



TaPS MASTER CLASS RESOURCE PACK: The Grand Guignol.

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The Grand-Guignol

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Introduction:

It's funny how people, like theatre, can get an undeserved reputation for something that they did not do. That's how I now feel about France's "Theatre of Horror": The Grand-Guignol. For many years it has had a rather dark reputation as only being about blood, gore, bad humour, or the erotic. Many critics or theatre historians have overlooked its worth and new academic studies are uncovering intriguing truths. During its emergence in Paris, in the late 1800's, it was a theatre for writers. Clever, well-timed, psychological plays, often inspired by topics that were "abuzz" in the daily news were extremely popular. Although there were melodramatic elements in some plays, actors sought to be as natural, and as believable as possible. Humor was also all part of an evening's experience as the organizers tried to find a real "balance" in what is referred to as "the hot and cold effect." Some special effects were used, but more important was that ensembles learned to work with each other to create illusions; to use timing wisely. The pacing of a performance, or an evening needed to be masterful.

Important elements of The Grand-Guignol to be considered:

- a mixture of theatrical traditions and other influences combining horror, comedy, symbolism, surrealism, melodrama, expressionism, "the well made play" and naturalism
- time period: late 19th to early-mid 20th century
- did not tend to focus on the supernatural but was more about one's mind state
- nights at the theatre were very structured leading to a roller coaster ride—from tension to comedy and back to tension (through the structure of performances)
- primarily a writer's theatre; even today some theatre groups still follow the "formula" of the original writers for the hypnotic effect they feel it has over audiences
- various theories exist on why it began to decline, including the belief that many of its writers couldn't match the horror of their stories to what was already happening during WW II
- the theatre was located in Montmartre, Paris and the "journey" through the streets to get there already set an eerie and provocative ambience
- the interior of the theatre was very church-like with melting candle wax, religious murals, and ground floor boxes; in fact, the building once was a church
- the feeling in the theatre was intimate; there was nowhere to hide!
- actors would try to "become" and not distance themselves from their roles. Still, they were lucid enough to realize it wasn't real and thus be able to interact with all that makes theatre, theatre—such as props, other actors, special effects. The performances tended to be naturalistic so rarely (there are exceptions) was the fourth wall broken
- pacing was very important and tended to be slow and even, allowing for natural pauses; even the more frightening or violent moments were delivered so that the audience could absorb the action and allow their imaginations to do much of the work

- sophisticated effects were the exception, not the rule
- the original theatre used a proscenium stage; make up and lighting were used and of course changed with technology, but music was almost never part of the conventions
- great hype surrounded *The Grand-Guignol*; it is said they had to hire their own doctor to deal with fainting audience members, but, academics now question how much of the hype was created by the theatre itself to promote its reputation
- considered a significant influence on 20th century horror films

Approach to this master class:

Warm up: Boal's "The vampire of Strasbourg" from 'Games for actors and non-actors

You need to be very sensitive to your audience, especially when exploring a tradition like *The Grand-Guignol*. If your purpose is to scare others for no other reason than that, then you may turn off workshop participants who will not be intrigued by whatever it is you wish to share with them!

By beginning with this game it opens up the senses and examines how a mood can be created, especially when embracing the unknown.

Remember, humans shriek and vampires loooooove to be given a squeeze by other vampires!

As a follow-up, encourage honest feedback about how participants felt about the game. It may teach you a great deal about your potential audience already. Are they ready for more, or do you need to tread sensitively?

The metamorphosis: glam and the mummies

This was an exercise that I participated in once upon a time in a teachers' workshop at a TaPS held in Stratford-upon-Avon. I have never forgotten it for its impact and its simplicity. It is a good way to build further on the mood created in the warm up exercise. Once again, know your audience and your host culture and substitute ideas when necessary to make your point.

This exercise asks your participants to consider various themes found in *The Grand-Guignol*: illusion, beauty vs. horrific, popular notions on aesthetics, death and decay, fear of the unknown...

Individuals, pairs, or small groups are given photos from popular magazines. These images highlight beauty—from models gathered together showing off the latest trend, to the sexy cowboy who for some reason is a promo for cigarettes, to the successful businessman who happens to be drinking the right brand of whiskey so suddenly the beautiful woman two tables down notices him. You all know the hype. These groups are asked to recreate/imitate the images from the magazines in the form of tableaux (frozen pictures).

Next, the same groups are given a very contrasting image. When I first took this workshop we were given images of mummies from archeological sources. Once again, choose these images sensitively depending on your audience. You may choose images from wars or contemporary snapshots of the world in which we live. What is important is that this is the side of life most of us would rather not see.

Groups use the second image to create new tableaux.

Choose an instrumental background or consider music that may enhance the irony of the exercise. This is not necessary but can be effective.

Divide your workshop members into audience and performers.

