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Popular Themes and Actors: Haunted Attractions Tailor the Experience to the Times

🕒 January 5, 2012  1 Comment

Every Halloween season, thrill-seekers gather at haunted attractions, with the desire to be in the presence of terror. The owners of these haunts work with skilled actors and makeup artists in order to deliver the creepiest, most sinister characters and provide the best fright nights imaginable. Located in an old theater, Gateway's Haunted Playhouse of Horrors, in Bellport, N.Y., delivered a terrifying show last year during Halloween season to 10,000 scared guests. "We are a regular performing arts center during the year, so we are able to reach out all year long to the theater-going community," said Scot Allan, assistant producer. "Our show speaks to all ages. We get kids as young as 10 years old and many teens and 20-somethings. We are unique and professional, considering we are in a real theater, not a warehouse."



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The Mangler character at Netherworld Haunted House. The attraction entertained over 50,000 guests during the 2011 season, and employs 10 makeup artists.

Allan said that it is common for haunted attractions to capitalize on teen movies. "Teeny-boppers are a big target for haunts, so many theme their attractions in line with these movies, featuring chainsaws and gore," Allan remarked. "We just try to be as scary as possible and make people feel as if they are entering a world that is completely terrifying."

This year, Gateway had many child actors from their school of performing arts. "Everyone loved the kids. You do not often see children at haunted attractions, so there was an element of surprise there that was very effective," Allan said. Another hit were the cool effects that were done with doctors and nurses. All actors are made up by a fully trained staff of professional make-up artists. According to Kevin McMullen, owner of The Warehouse of Terror, in Slidell, La., zombies are currently one of the most popular themes at haunts around the country, simply due to their prevalence in movies and television shows.


"Our theme this year was a demented doll factory and all the actors were very intense," said McMullen. "We had a 5-year-old actor, as well as actors in their 70s. There were a wide range of characters and they were all popular with the crowds." All the makeup is done in-house, and it is McMullen's preference to use makeup over masks. "Masks make it harder to hear the actor and makeup really sells the character."

Slidell is a small community, but the haunt draws people in from all over New Orleans, mostly those in the 16-30 age range. Six thousand guests visited the attraction this Halloween season.


With movies such as Paranormal Activity and an overall interest in ghosts, there seems to be a shift in haunted attraction themes, according to Ben Armstrong, owner of Netherworld Haunted House, in Atlanta, Ga. "We used to see a lot of asylums, with gore and torture, but now the trend seems to be heading towards supernatural elements, which is a very different type of horror," Armstrong said.

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Guests get a startle at the Netherworld Haunted House. The attraction's owner has seen a shift away from gore scares toward more supernatural elements in the industry.

Netherworld drew in visitors from all over the country, particularly Atlanta and the Southeast, this past season, resulting in over 50,000 frightened guests. What spooked them most were the outdoor characters. "In the parking lot, we have giants that walk around in suits that are very scary. We also have clowns, which are notoriously creepy and chameleons, who you can't see until they appear, seemingly, out of nowhere," said Armstrong. "We have 10 makeup artists on staff, but we do use both makeup and masks for our characters."

Amber Arnett-Bequeaith is the owner of The Beast, in Kansas City, Mo., as well as the equally scary Edge of Hell. Visitors to The Beast and The Edge of Hell may also visit the other two haunts, Macabre Cinema, which takes visitors through a haunted 1930s theater and Chambers of Edgar Allan Poe, which brings Poe's dark tales to life. "All our haunts are built upon the theme of the psychology of fear and phobias," said Arnett-Bequeaith. "Right now everyone is into vampires and werewolves, because of the Twilight movies and other television shows, so we have capitalized on that in the Edge of Hell, with vampires and bats."

"Some of our most popular characters are our Headless Horseman and Werewolves at The Beast, and The Rat Man, from the Edge of Hell," said Arnett-Bequeaith. "The Rat Man has lived outside the Edge of Hell for over 30 years and he captures rats and bites off their heads in front of the crowd." There are three weeks of auditions to find the best actors, who can maintain their stamina night after night for about a 6.5 hour stretch. All the actors wear makeup and Hollywood prosthetics.

These attractions have been a presence in "the original Kansas City" for 37 years and people who have been coming to visit for all those years now show up with their grandchildren. "The largest demographic is that set that is too old for Chuck E. Cheese, but too young for a bar," said Arnett-Bequeaith, who saw a crowd of over 100,000 guests in the 2011 season.

With a one-mile hayride, a labyrinth-style corn maze and six haunted houses, the Headless Horseman Hayrides and Haunted Houses, in Ulster Park, N.Y., brings in guests from seven surrounding states, and has been known to draw in thrill-seekers from across the country and the world.

"Our star is our headless horseman, who rides on a jet-black horse," said Michael Jubie, who owns the haunt with his wife, Nancy Jubie. "We also had an operating room scene in one of the houses this year that was particularly popular." Fourteen makeup artists are on hand to provide realistic



looks for the actors. Masks are used on occasion, as well, but makeup is preferred, as masks tend to hinder performances due to muffled voices.



An exterior view of The Edge of Hell haunted house in Missouri. "...Right now everyone is into vampires and werewolves, because of the Twilight movies and other television shows, so we have capitalized on that in the Edge of Hell, with vampires and bats," the attraction's owner said.

Erebus Four Story Haunted Attraction leads its victims through four stories of intense fear. Located in Pontiac, Mich., this haunt is owned and operated by Edward Terebus and his brother, James. Edward Terebus said that chainsaws are seen as a popular theme in haunts, time and time again. "There is just that fear of chainsaws and what could happen if it gets into the wrong hands," said Terebus. Zombies, insane asylums and hospitals are also examples of common themes. "It is amazing what can be done with contact lenses and false teeth," said Terebus, who predominately uses makeup for his actors. "Masks are so hot and also inhibit the voice. Makeup is more realistic and the closer you get to real, the more believable your show." The most popular character at Erebus is always the one who can play off the crowd the best. "The actors have to know what fear to play with. It isn't about the scariest character, but the creepiest actor. Who can have that quiet and calm, but dark and sinister demeanor? That person is always the scariest," said Terebus. This haunt saw around 50,000 people in 2011, from a wide range of age groups. -



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