

Touched by Terror: Inside the Growing World of Extreme Haunts

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In a quiet backyard in Medford, Long Island, a cult gathered. This cult had no specific ideology, no official doctrine or lore. It met for one purpose, a purpose its members held in sacred regard: to scare. And on the autumnal equinox, the first day of fall and the unofficial start of the Halloween season, now was the time.

Enter the blindfolded guests.

The seven of them were led into the yard by a masked cult member, who then drew an upside down cross on each of their foreheads. He took their blindfolds off and introduced them to the congregation.

“Welcome! We hope you enjoy yourself tonight,” he said. “Feel free to mingle and meet our brothers and sisters. Please, help yourselves to a drink.” The initiates squinted as their eyes adjusted and looked around: There were axes and knives jutting out from fences, skeletons hanging from trees, and cult members in robes and masks huddled around a bonfire. Retro cartoons of ghosts projected onto the garage door, and a beer pong table stretched out under a goat-head centerpiece. It *baaa*-ed every time someone walked by.



Photo by Michael Zinn

The cult-hopefuls filtered into the party, most heading straight toward the bar. A zombie bartender handed out free syringes of vodka, while a goat-horned woman charmed them with compliments. At first the guests shied away from the eager members, unsure of their intentions. Cult members shouldn't be *this* friendly, especially not at an initiation. But after an hour of revelry and swaying together to atmospheric '80s music, the seven marked guests let their guards down. Flock of Seagulls can really put a person at ease.

The guests threw axes at wood stumps, knives at targets, and Ping-Pong balls at solo cups. The members encouraged them, bolstering their egos even as they missed their targets.

Meanwhile, a young woman dressed in white floated among the guests. Her movements were graceful, even regal; she didn't seem to belong here. And yet, even in her quiet presence, the attention was all hers.

“It’s Mother! Everyone, it’s our mother! All hail!” the cult members swooned.

“It’s nice to meet you, I’m the leader of our group,” Mother said as she stroked a guest’s beard. “I hope you’ll join our family when the night is over.” She spoke so softly, the man had to lean in to receive her words.

Suddenly, the Eurhythmics’ “Sweet Dreams” blared through the speakers in a cadence so slow that the party seemed to drop under murky water.

“It’s time for the blood ritual!” a member shouted. The others reiterated, giddily. “The Blood Ritual! The Blood Ritual!”

A towering man in a white jumpsuit strode over to the guests and introduced himself as Brother Kurt. With an unhinged grin, he yelled: “Everyone to the basement!”

The initiates funneled down the cellar stairs into a windowless room. In the corner, Mother sat in an armchair, waiting for them. Except, something had changed in her: her white dress was now soaked in blood. She leaned back with an ease and sensuality she hadn’t seemed capable of possessing before: a spider waiting in her web. Mother commanded that they bow down to her, and they all sat beneath her on the floor.

“You think you’re worthy enough to join us?” she asked, then caught the eye of the bearded man in front of her. She frowned. Getting up, she put her face so close to his that their noses touched.

“Answer me! Do you—yes or no!?”

He winced.

The guests answered unanimously. “Yes.”

A flash of flesh hobbled out from behind a wall: a man wearing only a face mask and underwear of slick latex. Mother yanked the leash attached to his neck, and he heeled at her feet.

Brother Kurt and his counterpart, Brother Will, commanded the guests to lie down so that the blood ritual could begin. They did as told, a few closing their eyes.

Mother went back to the wincing guest, squatted over the face, and oozed blood from beneath her skirt. The man cracked an eye open and turned away in disgust.



Photo by Michael Zinn

“Keep your eyes closed!” Mother’s goons yelled. He obeyed, his skin turning red beneath the blood. While she bled on each guest, Mother’s dog-man sniffed the other initiates—growling in their ears and crawling over their bodies.

After this, the guests were forced to crawl up the concrete steps back to the yard. Here, the cult members threw pillow cases over the guests’ heads and yanked them to their knees. Now that the initiates had Mother’s blessing, they could go through a full-on cult hazing, complete with blood dousing. A pail of deep red liquid plopped in front of the guests, and the mob of cult members rushed it. They scooped it up with their own cups and pails, and drenched the recipients. The chilly night air was filled with coughs and groans. The guests shivered but didn’t dare try to escape—or disobey.



Photo by Michael Zinn

Next, the initiates were herded to another area of the yard, where they were beaten by a mob with pool noodles wrapped in duct tape. They stayed flat on the ground, taking multiple blows at a time. Mother circled the crowd of bodies, urging her children to hit harder, to make them suffer. She stalked them with an intensity that marked her a different woman from the clean, white-clothed virgin of an hour ago.

Finally, to seal their membership the initiates lined up in a kneel before Brother Kurt and received a communion of frozen beetles and cockroaches. He held it up for the crowd to see, then boomed his instructions in the cadence of a sanctimonious priest.

“Sister Laura,” he looked down at the woman on the ground, “Open thy mouth and receive thy blessing!” One by one the guests consumed their offerings, their crumpled faces chomping quickly to get through it.