The first half all take on their frozen images from the popular magazines—images of beauty and success. Instruct them that when you gently tap each person, he or she should slowly (very slowly!) transform into the second image. Upon the completion of the second image, they should crumble to dust on the floor.

Tell them that when they are tapped again, they should slowly transform back into “the fake and beautiful image”.

You are the conductor now and should play with all kinds of possibilities. Don't be uniform in your approach. Tap individuals at random intervals, even before they morph from one extreme to the next.

After one group has performed change sides and allow them to now be the audience.

Take the time afterwards for participants to discuss or to write down their impressions. Allow them to analyze for themselves: what made it disturbing?

Reassembling what we found in the basement

Based on the number in your group, you can at this point choose production teams and actors. The actors will be given time to look at an excerpt from Maurice Level's “The final kiss”.

The production teams are presented with a variety of “clues” to help them uncover how one may perform in the style of The Grand-Guignol. They are told they will then work together to create a performance that is as close as possible to the original practice. Items may include:

- images of posters from the original performances
- an excerpt from an acting guide written in the early 1900s
- technical notes
- information or a map of the theatre
- a diary entry from someone who has seen a performance

These can be taken from actual documents or be fictional creations infused with “truths” about the practice (see “Important Elements of The Grand Guignol” to be considered).

The production team then sets a plan for how they will work with their audience, the space, the text, and the actors.

The final kiss:

Actors and the production team merge. With limited time, it may be best to focus on a scene between Henri and Jeanne, where one finds the climax of the play. If you wish to work with an excerpt of a short second script for more diversity, then *The Lighthouse Keepers* by Autier and Cloquemin also captures many elements of the theatre.

Follow up activities:

- Consider other contemporary performances that create their own “hype” to promote a show. Is this an effective approach? For inspiration, look at the buzz that occurred when, although not a theatrical performance, the film *The Exorcist* was released in 1973. What is effective marketing vs. what is dangerous tampering with the general public?
- Pastiche: Analyze and explore an original script from The Grand-Guignol. What is this hypnotic formula that it had over audiences? Pay careful attention to the style, rhythm, punctuation, and elements left to the audience's imagination as you create a new, original script.

- Explore how historical influences, different writers and directors changed the face of The Grand-Guignol over time, and draw parallels to other theatre practices.
- Explore rituals-festivals like Mexico's *Dia de los Muertos* or Japan's *Butoh* to see how what one group of people or culture might consider aesthetic or intriguing, can be frightening for a different group or culture.

Two valuable resources that will lead you to other valuable resources:

1. *Grand-Guignol: The French theatre of horror*. Editors: Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson, University of Exeter Press, 2003.

An excellent source. It includes several plays that have been translated into English with a superb introduction on each. The book is written in accessible language and looks at how posters, movies, photographs, eye witnesses, newspapers, and other sources can help to create an understanding of a theatrical tradition or practice. A 'must have' if you wish to explore this genre further. One source states that this is the only English Grand-Guignol reference currently in print.

2. <http://www.grandguignol.com>

This website is created by a San-Francisco based theatre company called "Thrillpeddlers" that have been translating and performing Grand-Guignol plays for over a decade. The website recommends several other texts for future exploration, and even ones in French that they say are fantastic if only for the pictures alone.

Practitioner's Pathway:

Perhaps it all began when I was four years old and my mother brought me over to play for the first time with another child who would remain a best friend for life. According to his mother, all I said *all* afternoon was, "Let's pretend...Ok, now let's pretend this...Now let's pretend this....What would you do if...? And what would you do if....?" Apparently, after I left, he said to his mother, "He is fun but exhausting!" So I might trace my beginnings back to a love of play and a terribly overactive imagination. I plagued my parents with a constant, "*I'm borrrred*" and spent much of my younger years drawing, reading, and living inside that imagination. I loved music, art and literature classes in high school. I loved Shakespeare's plays and contemporary poets who didn't rhyme and movies where the ending wasn't clear.

I began studying Sociology in university before it dawned on me that this was my life and I better begin enjoying it, so I changed my major to literature with a specialization in theatre. The world suddenly opened up. In one course, we performed for, and worked with, young people. I loved it. While some of my friends planned on heading off to NYC to "make it" as an actor, all I wanted to do was to keep theatre and teaching as a part of my life. The little child was who always bored, and always pretending, suddenly felt that inner-yawn silence, because I had found a career that I loved. Teaching has taken me all over the world. It introduced me to drama therapy and to working with people who need to play to feel good again. It has allowed me to write, to direct, and to meet unforgettable students and colleagues. It brought me to ISTA, which has kept me sane and engaged for many years. It has made me want to understand Boal and Butoh and The Grand-Guignol.

I presently teach at The American School of The Hague in The Netherlands. The next stop on my pathway, I hope, will be to find the self-discipline and courage to begin writing once again, to silence the mermaids in my brain, who sing to me daily about all the stories that are *yet* to be told.