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Magic, Monsters, and Movies: America's Midnight Ghost Shows

Beth A. Kattelman

> Placing a bag over the boy's head, Dr. Silkini proceeded to cut if off with a knife. The girls in the audience squealed and screamed as blood dripped over the white tablecloth. Just after this decapitation, the Frankenstein monster seized the newly-severed head and started down the steps into the audience. At that precise moment, the house lights went off. Enthralled onlookers thought the rampaging creature was loose in the dark.
>
> During the blackout, girls shrieked and boys shouted as ghosts, bats, and eerie faces zoomed about overhead and up and down the aisles. On the stage a chorus line of glowing skeletons danced in front of tombstones and vanished as they floated skyward. After three minutes of special effects and imaginative terror, there was a flash explosion and then the lights came on.
>
> —Mark Walker[1]

The above description of a sequence from "Dr. Silkini's Asylum of Horrors" conveys what an audience might have experienced at a typical midnight ghost show around 1941. Midnight ghost shows (also known as "midnight spook shows," or "spookers") were magic shows presented on the stages of movie theatres across America throughout the first half of the twentieth century. They reached their heyday during the 1940s and early '50s and then declined steadily due to the advent of new media technologies and the public's changing taste in entertainment. The earliest ghost shows featured illusions and effects borrowed from séances, including table-tipping, spirit-cabinet routines, and the production of ghostly apparitions. Later productions showcased monsters from popular horror films and featured horrific illusions such as decapitations, immolations, and buzz-saw effects. While the content of the ghost shows varied widely from presenter to presenter, they were all similar in that they were usually part of a double-bill with a film, each featured some traditional stage magic, and, most importantly, each built to a climax containing a blackout sequence in which luminous apparitions appeared throughout the theatre.

As a ubiquitous branch of popular entertainment, the conjuring arts have received increased attention from scholars of late. Like other widespread amusements, performances of magic and illusion are representative of what was happening in the entertainment industry and the culture at large. For example, Matthew Solomon notes how magicians' use of trick films in their stage productions brought the craft to the fore of theatrical and cinematic innovation,[2] and James Cook goes so far as to state that the emergence of the modern theatrical magician near the end of the nineteenth century stands as a "powerful symbol of progress."[3] Midnight ghost shows were also important as conjuring performances, in that they represent a way in which some enterprising magicians were able to capitalize on the public's interest in séances and horror films to create shows that could be sold to theatres and movie houses at a time when new film entertainments were supplanting many genres of live performance. These performers created a trans-medial synergy between their staged magic shows and the emerging motion-picture industry that allowed them to not only survive, but to thrive in the changing entertainment milieu of early

twentieth-century America.

In this study, I seek to introduce midnight ghost shows to a wider audience, and to reinsert them into the history of theatre as performances that illuminate that moment in the history of American culture when film overtook live performance as the most popular form of mass entertainment. I also posit them as early examples of movie events that prefigured the phenomenon of midnight showings of cult films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

"El-Wyn's Midnight Spook Party"

As with most performance trends, the type of performance known as the midnight ghost show cannot be traced to an exact point of origin. Most magic historians, however, agree that the format was first developed and presented by the magician Elwin-Charles Peck (aka El-Wyn, El Wynne) sometime around 1930. Peck began his career as a stage mentalist, presenting traditional mind-reading effects, and at some point during the late 1920s or early '30s he began to feature a special Saturday night ghost show at midnight.[4] In choosing illusions for his ghost show, Peck borrowed effects from spiritualism, a movement that had swept America and numerous other countries during the mid- and late nineteenth century. In these late-night performances, Peck featured many effects that were based upon the types of phenomena one might experience when attending a séance, such as the production of ghostly apparitions, objects moved by unseen hands, and spooky sounds. Peck combined these elements into a unique format that quickly became popular with audiences: a series of magic tricks and illusions loosely held together by a spooky theme, culminating in a blackout sequence. Ghostmaster[5] Herman Weber was fortunate enough to have attended one of Peck's shows, and he gives this description of the production:

> His program when I saw it was presented as though some mild-mannered friend of yours had invited you to his home to see the actions of ghosts in his living-room. Although at least five people traveled with the show, you saw only El Wyn on the stage. Invisible ghosts opened doors, caused objects to dance, glass lamp chimneys to glide across table tops and crash on the floor, pans of water floated in the air and spilled their contents on command, the "Walking Away From Your Shadow" illusion was presented in a most novel way, with a spook theme. In fact, the entire stage program was of a "ghost" character. No die boxes or conjuring tricks. This was all to the good. But the big feature was the blackout that closed the show.[6]

The inclusion of a blackout sequence was one of Peck's major contributions to the formation of a unique piece of entertainment; it was this element that gave his show its distinctive character and that made it a standout success with audiences. This startling and spectacular moment, which allowed for a multitude of scary audible and visual effects to be delivered in the dark, was a novel experience for many theatre-goers, since advances in electric-lighting technology had only recently made an almost-instantaneous blackout possible; and the promise of "ghosts appearing throughout the theatre" and other sensational ballyhoo that could be associated with the production made "El-Wyn's Midnight Spook Party" a very marketable property. The midnight-show package was also attractive to theatre owners, because it offered an opportunity to make extra profit with little financial outlay. Midnight was a time when movie theatres were usually dark, so booking Peck's show brought additional audience members and income into the

establishment without disrupting the standard weekly schedule. This made the midnight ghost show very appealing and helped Peck's business to flourish. He was able to book "El-Wyn's Midnight Spook Party" in many large theatres throughout the forty-eight states and Canada, and at the height of the Great Depression his net income reached $3,000 per week.[7] As word of Peck's success spread, other magicians began copying the format and presenting their own ghost shows. They also found it a lucrative format, one to which they could easily adapt many of the tricks and illusions they were already performing. Thus while the content of the performances would continue to evolve—some later ghostmasters incorporated larger stage illusions, popular celebrities, and famous monsters of the day—the basic structure of Peck's midnight show remained a model that was copied throughout the entire life of the ghost-show genre.

Precursors of Midnight Ghost Shows

As noted above, for his ghost shows, Elwin Peck borrowed effects from séances, which were a major feature of the spiritualism movement that had swept the United States during the mid- to late nineteenth century. America's interest in spiritualism was sparked by an incident that occurred on 31 March 1848 in Hydesville, New York, when eleven-year-old Margaret and nine-year-old Kate Fox began to experience ghostly rapping noises in their home.[8] The strange noises were eventually heard by the girls' parents and verified by the neighbors. Soon the community became convinced that the two young girls were actually in communication with the spirit world, especially after the "spirit" was able correctly to answer test questions posed to it by community members. News of the unique phenomenon quickly spread throughout the country, and soon Kate and Margaret Fox, and their older sister Leah, who also "discovered" that she was a conduit for spirit communications, began giving public demonstrations of their "powers" on the lecture circuit, touring extensively, and holding both public and private séances. People across America and abroad became familiar with the "Hydesville rappings" and interest in spiritualism grew. Attending séances became a popular pastime, as many rushed to try and contact departed loved ones or to find out more about the afterlife, and soon the numbers of spiritualism-related entertainments, both public and private, mushroomed.

Due to their unique ability to produce "unexplained" phenomena at will, magicians and illusionists were ideally situated to take advantage of the public's interest in spiritualism. Some conjurors passed themselves off as actual psychic mediums and soothsayers, while others openly admitted that their spiritual manifestations were created using nothing more than common magicians' tricks. Some performers even built theatrical careers around purposefully debunking fake mediums by exposing their methods and recreating séance phenomena onstage, and a great rivalry arose between fervent believers and those who sought unmitigated proof of spiritualism's tenets. This rivalry was not confined to mystics and their critics. As Fred Nadis observes: "The ensuing battles between the era's anti-Spiritualist magicians and the mystic performers mirrored cultural tensions between scientifically minded skeptics and followers of Spiritualism."[9]

