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# The Business of "Boo!"

By Peta Owens-Liston/Salt Lake City | Tuesday, Oct. 31, 2006

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It's Halloween, which means that the 3,000 to 5,000 haunted houses across the nation are creaking open their doors for business. For about \$15 a person, hundreds of thousands of kids and adults willingly squeal and scream their way through attractions that are now so realistic that what once was cold spaghetti in a bowl is now, most certainly, brains.

Rocky Point Haunted House

Twenty years ago, these haunted houses were smaller and open for a shorter period of time, often for charity. Today, attractions in this \$300 million industry require anywhere from \$150,000 to



\$400,000 to be worth a howl. Marketing, particularly web sites, and advertising eat up a chunk of this, while sophisticated props like animatronics (robotic creatures) might run as high as \$16,000 for a lifelike monster. Some places create entirely new sets each year. Some scenes take two to three years to build and can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000, according to Amber Arnett-Bequeaith, who expects to escort 100,000 customers this year into her five-story warehouse haunt in Kansas City at \$20 a head. Even the term "haunted house" can be a bit of a misnomer; these dark amusements show up in steamboats and truck trailers, hotels and even a penitentiary, and occasionally in a real abode, like the Haunted Overload in Exeter, New Hampshire. The haunt-fest is even catching on overseas. They are popping up in the Netherlands, China, Europe and Australia.

Long-timers like Dracula and Frankenstein are considered "old school" in the haunted house realm, along with Hollywood copycat characters like Freddy Kruger or Jason (of *Friday the 13th*), according to Leonard Pickel, editor of *Haunted Attractions* magazine. "New school" storylines and characters that pull the viewer into a scene that feels so real that they feel part of it — usually that of victim. "You are the person in the horror movie and you're getting the kind of adrenalin rush that comes from hitting a rollercoaster loop at 100 mph," says Larry Kirchner, president of the International Association of Haunted Attractions.

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Many of these haunts are architecturally designed to tap into people's fears. Pickel, who designs haunts throughout the country, knows how to use architecture to creep out people, with features like wide rooms with low ceilings, elusive exits, crawl spaces, or uneven, shifting floors. Other eerie additions include lighting that comes from the ground, a high-tech sound system (allowing a variety of sounds to play at the same time), smells (like rotting earth) and the storyline. "A haunted house is like a horror movie and you are figuring out the story as you walk through it," says Pickel.

"For me it is about creating a realistic atmosphere that includes the smell, the feel, the sound, and the look of everything — if you miss one part it is suddenly not real any more," explains Cydney Neil, the producer of Salt Lake City's Rocky Point Haunted House, one of the oldest and most recognized haunts in the U.S. Neil invested three-quarters of a million dollars this year in her haunt, and she anticipates a hefty return as well. Imported live kelp lends authenticity to a pirate scene, the putrid scent of rotten meat permeates a slaughterhouse, complete with a locker from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and Hollywood make-up artists transform teenagers into depraved beings. "I make monsters on people," says make-up artist Chris Cannon as he puts the final touches on a festering wound. "And that helps bring out the monster in them."

In Kansas City, live animals — bats, rats, snakes, alligators — are real "props" in several haunts, including the Edge of Hell, Arnett-Bequeaith's warehouse, where skittish patrons descend from Heaven to Hell, with a stop in purgatory. The storyline: every day people make choices in their lives that determine whether they'll go to heaven or hell. "My great-grandfather was a pastor," says Arnett-Bequeaith, explaining her inspiration.



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What tends to scare people the most is the unexpected; the coffin in the middle of the room with a quivering lid catches your attention, while an actor lurks behind a draped archway off to the side. Though Hollywood-ish special affects and props can wow the crowd with goosebumps, it's the actors that turn the scream volume up. "People know the other stuff isn't real — the pop-up head or severed hand — but actors are real," explains Pickel. Plus, an actor can strike just at the right time to startle. "They know where the chickens hide," says Pickel, "always in the middle of the group." Haunted houses give people an opportunity to find out how they would react to a life-or-death situation in a safe environment, adds Pickel. Often that means they cry, crawl, run, hide, knock people down, and even abandon their companions. "You learn a lot about people by how they scare," says Kansas City's Arnett-Bequeaith. "But usually after the initial shock and screams, laughter follows."

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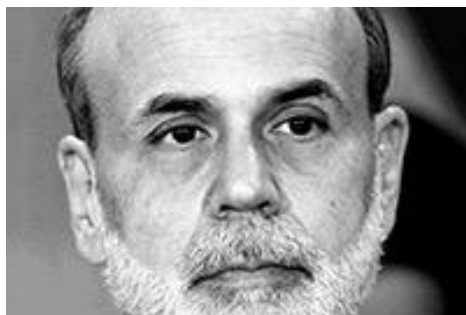
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