

## "The theatre of fear and laughter"

# Guignol entranced its crowds with guillotines

By WARREN CLEMENTS

Hapless victims are graphically guillotined, submarines are sunk, acid is thrown in faces, and other faces are pushed down on hot stove burners.

All this and more, from one of the most distinguished and ancient theatres in western civilization — the Grand Guignol of Paris.

"The theatre sits on a cobblestone, gaslit street which is unsafe to walk in," Barry Alan Richmond told a Friday night audience in Winters College during the fourth annual Cosmic art Convention. "Its subtitle is the theatre of fear and laughter,

and it is the grand-daddy of all the science fiction and fantasy you're enjoying at this convention."

Richmond, a lean, middle-aged man who resembles a cross between Anthony Perkins and Norman McLaren, was working as executive director of Columbia University's theatre programme when the Paris Grand Guignol folded in 1962. He promptly acquired the rights to the Guignol for the university, and currently plans to revive (and revitalize) the theatre in San Francisco.

The original Grand Guignol was formed in 1896, shortly after the time of Jack the Ripper. Its contem-

porary was author Guy de Maupassant, who joined Pirandello and Dostoevsky among the authors represented in the theatre's repertoire of (at latest count) 10,000 plays.

The name "guignol", roughly translated as "Punch-and-Judy show", suited the violent, "puppets for humans" type of fare presented to an eager Parisian public.

"The theatre dealt explicitly with blood and gore," said Richmond. "They were all one-act plays, half comedy, half drama, with a 10-minute farce at the end to leave them laughing. Sort of a hot and cold shower for the spirits.

"Nine separate shades of blood were mixed each night in a boiling cauldron, and only one man knew the formula. It's still the only stage blood which congeals at the right moment, which incidentally minimizes the amount of blood that has to be cleaned up later."

Aside from mundane stage effects like opening zippers and piercing bags to spill the blood when an ac-

tor's throat was cut, the theatre also developed ingenious effects. To simulate "delerium tremens" (the DTs), an actor chewed soap; a person "caught fire" by lighting a fungus which burned without producing heat.

"The Victor Hugo period of drama specialized in slice of life," said Richmond. "My theatre specialized in slice of death."

And Guignol was professional theatre; dame Sybil Thorndike worked in it for two years in the 1920s, and Sir Laurence Olivier used its techniques in his 1950 Oedipus Rex, when he cut out his eyes in full view of the audience.

Grand Guignol at its height was powerful enough to cause 15 persons to faint at a single performance, and raised the inevitable question, "why would anyone want to sit through such a gory spectacle?"

"People want to know about violence, however much they may deny it," Richmond insisted.

"The managers of the Guignol used to characterize an audience as having two parts: those who covered their eyes with their hands and peeked through their fingers, and those who covered their eyes fully, and afterwards asked their friends what had happened."

The reason the Parisian Guignol faded was partly because the old horror-show techniques had grown archaic and even camp, and partly because the theatre had an uneconomical 347 seats, with no hope of expansion.

Richmond, who has a scientific bent, has worked on new modern shock effects to use in his San Francisco theatre, although he rejected the information that a high-pitched sound on a U.S. army base made visiting officers have involuntary bowel movements.

"I was going to put it in my show, to give 600 people involuntary movements, until I realized it might be construed as a mass critical comment on my work."

## A rabies-infected drama

A typical Grand Guignol plot, as outlined by theatre head Barry Alan Richmond:

The episode is set in an African jungle during an outbreak of rabies. No serum is available to counteract the disease, which makes it necessary to kill any dogs or humans stricken by the malady.

At the core of this jungle live an aging doctor and his younger wife, who passes her time by having an affair with a young, white hunter. As the play opens, they have just made passionate love and fallen on to the bed.

While they sleep, the cuckolded doctor moves into the room and empties the bullets from the hunter's gun, and the water from the pitcher. He then injects the arms of the two lovers with a liquid from a hypodermic needle.

The lovers wake up, incredibly thirsty. There is no water. The doctor slips in and tells them that he has injected one of them with rabies, although it was too dark for him to tell which was which. The other lover has been injected with a harmless serum.

As the doctor leaves, considerably leaving behind a razor blade for whichever of the two received the

harmless serum, the two lovers turn on each other.

The lighting is steel blue; the shadows on the wall are red. The two lovers pace, until finally the woman goes into convulsions and attacks the hunter with a rabid fervour. The hunter slits her throat.

The doctor enters, chuckling, and informs the hunter that he had, in fact, injected both of them with the harmless serum, and that his wife seemed to have convulsions because of the psychological tension of the situation. To prove that the serum is innocuous, he kisses his wife full on the lips.

At this point, a servant enters and tells the doctor that he has found the wife's dog locked up in the attic. The dog had developed rabies, but the woman, not wanting it to be destroyed, had ordered it shut away upstairs — not, however, before the dog had managed to scratch the wife.

In the ensuing confusion, the hunter realizes that he has been scratched by the wife during their fight; and the doctor realizes that by kissing his wife, he too has become infected.

The curtain descends as the servant, aiming his shotgun, moves toward the two rabid unfortunates.

## National anthem is sung scat-style

His Excellency the honorable Barry Alan Richmond is the 47th president of the tiny 300-year old sovereign nation of the Republique de Montmartre et Ses Dependances.

This miniscule democracy, situated on several acres of Manhattan Island and almost unknown to Americans outside the government service, is a full-fledged charter members of UNESCO, and lists among its dependencies Normandy, Brittany, and the Kennedy International Airport.

The state also has designs on the sovereign and military order of the Knights of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta, which borders on Italy.

"There is, in that state, a marvellous door, through the keyhole of which you can see a large vista of Italy. The Italian government lists that door among its possessions.

"Montmartre, however, has claimed the keyhole as a dependency, and we have warned the Italian government that if it doesn't stop making claims on that property, we

will change the lock."

Richmond told his audience at the weekend Cosmicon that in addition to his title of president of Montmartre, he is Thane of Cawdor, Count of Monte Cristo and pretender to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire.

"We list among our famous citizens the man who diagnosed the troubles of earthquake victims as motion sickness," he said. "The third stanza of our national anthem is sung scat-style. And we have the only planes which run out of coal halfway through the flight."

Montmartre, which officially separated from the French government in 1920, is not to be confused with the Paris district of the same name. The republic has an embassy at 301 East 22nd Street in New York 10010, and plans to open one soon in Puerto Rico.

And the Grand Guignol is the state's official theatre. "If Montmartre didn't exist," President Richmond told his audience Friday night, "someone would have had to create it."

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