Photo by Michael Zinn

The cult members couldn't help but laugh: real, full-bellied laughs, as if they'd been holding them in through the forced pleasantries and shameless groveling. It erupted because this was what they wanted to do—it was the exchange they bargained for. This was my first immersive horror experience, an event called “Eye for Horror: Party Till You're Dead.” I hadn't seen anything like it before with my own eyes, without a screen separating me from the scene. I felt so a part of it, both energized and guilty, as if any moment I'd be found and reprimanded for laughing along. But the only people who could see were the people like me, the people like one another. No one was being judged tonight.

* * *

An extreme haunt is a haunted house that aims to extract the cowering child from even the most hardened adult; it uses forceful, controversial, and even dangerous methods to scare the guests. And the guests, in turn, expect this type of treatment—a treatment that has been described by frequenters as extremely personal. These haunts go past the usual jump scares and spooky decorations used by the average Halloween haunted house, and push the guests to their psychological and physical limits. They help the guests escape the rut of their daily lives and focus on what is right in front of them: whether it's a cockroach to be eaten or an ax to be thrown. Call it intense mindfulness.

Immersive horror and extreme haunts can appear to be the same to the unseasoned eye. Immersive horror events are driven by the story, carrying the guests along to discover new characters and plot points. Extreme haunts are driven by the guests' ability to accomplish

daunting missions and get through each ordeal. A lot of times they bleed into each other, with immersive horror stories containing common elements of extreme haunts (like force-feeding, bondage, water dousing, sensory deprivation, and forceful contact from actors).

The haunts aren't just around Halloween; they're year-round, providing the average person a fantasy world of shock and sensory overload. Participants can be kidnapped at unknown times, locked in claustrophobic spaces, bound and gagged, left alone in abandoned buildings, and more, depending on the creativity of the actors and directors.



A guest at Shock Theater's 'Party Till You're Dead' Haunt

The largest cluster of professional extreme haunts exists in Southern California, with giants such as Heretic and Hvrting running there. However, underground haunts are growing in

popularity, with over 75 immersive horror attractions across the United States. With new haunts popping up, chances are wherever you live there's an extreme haunt within driving distance.

You just have to seek it out.

Over the past year, I've attended extreme haunts and immersive horror events in my hometown of Long Island that I never knew existed, hidden in backyards, basements, parking lots, and office buildings. How can you find them? Facebook groups, actually.

I went seeking to find out what the participants get out of these events: why the actors do what they do, and why the guests willingly hand themselves over to these forms of quasi-torture. What keeps this community together? And does it have anything to do with the state of our world today—with polarized politics, terrorist attacks, and mass shootings? As I took on the role of observer, guest, and actor, I think I've come to discover my answers, and they're not as clear-cut as they may seem.

In an age when stories of real abuse, sexual assault, and murder saturate the news, extreme haunts dare to simulate these horrors in excess. They counter the participant's aversion to fear and subjugation, and make them face it. Extreme haunts emulate the roles of the abuser and abused by using horror tropes to both exaggerate and unveil what they truly are: a six-foot tall demon can represent a malevolent force of a Harvey Weinstein character. Replacing one monster for another, one normal fear for an extravagant one—can this really help?

When it comes to breaking the touch barrier, questions of consent and comfort levels come into play. In light of the recent visibility the #MeToo movement has caused, haunts have succeeded in advancing sexual empowerment and furthering the discomfort of guests, depending on the haunt. No two haunts are alike, and so there is no standard for how sexual themes are

explored in them. But what can be said about most haunts is that they warn guests ahead of time of sexual content. Guests can often be accommodated or opt out of the experience if this element is too much for them.

In general, haunt actors take on exaggerated roles like serial killer, cult member, sexual deviant, or mythical creature, all to exorcise whatever demons they possess in these scenes—and in real life. But have such scenes taken on a different meaning in recent years?

Since their widespread emergence at the beginning of this decade, extreme haunts have become more creative and elaborate. New York City’s “Blackout” (2012) is often hailed as the pioneer for extreme haunts, setting up expectations haunt enthusiasts have today. Since its growth, the storylines have become more unique and detailed, with a beginning, middle, climax, and resolution. Some come with themes rooted in their story, such as the commentary on addiction in “Stag” in Michigan, and Shock Theater’s take on couple’s therapy in Long Island. Today, haunt storylines vary, with some taking on overt political issues and others holding up a mirror to the guests’ psyches. No matter the theme, haunts have been borrowing tactics from one another other for years, dating back to the earliest forms of horror theater.

CHAPTER 1: The Origins

Before extreme haunts, before traditional Halloween spook walks, there was immersive horror theater. And what better example of watching a fake murder unfold while getting splashed with stage blood than the Grand Guignol?

This infamous theater has its routes in The Théâtre-Libre, which opened its blood-stained doors in 1887. Director André Antoine founded it in Paris, and with it, revolutionized the documentary-style play. These dramas appealed to Paris’ lower-class audience, depicting poverty,

starvation, and street crime. This naturalistic movement was grounded in reality and showed viewers the underbelly of French society as bluntly and brutally as possible. Otherwise known as “rosse” productions, the themes in Antoine’s plays didn’t offer any simple solution to the victimized; the villains and oppressors often triumphed, their crimes usually going unpunished.

