

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

I'm always interested in looking at how something in the past can have a big influence on modern day culture in a way that we don't even realize it. And I only learned recently how many elements in modern-day horror genres came from a very unlikely source – a theater in Paris called The Grand Guignol.

It might seem like a stretch to compare Parisians going to the theater at the turn of the century, to people watching the latest movie in the Halloween franchise, but there are fascinating parallels. And The Grand Guignol was discovering how to scare audiences and why an audience would want to be scared back when there were no horror movies or even horror theater – they were inventing something brand new.

Richard Hand is a professor at the University of East Anglia in the UK, and he wrote a book about the Grand Guignol. He says when the theater began in 1897, they were part of an artistic movement that was aimed at realism. A night at The Grand Guignol would be a series of short plays and at first that were grounded, realistic, slice-of-life – without any actual slicing. But there was already something edgy about the theater.

RICHARD: It was really the only theater in that particular district of Montmartre that was full of prostitutes and sex shows and, you know, sleazy, brothels and bars and uh, you know, a lot of Bohemians around there, so it kind of built that cult viewing. I think there was a dare factor.

And the theater itself wasn't really a theater. It was an old spooky chapel.

RICHARD: With carved angels, 10 foot tall, and the smell of incense and wax, but immediately it was an evocative setting. But in their first season, they had a play called Mademoiselle Fifi in which a, uh, French prostitute murders a Prussian officer during the Franco-Prussian war. And this was the one everybody talked about and they, they kept performing it. Then the audience loved it.

At the time, newspapers were full of lurid crimes. And the first artistic director, Oscar Metenier, realized they could keep making more hit plays if they adapted these stories to the stage.

RICHARD: When the audience was queuing to go in, he would talk to them. He talked to people in the queue. Now his day job was working for the, for the Parisian police force. So, he would say things like, oh, you read about that murder? Well, I can tell you what the body looked like. I can tell you what the newspapers don't want to tell you.

Alex Zavistovich is the co-founder of The Molotov Theater in Washington DC, which has recreated The Grand Guignol for modern audiences.

ALEX: There was a very popular, perhaps the most popular story that they, uh, were play that they did called "The Last Kiss" or "The Final Kiss." And in it, a man is convalescing after having been horribly burned when his jealous, uh, paramour throws acid in his face, that scenario was actually very commonplace at the time. Acid attacks were very commonplace.

Although he says one of their secret weapons in freaking people out was comedy. Remember it was a night of short plays.

ALEX: And in an evening of Grand Guignol, you'd have a suspense story followed by a comedy, typically a sex farce, followed by a real horror story. And the idea there is what they used to call le douche ecossaise in the original French, the hot and cold shower, meaning that you needed kind of a refresher or a palette cleanser to get people off guard enough so that the horror actually hit home.

That's a tried-and-true staple of the horror genre now – using comedy to let the audience drop their guard before you hit them with the jump scare. But Alex is still a strong believer in the power of theater.

ALEX: When you're seeing something on film, everyone kind of just starts thinking. I mean, whether it's, whether it's done that way or not, everybody just thinks, eh, CGI, or that was a camera cut, but when you're doing theater, there's no denying that what they're seeing is happening right in front of them. And you know, there are great stories, uh, when you read about the original Grand Guignol and it's, it's true because we experienced it as well. By the time you got through a production, the blood was everywhere. You couldn't get it out from under your fingernails. You walk across the stage, you can just feel your feet sticking to the floor, no matter how many times you cleaned the floor.

Felicia Ruff is a professor of theater history at Wagner College, who has written about The Grand Guignol. She says some of the real stars of the theater were the prop designers behind the scenes. They were incredibly inventive in designing

fake blood and other effects no one had seen before. And over the years, they kept trying to top themselves, which is how the theater pushed beyond True Crime into pure horror.

