is interesting to note that no other theatrical venture, outside of perhaps formal Improvisational Theatre (which is based solely on audience suggestions and participation) relies so heavily on the participants engaging each other and blurring the defined line of what is performance between the two halves of the equation. It is also commonplace amongst Theme Park actors to place particular types of people into a situation so that the response to the stimuli provided has a greater chance of successfully impacting the participant. This allows for a deeper experience for a participant as well as a more entertaining situation for the remainder of the audience. Who is selected is dependent on the theme of the experience as well as the level of involvement. This may be as benign as bringing a young child on stage during a show and requiring them to jump up and down during a particular section of the event or it could be hand-selecting the unwilling “victims” as they travel through a scare-zone within HHN.

The first example of profiled audience participation immediately engages the family that the child belongs with, as well as empowers the audience to join in the fun that he seems to be having. The second creates a much smaller, yet highly

impactful moment for the individual (and anyone standing directly next to them.) I believe, therefore, that the selection of the audience members within Visceral Theatre should not be considered negative in any way, but rather these unwilling victims have the opportunity to take part in the fun of the event by participating.

The “targeting” of individuals is an essential quality to Visceral Theatre, without it, a part of what makes Visceral Theatre so special would cease to exist. We must therefore clarify further what is meant by the term, and through that clarification gain insight further into all theatrically visceral events. Targeting is not profiling. Profiling is a negative, disrespectful, and often times illegal activity. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, Profiling is defined as “the act of suspecting or targeting a person on the basis of observed characteristics or behavior” including but not limited to sex, race, or socio-economic level.

What sets Targeting apart is that in all cases it is indiscriminate in its execution, and mostly equitable in its distribution. All of the performers within HHN hone their craft, some for decades, of looking for several other factors that may increase their chances of eliciting a visceral response. Remarkably it has far more to do with body language than what race or gender the person appears to be. For those performers who have spent years working on this skill, the ability to read stress related tells, ticks, and gestures is uncanny. Second only, of course, to their ability to exploit these gestures into a scare. This points to the performer’s role in the psychological profile of the event. Without these trained “killers” at the

event the overall effectiveness of the thematic and all aesthetics would be significantly less impactful on a psychological level.

The training process, which I will speak on a little later in this chapter will be shown to focus its attention on the discretion of the performer. The performer's discretion and direction (within the confines of a particular thematic) may seem counterintuitive, but it is usually validated in its results. The selection and targeting of these selections remains a very difficult task. This is because each instance, each moment, each person, and each person's thoughts, biases, sensitivity to particular stimuli, and their cultural reference point are shifting.

We target those people who seem to have been overwhelmed by the experience that they are having. Thoughts are constantly battering away at each other within a participant's mind and it is quite enough for the designers to interject ourselves into their space. And yet, these participants are *expecting* the performers to do so, *wanting* the performers to attack them. They are asking for escape from their real lives and live within the fantastic and horrible worlds that we create. If only for a short time, it is the goal of the performer as he targets a guest, to inflict this requested cruelty. This accepted cruelty serves as a psychological catalyst that is able to be exploited by the performer in order to cause eventual pleasure for the participant. It is for this reason that we rely heavily on the hand selecting of "who" a particular actor will scare and their ability to sense whom is more susceptible to the stimuli that Visceral Theatre is able to provide-

Is there a targeting of certain guests over others? Yes, and all of it is done on a situational basis. Anyone who has been to the event should be aware of this. From a mathematical and logistical standpoint it would be impossible for every guest to be impacted individually for his or her entire duration within the experience. In order, then, to make the experience as entertaining as possible, performers may seek out the previously discussed “wildcards” and use them to gain the attention from the other participants that are within the immediate environment. This allows for two different results. The first is that by gaining this attention, the performer could be distracting a participant just long enough for another performer to assault *them*. This scare/distraction/scare technique (Or “Ping-Ponging Guests” as it is referred to by the more senior performers) does not only apply to the “wildcard” situation. Due to the unexpectedness of the attack, it is quite possible for even the hardened veteran attendees to get scared in such a way. It also means that the experience requires two attackers (one for the distraction, one for the scare,) thereby limiting the number of participants that can be scared using this technique.

Attempts have been made to augment this practice so that more participants are invited to be involved, but the creators of this event can only do so much with the resources provided. Also, the participants are not just paying money to be assaulted on a visceral level, but they are also paying to have an immersive thematic that incorporates them as fully as possible. Individualizing the

experiences through this selection process (targeting) is only one way in which this immersion into Visceral Theatre is achieved. I will discuss other avenues and paths to this immersion in the following chapters.

The second reason that the performer would seek out the attention of guests in the surrounding area is that it is a constant reminder to the participants of where they are, what they are doing there, and what the inevitable result will be. It is instinctual to fear witnessing another person, perhaps someone that you are fond of, or close relationally with, be “attacked” by a performer. This type of voyeurism builds towards a nervous and anticipatory outlook on your environment. “I may be safe now, but that may change soon enough.” Or: “If they can get that person, they can get anyone, anywhere, anytime.” Are commonplace within the event. Thoughts like this lead to physical changes in the participant that mirrors the action surrounding them, which I will discuss soon. Targeting also works to increase the overall percentage of participants able to experience “more” during their time in the event. Personalized attention from the performers helps to also evoke memories of past encounters and reinforce the tradition of excitement felt by individuals, leading them to return to the event year after year.

Environment

The art of the scare is partially dependent on successfully using environment to bridge the gap between what the participant considers reality and what they perceive as fantasy. In a previous chapter we looked at environment and how the

Scenography helps to heighten the awareness of the participants' surroundings and provides fuel for their anticipation of events to come. the physical structure of the environments the performers inhabit during the event, supports and sometimes dictates to the performer what their function within Visceral Theatre is to the participant. Thematic notwithstanding, there are two major environmental types that are developed creatively each year – Mazes and Streets. These environments play a key role in scares and how a performer elicits them.

I will break-down Mazes and Streets in relation to how performers will approach their responsibilities (both for themselves and their intended target) as well as how they overcome the limitations these elements present. Regardless of how well Scenography has primed the event participants to anticipate the performers embodying a character through the environment, costume/mask, or storyline- eventually the actor inside the costume is going to have to create an action. This action will vary widely in relation to the performer's location within the immediate maze or streetzone, and how this in turn impacts the event globally.

Art of the Scare: Mazes

When describing the environments and the way in which they interact with both the performer as well as the participant, we refer to the thematic mazes as a "book show," while the street scare zones are thought of as an "improvisational show." This distinction is important because although they are both functioning

on behalf of the larger theatrically visceral event (location within a location), they play by very different rules in how they assault the participant.

The team that devises all of the maze thematic concepts works for over a year in their development through to implementation. Each performer sees the mazes for a fraction of the time that the designers and creators have had it in their minds. It is therefore necessary to make sure that they are designed, and built to maximize the response that participants will have with little to no lead-time in preparation for their performance. And even if this weren't the case, performers also become highly aware of their surroundings within the mazes and can even find new ways of scaring that were not originally conceived of. And if it is safe to perform said action, and it doesn't damage the performance space's environment then it can be quite refreshing for one of the developers to learn about the limits of the design's flexibility.

