

**HAuNTcon**

(New Orleans, 2019 and 2020)

The location is the Ernest N. Morial Convention Centre in New Orleans, a building which only stands out for its size. The exhibition halls and carpeted pathways can easily hold thousands of people, its green-blazered staff on hand to inform and advise. Yet this weekend, something is different. As soon as you enter Hall F, you find yourself slowly approaching a dilapidated little shack, shrouded in fog. Somewhere, electricity crackles, and off to your right, you hear the mad cackling of what can only be an insane clown. During a weekend in January 2019 and 2020, this space has been the home of HAuNTcon.

‘HAuNTcon’ is a partial acronym of the event’s full name, The Haunted Attraction National Tradeshow and Convention, which caters to haunt operators and owners around the US, where the term ‘haunt’ (or ‘haunted attraction’) refers to a form of Halloween entertainment. It is used to describe a form of walk-through theatrical performance in which guests move from room to room, from scene to scary scene, with the majority of attractions operating around the Halloween season. Haunts may offer detailed stories and recurring characters, or they may simply present a collection of scenes and an opportunity for actors to scare and for audiences to be scared. Gaining prominence in the 1970s in the US and in the early 2000s in the UK and Europe, the scare industry encompasses everything from big theme parks to private home haunts, with an annual turnover of close to half a million dollars in the US. Scares are big business and conventions such as these are an opportunity for the so-called ‘haunters’ (those involved in the creation and running of these attractions) to meet and swap knowledge, stories, and ideas.

HAuNTcon, which was founded in 2004 by Leonard Pickel, one of the key figures in the US scare industry, is now in its sixteenth year, and run by Liz Irving and Urban Expo. The event exists alongside Transworld, Midwest Haunters Convention, and Midsummer Scream as one of the key dates on the haunters calendar (outside of Halloween, anyway). The majority of these events, including HAuNTcon, are aimed only at industry professionals and are not open to the general public, functioning as a combination of showcase, tradeshow, and networking event. One of the key elements that sets HAuNTcon apart from these other events, however, is its emphasis on education, offering an extensive programme of over seventy hours of talks, seminars, and roundtables, alongside a tradeshow, workshops, and product sales. These presentations are wide ranging in their topics and cover anything from demonstrations of specific techniques for staging and set building, to practical advice on

marketing and ticket sales, to sessions that are almost academic in nature. Admittedly, the quality of these sessions can be as varied as the topics they cover, as all speakers are industry professionals, who may not necessarily be used to presenting in the format required. However, each presentation generally offers some new bit of information and, perhaps more importantly, a jumping-off point for further discussions.

What follows are some personal highlights from across the 2019 and 2020 education programme. Many of these sessions deal with topics that are perhaps expected, often focusing on elements of design and audience experience. Of greater interest to me personally, however, were panels on subject matter that is under-explored, especially outside of the haunt world. Across both years, sessions dealing with scare acting in particular had my interest. Although actor training and the different techniques available for doing so are one of the cornerstones for the field of performance studies, such explorations do not extend to the specific demands of genre performance. Notably, scare acting does not just require the actor's skills in portraying a particular character, but often sees performers having to navigate the challenges of large and cumbersome costumes, makeup and masks, as well as no small amount of audience management. Particularly informative were the sessions from staff at A Petrified Forest on training exercises used with actors; by Caroline Wells of Legends of Fear on the demands of queue-line acting (entertaining audiences as they wait to enter an attraction); and by Amy Hollaman (now of 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Haunted House) on actor training and management.

Another interesting aspect of HAuNTcon is that it invites presentations that are not merely practical, but extend into a more theoretical approach to haunt design. Discussions by Plague Productions on the connections between design and guest experience highlighted the role of the framing of an attraction and its potential impact on haunt visitors. An excellent presentation in 2020 from David D. Jones looked at the cultural context for monsters and our understanding of the Other, and how this can be utilised in haunt design, character creation, and actor training. Finally, the sessions by Margee Kerr on the science of scares deserve a mention. Her 2019 and 2020 talks offer haunters some insights into the psychology of perception, framing, and experience, and how these can be used to help enhance the impact of a haunt. Primarily, Kerr is very skilled at bridging the gap between academic research and popular impact, making relevant and often complex concepts accessible to creatives.

