

# Grand Guignol: In Living Horror

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## ABSTRACT

This project is intended to research the history and plays of Grand-Guignol, and use this information to write, direct, and produce two short plays in the typical style of Grand-Guignol. Further this project will also develop the methods and devices to create realistic stage effects before a live audience. This project will also assess the relevancy of this form of theatre to today's audience and how it compares to other similar forms of contemporary entertainment. If this project meets the objectives of a) being comparable, b) being relevant, then there is a possibility of resurgence.

## INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of advanced computer technology. This is present in everything from cell phones, to complex movie special effect programs. Ongoing advances combined with greater availability along with accessibility increase the efficiency of making computer special effects. Modern films are a major entertainment draw; it seems almost impossible for live theatre to compete with them to create realistic images onstage. This project proposes that it is possible to achieve the same experience, in the audience, as a contemporary film.

From 1897 to 1962 the *Theatre du Grand-Guignol* produced plays that shocked its audience. The style originated in Paris, France, and is called "Grand-Guignol" (pronounced gey-nole). However, after 1962, the style of theatre all but disappeared. After sixty-five years of popularity, the horrors of World War II would eclipse the displays of torture and murder on the stage (Peirron, 1996). Our distance from these events provides the possibility that this style of theatre may still be relevant for a contemporary audience. Today this form of theatre is rarely seen, and rarely put on. Grand-Guignol has been called "the French theatre of horror." (Hand and Wilson, 2002). Grand-Guignol was able to attract an audience with the thrill of fear. It staged the live acts of horror that have led to the genre of "slasher" films, and heavily influenced thriller novels, graphic novels and video games. Grand-Guignol is known for both the graphic displays on stage and creating an extreme effect on people, as a single night of this style would present to its audience a series of plays. One play would be a comedy; the next play might be an erotic adventure, followed by another comedy, and finishing off with a dark horror play. This was referred to as a "hot and cold shower" style (Hand and Wilson, 2002). The audience would be laughing during one play, and fainting during the next (Peirron, 1996). This research project will allow people to experience this unique style of theatre and help revive Grand-Guignol. This project intends to find out if Grand-Guignol still has the same effect today as it did originally. To do so this project will pose three questions to focus on. The three questions are: how does live theatre in the style of Grand-Guignol compare to contemporary entertainment, is it still relevant today, and is there a possibility of a resurgence of the style.

## METHOD

To answer the three questions posed above, there was five stages and objectives to the research. Each step added a new level of understanding of the different aspects of a Grand-Guignol production. The five stages are as follows:

### *Reading the literature*

The history of Grand-Guignol is not a long distant memory. There are reviews, photographs, and drawings of plays in performance. This project will include reading the books written on the subject as well as plays written in the style of Grand-Guignol, and any other resources available to provide information related to Grand-Guignol. The research will be done by reading the books combined with other available materials to develop a basis of knowledge of Grand-Guignol for this project.

### *Writing the plays*

A typical night at the *Theatre du Grand-Guignol* might include a comedy piece along with a horror piece. This project included writing two short plays in the style of Grand-Guignol. One was a light-hearted comedy, while the other was a dark, horror play. The plays have two characters played by two actors, and the plays will have the same actors. Both plays are approximately ten minutes long, with scene changes, and interludes to provide time for actors to set up the final performance will total around thirty minutes. This will create first hand experience into the methods and structure of the playwrights writing with the specific goal of creating suspense and horror.

### *Designing and Constructing the Plays*

The *Theatre du Grand-Guignol* was a small theatre, and because of this the audience was extremely close to the actors. As a result, the special effects had to be realistic. This project was performed in a similar intimate setting. This includes experimenting with known techniques to create scenery, costumes, and realistic special effects to capture the atmosphere and mood of the show.

### *Directing the Plays*

This objective helped interpret the textual elements into physical elements (sound, lights, and blocking). This included holding auditions, casting, and rehearsals.

## **RESULTS**

### *Writing the Plays*

The first play written was the horror play. The original story came to mind almost as soon as the idea for the project. The plot is that of a student getting revenge on his professor for not giving him a passing grade. It is a story of revenge that goes to the extreme of torture and murder. The second play written was the comedy piece. This was a challenge as I soon found it difficult to write something funny without it seeming like a joke. I had listened to a CD recording of a production of Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple" which was an excellent source of dialogue-based comedy. The plot of the comedy play is that of a musician who is about to become a star, only to find out he must give up his own artistic ideas to those of a large corporation. The plays were written and read by my advisers. The scripts were a basis and from writing them I knew I would allow the actors to change and add things as they see fit. Although originally written for two males, they were adapted to a male and female due to casting restrictions.