The performers who inhabit the themed mazes during the event are, in essence, locked into a single location- Directed to execute the same actions repeatedly thousands upon thousands of times during the event. It takes a particular fortitude on behalf of the performer to do this. And more so to do it well. One facet of the mazes that enable the performers to excel is the storyline. They can rely upon the information that the guest knows and put it to their own use. Using their character within the storyline to take over a small environment and dish out whatever emotion is necessary to deliver a viscerally charged encounter. They

also become so proficient at their directed action, that they are able to pick their victims amongst the crowds that push their way through the mazes. It should be noted that the performers in the mazes don't have the luxury of being able to target their *Wildcards* from a distance like the performers found in the scare zones. Instead they have approximately 3 seconds (and in some cases, much less) to consider who they are targeting. It is possible given the proper environment, for maze performers to "ping-pong" participants, but it is much rarer due to the speed at which participants are moving through the locations.

Stamina is a key component to keeping the "energy" of the maze moving forward during the course of the event. Over the course of a single night a performer during HHN will spend upwards of 5 hours, non-consecutively, scaring within their maze locations. Most staged theatre requires an actor to be onstage for no more than 3 hours total, and it is doubtful that the physical demands on those actors that are required to perform in those longer pieces of staged theatre equal anything close to the demands that HHN places on their performers. While not delivering dialogue in most cases, there is a tremendous push of energy that one must exert in order to stand out from the chaos that has already been created within the environment. There is an art to doing this kind of intensive performance repeatedly while still making it seem fresh. Investment in the character and the story is crucial, but so is the development of different ways to enact the scare. The lighting, auditory cues, effects, etc. are there to support the performer, but they (the performer) must force the participants' attention away

from those things, even if it is only for a split second, in order to capture their scare. It is a testament to the dedication of such individuals based on their stamina in relation to scaring. It is quite possible to have a performer successfully depress the trigger used to scare no less than 4,000 times during a night. This is a tremendous show of tenacity and personal stamina on their behalf.

Commonly the themed mazes are referred to as houses or haunted houses. However this distinction is incorrect. Since the participant has never been through the experience prior to the night of attendance they do not know where they are going, and invariably could get lost within the experience. Thus justifying the name albeit through definition only. As a rule most of the mazes employ several different types of disorienting features which only increases the confusion of the partaker. For participants who have traveled through the event once or many times before- they will find that the maze still retains a level of mystery directly proportionate to the level of scare that they will receive from the performers inside.

Art of the Scare: Streets

The Street scare zones, and the scares that are found there, are still rooted in the same philosophy as the mazes, but without the scenic anchors that performers in the mazes draw their performance from. On the street it is complete performance street art, with clearly defined goals. The benefit that a

performer may feel being in a maze is one of structure. The participants willingly place themselves within an “attack” zone near the performer, and once the performer gets his timing down, they are able to physically affect people by using their bodies as well as any lighting or auditory triggers that they may have at their disposal.

The Streets, however, are drastically different in their approach towards production of scares. I touched on this briefly while discussing Targeting. Each group (scare zone) works independently from each other; locked to their own distinct thematic. They, far more than the mazes, utilize the doctrines of *Perception of Danger*, and *Sincere Audience Connection* to achieve their goals.

Visceral Theatre attempts to become far more than a spectacle filled event tied to a simple overall theme. It attempts to shape an audience members' experience in a way that they will never forget. Visceral Theatre places the participants in familiar settings (Hollywood Blvd, or any of the easily recognizable locales within Universal Orlando Resort) and then destroys their perception of safety, and distorts any sincere connection they may have held for those locations on previous visits.

The doctrines of *Manipulation and Choice* also factor heavily into the Street program. In that, the participants are manipulated into feeling as if they have a choice of when and where performers could strike. Participants *choose* to enter

the mazes on their own volition. No one has such a choice in the streets. Carefully crafted scare zones exist at particular locales, traditionally, so that guests *must* take part in the event. Developing the scenography of particular locations to directly impact the participants is paramount. Recent advances in scaring also include random hordes of characters moving throughout the event each night, randomizing their appearances and disappearances so that no one knows exactly when they will be present. Universal has also legally cleared these characters to enter the once safe havens of the stores and restaurants; further proving that immersion means just that. The only safe location within the confines of Universal Orlando during HHN is the restrooms. Legally the event is not permitted to pursue a participant into this location.

Another facet of the Streets that separates themselves completely from the Mazes is that the performers are encouraged to roam freely within these zones and attack the guests using any number of different scaring techniques. Needless to say HHN employs several proprietary types of scaring techniques that may not be discussed here at length. I will, however, go so far as to divulge that the scaring process in the Streets is far more rigorous than a performer within a Maze.

In a Maze the participant is surrounded on all sides by the experience. Fully detailed sets, décor, specialized lighting, effects and even the occasional video element encroach upon their personal space thereby putting the onus on the

quest to explore their environment in a tension filled straight line. This “tension” is beneficial unconsciously to the participants’ overall experience, even though at the time the participant is unaware. This “anticipatory unexpected stress” partnered with the already accompanied “anticipatory expectant stress” and the physiological reactions to the event will be discussed later in this thesis, and it will become clear how this is true.

Conversely, with no constructed environment to support your abilities to scare, performers on the Street utilize speed, clouds of fog, and guest flow to increase their chances of attack. Unlike the Mazes, in the Street program with no major environments displayed for the participants (other than the original park structures as they stand) the burden to act is on the performer. Consciously targeting each group of guests that walk by and plucking out a victim. Sometimes elaborate set pieces are used, but mostly the performers are so attuned to the ebb and flow of bodies that they know when to scare and when to refrain. As the performer becomes more attuned to the movement (lights, sounds, fog, physical effects created) within their area, the character that has been created for them, limitations of their costume, as well as the ebb and flow of participants throughout the area, they are more likely to be able to ascertain whom they should attack next.

During the course of the event a participant may need to spend time outside of the direct experiential contact that the scarezones provide by allowing

themselves to be funneled through queue lines that lead to the various mazes within the event. And stepping out of the event does present a problem in relation to the experiential fulfillment that we ask from our participants. However, as previously discussed in chapter 2, every attempt is made to keep their emotional state of mind heightened, and via these attempts sufficiently entertained.

Throughout its history HHN has employed several different techniques to keep the participants in as close to a state of disorientation as possible. While not permissible to attack the participants, legally, while restricted in a queue- to do so would cause an unsafe panic- attempts are made to interact with them and assault their senses. There is a large amount of proprietary information that bars me from divulging too much in relation to all of the steps taken to impact the participants thusly. However, I will say that if there was a weak link in the amount of participation allotted to the guests at any one time, it would be when they are waiting to enter a maze. Or, more succinctly, this is an area in which we could improve the participants' experience.

“Traditional” Shows

Unless specified within the handbill, most traditional full length plays and musicals include an intermission period in which the patrons may take a moment to digest the information and emotion that they have been allowed during the first half of their experience. Visceral Theatre has no intermission. Instead, the closest thing to a pause within the event is the two to three (depending on the

year- Remembering *Temporal Fragility of Time*) different staged pieces of traditional theatre to which the audience can be treated. And while the first example is a show that has been staged for the last two decades, each year it is fresh and without any ties to the previous incarnation except the name of the title characters.