The plots were unpredictable, the endings ambiguous; one such play, “In the Family,” documents a family dinner in which a son mourns the public execution of his best friend, while the rest of the family finishes their meal, unaffected. Such plays were a rejection of religious and societal standards of good and evil. It did more than satisfy the audience’s bloodlust: it held a mirror up to their faces, showing the unflinching reality of what human beings do to one another.

After The Théâtre-Libre closed due to financial problems, one of the writers and co-founders, Oscar Méténier, opened The Grand Guignol in 1897. Its name translates to “The Great Puppet Show,” paying homage to the darkly comedic Punch and Judy duo.

The shows at The Grand Guignol evolved from starkly realistic to dramatically horrific by writers Max Maurey and André de Lorde. While suspense kept the audience intrigued in the play’s drama, excessive gore delivered a satisfying catharsis—sometimes causing spectators to faint or vomit. Animal body parts simulated human organs in scenes of dismemberment; one particular scene featured dog eyeballs bouncing into the crowd as characters gouged their eyes. Illusionary mirrors, retractable blades, plaster for skin wounds, buckets of stage blood: these special effects laid the groundwork for horror movies, particularly the splatter-punk genre.

The spectacle drew audiences and actors of all races, classes, and genders. Royalty from Morocco, Holland, and Greece all visited the theater during their stays in Paris, while the original

fans—the poor working class—continued to flock in large numbers. The Grand Guignol became known as more than a theater. It was an extreme production, an immersive experience.

The Grand Guignol, like many forms of extreme entertainment to follow, answered the call of an apathetic public living in poverty. Another societal crisis, The Great Depression, sparked a new form of macabre entertainment in the U.S.: spook walks. Following the stock market crash of 1929, working families needed an affordable activity to entertain their children. Amusement parks that could not afford high-tech rides hand-built small structures to serve as the location for the guests' cheap thrills. Though they were meant to frighten, the haunts were a safe outlet for neighborhood kids during Halloween—a time when frustrated children and out-of-work youth vandalized towns.

Many haunts were funded by religious youth groups, such as Youth For Christ, who created low-budget walk-throughs as a means to attract new members and raise funds for the church. Though these church haunts went on to utilize pop culture examples of horror (vampires, ghosts, aliens, etc.) a few congregations shifted gears towards the end of the century.

In the late 1990s, Trinity Church of Assemblies of God transformed the haunted house medium to promote their moral teaching. In its inception, the group used actors to show scenes of visceral abortions, a gay man dying of AIDS, teens dying in drunk driving accidents, and an incest-rape resulting in suicides. In 1999, the group went as far as to simulate the Columbine shooting, even as the families of the victims were still grieving. These scenes were not meant to entertain, as the haunt's predecessors did. The church took the route of The Théâtre-Libre, showing the horrors of real-life sin.

They preached that even if sinners manage to evade the consequences of their actions, their true punishment awaits them in hell; hence, the haunt's name, "Hell House." Similar religious haunts have opened since, mostly around Halloween. Houston's Central Baptist church was famed for its Judgement House in 2015, which leads guests as detached onlookers through a non-believer's death, judgment, and sentencing to hell.

While today's extreme haunts and immersive horror experiences can also have moral themes, they're more likely to demonstrate them in a nuanced way, sending guests straight into the heart of the darkness and letting them sort out their feelings later.

In Eugene Thacker's horror philosophy text, "In the Dust of This Planet: The Philosophy of Horror," he describes the phenomenon of a magic circle. It's a designated space—often drawn by witches with a salt circle—in which the unknown enters at our own discretion. This circle is considered separate from the rest of the human world, and in essence, is its own miniature world where the supernatural can inhabit. Magic circles only exist when we create them, if we put in the effort and belief.

Extreme haunts and immersive horror execute this concept in real life. The agreement of the participants—both actors and guests—to draw that circle, to believe in and inhabitant a fantasy, makes the haunt's story real within its own space and time. That is, if one thing remains constant: real emotion.

CHAPTER 2: Drawing the Circle

For my first immersive horror experience I was texted an address deep in Suffolk County on Long Island, prefaced as "a backyard you can't miss." Will Puntarich, one of the co-founders of Shock Theater, explained that since it was the autumnal equinox, everyone's encouraged to

wear a costume to keep with the tradition of Halloween. With only a few days to scrounge up something, I was down to two costume choices: a kangaroo suit or overalls that could just pass as a Chucky costume. I picked the latter, not wanting to draw more attention to myself than necessary.

I left my worried grandmother with the address written on a sticky note. She was scared for me, for good reason: I could get kidnapped. Hurt. Killed. Molested. All by strangers I'd just connected with online. If that's not the beginning of a horror movie, I don't know what is.