Finally, I applaud HAuNTcon's commitment to increasing visibility and diversity. Haunting is traditionally a male-dominated industry, often right-wing in its politics and still

wrestling with established tropes of, for example, negative portrayals of mental health as entertainment. Many of the haunters present offer alternative approaches to such questions, and Liz Irving and her all-female team behind HAuNTcon actively seek out and welcome such perspectives. An excellent example of this is the Breaking the Boundaries panel, staged in both 2019 and 2020, which showcases the efforts of women in haunting. Consisting of Alexis Abare, co-owner of Haunted Farms of America; Amy Hollaman, general manager 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Haunted House in Denver; Margee Kerr, sociologist and author; Alisa Kleckner, owner of Scared of My Shadow LLC; and Jennifer Loman, co-owner of Reindeer Manor Haunted House (2020 panel only), the session sheds some light on their experiences within the scare industry. Opening up discussions about prejudice, but also the importance of representation, diversity; and mentorship, and how to structure a business in order to support these, Breaking the Boundaries allows some insight into an often-forgotten aspect of haunting. Although both organisers and panel members acknowledge that a lot more work is needed, both at HAuNTcon and within the industry (for example, there is only a small presence of BIPOC haunters at the event), it is encouraging to see a big convention actively engaging with these concerns. In addition to the programme on the show floor, HAuNTcon offers a number of extra-curricular events and tours. Access to the Costume Ball is included with the ticket, and attendees could also take part in a guided trip around a number of New Orleans sights and sounds: for instance, attendees are invited to visit the largest haunted house on the US south coast and participate in a walking ghost-and-cemetery tour along the city's famously haunted streets. This, then, presents a well-rounded programme with elements of interest for those researching the scare industry as well as the professionals working within it.

As a first-time visitor in 2019 with a research agenda, I was particularly struck by the love which underpins HAuNTcon – a love for haunting, and for horror, and for scares, that goes beyond making money. In many ways, the tradeshow offers a place for industry professionals to come together to share and to validate this love, and the effort that goes into these Halloween creations. Although the theme-park events are most widely known, many US haunts are quite small and based around a certain locality, drawing talent and craftspeople from their immediate surroundings, with money being put back into charities or the local community. Often employing a mixture of professionals and those who are new to haunt work (including high-school kids), the industry is home to many so-called haunt families, the collective of creatives behind each haunt, who provide a safe haven for all who take part. A lot of stigma surrounds horror fandom, as well as the efforts of creatives within horror-related

industries. This is exemplified by narratives in wider media, and even by academics working within horror studies: in the Preface to his 1989 study *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, Andrew Tudor assures his readers that he has ‘no desire to kick kittens, drink blood, or disembowel members of the moral majority’.<sup>1</sup> Noel Carroll, in his seminal work *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), takes aim at his parents, who tried to keep him away from horror media, only to now prove that he has ‘been gainfully employed all along’.<sup>2</sup> These discourses have endured and it is easy enough for a horror fan to be singled out as the ‘weird kid’. By contrast, both the individual haunts and tradeshows such as HAuNTcon offer a place for many to share their sheer love for the genre, and for what they do.

Lacking a formal history, a major component of haunt culture is based around oral storytelling, sharing best and worst scares, discussing the building of a prop or a makeup effect, with both small and mid-size events putting a lot of effort into the creation of their own theatrical sets and set pieces. Conversations about actors rising from fog, audience members too scared to continue, and lines such as ‘my wife makes great dead bodies’ form a huge part of this shared fabric. Yes, haunts are scary, but they are supposed to be scary-fun, where the best scare is the one where a guest will scream, and then burst out laughing. This passion for horror, but above all for entertainment, can be seen in this wish to share these experiences, to be proud of one’s haunt, but also to be willing to share knowledge in order to become better still.

Undeniably, the landscape of the scare industry is different as I am writing this in October 2020, amidst the impact of COVID-19. Although many attractions will not be running this year, others are opening with social-distancing measures in place or in new forms, such as drive-in scare attractions. HAuNTcon 2021 has already been announced as taking place online, and has been organising educational sessions about creative responses to the pandemic and advice on safety measures. ‘Save Halloween 2020’ efforts have been quietly trending, and haunters and horror fans alike continue to show solidarity to attractions, conventions, and each other. Like the rest of the world, it is unlikely that the scare industry will ever be the same again, yet I have no doubt that with the passion and commitment of so many individuals, haunts will endure. They may be haunting, but they are far from dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. ix.