Bill and Ted's Excellent Halloween Adventure is an annual parody show that highlights and skewers the years' pop culture. The characters Bill and Ted are taken from a pair of movies from 1989 and 1991 respectively, (imdb.com) about two slackers who are destined to change the world for the better. This 25-30 minute comedy show is filled with bawdy humor, dancing, adult language, and scantily clad people all attempting to give a bit of respite before the participants move on and continue exploring the event. Conceived entirely within a matter of months, this show has its finger on the pulse of what is trending in social media, film, television, and music. The creators of this show take pride in being able to deliver a solid, story-based, humorous show that has a large gathering of faithful attendees each year. Through the use of humor, it is able to provide balance to the rest of the event by giving the participants time to calm down before being plunged back into the nightmares that have been created.

While the show itself doesn't count as an "intermission" per se, it does allow the participants the opportunity to take a few minutes between being terrified. This is

a necessary aspect to the event (both inherent to this particular show as well as globally event-wide) for three different reasons. The first is that it offers another venue of entertainment to the participant so that they feel as if their money was well spent. It is completely contrary to the rest of the event and is therefore looked at as a place of refuge. (Even if only subconsciously.) And the final reason is that it allows the participants to feel a sense of safety during a time in which they have been bombarded with sensory-overloading experiences. It resets their emotional standpoint so that they will be more open to the scares once the show finishes and the audience is literally “dumped” out into the event.

For the past few years a shift has occurred within this show that I believe bears reporting. Previous to 2007 no profanity had been allowed in the show by any of its characters and now it is commonplace within each years’ script. None of the words are beyond what is said on basic cable after 10pm everyday, but to hear them spoken in that venue, publicly, within a theme park means a great deal. The event is marketed with the idea that no guest should be under 13 due to parental guidance being suggested. I feel as if the use of profanity that is used on late night cable television could, in some instances, add something to the scene. But the use of these words within a park that is normally squeaky clean during their daytime operations does more than just change the dynamic of what is being seen. By using these words during a live show (in a theme park) it is immediately implied to the participants that the rules that would normally stop them from investing emotionally to the event that they are attending are now gone.

Those restrictions have been lessened and therefore the event itself becomes more dangerous to all involved. By creating material that would be taboo for any guest outside of HHN, Visceral Theatre makes the very strong statement that it intends to create an experience that is singularly adult and because of this, Visceral Theatre commands the attention of the participants present.

There are several different shows that have fit into “second billing” status during Halloween Horror Nights’ history. Throughout the years magicians, freak shows, group dancing, live “executions,” contortionists, and a multitude of other types of acts have lived on the HHN stages and have provided a break from all of the action. The most positively received of these shows was the Rocky Horror Picture Show: A Tribute. This slightly truncated re-telling of “Rocky Horror,” is based on the cult-classic film from 1975 (imdb.com) and is one of the most popular shows that have ever been produced on Universal property. This second opportunity for the participants to break away from the event for a short time was filled with audience participation opportunities and live singing and dancing.

This participation allows the guests to forget about the scariness of the event for a short time, and focus instead on just enjoying themselves. Like the above example, anytime that there is a difference in stimulation throughout a

participants' entire exposure to the event, the more likely they are to be impacted more drastically by the high stress periods and find more pleasure in the low stress intervals. In this way, "Visceral Theatre" acts as more of an umbrella term and that these different facets of the performance embrace aspects of the Visceral Theatre model depending on the creators' and audiences' expectations (or in spite of them.)

Scareactors

No proof, other than my own observation, makes this next statement any more true. The performers that bring forth HHN as Visceral Theatre each year are among the hardest working, dedicated, and passionate individuals that I could hope to have the pleasure to work with in any venue or event. The fact that these people pour their heart and souls into every "set" (defined as a forty-five minute period working followed by a forty-five minute break, repeated throughout the night) that they work is a testament to the event's ability to create such a following within its rankings.

Imagine being placed within a space half the size of a standard closet, in the dark, wearing a latex mask. Add to this, fifteen pounds of clothing, and having to perform the exact same physical motion and attack every seven seconds for an entire 45-minute period, repeated multiple times each night and multiplied by the amount of nights throughout the run of the event. Conservatively this means that

each performer within the mazes of HHN will have performed over 55,000 of these cycles in the conditions cited above. And while each of them off the record would give a different reason as to why they do what they do; it is my assumption that they perform these tasks on behalf of the story that has been built as a backbone for the character that is being portrayed.

The work ethic that is displayed yearly by a largely returning cast is humbling to the uninitiated. And one could mistake this dedication for passion about the genre of horror films alone. However, this is hardly the case. Due to overwhelming response and loyalty that HHN sees from its alumni-based cast each year, it is necessary to begin auditions the second weekend in July. This first Tuesday, or what has now become known as “The Reunion” brings together any and all of the people who have performed in Halloween Horror Nights in totality through its existence and offers these people the first chance to be cast in that year’s event.

Because of the varied background of all of the performers (ranging from elementary school teachers, lawyers, and professors to tattoo artists, car mechanics, and students) this “reunion” gives them the opportunity to come back together and see one another previous to the current year’s event beginning in earnest. More than a few marriages that have resulted from couples having met while performing at HHN, and subsequently there are now performers that were

not yet born when their parents were first connecting viscerally with the participants in the park who are now scaring alongside their mothers and fathers.

These inter-personal connections that the performers have made, over time, are no different than any other cast of any other type of theatrical endeavor. However I would argue that these connections are far more necessary in order for Visceral Theatre to exist and thrive, than in other climates. When placing yourself inside the type of conditions listed above, it helps to know that others are doing the exact same thing for the exact same purpose at the exact same time. Both the Street and the Maze casts understand, and take ownership of their roles, as well as their more global role in the theme of the year. Each maze is independent from another and yet communally they form a varied, immersive, singular experience. Micro in detail yet macro in effect. Each of the performers assumes The performers that take part in the ritual of Visceral Theatre foster camaraderie through their struggles to maintain character (in certain situations) as well as through their collective successes. If the participant is gaining a cathartic release through their role in the dynamic collaboration that is Visceral Theatre, than the performer is receiving just as great a gift in the eliciting of that response.

Training

Of all of the traditions that have sprung up internally among the performers during the 22 year history of HHN, the training of a scareactor during the rehearsal process of Halloween Horror Nights is one of the most peculiar.

To train approximately 1,000 performers over a three week period is a very large task. It is the second to last step (ahead of execution of the event itself) in a very long process that began months earlier during the concept phase for the current year's event. The concepts are then disseminated to a larger group of designers and technicians to begin the process of determining what will be feasible to be created in the time allotted. Once these parameters are met there are several other steps (construction bids and the like) that must be adhered to before casting the event. Once however the cast has been selected, there is a veritable small army of support staff helping to create the event as it is experienced on behalf of the participants.

Due to the high volume of action that the performers will inevitably undergo during the full run of the event, it is important to not tire them out with too much information as they train. It is extremely important to pass on the ideas and main themes to each of the maze stories, however, as they will be carrying the weight of the story and supporting it through their actions during the length of the experience. For this reason it is important that we involve the cast in as much of the thematic as possible. Previous to this involvement the first rehearsal begins by filling out the necessary paperwork and attending all of the safety awareness classes that have been designed specifically with the Scareactors in mind. There are pages of material that must be covered so that each and every performer that

is a part of the event feels secure in their environment and how to prevent injuries.

