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Priceless Scares with Lighting

Priceless Scares with Lighting by Ryan Pluta

In October, countless radio and television commercials boast how this or that haunted attraction event is the "most terrifying and frightening attraction in the area." The ads focus on the promise that they will scare the hell out of you. However, as haunted attractions get more and more elaborate, the actual scares seem to get lost in the background and designers tend more to dazzle the patrons with high-tech animatronics, make-up and set design. However, when you look at what is at the core of the intended experience from a haunted attraction, we find that the patrons come to your haunt because they want to be scared. While the effects and scenes are an extremely important element in the equation, intense scares are what your patrons are looking for. Otherwise, haunt advertising entices the public by saying things like "neatest looking sets" and "featuring expensive animations." Some people do not feel that they can be scared in a haunted attraction. They feel that they are too mature or too experienced. Your goal is to consistently prove them wrong, and if you can give your patrons even one great scare, they will remember your attraction over all others for years to come.

Most of us have vivid childhood memories of going to that certain haunted house that absolutely frightened us out of our wits. That experience sticks out in everyone's mind and the time, place, even the scare itself are vividly recalled. Chances are there were no high-tech, motorized, zillion dollar animatronic monsters at the haunt in your memory. Just actors, lighting and simple scenes! People want this same terrifying experience today and the successful haunts supply plenty of scares. Your goal is to make as many people as possible remember your haunted attraction as the one that really scared them, not your competitors, and to that we should get back to the basics. It is surprisingly simple to achieve some great scares with the use of lighting, set design, shadows and darkness, regardless of your budget.

Lurking In The Shadows

What we are trying to create in order to scare our patrons is the element of surprise. Planning and imagination is very important to devise the unexpected scare. The timing of the scare is essential, as is the actor's ability to hide or become invisible. Hiding an

actor can be done with as little as a strobe light in a room with flat black walls and actors dressed in dark clothing. The position of the light in a room will determine the location of the shadows and where the customer's blind spots are located. The goal is to have your actors able to see the patrons extremely well while the patrons are able to look directly at the actor and never notice their presence. Even from just a few feet away!

To accomplish this effect, aim the strobe light directly into the faces of your patrons. This gives your actor a clear and safe view of the entire area by having the light at their back. It also slightly distorts the vision of the patrons and can create blind spots that serve as areas for your actor to hide. The height at which you position the lighting is also a strategic placement. You can generally allow the actor to hide completely invisible from the patrons by placing the lighting above the actor. Place the light securely above the height of the actor on top of a shelf large enough to block the light from traveling straight down. The walls directly across from the lighting position should be flat black in order to minimize the reflective bounce in the actor's immediate direction. The floor should also be flat black as well to hold the reflection to a minimum. Flat black soaks up light as opposed to reflecting it, resulting in a dark environment that is still safely lit from the actor's point of view. The actor can time his scare with the strobe and will seem to appear from nowhere. The result is an unexpected scare from an unexpected area.

The Deer in the Headlights Effect

When driving down a two lane road at night, an approaching vehicle with bright headlights will blind you. Your eyes focus only on the bright light and you cannot see anything approaching from behind it. Similarly, aiming a spotlight down a hallway directly at your patrons will also hide an actor as long as that actor stays behind the light, even though he or she is standing out in the open. No need to pump 1,000 watts of high-intensity light into the eyes of your patrons. It does not take much, and you need to experiment with different light fixtures to get the best result without burning someone's retina. Keep in mind that if every scare comes from underneath the light, your customers will get wise to your strategy. So the key is to mix up these scares with others used throughout the attraction.

Imagine all of the time and expense put into creating secret doorways and objects for the actor to spring from. Let's be realistic, in this day and age, patrons have seen it all. The misdirection techniques followed by the actor jumping out from behind an object or a door is commonplace. The use of lighting to create a scare needs no misdirection. In fact, you want the patron to be looking in the direction of the actor which will inject an even higher intensity into the patron's experience. This casting shadows technique has many applications and is a very simple technique to accomplish. Casting shadows around corners and scene props is something that only you can master within your own Haunted Attraction's design.

Simple But Scarier

Going back to the basics and keeping the scares simple will not only increase the fright intensity of your attraction, but it will also help differentiate you from your competition. We have created entire Haunted Houses based solely on this technique and most patrons rate it above our other houses with high-tech visual effects because it was deemed "scarier." Using light to cast shadows and hide the actors from your patrons creates the perfect environment for great scares. It puts your actor in control and your patrons are sitting ducks. The implementation of this technique is simple and very effective. Flat black paint, strobe lighting or other bright lighting are inexpensive materials that can be combined to create priceless scares. By all means, include different variations of this technique and different types of scares throughout your attraction, but in order to give the customer what they want, you have to scare them. If you accomplish this task, you will not only have a repeat customer year after year, but also their recommendation for everyone they know to experience your attraction.

Scares = Customer Satisfaction = Profits.

Ryan Pluta is owner of The Carnival of Horrors, a multi-element event in Cleveland, OH, now in its 5th season. His company Haunted Crypt Productions has been producing haunted attractions in Northeast Ohio for the past 13 years.