FELICIA: Everything has to be precise because you've got someone who's doing a fake, like gouging out of an eye. Now an eyeball is going to be rolling on the stage. Now, obviously that's not the person's eye, but they've got, maybe they've gone and bought like real eyeballs. So not human eyeballs, but animal eyeballs from the butcher so that they, when they bounced, it would sound and look real. I know this sounds really disturbing, but that was the idea. There was also a lot of eating of eyeballs and organs, and they had confectioners who they would have like make candy eyeballs, um, so that you could see someone eat an organ onstage. And there's never, the audience can never have that moment where, and I know this is a one of your themes, where they can have a moment of disbelief.

Alex discovered that firsthand when his theater company staged one of the most popular plays from The Grand Guignol, The Final Kiss. It's about a man who was burned by acid. He gets revenge by throwing acid back at his former lover. Alex says when they re-created the play, they relied on age-old trick The Grand Guignol used all the time -- the principle of misdirection.

ALEX: What we ended up doing was taking this vial of acid. It was water, of course, obviously, but, um, we, we showed it and he directed his attention to it. So did the actress and therefore, so did everyone in the audience. And in that moment, the actress just reached her hand forward near the footlights and grabbed the handful of stage blood mixed with torn up pieces of tortilla wrapper so that when he threw the acid in her face, she in a natural way would bring her face up to the wound and then drag downward. So that she's just transferring her handful of stage blood and tortilla wrappers down her face. It looked extremely natural. And just being able, she's able to sort of peel off the tortilla and look at it in horror, but all of this stuff happened directly in front of people, and they had no idea that they were being fooled ever so subtly in their minds they'd seen the entire thing unfold directly.

You can actually watch that scene on their YouTube page. I've seen it several times, and I still can't figure out when the actress grabs the tortilla strips mixed with stage blood while the man is threatening to throw acid in her face.

CLIP: FINAL KISS

But Alex discovered the really gross stuff never had the same impact as the little horrors.

ALEX: We had another, uh, play where we had, again, tremendous amount of, sort of, of, of bloody special effects. But early on, we had somebody cut the palm of their hand using just the kind of novelty prop thing that you could find at a toy store, just a little razor blade with a squeeze bulb and that little cut on the palm of an actor's hand when they showed it to the audience, got a much greater reaction than an onstage disemboweling, for example, which was in the same play, because it's just much more relatable. Nobody knows how to react to it. So you're just sort of witnessing a spectacle when you see something as grand as a disemboweling, but everybody's had a real vicious paper cut.

Richard Hand says the original Grand Guignol also discovered they could rely on subtle effects to unsettle an audience.

RICHARD: You know, we, we know sound is one of the greatest secret weapons in horror movies. So, they would do things like, um, have sound effects from the rear of the audience. If you're suddenly hearing the smashing of the windows, the serial killers coming in, but that's behind you. I imagine, you know, people on the back row thinking they're safe, they're suddenly up front, you know, it's here behind me. So, they would do things like that. And it made it, I know it's a cliched word these days, but kind of immersive.

But the plays weren't just about shock value. The Grand Guignol plays kept coming back to certain themes – which will feel very familiar today. For instance: the fear of new technology. The Grand Guignol did plays about automobiles when they first started appearing on the streets of Paris. There was a play about the telephone.

RICHARD: And in it, this kind of what we call a yuppie kind of character and he's having dinner with friends, and he says, oh, you've got a telephone like us, everybody, everyone. Who's somebody, who's got a telephone these days and I'll just phone home to see how my wife and baby and he phones up and he hears there's an intruder in his home and he hears his wife and child murdered. He's at the end of the phone miles away. There's nothing he can do now. All very interesting the place of phones in horror, but this is from about 1901. It's really early. It's really early, so, *Scream* and all these wonderful films that use telephones so brilliantly through the decades, you can trace it back to that moment of technophobia on the Grand Guignol, it's horrible, it's gory, but

you don't see a thing because that's happening in the other house. You just see the guy listening powerless as he loses his mind, as it all happens on the end of the line.