The next phase of their training incorporates all of the stories that surround HHN for that year. It is also a highlight for both the creative team as well as the performers. Together, with their fellow cast members, each street and maze is told the oral story of their particular piece of the event. This part of the training is unique to Visceral Theatre for several reasons. The first is that the performers, until this point, are still to a large degree, guests. They are not full participants in the event yet, no makeup has been applied, no costumes have been fit. The people who show up the first night of rehearsal are able to sit back and absorb the stories on an intellectual level before moving toward the physical. This is one of the single greatest advantages that we are able to give to our performers. By slowly involving them into the story and giving them roles within it provides an ownership of that story that only Visceral Theatre is able to provide.

Traditionally an actor is cast, performers for Halloween Horror Nights are created. Through a personalization that occurs during this dissemination of story. The previous sentence may read as gauche, but the underlying development that is taken to impact as large of a cross-section that occurs within this story telling has a direct impact on the individuals in attendance. The casts immediately upon hearing these stories begin imagine their characters' place within that world. As

they are given makeup looks, costume pieces, and inevitably placed within their “boo-hole,” they begin to take on the mantle of passing that story directly onto the participants as they travel through the event.

Beyond the connection that the casts feel toward their particular story, a bond is formed inside of each cast that morphs and may end being larger in nature than their performances within their relative spaces. Simply put, the scareactors begin to add to the story through their actions.

Case in point; During the 2010 haunt season, an original maze was developed titled HAVOC: DOGS OF WAR (The description of which is labeled in Figure 4.) The idea was inspired by a vast array of espionage movies, comic books, war movies, etc. During the concept phase it was talked about that the characters that inhabited this maze would be so affected by the chemicals that they were given, that they had lost all of their hair. During the audition phase this meant that we had to ask the question of every person who came through the door, male or female, if they would be willing to keep their head shaven down to the skull for the duration of the event. The turnout was enormous.

During the training phase it was time to provide all of the cast members with a haircut. For all of the performers that had yet to shave their heads we offered and

saw several performers have their heads shaved. This was a visceral, immediate bonding moment for all of the performers.

From this we also saw developments in cast cohesiveness that we, as creators, could never have fathomed. As the cast were all military personnel, they created their own cadences to coincide with their travels to and from set. They developed code names for themselves and their management staff and only answered to these during the run. Part of the makeup design was to place barcode “tattoos” on the temple of each of these soldiers. The idea was that they were treated like animals and that together they were more important than individually. One of the performers went so far as to get an actual tattoo of the makeup design on her skull, where normally the makeup would be applied.

During the run of the event this maze consistently had fewer injuries, call outs for sickness, or safety issues than all of the other mazes within the event, while maintaining one of the highest reported guest satisfaction scores on record. This one facet of their characters was enough to push them together and make them depend on one another. That is something that the training could never provide. Unfortunately due to guest satisfaction matrices, guest satisfaction counts, and the results all being proprietary they will not be included here. However, the success of this maze has now led to a sequel being created in the current (2013) iteration of the event.

There have been dozens of original mazes created during the history of HHN. However, only a very small percentage of these mazes are granted a second story to expand upon the guest experience beyond the single year. The only way a maze is able to make the leap from a singular experience and have any continued life (thus becoming the exception to temporal fragility) is to have an extremely compelling story line mingled with over-abundant guest satisfaction to its original incarnation. And the only way to achieve this is through internal collaboration during the concept phase coupled with an aggressive training regimen that may include going to extreme lengths (shaved heads,) and a passionate group of individuals trained to carry out the thematic of a maze beyond even the creators' original hopes. The performances that are delivered border on the fanatical, but it is what is needed to deliver a lasting impact viscerally.

CHAPTER 5: OUTSIDE THE INSIDE

Visceral Theatre Vs Other Mediums

To gain perspective on Visceral Theatre's ability to affect audiences, it is necessary to describe and elaborate upon different entertainment offerings and what they may lack in regards to Visceral Theatre. The visceral connection that an audience has with film cannot be denied. For over a century this has been the entertainment choice of the populace. Each week during the summer "blockbuster" season, throngs of people line up in droves to watch their favorite celluloid heroes duke it out for the coveted prize of years' best. However, this experience has little to do with immersion, Visceral reactions based on film properties have to do with the over-active imaginations of the audience that plant ideas about what they have experienced. The audience takes part in the activities that work to force a reaction- the honest reactions of an individual thrown into a situation which could be perceived by them as wholly out of their control. And it would be laughable if it weren't for documented cases of audience members not being able to control themselves physically while watch a film.

A filmgoer who saw the movie in 1974 during its original release fainted and broke his jaw on the seat in front of him. He then sued Warner Brothers and the filmmakers, claiming that the use of subliminal imagery in the film had caused him to pass out. The studio settled out of court for an undisclosed sum. The film affected many audiences so strongly that at many theaters, paramedics were called to treat people who fainted and others who went into hysterics. (Frater)

The imagination of an audience member driving them to have such a unique, focally charged occurrence with the visual ghost of an actor who is portraying a character months previous to the audience member's experience is surrealistic at best. It highlights the amount of power a person's imagination and belief center can be when dealing with irrational symbols, situations, or thematics. It also solidifies the influence Visceral Theatre has over its audience.

Use of the Physiological Response Pattern

We tap into the emotional brain of our participants, bombarding them with atonal audio at a wide range of volumes, video content for them to witness events that help to set up various experiences, distractions, and tactile re-enforcement of their environment. As a reward, (outside of the financial) the participants provide us with their screams and laughter. One of the strongest pieces in the arsenal of HHN in regards to guest interaction is also one of the simplest, and easily the most overlooked. This use of the physiological response pattern taps directly into the logical brain, over-loading it with information for the express purpose of then bombarding the emotional core of the brain. SIF, as it is referred to by everyone connected to the construction of the mazes, or "Stuff in Face" gives a huge advantage within the thematic mazes in our attempts to create more viscerally charged theatrical moments. (i.e. scares)

The idea of hanging pieces of shredded material (cloth, plastic sheeting, severed body parts) simultaneously blocking a participants' view of what is coming next plus increasing the amount of tactile contact during their experience is one way to increase the guests experience. Pieces of black monofilament to simulate the feeling of walking through spider webs is often enough to over-load the logic center in the brain and cause the individual to become hyper-sensitive to their location and the stimuli it holds. Even though it sounds simple, and ludicrous to believe, in execution it is extremely effective in "preparing" as it were, a participant for victimhood. This sensitivity goes beyond the instinctual urge to safeguard a defined personal space when faced with an unfamiliar encounter in an unfamiliar environment. Upon walking through heretofore, unseen strands of a foreign material are enough to short-circuit the prefrontal cortex- and give the emotional side of the brain control over which survival response to choose from. This is a unique facet to Visceral Theatre and one that it relies on in order to exist. Without the ideas behind this forced surrender of the dogmatic portion of an individual's mind, inhibitions would keep that participant from being fully immersed into the thematic provided.

For those individuals who consciously choose to remain immune to the event via alcohol consumption, defensive societal posturing, or the like, an attempt is still made to include them within the proceedings. And while the targeting of participants is fair, the reactions seem to increase once a participant who seemed to be in control has been broken down and accepts the actions of the

creators of HHN. There are definitive physical responses that are included in this process. The targeting is used to increase the amount of adrenaline within the blood stream.