Although audiences for events promoted as actual spiritual séances and audiences who favored performances given by admitted magicians often differed, some events had broad-enough appeal to attract large numbers of both believers and skeptics. This was especially true for audiences attending lectures by the most famous "debunkers," and for those attending the more well-known spirit-cabinet acts presented on the vaudeville circuit. Performers such as the Davenport Brothers and Ana Eva Fay drew crowds that ranged from fervent believers to curiosity

seekers to those just looking for entertainment. Due to the broad popular appeal of spiritualism-based entertainments, some of the most well-known vaudeville magicians eventually began offering midnight performances featuring séances and spooky effects. As Philip Morris observed: "Back around the turn-of-the-century the major touring illusion shows—Blackstone, Thurston—would play a theatre for an entire week and they would advertise that on Saturday night they were going to do a 'special midnight extra show,' and that show would be a spiritual séance where they try to contact the dead."[10] Thus the magician's art inhabited the séance room and séances inhabited the theatre. Magic performances that included faux séances and spiritualism-inspired routines became so common, in fact, that by the end of the nineteenth century, they had already earned the popular moniker "ghost show." An 1896 article in the *Atchison* (Kansas) *Daily Globe*, for example, reports that "[the] Miller Bro[ther]s gave a ghost show at the theatre last night. It was by far the most clever affair of the kind given in Atchison in some time. . . . He [*sic*] gave slates to people to hold, which, when unfolded, contained messages from the dead. . . . In the final cabinet test, ghosts walked out on the stage. . . ."[11] It was this trend upon which Peck was building when he added a signature blackout in order to create his unique version of the ghost show that was to be performed in movie houses at midnight.

From Ghost Shows to Horror Shows

The history of the midnight ghost show can be divided into two phases. The first phase spanned from their inception to the end of the 1930s. During this period, the shows closely followed in the tradition of Peck's original by offering séance effects, spirit apparitions, and an assortment of spooky happenings as described above. The second, much longer phase of midnight ghost shows came about at the end of the 1930s, when the show was almost always presented as part of a double bill with a film, which was provided by either the theatre or the performer. This period featured shows of a more horrific nature that were often much bloodier than the earlier spiritualism-based fare; instead of spirit cabinets and séances, these productions showcased impalements, immolations, limb-severing, or decapitations as their major effects, and they were often termed "horror shows" or "monster shows," rather than ghost shows. This change in the character of the shows came primarily from the influence of the exceedingly popular horror films that had been released by Universal Studios earlier in the decade. In 1931, Universal released two of the most successful and influential horror films of all time: *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. The success of *Dracula* alone allowed Universal to turn a profit for the first time in two years.[12] And by following this with the successful releases of *Frankenstein* and *The Mummy* in 1932, Universal established itself as the "major producer of macabre motion pictures for the next quarter of a cen-tury."[13] In 1938, Universal experienced a marketing coup by re-releasing *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* as a double feature, and audience members once again filled theatres to see the iconic monsters, causing one motion-picture trade advertisement to announce, "Horror is paying off again!"[14]

Young audiences became well-acquainted with Universal's horror films and magicians were able to capitalize upon these proven popular entertainments by incorporating elements from them into their midnight performances. Now, instead of featuring a psychic or medium as the host of the evening, the horror shows were fronted by magicians who took on the character of a mad doctor with names like Dr. Silkini, Dr. Zomb, or Dr. Ogre Banshee. The sets, which had been parlors or séance rooms, morphed into representations of laboratories or dungeons. Ghost-show operators also incorporated the actual iconic screen monsters into their shows. In 1941, for

