The Horrors of the Grand Guignol: Crash Course Theater #35

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=jUM4RkZ1tuI
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/jUM4RkZ1tuI

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today, we'll be exploring--EUGHH. Oh. Yeesh. We'll be exploring the Grand Guignol, the horrifying theatrical tradition that had French audiences rolling in the aisles and then fainting in the aisles and then vomiting on the pavement outside the building that contained the aisles for more than 60 years. Is this what Aristotle really had in mind with all that pity and terror stuff? Did he mean literal purging? I mean, I guess a good barf can be cathartic in a sense. And get ready for the goriest Thought Bubble yet and really maybe the goriest episode yet? So content warning for blood, guts, and mediocre French pronounciation. Lights up.

(Intro)

Grand Guignol's antecedent is melodrama, with its anti-literary, visually forward focus on sensation and surprise, but let's not forget Andre Antoine and the Theatre Libre, because believe it or not, the Grand Guignol with all its rabies and insanity and troubling exoticism is another offshoot of French naturalism. It took a bunch of inspiration from the sordid side of naturalism, the side that seemed to delight in depraved situations designed to shock middle-class theatergoers. One of the specialities of the Theatre Libre were short semi-documentary one act plays called "Comedies Rosses", usually translated as "cynical or bitter comedies", which depicted a lowlife world of thieves, prostitutes, alcoholism, and violence.

A lot of these comedies were based on a kind of newspaper story called the "Fait Divers" which were strange but true vignettes, usually about crime or horrifying accidents that filled up the pages of popular papers and were lavishly illustrated. Unlike melodrama, they usually had sad or tragic endings.

Oscar Metenier, one of the Theatre Libre's co-founders, was a former tabloid journalist who once took Andre Antoine to an execution for fun. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Metenier specialized in churning out comedies rosses inspired by fait divers.

A few years after the Theatre Libre folded, Metenier opened the Theatre du Grand Guignol in Paris in 1897. The name comes from Guignol, a character in the French version of the Punch and Judy puppet shows. Guignol was a working class man known for his courage and wit. So, is this a puppet show for grown ups? Maybe? Are the human actors just big puppets? Maybe. Is it part of some cryptic conspiracy having to do with Guignol's trade as a silk-weaver? Probably not, but also, maybe. I mean, French puns can be very complicated.

An evening at the Grand Guignol would usually feature five or six short plays, alternating comedies rosses with shockers, and comedy comedies, a method know as "hot and cold showers."

Metenier ran the theater for a few years and sold it to Max Maurey, who moved it away from slice-of-life plays and toward horror vignettes. Slice-of-death dramas, as one critic called them. As a director, Maurey demanded absolute precision, just like Antoine. But, in 1915 he sold the Grand Guignol to Camille Choisy, who moved the acting away from naturalistic and toward a more stylized approach.

In its 65 years, the Grand Guignol produced about 1,200 plays. Today, the term Grand Guignol is synonymous with the shockers, the blood, and sometimes even guts, offerings. The farces about sexual infidelity and the comedies rosses about lower-class depravity have mostly faded from memory.

When it came to the shocker, the great writer was Andre de Lorde, AKA the prince of terror. He was a doctor's kid and, even from an early age, he had an unhealthy interest in suffering. He use to like to listen to the patients screaming behind his father's door. He said that he wanted to write a play so terrifying that the whole audience would flee the theater. You know, like typical artist goals.

Famous psychologist Alfred Binet was another popular Grand Guignol playwright, and frequent de Lorde collaborator. He created the Binet intelligence test, which included charming questions such as, "what is the first thing you would do if you came home after school and found your mother strangled and mutilated?"

Their plays, and those of other Guignol-ers favoured themes like mutilation, insanity, strangulation, paralysis, hypnosis, leprosy, live burial, guillotining, mountaineering accidents, and the gouging out of eyes. Rabies was also weirdly popular. One famous actress, Maxa, said she'd been killed at least 60 different ways.

It's not completely clear how, or why, audiences enjoyed the Grand Guignol. Did they feel genuinely afraid of the over the top horrors or did they laugh at them? Until its lasts decades, the Guignol never favored a camp-style performance. The actors were instructed to make the scenes of murder, torture, and rape look and feel as real as possible. They gauged their effectiveness by the number of patrons who fainted at the end of each sketch. Sometimes, as many as a dozen people went unconscious. Sort of like the inverse of a standing ovation, I guess.

To make the short plays even more horrifying, the Grand Guignol developed a bunch of gruesome stage techniques, too. There was usually at least one vat of fake blood warming backstage, a lighter and runnier liquid was used for new wounds, a darker and stickier liquid for old ones. Stage weapons were invented that retracted into their handles, or that simulated bleeding when moved across the flesh. Actors chewed soap to mimic rabies, and wielded prosthetics meant to simulate the burning and flaying and amputation of limbs. One company manager purchased a bunch of eyeballs from a taxidermist hoping to find a type that would bounce convincingly.