Increased heart rate and intensity and speed of horizontal eye movements in this experiment were attributed to the startle response. This is attributed to the sympathetic flight-or fight response trigger by the fear center located in the amygdala. The release of norepinephrine on the betaadrenergic receptors, located on the SA node and the ventricles of the heart, causes an increase in heart rate. The autonomic nervous system innervates the oculomotor, trochlear, and abducens cranial nerves, which are responsible for movements of the eyes. The muscles used for eye movement are skeletal muscle; therefore, amplified sympathetic innervations cause greater contraction resulting in increased speed and intensity of the eye movement.

(Schmitz, et al.)

The above quote is from the paper “Physiological Response to Fear in Expected and Unexpected Situations on Heart Rate, Respiration Rate and Horizontal Eye Movements.” It speaks to a very important aspect of Halloween Horror Nights, and Visceral Theatre on the whole.

Physically human beings are wired with the flight or fight instinct and this instinct is (as a writer for the themes that are used within actual events) a blessing. We want to engage the audience to a point where they feel as if they are seeing something that shouldn't exist, actions that shouldn't be happening, and yet we must not go too far as to elicit panic from the masses. In all honesty I do not believe that we as artists will ever be capable of going too far.

The manipulation of the logic center within the brain of a participant is a temporary instance, only effective as long as they remain in the event. And there is currently no research on residual trauma outside of nightmares the participant might experience once they are safely home. Also, it is a benign manipulation as it is completely voluntary. Participants arrive expecting to be changed and altered by the events of the evening. It is our task to provide that short-term alteration.

The Illusion of Choice (The Magic Number is 7 +/-2)

There was a brilliant study conducted by Barry Schwartz, a Professor of Psychology at Swarthmore College, that dealt with the inability of human beings to maintain rational thought when presented by a limited amount of choices and or particular amounts of information. this study, as discussed via an interview/expose that Schwartz presented to Radiolab, it takes surprisingly little to overload the logic circuits. Participants within the study were asked to memorize a number somewhere between five and nine numbers. After they were given this number they were asked one at a time to leave the room, continue thinking of the number, walk down a hallway, and then enter another room, and finally repeat the number to a person sitting there. As each member of the study performed this task- and while attempting to retain the number they had been asked to memorize- they encountered a person with a tray halfway down the hallway unexpectedly. This person offered the participant a treat. The choices were a fruit cup or a piece of chocolate cake. The participants in the study are

faced here with a dilemma. Do they make the logical choice and choose the fruit cup which is healthier for them, or do they choose the chocolate cake and gain emotional satisfaction? One of the most interesting facets of this study is that it is a double study showing cause and effect. When a participant is given a task of remembering something, anything, that totals seven, plus or minus two, they are incapable of keeping their emotional brain in check. The logical brain is, according to this study, an incredibly strong appliance within the brain, however once it is tasked it cannot restrain the emotional brain by a factor of seven times. "They are overwhelmed by choice, leading to a shutting down of their logical brain and a susceptibility for their emotional brain to take over control."

(Schwartz)

The participants selected chocolate cake more than seven times over those who chose the fruit cup. This information on the way individuals think in situations where they are faced with choice and information is a boon for Visceral Theatre if it is used to our advantage. We may either by over-load the logic circuits through mental exercise or by giving too many options to the participant we will kill the ability of the participant to remain purely logical. This will therefore increase their emotional response to the stimuli at hand. The evolution of Visceral Theatre, therefore, is to attempt the over-loading of the prefrontal cortex with too many options for entertainments. Increase either the stimuli that the guest is required to interact with or give them so many options that their primary defense (logic center) against all of the stimuli provided is too weak to fight back.

These varying techniques can appear in several different guises throughout the event. By developing new mazes with a variety of thematics each year we have already forced the guests to select from such a large number (Within the range of seven, plus or minus two.) that they are off balance psychologically. Take into account the freedom that the participants are allowed inherently in regards to how they progress through the event and it is easy to see that Visceral Theatre stacks sets of these choice structures together to continue the logical disconnect. For every action that a participant in the event takes, there is a feedback loop that is ensuring their reactions to the stimuli presented are taken from their emotional core rather than their analytical or critical mind.

Unfortunately there is a down-side, morality notwithstanding, to the feedback loop that the participant will feel during the experience. According to Schwartz, immediately following your visceral experience in which the emotional brain has dictated action, there is a moment of Choice Angst, what he labeled “The Disease of Modernity.” During HHN participants may find themselves lamenting that they did not choose a different (in the case of Visceral Theatre this would mean entering a maze with multiple paths) course of action. “They are overwhelmed by choice, leading to a shutting down of their logical brain and a susceptibility for their emotional brain to take over control.” (Schwartz)

However, based on the opportunity that participants have at their disposal of going through an experience several times, they can alleviate this feeling by taking the time to return to the event again and make a different choice- thereby increasing their overall event experience. And, with the above principals of Temporal Fragility and Cruelty- it is certain that their experience becomes increasingly heightened and will grow in prominence among their memories regarding the event.

CHAPTER 6: STORY COMES FIRST

Process For The Writer (In the Realm of Visceral Theatre.)

After investing in the scientific reactions of participants event-wide based on the previous chapter, one might get the impression that anyone can prepare the types of experiences that our guests face and retain the same reactions. And yet without story coming first there is no event-wide experience to attend. That story has everything to do with the anticipatory anxiety that the participants feel as they enter the event and with the physiological responses that occur based on that external stimuli once they are experiencing them first-hand.

Story must remain a fixture within a Viscerally Theatrical event in order for it to be successful. In fact, it *must* come first above all else. It is also true that several different events function throughout the United States and overseas annually, but because they don't adhere to the guiding principal of "Story Comes First" there is no rhyme nor reason for the haunts they operate and thus they cannot be considered Visceral Theatre. Story is the benchmark to which this distinction is made. Anyone can build a "haunted house." Not everyone can provide the type of all immersive, consuming event that has such a reaction with its participants that it thrives for over two decades, growing each year in reputation and esteem. (GoldenTicketAwards.com) It is due to the diligence that is taken in the creation of the stories that are used each year that makes the difference. In the following chapter, the ideas that result from this process will be discussed, and so I would

like to take this time to break down how story comes first as opposed to focusing on the results of this action.

Inspiration for the stories that are told can literally come from anywhere. It is carefully choosing which of these pieces of inspiration will yield an exciting experience for our guests that becomes the challenge. Earlier within this thesis the doctrine of *Sincere Audience Connection* dealt less with the content that the participants would be exposed to and with the messaging of the content in order to maximize it's effectiveness once the participant began exploring the event. Story isn't concerned with the messaging. Story transcends the messaging.