### *Designing and Constructing the Plays*

Having written the plays I was able to begin designing them. The set would be basic. Both plays take place in an office, so a simple desk and chair set up was all that was needed for both plays. The innovative part was designing the effects for the horror parts. The original idea was to have a hollow desk that the actor's arm went into while the other actor dissected a fake arm from. This idea was soon replaced by a simpler one on the arm prosthetic. The effects were created with complete safety to the actors in mind. There was no chance for real danger to come to the actors. They blood would be delivered by a bulb under the actor's arm, and traveled through a pipe into a long balloon. This allowed the blood to be squirted. Pieces of chicken were used to simulate muscle tissue. Protective medical adhesive pads ("Mole Skin") were used to both protect the real arm, and create stiff skin flaps. The set up was covered in a latex prosthetic that covered the forearm. There was an effect in the story where the student slams a dissecting probe into the professor's hand, pinning it to the desk. This was achieved using basic stage makeup techniques. The final effect was the student slitting the neck of the professor. The scalpel used by the student is clearly sharp, and it was used to cut through the skin, but at the end it is used to slit the professor's neck. Switching the sharp scalpel with a duplicate dull scalpel solved this. It still appeared sharp, but was able to be slid across skin without any possibility of slicing. Attached to the scalpel was a squeeze bulb and a pipe that the actor controlled as he dragged the scalpel across her neck. The final problem that was not solved until the final rehearsal was her other arm. Practically a person with an arm free would offer some resistance to a person dissecting their arm, so ideas included tying it up or trapping it. Ultimately I remembered magic "gag" where the sound of the arm breaking was caused by smashing a plastic cup under the arm. So her arm would be broken with a crushing sound. This provided the necessary weakness of the arm that prevented the professor from fighting back.

### *Directing the Plays*

The first part of directing the plays was to hold an audition to select the cast. This was held, and five people showed up. They read from a segment of a script from a book about Grand Guignol. They were told to create as much suspense as possible, and try to experiment with pace. I was able to cast the two actors needed. The first rehearsal was set up to discuss the play and the project. The actors read through the script and began memorizing the

lines. The next rehearsals started the blocking (where to move and when) of the actors. During the rehearsals new props were added each time to become familiar with them. As soon as they were off book (completely memorized the lines) we were able to work more on the effects. During the technical rehearsals where everything was in place, the effects and the set, we were able to finalize everything, and I was able to see how it looked in a ¾ thrust stage. There were dry runs and finally blood rehearsals where we were able to add the blood effects. A plastic sheet was used to cover the props and set to determine where the blood would go, and how it looked. The actors were eager to incorporate new ideas. These rehearsals prepared the actors for the public performance.

## DISCUSSION

Most bad ideas start off with the phrase “Wouldn’t it be cool if...” I did not know what I was getting into but enjoyed the whole project. The process was quite intensive, and I was surprised at how eager the actors were to my suggestions. However, things did not always go as planned. In my over inflated expectations I imagined a lot of people showing up to the audition interested in being a part of this unique project, but only five people showed up. Two of the people would be unable to commit to the work involved. I chose two actors from the audition, and notified them. Soon after I sent them the e-mail I got the replies, one was an enthusiastic yes, the other was unable to be a part due to other conflicts. Fortunately I was able to call upon someone who had expressed interest but was unable to come to the audition after he agreed the rehearsals were able to begin. Both of them were glad to be a part of it, even though it seemed like the female part was getting all the abuse. During the rehearsals there were certain elements that I repeated asked to make sure she was not injured during a few moments. While it may not have been comfortable, it was not painful for her in any way. We added a few changes right before the performance. I’m fairly certain this created more anxiety in me watching it than it did in the actors. Again, with my over inflated expectations I anticipated a full house the night of the performance. It was still a good turnout. The performance went really well. The intermission between the plays appeared to be quite long, but was needed for them to set up. The only practical mistake was that the actor dropped the scalpel during the switch. The big final neck slitting did not work properly. Despite those small mistakes the plays were well received. Members of the audience were invited to a facilitated discussion which examined the strengths and weaknesses of the plays. Overall people felt that this form of theatre is effective, and able to create similar reactions to contemporary movies and media. This gives evidence to the fact that this form of theatre has a chance of resurgence, and not just a forgotten memory.

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