To some, that's kind of the point; Gregory Carl, creator of the Pennsylvania-based extreme haunt "Alone" (2019), expressed that the goal is to make you genuinely question your safety. In his haunt, you meet him at a planned location, and then are blindly guided to an unknown secondary location with no way to communicate with the outside world.

"When you go to a haunted house or amusement park, you have the expectation you will be safe," Carl said. "They know no one is really going to cut you up with a chain saw because you've seen those chain saws with no chain."

"Alone" focuses heavily on psychological horror, letting the guests' own minds scare them in the dark. He doesn't release details about his four-hour ordeal; the mystery is part of the experience.

Shock Theater's haunt was the polar opposite. The cult scene, as previously described, unfolded before my unseasoned eyes with over-the-top ritual, decor, costume, and acting. This "magic circle," was based on the group's combined effort—it was an alternative reality, held inside a square of the yard's fences. This haunt, like most of the company's others, was set to last about an hour.



Photo by Michael Zinn

As I entered this stranger's backyard an hour before the haunt, I couldn't help but worry about how I would be received. *I shouldn't have painted on this stupid makeup* I thought, noticing black smudges on my hands from wiping too much. *I look like such an amateur.*

All the actors, directors, and observers stood around a fire pit mingling and stoking the flames. It was a jovial atmosphere beneath the fake cobwebs and overcast sky. After a quick introduction, everyone welcomed me, and not in the creepy cult kind of way.

I followed Brother Kurt, whose real name is Kurt Smith, into the basement where the blood ceremony was set to take place. Since this was his house, he had no problem going behind the bar and fiddling with the lights.

“Tonight we want them to go, ‘What just happened?’ If we get a write-up that says they had a nightmare that night or couldn’t sleep, we did our job,” he said. “That’d be fantastic.” He laughed.

As a haunt veteran for about 15 years, Smith has seen the traditional haunt industry change—becoming tamer, surprisingly.

“In an odd way, we’ve been forced to be less severe,” he said. “The use of hand props is banned by a lot of places now because of simple instances of someone getting smacked by them, but that’s because of tight spaces and corridors. It comes as a liability for the locations.”

And, even though they are built on the idea of liberation, extreme haunts do not have absolute freedom. Organizers are required to purchase insurance and permits before hosting an event. Because there is no official haunt permit, most haunters use movie permits for their shows.

“Everyone who paid is technically a producer in a film,” said Puntarich, one of the co-founders of Shock Theater. “We shoot everything, there are scenes and whatnot, guests act in it, so they basically pay us to make a movie for them. So, that’s how you skirt the situations legally.”

But the film permit isn’t just an excuse; the night truly unfolded like a horror movie. The ideas for Shock Theater’s storylines usually start with an average scenario, but turn when everything goes horribly wrong.

“I grew up reading Marvel comics and DC comics, and they had these editions called ‘Marvel What If’s’ and ‘DC Elseworlds,’” Puntarich said. “They always told stories of what would happen in a different reality. Like, ‘What if Superman became Batman?’ Or, ‘What if

Spider-Man joined The Fantastic Four?’ What would happen? So that’s what all of this is, a what-if scenario.”

So tonight, this party was going to go horribly wrong with a cult initiation. And just like in a film, music played a major role in setting the scene. A Flock of Seagulls, Hall and Oates, Oingo Boingo—even “Monster Mash,” a relic novelty song from early ’60s, was blasting during the big ax-throwing scene.

“Oh, yeah, it’s all intentional,” Puntarich said, when I pointed out the surprising song choice. “It’s the juxtaposition. I try to make everything as cinematic as possible for people. Instead of making a movie, I put people through what could happen in a movie.”

Whether he knew this or not, Josh Williams, a frequent guest of Shock Theater’s haunts, said he felt exactly like a character in a horror movie. “They have an idea of how the movie’s gonna go,” he said of the haunt organizers. “They can do as much as they can to create the stimuli for us as the unknowing characters, so we can fulfill the role they have for us.”

Shock Theater’s “Eye for Horror” series, in particular, emphasizes this idea. The series is a group of shows centered on the images and videos taken during the haunts—their first being in a hotel, their second being here at the cult party.

“That’s why it’s called ‘Eye for Horror,’ ” Puntarich said. “It’s about watching; it’s about the causal reaction of it taken out of context.” After each show, he edits the videos together to post on the group’s Facebook page.

Early in the night, before the period-blood spurting and fake-ax throwing, the event’s professional photographer, Michael Zinn, floated around unnoticed. He was capturing the unease, the anticipation and, finally, the piñata whacking.

Only an hour later, Zinn was in the same spot, capturing the guests now in the piñata's place. They were motionless on the ground as the actors whacked them with duct-taped pool noodles, like they were filled with candy.

“The best part about photographing haunt guests is capturing genuine emotion,” said Zinn. He told me of how authentic these photos were, as opposed to the forced expressions customers put on in professional shoots.