Take for example the wholly unused story that appeared earlier within this treatise regarding little Cindy and the eyewitness accounts of the tragedy surrounding the Good Harvest Orphanage. While *pursuing* this particular *taboo thematic*, it was necessary to create this story as a basis for all of the experiences that the participants were going to be involved in as they traveled through the maze. The location of the Orphanage and several other key facets to the story are all derived from a real town in Ohio named Carey. Carey is the birthplace for one of the Show Directors responsible for creating the event. While this homage to a hometown at first seems like a expression of camaraderie between creators, Carey was also chosen for very specific reasons. Its semi-remote location within the state of Ohio allows for creative license on events that would occur there due to the relatively small amount of people that would have or

had traveled there with any regularity. The small population lends itself towards more freedom creatively in being able to manipulate the geography and historical references that involve the town. The archetype of an idyllic small town “somewhere in America” also allows for the horrible psychological thought of “If it can happen there it can happen anywhere” within the guests’ minds. Through research done to correctly place the Orphanage within the town limits, the names of newspaper publishers within the area, as well as the Wyandot Wildlife Management Area, the participants are treated to a full, rich, ghost story that immediately and viscerally sets the tone for the thematic of the maze.

Although this particular story wasn’t used in the final execution of the event, it is no less important in showing from where inspiration can come. It also demonstrates that at no time did the idea of terminating this thematic in lieu of one that would have been more tame and therefore more palatable for a larger number of participants ever come up as a discussion point. Story came first. Even if it meant that eventually it would be augmented to meet certain standards within the setting of HHN, it came first.

A Scare is Just a Scare

Psychological and Physiological consequences aside, there is a very real need for the event to be scary in order for it to be successful. Participant approval of the event hinges on this aspect more than any other. And it is through the combination of the above mentioned doctrines filtered through well constructed

and leveled stories, this example of Visceral Theatre is able to affect participants at a core level. These reactions are purely due to the fact that a scare is sometimes just that.

On a practical level as a creators, we face several limitations on what we are allowed to do to/with a participant legally- both for their safety and our own. This heavily impacts the type of scares that we are able to accomplish. Combining the maze thematic/story to the limitations of the real world and the limitations of the performers in a way that doesn't detract from the participants' overall enjoyment is a particularly difficult challenge.

There is a technical term for the location of a Scareactor within their set inside the maze. A Boo-hole. This nickname arose not long after the event's inaugural run and has become a part of the shorthand used between Scareactor and management, creative team, and each other to describe particular situations that they face; situations that may require assistance in protection from an over-zealous participant panicking, work-related injuries from over-exertion, or simple clumsiness.

Above any other facet of the event, safety of everyone involved is our primary concern. All other decisions, particularly creative choices, are scrutinized with the safety of all those involved taken into account. In the same way that the sincere

connection that we wish to establish with the participant can be used to greatly impact the guest and create a collaborative experience, it can also serve as a spring board for mischief and malice in a very destructive manner. This is true of all viscerally charged theatrical pieces. Anytime the participants are given an amount of trust on behalf of the performers, there is always the chance that they will choose to destroy the collaborative process. Being hyper-sensitive allows HHN (Visceral Theatre) to maintain an entertaining atmosphere while still protecting everyone. It is due to this vigilance that participants are able to attend and feel free to create with the performers.

The amount of people that travel through the event during its run is astonishing. Several hundred thousand participants will attend the event during its duration. This means that the design must also provide a similar experience for all of these people and yet appear to be the first time the action/effect/lighting change has ever occurred. Each individual must feel as if the story was written for them. That the maze they are about to enter into was created with their deepest phobias in mind. That as the designers and creators of the event, we not only know what scares all of the guests, but we will also prove it.

As designers, we attempt to include some flexibility in the finished locale so that a performer doesn't get tired of doing the exact same thing for thousands of cycles. We work to make them as comfortable as possible, especially if they have been asked to perform within a Boo-hole that may not be a standard size

(doorway, bed, sewer grate, etc.) In fact placing hypothetical Scareactors within a maze at varying degrees of height is an extremely effective way to describe this principle:

The story dictates that the performer's character must perform actions "A."

1. Press the trigger switch that will set off a blinding burst of light from a large strobe lamp over the participants' head accompanied by an enormous roar that seems to come from the elevated horizontal prison cot that the performer is laying on.
2. Simultaneous to this auditory and optical distraction, the Scareactor would then roll toward the participants, reaching for them.

If successful the reaction from the participant will be "B."

1. The participant physically recoils away from the stimuli.
2. Participant is immediately attacked from the other side of the corridor by the Scareactor they did not see standing there.

With a goal of eliciting result "C."

1. The participant screams.

CHAPTER 7: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES VS ORIGINAL CONTENT

History Lesson- Beginnings

The growth of HHN (and thereby Visceral Theatre) throughout its history has been nothing short of staggering. The event began in 1991 and was originally entitled “Fright Nights.” (horrornightnightmares.com) Over the course of three nights guests were treated to a single haunted attraction, the aptly named *Dungeon of Terror*, and more show-like experiences than any other event since. Before discussing the different periods of growth and expansion I would like to touch on the initial reasoning behind developing the vast array of live performance pieces that the guests were treated to at this event. Primarily it was due to the fact that the producers did not know if anyone was going to come. The cultural niche that Visceral Theatre would soon carve within the Central Florida area was up until that point, largely non-existent.

Universal chose to develop a maze experience in *Dungeon* that was unlike any other before it. Film quality sets, professionally applied makeup and costuming, special effects- these were the hallmark of the event and guests couldn't get enough. I have chosen to not supply a physical layout of this first maze to compare it to one created within the modern era. This does not come out of a belief that it would not “hold up” against those mazes that came after it. *Dungeon of Terror* still ranks as one of the most popular mazes in the event's history. I do feel however, that there is a very good reason for this ranking. It was the first to

fully immerse the guests in an experience of its kind. It had a novelty that all of mazes must pay homage to if they are to be successful. And while paying that respect, it is just as important for the mazes that are created each year to set themselves apart through innovation while adhering to the doctrines listed above.

The event, as terrifying for the guests as it may have been was still not what I would classify as Visceral Theatre. This first attempt with its amazing, albeit single, maze surrounded by live-show experiences similar to what you would be seen in a carnival's midway was still missing a vital ingredient towards becoming a full scale viscerally charged theatrical event. It received this ingredient three years later. The event's fourth incarnation resembled more closely that which it does today. In 1994 the inclusion of a full street program lead to the creation of the first "Scarezones," thereby gaining the ability to transform guests into participants in what can be called Visceral Theatre.

Although the reason behind incorporating the streets into the experience may seem like the logical progression of the event as we look at it now, it can not be overstated how radical an idea like this was at the time. To allow hundreds of actors, many armed with props and functional chainsaws (sans sawing teeth) to roam throughout the streets of an event with no prior knowledge on how to control them outside of the limited training that they received- and let them "attack" participants that have *never* experienced anything like it- is an amazing conceit regardless of its origin.

In some ways this moment- when a guest first experiences what it means to be completely immersed within the environments of HHN- they cease to be just a guest and become a participant, themselves impacting and devising the theatre working around them. The theatre which cannot exist fully without them taking part; this transition of a guest into a participant is one of the purest moment's that Visceral Theatre can hope to accomplish.

History Lesson- Expansion

Halloween Horror Nights is an annual institution. Seasonally, an expected event. This theatrically visceral experience has changed drastically during its 23 year legacy, both growing and evolving into the juggernaut that it is today. From the simple beginnings of a single maze experience in 1991, Halloween Horror Nights now employs well over 1,000 people each year. And that number is just for the performers and support staff, let alone the entire parks' staff who are helping to support the event globally. Due to its popularity it has expanded from 3 nights to 25 nights spread across two months. Worldwide media and marketing for the event brings a significant "Outer-US" guest load into the experience. Some of whom will spend their entire two-week holiday at the park attending HHN. If looked at with the correct lens, it could be said that every person who works for Universal Orlando Resort helps shape the event into its current iteration.