example, brothers Jack and Wyman Baker added the Frankenstein monster to their Dr. Silkini shows, advertising that the monster would appear "Direct from Hollywood." This almost instantly increased their profits to over $3,000 per night.[15] During the 1940s, ghostmasters also drew upon an additional bit of trans-medial synergy by taking advantage of the new cult of film celebrity that was burgeoning in the United States: some booked movie stars and famous monster portrayers to tour with their productions, thus capitalizing upon the name recognition of the star or of the feature monster they portrayed. Glenn Strange, who played the role of Frankenstein's monster in the last three Universal films, toured with Don Brandon's ghost show,[16] and Bela Lugosi toured as Dracula with Bill Neff's "Madhouse of Mystery" during the 1947 season.[17] Lugosi even appeared in his own spook show called "Nightmare of Horror*,"* which opened in San Diego for a two-day stand beginning on 7 February 1947.[18] Then, in 1948, a major innovation gave ghost-show entrepreneurs an additional boost. In that year, Don Post of Hollywood obtained a license from Universal Pictures to introduce the first rubber false face of the Frankenstein monster, which was soon followed by the release of other masks of famous monsters.[19] These masks were a real boon to ghost-show producers, who now no longer had to rely on prosthetic pieces and theatrical makeup to create their creatures. The masks allowed for quick changes, thus giving ghostmasters the possibility of including a larger number of characters and monsters in each performance; one actor could portray numerous parts without having to remove and reapply makeup between each appearance. Masks were also cost-effective, as they reduced a performer's necessary prep time and precluded the need for producers to constantly replenish makeup supplies.

Effects and the Blackout

Even though one ghost show or horror show could vary widely from another in terms of illusions and content, there were some general standards that most operators followed. The show usually lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour and featured a magician who served as a host throughout. This magician would also perform the magic effects comprising the body of the performance. The effects varied widely depending upon the magician's level of skill, resources, and stage persona. Some early ghost shows consisted of one extended séance, while others were made up of a series of tricks and illusions that were drawn from a more traditional conjuring repertoire such as object productions, vanishes, or levitations. While there was no standard or template for this part of the show, the best ghost shows and horror shows tailored each effect to a specific theme; rather than just presenting a string of unrelated magic tricks, the creepy atmosphere was reinforced throughout and the suspense was built until the moment of the climactic blackout.

Ghost shows and horror shows not only delivered spooky thrills to audiences, they also had elements of comedy mixed in with the scary moments, thus helping the shows to appeal to a wider audience. The most popular ghost shows included a liberal sprinkling of gags and shtick that was borrowed from vaudeville though revamped in order to ft a scary theme. For example, one very popular running gag in Arthur Francisco Bull's "Midnight Spook Frolic" was a skull that floated out from the curtains:

> When he looked at it, it halted and quickly retreated into the wings. This was repeated several times, and each time the skull floated out further. Finally, it advanced to mid-stage and hovered there. In his own deadpan style, Francisco stepped back and gestured for the skull to continue on, whereupon it sailed past him and off into the wings on the opposite side of the stage.[20]

Another comic feature of many ghost shows was a segment known among magicians as the "committee." This referred to a part of the show in which several audience members were invited onstage to take part in an effect or illusion. This sometimes consisted of the audience members participating in a séance or volunteering to be hypnotized, or the magician would have the people sit in a row of chairs onstage in order to play various tricks on them. One of the standard tricks was the "hot seat," where an unsuspecting victim's chair would be wired to deliver a small electric shock, startling them and causing them to jump from their seat.[21] Usually, audience members who volunteered to come up onstage would play along as the ghostmaster quietly "coached" them during the committee section. Dick Newton, who toured with "Dr. Banshee's Chasm of Spasms" and "Dr. Dracula's Den of Living Nightmares," relates how this set-up worked:

> Sometimes you just prompt the kids when they're up there . . . there's five kids sitting in a row, and you'd say to the fifth kid as he sat down, "As soon as I start to come over to hypnotize you, get up and run like hell." And then you'd start with the other four, and one at a time you'd prompt 'em. And then when you got to him he would get up and run for his seat, which would be a huge laugh.[22]