The photographer himself, Michael Zinn

Actor Taylor Monahan (tonight known as Mother,) knows something about fake smiles, too: They're exhausting. "I work at Apple," she told me before the show. "I fix phones. I repair relationships between the clients and their devices, between them and the company. It's like the complete opposite of what I do here. It gets super tiring having to smile all day—you have a customer come in and they're so furious, they're at a 10 and you need to bring them down to a 3.

So to have people come in and want to participate in this, who give me permission to terrorize the shit out of them, it's a good stress reliever."

Taylor said she first discovered her love for haunting after a hard breakup back in 2015.

"I wanted to do it because I was bored, I was lonely, so I was looking for new things to do and learn," she said. "It was freeing; it was a different side of me. I've always loved Halloween, but it was such a different experience to actually inflict terror onto people. It's like a whole other world, and I did forget about real life for a while. And I've met a lot of great people from it, people I'm still friends with."



Monahan, pre-haunt. Photo by Michael Zinn

Later that night, as I watched her command the room during the blood ritual, I couldn't imagine Taylor as anything other than confident and self-assured. Her character of Mother has to come from somewhere, after all.

CHAPTER 3: Pushing the Boundaries

Five months later: It's the end of the night at Shock Theater's Valentine's Day haunt, which took place at 13th Hour Haunted House and Escape Room in Wharton, New Jersey. The boxy, industrial style building is hidden behind rows of suburban homes, standing tall in an otherwise flat stretch of empty roads and parking lots. 13th Hour mainly hosts traditional haunts and escape rooms, but rents space a few times a year. The building is incredible in its ability to host haunts, both in its size and functionality—allowing larger audiences to experience the show with a traditional walk-through structure in a maze, while still having crevices (for tight interactions), small rooms (for face painting and toe sucking), and sinks (for water dousing) for extreme haunt actors to utilize. Some of the venue's traditional haunt actors were recruited to get extreme tonight.

I was also offered the opportunity to act in the haunt, and was now watching a masked Puntarich whisper to the last guest of the night in a make-shift room of black curtains:

“I want to have a conversation with you in the dark. Every day wake up from a dream where the world is burning. It's burning because people like you who pay strangers like me to abuse you in the dark. There has to be something missing in your life for you to enjoy this. I hope before you leave, we can fix that.”

I'm drenched in sweat, fighting through asthmatic coughs for air. I take off my mask of faux-corpse skin, and suddenly I'm a normal person again. I open my arms to the last guest, completing the final ritual of the night: the hug. The hug is the question mark at the end of the sentence, a suspicious offer after a brutal night of crawling, spanking, spinning, force-feeding, and water dousing.



Guests hugging at the end of the night. Photo by Will Puntarich

The woman leans into my hug, tucking her chin over my shoulder. We stay completely still. This is the first sign of love she's gotten at this Valentine's Day Haunt, and it's coming from the person who'd just terrorized her.

Finally, Puntarich says: "Now you have exactly three seconds to get out of here before I tase you. One...Two..."

She breaks from our hug.

"TWO AND A HALF..."

She pushes a pull door.

"TWO AND THREE QUARTERS..."

She gets the door and runs into the parking lot without looking back. He takes off his mask and smiles. "I thought I was gonna have to tase that lady."

In the dressing room, actors wiped off their makeup and laughed about guests peeing themselves. Even though it was blackout haunt—meaning the guests were blindfolded the whole time—some actors still wore costumes. One actor in particular was still bouncing around as the others wound down: a high school-aged girl sporting pigtails and an ear-to-ear red grin. Here, she’s known as Mikki the Clown.



Masks available for use in the dressing room at 13th Hour

“The reason I picked being a clown was because I can be myself,” she said after the haunt, her voice raw from screaming. “I love my character, it’s just my personality. I say things like [manically laughs] I’M COMING!” Her voice boomed throughout the room. Later, other actors told me that her laugh can often be heard from the other side of the building, and has become somewhat ubiquitous at 13th Hour. “I’m the same way here and not here,” she said.

For Mikki the Clown, dressing up is a way to bring out what is already inside her. For others, like Jake Rose, costumes are a way to become someone else.

“I like that I get to not be me for a while,” said Rose, a longtime haunt and character designer at traditional haunts like Gateway Playhouse in Bellport, Long Island.



Jake Rose in his self-designed costume

So with actors having the freedom to choose who they want to be—or enhance who they already are—what’s more frightening? What do the guests respond most viscerally to?

“There’s some strange things that get to people, and it’s always something dysmorphic... like if you’re looking at a human being and there’s things slightly off,” said Ricky Vitus, a former contestant of Syfy’s special effects competition, “Face Off.” “It’s things that are unnatural, things that are slightly different from what you would normally look at. People get weirded out by things they can’t understand. Something they can’t grasp always gets them.”

What he's describing is "The Uncanny Valley," a term coined by a robot designer Masahiro Mori that's defined as an aversion to inhuman beings masquerading as human.

"The sense of viewer familiarity drops sharply into the uncanny valley once the artificial figure tries but fails to mimic a realistic human," Jeremy Hsu wrote in an article in *Scientific American*. The fear of the human body can be exploited to no end at haunts. Some costumes with deep pock marks and crevices trigger trypophobia, the fear of holes, while others over-use teeth as a means to throw off the viewer's gaze.