All of this expansion directly impacts how HHN is able to function as an entity. Organizationally, the event has had to adjust and evolve just as rapidly. Content aside, innumerable changes have been made to the logistical side of the event. Unfortunately, due to legal prudence and the proprietary nature of these business plans and human resource parameters, and absolutely no impact upon what the participants may feel during their time within the event, I have chose to omit them here.

What has also expanded throughout the years is the level of expectation that the participants hold for their experience within the Visceral Theatre. Due to the education that these returning participants are given as each year passes, techniques and technology must evolve to suit the ever growing tastes and knowledge bases exhibited by the returning candidate. This is a challenge that the designers of this event relish. This invisible collaboration (pressure) pushes the creators to develop stronger thematics, and more viscerally stimulating attractions thus raising the stakes once again and continuing the conversation with the guest.

The previous 22 years have also seen an amazing transformation and evolution of the event in terms of technology and how it is used to impact the participant. This expansion of technology has seen the event go from tin cans filled with beans that could be shaken in the face of the guest to startle them, to simple foot triggers, otherwise known as EPROMs- EPROM stands for Erasable

Programmable Read-Only Memory. EPROM is an early form of flash memory chip that retains its data after the power supply has been terminated. This was the common way that the above audio stingers were delivered. (Stanford.edu) - that upon being pressed, would activate loud audio stingers thus startling the guest. Proprietary video and projection systems as well as full audio scores for each maze designed by a professional studio are now standard.

The question to these advances must be “are they necessary?” If the “shaker cans” and rudimentary audio devices were able to elicit the responses and overall satisfaction that led to the growth we have seen over the last two plus decades, then why is it necessary to change the medium in which the stimuli is delivered? There are two very simple answers to this question. The first is a matter of obsolescence, and the second is a matter of perception. While the first cannot not be controlled but merely procrastinated upon based on the practicality and age of the equipment, the second allows for Visceral Theatre to evolve and grow as the expectation of delivery changes with common technological advances.

Audiences have gained a vast amount and range of differing entertainment offerings within the past 20 years. Common sense tells us that this also impacts directly, their perception of sophisticated technological entertainment.

Smartphones, High Definition televisions, and endless streaming films across the internet are just a small set of examples of the technology that Visceral Theatre

must challenge, on a platform level (excluding content) that didn't exist when the event was first created.

Visceral Theatre does, however, maintain a constant and consistent equalizer to these new and varied avenues of information receipt. Human interaction within a live setting cannot be equaled. If this were a false statement then what we know of as "theatre" would have ceased to exist during the early part of the 20th century with the advent of radio, television, and film. Those mediums that are capable of transporting audience members to a place, force them to relate to, empathize with, love, or loathe characters that do not exist in flesh and blood would have taken the place of traditional theatre long ago. At the point in which an audience member comes into contact with a current film in wide release, it may have been an indeterminate amount of time since those images were captured. In essence: Regardless of the delivery systems involved, Visceral Theatre retains a rare component that separates it from those other entertainments. The live human-to-human interactions are not simulated. And the reactions and connections, in whatever form they choose to take, are present in the moment and not made to or with the memory of a character.

History Lesson- Themes and Icons

It is ironic that during the "early days" of HHN, the event did not prescribe itself with the authenticity to licensors that it now does. It was quite possible during the first years of the event to be attacked by near identical replicas to very well

known figures/villains within the horror genre with little regard to licensing.

'Chainsaw Maniac' (Leatherface from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre) and 'Hockey Face Killer' (Jason Vorhees from the famed Friday the 13th saga) both made appearances before the shift towards collaboration and adherence began.

I can only speculate as to the legal reasons behind this change in the event's approach. In fact, one of the major reasons that the event has transitioned to such a stringent adherence to the authentic application of intellectual properties may have less to do, however, with the legal challenges that the event may face. This change may actually have more to do with the need for the event to be as viscerally connected to story, character, and most importantly an over-riding theme that can be told to the participants in order to grow beyond what is found in other, more common haunts.

Initially, out of context, all of the figures/villains from the various horror films that were used during these years are/were scary. Put together in a random pastiche of characters and they became a force against the guests. But for how long could this impact be expected to continue before the guests became bored with the same characters year in and year out? Without a story-line to directly relate the backgrounds of all of the various characters that the guests are encountering in the immediate area, how are the characters able to retain their strength of purpose? If nothing binds them together or establishes why their presence matters to the participants, how long will the participants be expected to remain

terrified. This formulaic approach to placing the same (albeit well known to horror fans) characters in the event does not allow for the event to grow. The participants to this event demanded more, and eventually they got what they wanted. Original content pieces began to appear. Single story-line driven thematics were established. Overall themes to the event became the norm. And then, the Icons arrived.

In 2000, for the tenth anniversary of the event, the most memorable single character in Horror Nights' long history was created to unify the event. Jack Schmidt; a child-killing circus clown who, with a detailed backstory was taking over the event and using the entertainment options inside of it as his personal playthings. (horrornightnightmares.com) Instead of the guests coming to enjoy the celebration of Halloween with walking through a couple of mazes, this was something brand new that hadn't been seen before. Jack took control and unified the event. The guests were no longer simply guests, they were simultaneously a participant and a victim. The guests were going to pay a price for coming to the event. Jack threatened their safety. Jack established a social contract with the guests- That their attendance to the event justified him doing anything to the guests that he wanted. This social contract is established with the purchase of a ticket. Unlike traditional theatre, however, Visceral theatre's social contract must enlist the audience/participant into the ranks of the performers and collaborators if the event is to reach its full potential and impact.

Jack's creation changed the entire path of the event. Jack was the first Icon. The first character developed that had enough strength via marketing and resonance through appearance to impact the entire event. Jack was the catalyst for most, if not all of the Icons that would follow from this anniversary through 2010. Within this ten year time period other Icons would follow, yet none would attain the status of this first monster. This character also re-defined what it meant to attend the event as a participant.

Jack, a seemingly harmless, centuries old archetype that should not be scary in the least became a terrifying idea unto himself. The Icon serves as just that, an Icon. A visual, auditory, (and marketing depending on the character involved) foothold that any participant upon their arrival to the event will be able to quickly digest and understand what it is they should fear. A single focal point that the entire event could be developed from. The thematics across the entire event do not need to line up perfectly with the Icon in order for it to be cohesive nor does the Icon need to register fear-wise with all attendees. An Icon is developed to cast a wide net viscerally, and create an environment that fosters a heightened experience for the participant, not be everything to everyone.

Collaboration with Personalities

A common trend on Broadway currently is the pairing of persons with varying levels of fame and using them to create a buzz around the show that is being produced. (Ex. A production hiring Julia Roberts to perform in a play- Three Days

of Rain.) I will not cast stones at the wonderful plays/musicals that employ this technique if the pairing is justified by the person's abilities. However, when the pairing is created strictly in order for the name recognition to drive the product (ticket sales,) regardless of its quality- I find it abhorrent, and counter-intuitive towards the creation of art.