It wasn't just new technology. The Grand Guignol would do plays about anything in the news that made people feel uneasy.

RICHARD: The Grand Guignol would have done a play about the last American troops to leave Afghanistan or something like that. Something very topical. Um, and the fact they did a play about The Boxer Rebellion, that is almost exactly that. And so, audiences are watching something that's very, very contemporary.

Another common theme was the fear of medicine – modern medicine.

RICHARD: At that time, there is a sense of the kind of God is dead kind of the era, you know, that the new religion is science and medicine, but there's also something relatable. I think for the audience who were investing all of their faith and belief in the power of science and medicine. Um, and then the Grand Guignol presenting doctors, getting it wrong, doctors going crazy and abusing their patients and all of these things. And you realize that is something really terrifying for them.

FELICIA: There's a line where they call for a doctor in the house. Cause somebody faints. And they're like, nah, we can't get the doctor. He's fainted too.

Again, Felicia Ruff.

FELICIA: There are lots of reasons why doctors are become characters in these plays, you know, partly it's because of the setting, partly it's because a doctor is allowed to touch a person in kind of, they're given permission, and so now they might be able to violate that touch with something sinister or sexual. You know, we shouldn't leave out that there's like a kind of voyeuristic sexual element in all of these horror plays. But so many of these plays are written by doctors. They are medical doctors who are writing for the Grand Guignol. There are even some psychologists, you know, emerge. This is an emerging field, two psychologists who are writing about madness in the Grand Guignol. So again, it sort of ties back to the idea of an imaginary world, but that this is real like that this could be real, that this could be happening at an asylum near you or a hospital near you.

Felicia gets extra points for working the entire tagline of my show into two of her answers.

Anyway, she thinks that in the end, the appeal of The Grand Guignol came down to a feeling of voyeurism.

FELICIA: I think part of it is that sense that at the end of the night, you've escaped, you are alive. That feeling that I'm alive, I'm walking out of here safe, and I'm going home. I've been through that. I've seen somebody else suffer and die on stage, maybe, but I'm alive. I feel alive. There's a little bit of schadenfreude in there, but I think there's also a real, sort of the physical sensation of feeling a kind of triumph and being able to walk out into the street, having escaped the horrors.

After the break, the Grand Guignol dies by its own hand. But it gets resurrected as a ghost that haunts modern horror to this day.

BREAK

The Grand Guignol mostly stayed in Paris but starting in the 1920s, there were a few different versions in London. Most of them were short lived because the British government was allowed to censor plays, and this French horror theater was not exactly their cup of tea. So, the versions that played in the UK were heavily watered down. But Richard Hand says they still found a loyal audience.

Like there was one play about a scientist who wires up the head of a guillotine victim and brings it to life with electricity.

RICHARD: Well in 1928, that was played by a young British actor called James Whale, who would go to Hollywood soon afterwards and make Frankenstein. So, when we have it's alive, uh, James Whale knew because he was the head on the wires three years before.

That's one of the reasons why the Grand Guignol started to decline. The movies were giving them a run for their money. The Grand Guignol used to be a perfect date night for young couples.

RICHARD: But maybe that audience that are going to go along with their boyfriend or girlfriend and have a bit of a laugh and then a drink afterwards, maybe they're going to the movies. Maybe they're going to go and Le Diaboliques, a magnificent French film, which is totally Grand Guignol, but you can have fantastic close-ups of the body in the bath and things like that.

Also, over time, many of the creators of the Grand Guignol retired or died. Felicia says the next generation didn't quite have the knack.

FELICIA: The stage itself was only 20, like it was a very, very small, it was like 20 feet. So, there's this real kind of intimacy. And at some point, if they're not doing the show perfectly, it's going to lose its reality. And then it loses the impact. So, it can't, it can never come up short. That's one of the things, the actors from that era talk about, like they had to be perfect. If you lost your audience, it was almost impossible to get them back in the middle of one of those shows, and tourists were going. So, it was becoming more of a commercial thing than a really artistic thing.