I'd never appreciated the power of the haunt actor until I took on the role on myself. I told myself I wanted to do it for this project—purely for research purposes. But deep down, I wanted to know if there was some mystical element to it, if whatever character was lying dormant inside me would break through my subconscious like the chest-burster in "Alien."

The first installment of "Blind Date" took place one week earlier in an advertising firm's office building in Rocky Point, Long Island. I waited behind a makeshift curtain while the guests, with their eyes taped open "A Clockwork Orange" style, watched the 1985 porno "New Wave Hookers" on a clunky TV.

The haunt's premise: You come to couple's therapy and everything goes horribly wrong. The front room was bathed in cool blues and purples, with a disco ball spinning next to the typewriter on the front desk. The first room was meant to get the couples acclimated to a David Lynchian style romance.

The guests came in groups of two or four, with three private shows in total. Three actors welcomed them: a secretary—who'd later become a dominatrix—a sex therapist, and a research assistant. The three put on a manic, partially improvised skit, detailing what their therapy session

was for, and giving them the safe word (which was actually a safe-phrase, “This is over,” an allusion to breaking up).

Once the couples were led blindfolded behind the curtain, social cues, boundaries, and shame went out the window. I acted mainly as a helper, moving the guests around, going with what the other actors were doing, sometimes improvising as a member of another couple in therapy. We slow-danced to nightmarishly slow love songs, spun them in circles, and force-fed them a romantic dinner of slimy ramen—which caused one man to vomit.



Where guests sat to be force-fed

From there, the haunt got more sexual. I didn't know if I'd be able to go all the way through with it. This was the question that'd been on my mind: how comfortable can guests truly be in these situations?

Danielle Elliot, a writer at Jezebel.com, wrote about her uncomfortable visit to Pittsburgh's "Scarehouse: The Basement." Elliot described being cornered by men in their underwear, having her face licked, and having men put their tongues close to her mouth. "When it comes to borderline sexual assault—even if that wasn't the intent—it's gone too far..." she wrote.

And in April A. Taylor's Ranker article on The Victim Experience, she details particularly inflammatory acts that the guests had to endure, including sex toys in the mouth, being stripped of a shirt, and crawling on their hands and knees. "A male victim reported having a bloody dildo shoved in and out of his mouth, and remarks the experience is harder for men to make it through," wrote Taylor.

Unlike those two, the sexual assault scene in New York City's "Blackout" traumatizes its guests through making them watch it happen to someone else—that is, an actor. Guests are tied down and forced to watch an actor simulate rape on another actor, and there's nothing they can do about it except call the safe word. Alex Riviello wrote about his experience in a Slash Films article, saying, "It put me in the mindset of a victim better than I ever have been in my life, and for the next few days, I would get jumpy recalling what happened."

But the haunt's co-creator, Josh Randall, told Haunting.net that it's all part of the immersive theater experience. "They're not actually doing it," he said in an interview with the haunt and immersive horror website. "It is simulated. Utilizing those tools of misdirection to fool

the audience. This is a piece of theater.” And just like in theatrical plays, the audience’s empathy with the characters is what makes a story gripping.

With all this in mind, I mentioned to Puntarich that I felt hesitant about putting the female guests through the sexual content. He seemed genuinely surprised.

“Why? Everyone gets treated equally here,” he responded. This sentiment was expressed at Shock Theater’s other haunts, too, where the actors were reminded before the show not to target anyone for their gender, race, sexual orientation, or disability. I’d believed that this was a precautionary measure to protect from discrimination, and it is, but it also meant that no one is *exempt* from what the haunt has in store, either.

And so that night, men and women alike had to swallow their pride (no pun intended) and take a dildo in the mouth. It was in no way forced, and most guests laughed through it. The dildo was double-sided, so the guests were told to “Lady and the Tramp” it. Couples were spanked, ordered to spank and hold each other, blindfolded, tied to chairs and spun, sent into a claustrophobic bathroom with a dominatrix, doused with water, and ordered to simulate sex with a blow-up doll. After it was over, they were sprayed with a bottle of water as they were told that they need to be cleaned up to go back into the real world.

After watching the first group enjoy their time, I was able to relax. This haunt wasn’t meant to play on the fear of sexual assault. Instead, it aimed to re-shape the way we approach sex itself. In this space, it was a slapstick-style romp, showing that immersive horror experiences don’t always have to be insanely intense and serious. They can test the guests’ ability to laugh at themselves, and let their pride go. Here, sex was represented as awkward, fumbling, embarrassing, and goofy.



Co-founder David Graham slow dancing with a guest

There was a moment in the middle of the haunt where four guests (two couples) were blindfolded and told to cuddle someone else's partner. The actors coached them through it, berating their cuddling style.

"You call that *love*?" screamed David Graham, co-founder and actor. David works at a costume shop on Long Island, and has been working in haunts all his life. "I started working with him [Will], and he had new ideas that no one was ready for. So I prefer to do this rather than traditional houses."