Much like the development process within Broadway, HHN shares the idea of matching up those who would benefit from such a pairing and utilizes these pairings to create one of a kind experiences. During the 2012 haunt season, the famous magic and comedy team Penn Jillette & Teller collaborated with the creators of Halloween Horror Nights in a bid to produce *Penn & Teller: New'kd Las Vegas*. It was a Las Vegas centric haunted maze in which the participants were thrown into a nuclear apocalypse but on Penn and Teller's terms. The storyline that was developed had the duo performing a version of their infamous "catch a bullet in the mouth" trick, in which they each shoot a gun at one another and catch the other's bullets in their teeth. However, because it is Visceral Theatre where everything must be heightened and because Penn & Teller are never satisfied with the status quo; we created a maze showing the aftermath of them performing said trick but instead of handguns, they decided to use an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile's warhead.

Despite obvious leaps in logic for the sake of fun, this maze quickly became a crowd favorite due to its unique blend of humor, horror, and spectacle. The

guests were asked to don 3D glasses which reacted specifically to the special UV reactive paint and scenery treatments that were done within the maze. Also, great pains were taken to establish all of the stereotypical Vegas locations that we could fit into the maze so as to complete the immersion into the environments.

Stereotypically familiar places such as Casinos, Honeymoon Suites, and Wedding Chapels all took on a nightmarish tone, complete with melted Elvis Presley Impersonators and Three-Breasted Showgirls. Sign re-creations of iconic Vegas landmarks were also created to re-enforce the idea of geography and constantly bombard the participant that they have been transported to a different place.

As one of the creators of the event, I must say that both Penn and Teller were a joy to work with in the maze's conception. Each brought an amazing amount of energy to the event and cared enough to participate inside the maze as performers for a short time, something that they did not have to do.

However, what truly impressed me about both of these gentlemen is that they understand the fundamentals of what we are attempting to accomplish. They have worked long enough within the entertainment field that know for certain what theatre is, and by extension the aims of all of the collaborators involved with HHN. Penn Jillette espoused these beliefs during a press junket that was held on

the opening night of that year's experience. What follows is one of the most impressive, concise descriptions of what Halloween Horror Nights and the foundations of Visceral Theatre are all about.

You know, when you work in theatre you have the proscenium...have the kind of narrative that happens there that you look into. The wonderful thing about Horror nights here at Universal is that they have this completely surrounded site-specific theatre that happens with people who without even realizing and watching what you're doing already have pulse rates up around 130-140. (Teller)

Penn then goes on to say the following.

The purpose of art which is to get the visceral and the intellectual to collide at the highest possible speed for the biggest possible crash and what you're doing in a haunted house...which have your guts and your intellect fight as hard as you want. To be able to go into a place where you will feel completely frightened, and feel all of that and yet know that you are safe and everything's done responsibly is the pinnacle of art. (Teller)

High praise indeed.

CHAPTER 8: SUMMATION AND THOUGHTS

A note of interest. During my time writing this thesis I was asked to work closely with the creative team that is responsible for the Halloween Horror Nights event (Super Horror Show) in Universal Studios Japan. This included the creation of several facets to their event from afar, as well as spending a dedicated amount of time within their property helping to shape the event in total.

Culturally the participants that attend this version of the event have different markers psychologically for what terrifies them. In lieu of this, the short-circuiting of the logic center (as it were) that we push for within our event domestically is not as prevalent in theirs and therefore achieves a strikingly different result. Case in point; The event in Japan doesn't allow for the participants to have as much freedom during their event in terms of movement as does Orlando. This is due to population controls built into the event- the population density in Osaka allows for 40,000 more participants on a nightly basis within the event than the event in Florida.

Due to this overcrowding, the event's producers have dictated that all participants must travel clockwise through the event. Together, en masse the entire park full of participants travels along the same route, experiencing essentially an enormous external maze-like form. All of the street performers and stage experiences are geared toward this point of view rather than being truly immersive. Instead of 360 degree immersion, the scareactors that would normally be invading the personal space of the participants find it more impactful

to be placed on elevated platforms and perform short “scenes” of horror. The producers often use “shills,” paid actors whom are trained to be victims of particularly horrendous acts on behalf of the performers. There is a direct result to these striking, if not quite gruesome pantomimes being played out. This inevitably produces a voyeuristic response rather than true collaboration between participant and performer.

While impactful, it is pageantry, not Visceral Theatre. By eliminating the fundamental idea of choice (and therefore removal of the 7 plus or minus 2 formula) this event does itself a tremendous disservice. Only when the participants at large will be able to move freely within the environments and be subjected to the same choice dilemma could this event be thought of as Viscerally theatrical.

And that dilemma, in the end may symbolize the event and all of the experiences that it provides for the participants, the performers, and even its creators. And in the end Visceral Theatre exists because we, the participants, performers, and creators have chosen for it to exist. In this respect it is no different from any other art form that has come before it, or is likely to follow. And yet, based on all that has been said above, it is unique.

Throughout my tenure as a collaborator with HHN, I have learned a great deal about myself and how my perception of the world, and my actions within it, affect the numerous performers, guests, and fellow collaborators in our creation of the

event. Writing this thesis has challenged me to re-assess how effective we are as a team, and through that reflection gain a better appreciation for those that I share time with while creating this event.

Visceral Theatre is, I believe, a vital step in the evolution of Theatre as an art form. And as mankind is inundated with an ever increasing amount of art forms with which to examine the human condition, it will be of particular challenge for Visceral Theatre to maintain the ability to remain impactful. And as I close out this thesis project I am hopeful about how my experience with this event/theatre style will dictate my actions and perception in the years to come. My work has also raised answers to questions within myself that I hope will inform my art in the future. Chief among the answered questions is how far is too far? As much as I might have described it in the preceding chapters, what exactly is the tipping point when art crosses the line with a participant, willing or otherwise, into something else? Something else that is no longer causing visceral reactions for the sake of enjoyment on behalf of the participant/performer partnership, and by extension gaining perspective on oneself through that fear? There may be future artists who seek to push beyond the tipping point and cause actual trauma to an audience in order to elicit specific physiological responses from their participants. If I have learned anything during this treatise process it is that I am not among them. As an artist I do concede that the idea of abuse would make for an interesting continuance of the work I have begun here, but I would never condone such action. Examining Visceral Theatre has given me a new

perspective and appreciation for how the art of theatre is built, designed, and executed. Using my research as a template to measure all of my next projects against it is an amazing opportunity, one that I will not take for granted.

After this entire exploration into what Visceral Theatre is, what remains is the question of what Visceral Theatre could be. Why hasn't there been significant study, psychologically, to determine the effectiveness of this type of theatre previously? How will the audiences in the future be shaped by the thematic, taboo or otherwise, that we will produce for them. Is there a "law of diminishing returns" in guest sensitivity towards these thematic and how will this effect the way in which the art is developed? What is the moral boundary, if any that stands in the way of this type of event from becoming so taboo that the audience ends up rejecting what they see because it violates their own belief structures? What does this teach me as an artist? With the exclusion of this last question, which can only be answered by myself to myself, all of the other questions could be used as launching points for other discussions and arguments about this ever shifting style of theatre. I can think of no greater argument, therefore, on its behalf as vital to the growth of theatre at large.

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