But the real decline of The Grand Guignol happened during the Nazi occupation of France. The problem wasn't that no one was going to the Grand Guignol in World War II. The problem was who was going.

RICHARD: You know, some, some theaters close down during the occupation, it didn't have to stay open, but chose to. It continued to be successful. And it was with the occupying German soldiers going to watch the Grand Guignol. But I think for some people, local people, I think there was a little bit of betrayal there. And especially then it throws a light on the content. So, when we know what was going on in World War II and the thought of people going and getting pleasure out of bloody violence on the stage, something not quite so funny anymore, perhaps not quite so much fun. Um, now I remember, you know, sometimes said that after Auschwitz, horror was impossible, so the Grand Guignol had to go, I think that's a bit too simplistic. After World War I, the Grand Guignol, you know, entered its golden age, uh, that didn't put people off. You know, they would have been seeing invalid soldiers on the streets of Paris. But I think it's that World War II factor that complicit nature of the Grand Guignol. I think for some people it's hard to forgive.

The Grand Guignol finally closed in 1962. By that point, it had been a shadow of itself for a while. And the world had changed so much. When The Grand Guignol began, Queen Victoria was ruling the British Empire. When it ended, The Beatles were recording their first album. During that time, warfare went from swords and horses to nuclear missiles.

And when the theater closed, Psycho had come out two years earlier. It was a very Grand Guignol with a Gothic atmosphere, a nihilistic ending, the feeling of true crime, and lots of blood.

NORMAL BATES: Oh God, Mother! Blood! Blood!

In fact, I found a 1959 New York Times story about the making of Psycho. And the reporter compares Psycho to the big horror movies at the time like The Blob or The Fly, and he says quote, “Mr. Hitchcock believes, a la Grand Guignol, that horror is human.”

The Grand Guignol also influenced pop culture in more subtle ways. When the theater shut down in 1962, the movie Whatever Happened to Baby Jane came out, where Betty Davis served Joan Crawford a dead rat for her dinner.

CLIP: BETTY DAVIS EVIL CACKLES, JOAN CRAWFORD SCREAMS

That movie kicked off a new genre of film that critics called Grande Dame Guignol, where aging actresses played monstrous characters. And the set design and cinematography reflected their dark, twisted emotions.

You know who ate those movies up? Quentin Tarantino. Whether it’s intentional or not, I found in almost every review of a Tarantino movie, at least one critic compares his style to The Grand Guignol.

Usually they’re talking about the shock and horror, but Alex Zavistovich has been thinking about the movie Death Proof, which is part of the Grindhouse double feature. Because there’s a moment in that movie which reminds him of the style of acting in the Grand Guignol, which often came very close to breaking the fourth wall.

CLIP: DEATH PROOF MUSIC AND CAR SFX

ALEX: And there was a moment where Kurt Russell's character is using binoculars to sort of survey his next potential victims as they're driving down the highway. And he takes his binoculars down, look straight out and looks directly into the camera, which, you know, is a no-no in filmmaking. And a slight change comes across his face, this like a very slight grin that suggests, yeah, stuff's about to get heavy. But it was that direct address, that 4th wall ambiguity that is part and parcel of what it meant to act in the original Grand Guignol that obviously got translated directly to film.

The Grand Guignol also influenced horror comics in the U.S.. Some of the American publishers had visited the Grand Guignol. And their horror comics which were so controversial, Congress held hearings in the 1950s, which led to the creation of the infamous comic book censorship code.

SENATOR: Here is your May 22nd issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman's head up which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?

GAINS: Yes, sir; I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste for example might be defined as holding the head a little higher and Yes, sir; I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody.

And Richard Hand says, we can't forget television. That's where he still sees the reflection of The Grand Guignol today.