The most notable feature of every ghost or horror show, the climactic blackout, usually lasted from two to three minutes, during which time the audience sat in complete darkness while eerie sounds and luminous apparitions filled the theatre. Although any number of different illusions and effects could lead up to it, the performance of the blackout itself remained similar from one show to the next. The standard way to begin the ghost-show blackout was with a bright flash from a flash-pot or flashbulb. This was of vital importance, because it "charged" all of the luminous materials in the theatre, making them glow. The flash was also important because it would temporarily blind the audience members, making them less likely to be able to see the assistants manipulating various effects in the dark:

> A few seconds after the auditorium is plunged into total darkness, one or two or three photo flash bulbs should be shot from the stage into the audience. This action startles and frightens the audience, temporarily blinds them and activates your markers, stooges faces with luminous make-up and all luminous paper, whether on stage or in the auditorium, as long as they face the source of the light. All assistants and stooges should be briefed to CLOSE THEIR EYES the second the lights go out, and not open them until after the flash (which they can discern with closed eyes). Thus they escape the temporary blindness suffered by the other spectators.[23]

Most of the visual effects during the blackout were achieved with luminous paint or makeup. Ghostmasters painted frightening images on balloons, streamers, cloth, and so on, and these devices were manipulated by numerous performers and assistants throughout the theatre. Some luminous figures might be worked by helpers running up and down the aisles, while others were hung from cane poles and extended out into the house so that they seemed to be flying right over the audience members' heads. Luminous makeup was also used on previously recruited audience members' faces in order to make "ghosts" appear in the audience. This was not only a great way to inexpensively expand the size of the cast, but could also prove a long-remembered treat for the youngsters who happened to be recruited as helpers:

> One Halloween, when I was a boy, the largest theater in town staged a midnight show, advertising that "ghosts" will suddenly appear in the audience, sitting right next to YOU!" That fascinated me.
>
> The theater marquee also promised a horror movie and a stage show featuring a spooky magician. I could understand that kind of stuff. But how could a ghost suddenly appear in the seat next to mine? I found out.
>
> The only place a kid might get a penny candy bar (in 1938, they were bigger than today's theaters) was in a downtown poolroom. And that's where four friends and I were when magic struck. A stranger asked us if we'd like to see the Halloween show at the Majestic. He said we'd have to do "only a little work" to earn admission.
>
> As instructed, we appeared at the theater 30 minutes early. Backstage, something greasy was wiped on our hands and faces, and we were ordered to sit in the auditorium, widely separated. We received no explanation of what we were supposed to be doing, so we were bewildered, but it didn't matter because we were also in free.
>
> You guessed it. The greasy stuff was phosphorous. After the crowd came in, and the lights went off, I glowed in the dark. I wasn't sitting next to a ghost, I *was* a ghost.
>
> I didn't catch on until a woman leaned into my face and said, "My God, kid, what happened to you?" Then I saw my friends shining in other rows, and I realized I was in show business. I waved my ghostly hands in the air and said boo and laughed menacingly. People were so frightened they giggled. It was marvelous.[24]

In addition to providing visual apparitions, showmen also created excitement and fear in the audience during the blackout by subjecting them to some type of physical sensation. This was done by throwing something into the house such as rice, un-popped popcorn, or wet strings, or shooting cold water from water pistols. Ghostmasters would use anything that would startle but not physically harm audience members. One clever effect was created by tying a long black rope between two poles and draping wet lengths of string from a mop head over it. As soon as the lights were out, two assistants would grab the poles, pull the rope taut across the center section of the house and slowly walk up the aisles, dragging the wet ends of the strings across the faces of the spectators. The audible suggestion that "cold, slimy worms are falling from the ceiling" could enhance the effect. By using black silk threads instead of mop string, the same setup could be used to create a similar effect of spiderwebs brushing the audience faces.