We'll explore the dark pleasures of the Grand Guignol by studying one of its greatest hits, *A Crime in a Madhouse*, written by Andre de Lorde and Alfred Binet and first staged in 1925. The play starts innocently enough, Madame Robin, a favored inmate at said madhouse, is having an after-dinner chat with the nun who works at the asylum. The nun asks, "why are you still here when you're cured?" To which, "Madame Robin replies, turns out, when you've been in an asylum for years, people on the outside are kind of suspicious of you, and also, isn't it handy that I can be here to help out with the exposition? Oh, and speaking of exposition, I sure am glad that little Louise is going home soon. And, wow, I sure like her a lot better than the two older ladies she rooms with, Hunchback and the Normandy woman. Didn't one of them lose a daughter? And isn't that why she now exhibits psychopathic behavior towards young women like Louise? Not that I'm foreshadowing or anything."

She goes on to say, and I'm just paraphrasing here, "hey, did it ever occur to you that maybe One-eye, the notorious child murderer, shouldn't be sleeping right next to them?" And, I mean, what is foreshadowing anyways? Is that like, when you have four shadows? Just asking for no particular reason. And, the nun is like, "don't worry about One-eye. She's been paralysed for six years. So, it's totally fine that no one actually guards the lady-patients at night. Ok, wow! Look at the time. Got to go!" How convenient.

The nun leaves, and things get grim pretty quick. Help us out thought bubble. I'm going to watch this one like this.

As soon as it's lights out, the nun is like, "gotta go pray for the dead. Peace." She locks the women into their cell, and leaves. In the second act, Hunchback and the Normandy woman are whispering in their beds. Louise wakes up and is like, "what are y'all up to,

murder ladies?" And, their like, "oh, nothing."

Then, the door of the cell starts to open and One-eye rushes in and holds Louise down on the bed. Louise tries to yell, but One-eye holds a hand over her mouth, stifling her screams. One-eye says that when Louise went crazy, a cuckoo bird flew inside her head and now it's time to let the bird out, by removing Louise's eyes. But first, Hunchback and the Normandy woman have to waste a bunch of time by adjusting the lighting and softening up a stiff cloth, because suspense.

Once the cloth is moistened, One-eye covers Louise's face with it, and stabs one of the nun's knitting needles through each of her eyes. Louise stands up long enough for the audience to see her mutilated, eye-less face, and then dies.

The Normandy woman and the hunchback are like, "but where's the bird?" Disappointed, they grab One-eye and drag her toward a conveniently-located stove, where they burn her face off and then kill her. At that moment, a couple of the nuns return, but everything is dark and quiet, so they go back to their prayers.

Thought bubble, this is not a reasonable standard of care.

So, what do we do with this? Do we laugh? Do we scream? Do we feel purged of our pity and terror, and ready to rejoin Democratic society as rational and engaged citizens with absolutely no desire to stab eyeballs or sear face-parts? Or, do we just feel really, really bad?

These are good questions to ask ourselves about horror in other forms of entertainment, too, like movies, books, video games. As a culture, we've been enjoying horror for a long time. Isn't that right, Oedipus? But, why do we love it so much? Andre de Lorde's theory was this: Each one of us has in his innermost being a secret longing for violent emotions. Is that true? And, if it is then why? Maybe de Lorde's psychologist could've answered that one. Except that his psychologist was Alfred Binet, who co-wrote the horror plays with him, so Binet was probably like, "I concur! Now, which eyeball do they stab first?"

The Grand Guignol was most popular during and after World War I. Millions were dying in trenches, but apparently people thought it was relaxing, or cathartic, or distracting, or something, to go to the theater and to see people killed in more autres styles. The Grand Guignol became a huge tourist attraction.

Interest petered out after the second World War. Maybe radio and film had finally exceeded the Grand Guignol in barbarity. Or, maybe nightlife which didn't make you hyperventilate and vomit became tres chic. There's also a theory that when reports emerged of the true suffering in the Nazi death camps, viewers turned against the Grand Guignol. Simulated torture just wasn't fun anymore. As the company manager, Charles Nonon said, "Before the war, everyone felt that what was happening onstage was impossible. Now we know that these things and worse are possible in reality." The theater limped along for another decade and a half, shuttering in 1962.

Thanks for holding my hand through that one. Next time, we're going to enjoy a little less horror as we visit the Irish Renaissance, checking in on the sparkling argument of George Bernard Shaw and the devastating wit of Oscar Wilde. Yorick loves a one-liner, so do I. And, until then, either these curtains go or I do.

[Outro]

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows, like The Art Assignment, and Eons, and It's Okay to be Smart.

Crash Course Theater is filmed in the Chad and Stacy Emigholz studio in Indianoplis, Indiana, and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

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