By the end of the night, the floor was sticky with ramen and slick with water. The guests thanked us before leaving, some even claiming that their relationship had never felt better.

CHAPTER 4: Running the Risk

Aside from insurance and permits, the extreme haunt industry basically self-governs its standards. Waivers are a commonplace among all haunts, and they often borrow structures and clauses from each other. One of the first extreme haunts, “Blackout,” listed information on its waiver that has become pretty standard: Don’t touch the actors, do as you’re told, you must be 18 or older, and if you say the safe word, your experience is over and you will not receive a refund.

The safe word isn’t the only thing that can stop a haunt. Puntarich said he goes by physical cues—expressions, breathing patterns, and verbal responses—as determinants of guests’ safety. “I’ll break fourth wall, I’ll break character completely and go *are you okay?*” he said.

However, waivers aren’t a fool-proof way to avoid lawsuits. As Shock Theater’s manager, Michael Hoad said in an interview, “Generally speaking, a haunt waiver is never something that will hold up in court. Your signing a waiver at a haunt is part of the show.” The waiver raises the stakes by making you think, *this must be really serious*.

“Waivers don’t mean much anyway,” said Michael Baker, director of Gateway Haunted House on Long Island. Baker plays a huge role in the production of the playhouse’s dramatic productions throughout the year. When fall arrives, he devotes his time to putting on an elaborate, theatrical traditional haunt. It dares not to break the touch barrier, and he focuses its efforts in atmosphere, set design, and acting. Baker calls it PG-13, compared with extreme haunts’ R-rated fare.

Gateway has grown exponentially during the past 10 years, expanding from 30 actors to 100, even adding 50 security guards for the hoards of crowds passing through each night. The operation puts thousands of guests through the haunt every fall, its audience appeal stretching from teenagers to families with children. When it comes to extreme haunts, however, Baker has some strong opinions.

“I think we cross the threshold when we start touching or doing things that are physically aggressive, even if they may be safe,” he said. “It’s a free society to do those things, but I think it could really put a damper on the haunt industry. If one thing goes wrong in a haunted house, it affects all haunted houses.”



Actors breaking the touch barrier at 'Party Till You're Dead.' Photo by Michael Zinn

Baker says he wishes that extreme haunts went by a different title, since the public tends to confuse them with traditional haunts. “They’re two totally different things,” he said. “They’re in the same family, it’s a fun house, but one’s more physical. And they don’t have the same amount of people as traditional haunts, not even close. They rarely stay open. People don’t flock to them.”

True, traditional haunts make much more of a profit from their general audiences, generating an estimated \$300 million in ticket sales nationwide, according to a nationwide haunted attraction association, American Haunts.

When it comes to extreme haunts, or at least Shock Theater, it’s a labor of love. “All the money that came from the show went into the show,” Puntarich said. “There was no profit. And there probably never will be. We just try to avoid loss. Breaking even would be great.”

Perhaps the extreme haunt fans can sense this; they’re far more committed than traditional haunt guests, traveling cross-country, and even across the world, to spend one night with this niche community.

Co-founders Puntarich and Graham talked about a show they put on for only two people who flew in from Australia. “Wrong” was a story about two criminals who kidnap the wrong people (the guests) and have to find a way to dispose of them. So they take them hostage in their car, bind them, and end up in a parking lot. Seeing their aggressive handling of these two “hostages,” onlookers called the police, who broke up the haunt around the same moment actors dressed as cops were set to show up on the scene. They were blasting “Out of Touch,” by Hall and Oates the whole time.

This was one of two major incidences that shook Shock Theater, the other ending in a lawsuit. In one of their earlier shows called “Initiation,” the guests were handed their waivers by a horned man named Lou Cifer, Attorney at Law. One of the clauses in the waiver states that the guests consent to signing their soul away to the devil. One guest sued, claiming he wanted his soul back. The story was covered in Complex magazine, its title reading like a headline from The Onion: “Man Sues Haunted House For Reaping His Soul.” The suit was eventually dropped, since evidence of the existence of souls, it turns out, has yet to be discovered.

The lawsuit resulted from Shock Theater’s “Dead of Night” series, which focused heavily on social-political themes—some of which foreshadowed the 2016 election. Puntarich said he’d seen white nationalism rising while Donald Trump was still teasing his candidacy.

“I realized that there isn’t anyone talking about this extreme of society taking over, and I was like, ‘what if there was this clandestine science institute run by the government and they were using the media to help facilitate a race war?’ And that was the theme. It was about the alt-right before the alt-right came out.”

This haunt opened with Orwellian elements: Guests had numbers written on them, and were ordered to find their number’s subsequent box among rows and columns. Voices echoed over the speakers, saying phrases like *We are here to protect you*. The guests were then subjected to clips played over a projector of natural disasters, war, and riots mixed in with images of puppies and giggling babies.

“No matter what faction you let get in power, you let those factions grow without challenging them—right or left—you are going to end up in a dystopia,” he said.

