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Behind the Screams: The Weird World of Haunted House Operators

Oct 6, 2010 – 3:10 PM

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Tony Deconinck
Contributor

(Oct. 6) -- They plan this all year, you know. They stay up at night, staring at the ceiling, dreaming up new and more diabolical ways to give you nightmares.

What they crave is this time of year -- when the darkness comes sooner and the chill of night creeps into your bones -- because that's when they finally get to unleash their horrors upon you.

Their reward is your terrified scream.

Their faces and names are relatively unknown; most people only know the darkened, terrifying worlds they have created with names like Erebus, Netherworld, The Beast, and The ScareHouse.

They are members of [America Haunts](#), a brotherhood of 18 of the most elite haunted houses in the nation.

Though they are billed as some of the scariest people



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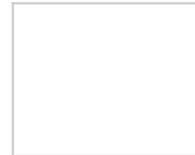
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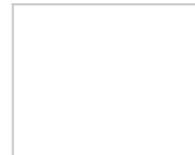
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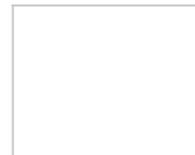
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in the country, most members of America Haunts don't consider themselves particularly odd.

"I think that's hilarious; people are so disappointed when they meet me and my wife," said Scott Simmons of [The ScareHouse](#) in Pittsburgh. "They're expecting Marilyn Manson and they get this dorky suburbanite, instead."

Still, many admit that being in the business for as long as they have has left them a little twisted -- not surprising considering they're constantly trying to find new and novel ways to freak people out.

"We've been thinking about it for 30 years," said Ed Terebus, who runs the famed [Erebus](#) haunted house in Pontiac, Mich. "How can you not be a scary person if you live, eat, sleep and drink haunted houses?"

All of them arrived in their current profession from different starting points. Thirty years ago, Amber Arnett-Bequeaith's mother and grandmother performed plays for tourists at an outdoor theater on their family property. Today, everybody who wants to be a performer at [The Beast](#) and [Edge of Hell](#) -- two horrifying destinations operated by Arnett-Bequeaith -- has to audition for their part.

"They have to show grit, determination, and stamina," said Arnett-Bequeaith, a quiet mother of four. "I tell them that the screams are their applause."

Ben Armstrong came to run [Netherworld](#) after being in local Atlanta television for 18 years and choreographing zombies in films including *Zombieland*, *Walking Dead* and (Rob Zombie's) *Halloween*. Some of those zombies were members of his *Netherworld* cast.

The haunted houses that



Amber Arnett-Bequeaith

Scary, isn't it? The operators of the nation's most horrifying haunted houses belong to a unique trade group that allow s them to netw ork, ask advice, and share ideas about how to scare you senseless. This image show s a scene from the Edge of Hell haunted house in Kansas City, w hich features an infamous Rat-Man and his long-tailed friend.



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belong to America Haunts are as diverse as the men and women who operate them.

At Erebus, Ed combines his fine arts background with Jim's engineering background to create high-tech features like moving walls that push people into bottomless pits.



Edward Terebus

This sword-wielding demon is just one of the ghouls you'll face at Erebus in Pontiac, Mich. -- a sprawling haunted house that stretches 2,450 feet.

"This is not your mother and father's haunted house," said Ed Terebus. "We're using pneumatics and programmable logic controllers that can trigger different events."

Simmons -- the man behind The ScareHouse -- started trying to creep people out at a humble haunted house that served as a YMCA fundraiser. Now he runs The ScareHouse, which is three horrifying haunted houses in one.

"We really try to push the envelope of what you expect in a haunted house, conceptually," Simmons explained. "In Rampage, the whole area is influenced by steampunk, even the robots, and we mixed that with a detailed plot influenced by George Orwell's 1984 universe and Pink Floyd. You're entering into a world with this ongoing story and you're dropped in the battle."

In addition to the militaristic steampunk universe of Rampage, he also runs Delirium 3D -- an off-putting, brightly-colored medley of weird that's a jangled mash of overhappy neon strangeness that combines European rave music with a cybergothic aesthetic. To top it all off, you have to wear 3D glasses to go inside.

Even in Forsaken, the most traditional haunted house operated by Simmons, the focus moves from straightforward scares to troubling, disconcerting scenes that are deliberately designed to push

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people's sensibilities off balance.

"This year we put a guy in a bunny suit with an axe," said Simmons. "It was inspired by furies. Their national convention is here in Pittsburgh every summer, and we felt that what really scares people is contrast, that incongruity. You see a guy in a bunny suit in the basement, that's just wrong."

Whatever you have, they'll use against you. They know how to prey on whichever fears are most convenient. If you're isolated and alone, they take advantage of that. If you're in a group, they exploit the herd mentality.

"We will show no mercy," said Terebus. "We will give you fear so intense it will feel like pain."



Scott Simmons

ScareHouse's Forsaken brings a visit from a variety of disturbing creatures, including an axe-wielding bunny.

The Beast's Arnett-Bequeaith agrees.

"It's psychology. No one scares the same. We all have different fears, some innate and some taught. Some cry, some scream, some fall to the ground. It's about fear. We utilize live animals; it puts your mind into that different dimension."

Not just any animals, either, but a 24-foot-long reticulated python that Arnett-Bequeaith hopes to get confirmed by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest in captivity.

Meanwhile, Erebus is seeking to reclaim its own Guinness World Record for the longest haunted

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house with 2,450 linear feet (over seven football fields) of horror.

"That's 45 minutes of continuous terror, which is more than many people are able to handle" says Terebus, who noted that Erebus is continually trying for bigger and better scares out of necessity. "Southeast Michigan is the haunted house capital of the world. There are 70 within a 50-mile radius; this forces us to innovate and constantly get better."

To make sure of that, Terebus keeps a "wimp board" tallying people who couldn't make it through Erebus. They also keep track of the people who vomit, who faint, and who wet themselves in fear.

Considering their unique line of work, many America Haunts members say belonging to the fraternity gives them a rare chance to talk shop with other people who understand them completely.

Armstrong says the biggest advantage of America Haunts is that it offers haunted house operators a network of scare experts who they can contact to share ideas and advice.

"I had a guy call me who had a malfunctioning pumpkin device. There aren't a lot of people you can call with that specific problem."

It also lets them unwind and tell their own brand of war stories to one another after the season finishes, enjoy each other's company and meet up with the everyday people behind the hellish terrascapes they've created.

For each of them, the rewards are different.

Terebus says the biggest compliment he gets is when he sees a kid drag his parents to his haunted house, but then sees the parents return the next night on their own to experience it again.

For Armstrong, the compliment is in the scare itself.

"They might run or flip out, but then they start laughing and say, 'Okay, you got me.' I want them to

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leave and be happy, but I don't mind if they have a few nightmares, too."

Unsurprisingly, plenty of odd things happen when you work in such an odd job.

"My grandma found a dead squirrel one day, and so she boxed it and gave it to me," says Terebus. "She thought I'd have a use for it. A dead squirrel!"

So, if you're feeling a bit apprehensive as Halloween approaches, it might just be a gut feeling that somebody out there is waiting for their chance to hear your terrified, paint-peeling scream.

And you'd be right.

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