RICHARD: Because the Grand Guignol loved short plays. They weren't interested in doing a long play. They wanted to take you to the final act and hit you over the head immediately. But I think, you know, televisual horror, American Horror Story, Penny Dreadful, all these series, they're not full-length movies. They're episodic. They have an ensemble, the American Horror Story guys, you know, Sarah Paulson, Even Peters. I mean, they, they are descendants of the Grand Guignol stars, loving what they're doing, and you never know, are they going to be the victim of a villain?

CLIP: MONTAGE OF SARAH PAULSON ROLES ON AMERICAN HORROR STORY

That is such an interesting comparison with American Horror Story because The Grand Guignol was a theater troupe and they kept reusing the same actors over and over again.

RICHARD: Yeah, that's right. And I think it, in that way, you kind of get a sense it's quite a specialized form, perhaps, you know, that they were real masters of this. And I know Paula Maxa the most assassinated women in the world and all this, the legend goes, she really mastered the form and it's fascinating getting responses to what people made of her and that the culture around her. And she tries to do other things, but she comes back to the Grand Guignol probably typecast by that point. But there again, in the Grand Guignol, as I said, sometimes she's a victim. Her scream was legendary, but there's someplace where she plays nasty bits of work as well and loves every minute of getting a bit of revenge.

Speaking of the theater and revenge, we can't forget the most popular horror musical of all time, Sweeney Todd, about a barber who slashes the throats of his customers, while his downstairs neighbor turns them into meat pies.

Once again, I found an article from The New York Times. It was a 1979 story about the making of Sweeney Todd where Stephen Sondheim says that he's always been interested in The Grand Guignol. Sweeney Todd was his chance to make a Grand Guignol-style musical.

That makes sense to Felicia.

FELICIA: Sweeney Todd was built on a melodrama, which was built on like real crime stories. That's the same. That's where, um, a lot of the material at least initially came for the Grand Guignol from these real crime, true crime stories that they were trying to re-enact.

CLIP: Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd / His skin was pale and his eye was odd / He shaved the faces of gentlemen who never thereafter were heard of again / He trod a path that few have trod / Did Sweeney Todd / The demon barber of Fleet Street

Richard also sees the influence of the Grand Guignol on immersive theater today – which is usually set in a spooky or evocative location that was not originally a theater. And that's all very popular but still, he wonders, what is the role of shock and horror in our culture today?

RICHARD: You wonder don't you, we're in a world of trigger warnings now. Um, you know, what do we do about that? I think there's a contract. I think you have to say to people. Yeah. If you really don't like horror, if it's going to give you nightmares, don't bother.

That is such an interesting point about how we're now in the culture of trigger warnings. I mean, the Grand Guignol completely flies in the face of that.

RICHARD: Yeah. That's it, I mean, um, yeah, it's difficult, isn't it? Because you don't want to destroy the plot, trigger warning, describing what's going to happen. You need to surprise factor in the place. Even though often with horror, often with Grand Guignol. I think when something happens, a moment of horror, I knew that would happen, you know, but at the same time, it's the suspense getting there, isn't it, there's kind of spider and the fly kind of thing. It's inevitable, but it's how you get there.

One of the thrills of the Grand Guignol was leaving the theater and feeling like you survived. Being alive may have been something we took for granted but in the age of COVID, when theaters are beginning to open again with lots of safeguards until the shows shut down because there's a COVID outbreak among the cast or crew -- I'm not sure we need to be reminded that we're lucky to walk out of a theater alive and healthy.

Although I'm certain, if the Grand Guignol were around today, they would definitely write a play about that -- or maybe several plays about that.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Richard Hand, Felicia Ruff and Alex Zavistovich. Also thank you to Anika Chapin, a listener who suggested this topic.

In the show notes, I put a link to the Molotov Theater. They also do radio dramas based on Edgar Allen Poe, and the Grand Guignol also used to stage adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe's work. I also put a link to their audio dramas in the show notes.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook and Instagram. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

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