Other companies are joining in on the Hell House-style of social commentary. A haunt in Michigan, called “Stag,” recently put on a show about addiction. Since they couldn’t force their guests to partake in the drug shooting, they used a “Blackout” style of empathy, forcing guests to vicariously suffer through the actors.

“A scene where you’re helping someone get high off heroin becomes a harder thing to endure than being threatened with violence,” wrote Jon Kobryn, a contributor to the extreme haunt and immersive theater site, Haunting.net.

Now in 2019, some might say we’re already living in a dystopia. But even with mass shootings, epidemics, natural disasters, and world leaders with their fingers near the launch button, our personal problems are what ail us the most: What are you dealing with every day? What is your burden?

I asked this of the 20 guests right after they got out of a haunt in November. They were still catching their breath, covered in the red and blue paint and cupcake icing that was slathered onto them by a clown in a secret room. Some were even missing shoes, since they had to take them off for one actor to lick their toes.

The careers of these guests were just about as varied as you can get: a Ph.D. candidate in statistics, a college professor, a middle-school teacher, a biohazard technician, a construction worker, an administrative assistant, and a former haunt actor.

“My friends know me as someone who worries about things all the time. About what students think, what colleagues think,” said a law professor who asked to remain anonymous. “When you’re in this type of thing, you’re in the moment, and you’re not thinking about those other things.”

This guest emphasized that he feels particularly welcomed at these shows, as the organizers take the guests' trust seriously and operate with compassion. He'd come to stay overnight at a hotel just to attend this haunt, and mentioned the company's helpfulness in keeping his stuff safe while he was inside.

"They did a great job knowing not to push me in a way that was too far beyond my limits," the professor said. "That's the thing I like about this company is that they really care about the safety."

Rich Bautz is a frequent haunt guest who introduced his wife, Kelly Kautz, to the experience on this night. "I have anxiety about everyday shit like cancer and car accidents, and this is the kind of stuff that makes me not think about anything like that," he said, beaming. "It's almost like cathartic. You feel so refreshed when you get out of these things. You push yourself to do things you wouldn't normally do and you feel great about it."



Guests being struck at 'Party Till You're Dead.' Photo by Michael Zinn

Kelly Kautz appeared to feel the same, even with her long hair drenched and stained in her ponytail. “It was relaxing for me. It wasn’t high stress, there were no nerves—it was just fun, you just go along and play and participate.”

Sonia Witek is a biohazard technician whom I also spoke to after the haunt. With her face slathered red and her shoes soaked, she told me about the real gore she deals with when cleaning up a crime scenes.

“You have to shut off emotions, otherwise it could get to you,” she said. “Like, say you’re cleaning up a suicide, you know that the family has been affected and you know you’re there to help the family out. You’re dealing with people in their most vulnerable.”

I asked why she’d want to experience more horror after seeing it so much in the real world. “I can feel all the emotions I have to shut off during the day,” Witek replied

We’re all seeking to feel something; there’s no shame in that. And if you can get that by participating in a fantasy—by handing over control as a guest, dominating the room as an actor, or making your vision come to life as a director—there’s a cult of freaks waiting to welcome you.

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SOURCE LIST

Anonymous Professor, November 10, 2018; Guest who doesn't want identity revealed

Michael Baker, October 5, 2018; Director of Gateway Haunted House, a traditional haunt

Rich Bautz, November 10, 2018; Haunt Guest

Kelly Bautz, November 10, 2018, Haunt Guest

Lauren Becker, September 22, 2018; Will Puntarich's girlfriend who is somewhat new to haunts

Ian Bonavia, September 22, 2018; Haunt actor

Heather Buckley, August 9, 2018; Horror movie producer and genre Q&A host

Cara (no last name given), February 9, 2019; extreme haunt actor, immersive horror enthusiast

Gregory Carl, December 27, 2018; Creator of Reign of Terror Entertainment

David Graham, September 22, 2018; Co-creator of Shock Theater

Michael Hoad, September 22, 2018; Shock Theater Manager and admin for extreme haunt sub-reddit

Mikki the Clown, November 10, 2018; Clown haunt actor in traditional & extreme

Austin Minard, November 10, 2018; Haunt Guest

Taylor Monahan, September 22, 2018; Haunt Actor

Will Puntarich, September 22, 2018; October 5, 2018; November 10, 2018; February 9, 2019
Shock Theater co-founder, writer, director, actor

Jake Ross, September 22, 2018; Extreme and Traditional Haunt Actor

Gary Munoz-Villarreal, February 9, 2019, Haunt Guest

Ricky Vitus, September 22, 2018; Special effects artist

Ellie Small, November 10, 2018, Haunt Guest

Kurt Smith, September 22, 2018; Co-founder of Dead of Night and haunt actor

Charlie Tryjar, November 10, 2018; Haunt Guest

Steve Waters, November 10, 2018; Haunt Guest

Josh Williams, September 22, 2018; Haunt Guest

Sonia Witek, November 10, 2018; Haunt Guest and biohazard technician

Michael Zinn, September 22, 2018; Haunt photographer