Sound was also an important part of the blackout segment of the show: eerie sounds added to the sensory experience and helped to create an exciting and frightening atmosphere. Many performers used recorded soundtracks that featured thunder, screams, moans, evil laughs, scary music, or some combination of these. In theatres that did not have the equipment to play records or tapes from the booth, enterprising ghostmasters came up with other clever ways to fill the theatre with otherworldly sounds. For example, Herman Weber had an effect that he would sometimes use for his blackouts, which he dubbed "The Witch's Music." He first used the technique, which consisted of a small music box mounted on a piece of wood and attached to a microphone, on 26 June 1942 at Warner's Ohio Theatre in Lima, Ohio:

> The theatre is blacked out at a midnight ghost show whereupon weird tinkling music is heard to fill the theatre. A luminous guitar or mandolin may be floated about to seem like the source of the ghostly music. No records, turntables, or sound effects from the booth are

needed. You simply have a small music box in your pocket which you attach to the microphone and set going during the first moment of the blackout.[25]

Because the blackout was so important to the success of a show, it was a primary consideration when loading into a new theatre. As Morris notes: "One of the first things you did when you arrived at a theatre was to see how effectively you could get a blackout."[26] Of course, sometimes there was a problem getting managers to agree to blackout the entire theatre due to the safety hazard it would pose; in these situations, ghostmasters had to use a little salesmanship or ingenuity in order to make sure the show would be a success:

> Some theatre managers, alert to the fire laws, may object to pulling the exit lights. A little sales talk and the definite assurance the show will be a FLOP if all lights are not extinguished will usually do the trick. However should such an argument fail, the operator should have available EXIT signs made on luminous paper or cardboard, which can be placed over the house exit box.[27]

The inability to get a complete blackout during the performance could spell disaster for a show; if the audience could see the assistants manipulating the luminous materials in the dark, the "fright-factor" would be totally lost. Magician Lee Jacobs recalls a story of how a technical snafu at an Ohio University performance turned his midnight ghost show into one of the (unintentional) comedy hits of the year:

> A friend and I were going to produce a ghost show on the Ohio University campus. Getting a blackout in the theatre was tough because there were two separate switches which had to be thrown. I briefed the technicians that when they heard the gunshot, they would throw the switches for the blackout. Well, one of them didn't hear the shot, so half the lights stayed on. I had told my assistants in the audience NOT to begin anything if we didn't get a total blackout, but they did anyway. There they were, running up and down the aisles with cane poles and everyone could see them! In the confusion, the doves onstage got loose and decided to roost on top of the movie screen. When the movie came on, the audience could see a silhouette of me jumping behind the screen trying to retrieve the doves. They were in hysterics.[28]

Aside from achieving an entirely dark theatre, the most important consideration in creating a successful blackout sequence was to make sure it provided a complete sensory experience for the entire audience. If part of the audience was just left sitting in the dark with nothing going on, they were apt to be bored or disappointed and were more likely to become restless and ruin the show. In his *Ghost Book of Dark Secrets*, a handbook on how to stage a ghost show, Robert Nelson insists that "visual manifestations occur for ALL spectators . . . AND physical contact should be made with the GREAT MAJORITY of the audience. The object is to create utter confusion and FEAR in the minds of the spectator, if possible."[29] If a blackout was boisterous and jam-packed enough, it stood the best chance of success. Bill Neff, one of the most prolific and talented ghost-show operators, was exceptionally good at creating an "effect-full" and effective blackout. As magic historian Milbourne Christopher reports:

> I have never heard a theatre audience scream as loudly as did the one I was a part of when

> I saw Bill Neff's spook show. Once the lights were turned out and phosphorescent figures appeared the audience started to yell. The bedlam continued until the spirits bowed out and Mr. Neff reappeared to acknowledge the tremendous response.[30]

In addition to potentially being the most exciting part of any ghost show, the blackout segment was also the most risky. It was during this time that audiences were most likely to get out of control, thus the lead-in for the blackout sequence was very important. This was the performer's chance to give the audience direction and to help diminish the possibility of someone getting hurt or ruining the effects. The better the performer was at controlling this moment, the more likely he was to have a safe and successful blackout. Performers used various methods to achieve this control. One of the most popular was to ask audience members to hold on to their chairs or to reach out and hold on to the hands of the person sitting next to them; other performers preferred the straightforward approach:

> The operator need not fear the presence of flashlights in the audience—IF he will inform his audience in a friendly and diplomatic manner that such actions will not be tolerated—that flashlights, matches, or any undue disturbances in the audience by anyone will cause him to IMMEDIATELY TURN up the lights, and stop the performance. Point out that it's all in fun, and that just two or three spectators who fail to COOPERATE COULD bring the show to a premature end. Place the responsibility squarely on your audience. As an added precaution, post two or three ushers mid-way in the aisles.[31]

Most ghost shows used one of two methods to psychologically condition the audience to experience fright during the blackout segment of the show. The first was suggestion, where the ghostmaster would prime the audience by telling them about all of the horrible things they were going to see or feel in the dark; an intense, direct-address monologue featuring vivid descriptions of the horrors that awaited them was a standard feature for many performers. In this monologue, the ghostmaster would use the power of suggestion to convince audience members that "spiders will crawl through the auditorium" or "snakes will slither at your feet" or "monsters and ghouls will appear"—anything that would put the audience on edge and prepare them for the effects to follow. The second type of lead-in to the blackout became popular in the later, more horrific ghost shows. It featured a scene just prior to the blackout in which a creature or monster would "get loose" onstage and head down the steps toward the audience. There would be general consternation and confusion and then the ghostmaster would scream something like "Oh no, the monster has escaped! The monster is loose in the theatre!," and just as the monster headed toward the audience, the blackout would occur. Ghostmaster Brandon describes how he used this method in his production of "The Mad Doctor and his Chamber of Horrors":

> I started with an old guillotine. . . . Essentially the trick provided for a person to be placed behind the illusion and their head and hands placed in stocks. While the magician was talking to the audience and seemingly, not noticing what was happening, an assistant dressed as a hunchback with a terribly distorted face, came out and tripped the release. The blade fell, blood few everywhere and the head fell into the basket. Spectators actually saw the head fall. The hunchback picked up the head in one hand and a very evil looking knife in the other . . . [and] headed down into the audience when the blackout occurred and the ghosts came out.[32]

Once the house lights came back on, the host magician would quickly wrap up the performance and, in most cases, the film would start. While some ghostmasters such as Peck and Weber presented their stage shows following the film, most of the time, the film was the final event of the evening.[33]

Touring and Marketing

As theatre historians know, a theatrical event is not created in a vacuum, but is always closely tied to its context. The event and the context exhibit a reciprocal relationship where each informs and influences the other in infinite succession. As Thomas Postlewait writes:

> Events and their contexts are, by necessity, mutually dependent conditions, just as any action must be understood as an aspect of its motivating conditions and its results. Intersecting both synchronically and diachronically, the event and context participate together in an historical matrix. Within the vectors of time and space, the event and the context are mutually defning.[34]

In the historical matrix that surrounded the ghost shows, many elements influenced not only the creation, but the touring and marketing as well. One such element was the organization of the motion-picture industry in the United States. Throughout the 1930s and '40s, most movie theatres were owned by five major motion-picture studios: Paramount, MGM/Loew's, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Radio-Keith Orpheum (RKO). These companies instituted a vertically integrated business model wherein they controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of their own films, and they worked together in an oligopoly that controlled the entire industry: "As distributors, the majors determined which movies were shown in which theaters. They classified every movie theater in America and allotted them different positions on a scale of priorities that determined how long after its initial release a given theater could show a picture."[35] By working together, the five major motion-picture studios controlled the distribution of all of the most popular and highest-quality films, as each company would first book their own films and then work in the films offered by the other four.[36]

The major studios also imposed the practice of block-booking on small exhibitors: "Under this arrangement, theaters were not permitted to hire individual movies but had to accept them in blocks, sometimes as large as fifty, but more commonly in pack-ages of five or six."[37] This system helped ghost-show operators in putting together tours, because it allowed them to book their show into several theatres by selling it to one studio, rather than having to book individual performances with independent theatre owners:

> Amazingly the big theatre chains actually allowed us to "hop scotch" on the tour. To illustrate, we would play a town for Fox theatres today; and tomorrow in the next town, be owned by Commonwealth Theatres, and the next town would be an independent. Then the next spot would be operated by Paramount. Then back onto Fox for the next three towns and so on. The chain which we started out on and which was generally the largest would actually arrange with the other theatre operators for our dates in the towns along the way. In other words, the chain really did our booking for us, saving us time and money as well as keeping the appearances relatively close.[38]

Ghost shows were usually booked into a theatre on a 50/50 split of the gross proceeds, less taxes and expenses. The expenses included the cost of the horror film, advertising, and stagehands.[39] The job of promoting and advertising a show primarily went to the local theatre owner or manager, upon whom the success of the show could depend. The ghost-show operator would provide an advertising trailer to be shown in the theatre a few weeks prior to the event, along with taped radio spots, lobby cards, ad layouts, or other materials that could be used for promotion, and then would rely on the local theatre owner to place ads and set up any other displays or events that might help to sell the show. While this worked well in situations in which independent theatre owners would get a direct cut of profits, sometimes salaried managers for the large theatre chains were resistant to the arrangement:

> Playing chain theater dates, one will frequently encounter a manager who dislikes playing midnight ghost shows. Actually, they do not get any extra salary for their extra work, but are obliged to remain at the theater half of the night. And sometimes, these managers fail to fully cooperate in "selling the show" and consequently, box office results will suffer.[40]

Despite the challenge posed by some reticent chain-theatre managers, touring ghost shows broke box-office records in many of the theatres in which they played; and from the late 1940s into the early '50s, dozens of ghostmasters crisscrossed the United States, playing one-night stands in both large and small towns (see fig. 1). In fact, in order to capitalize upon the amount of money that a ghost show could generate, some producers had multiple units of a show, sending out a featured performer to head up each one. A 1947 advertisement in the magician's magazine *Genii* ran as follows:

Figure 1. Advertisement for the ghost show presented by magician Dota “Mysterious” Brown in the1940s. (Source: printed from a letterpress block contained in the Curtiss Show Print Collection, The Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, The Ohio State University. Reprinted with permission.)

WANTED AT ONCE!

Professional magicians who would like to go on the road and work year round at a good salary. Am at present lining up midnight spookshows to be presented by a large motion picture producing company. We can use you if . . .

—you can do a 45 minute show out of a suitcase;

—have a suitable late model car to transport you and your show in.

—you can obtain the services of two assistants (one attracive girl and one fellow or two attractive girls) who will be paid a very substantial weekly salary by us.[41]

In 1953, Jack and Wyman Baker's Dr. Silkini franchise had seven units crisscrossing the country, which meant that their productions were playing nearly forty-two theatres a week.[42] These seven units would be headed up by one of a number of magicians who could step in and perform the lead role: "I was . . . one of the many Dr. Silkinis on tour for Baker. I believe there were a dozen of us at one time including James Randi and Roy Houston [*sic*]."[43] The shows were extremely lucrative for both the magicians and theatre owners, and the ghost-show business flourished. The industry was still viable and lucrative well into the 1950s, enough so that *Genii* ran a three-part feature on "The Ghost Show Business" in 1958 in which ghost operator Bob Nelson states:

> [The] Ghost Show business today is still very profitable, but it is not the easy come money of a few year [*sic*] ago. More advance thought must go into the preparation of the show, the selection of territory and and [*sic*] dates, advertising and exploitation, and more showman-ship. These efforts will be rewarded.
>
> Oddly enough, many theatres and many chains will book any ghost show, good or bad, because these shows still continue to make money. Recently, one of the heads of a large circuit of major theatres told the writer that ghost shows were worth $50,000.00 yearly profits to their circuit.[44]

The Decline of the Ghost Shows

Just as cultural factors sometimes converge to create circumstances that foster the rise of new entertainments, so too can they converge to work against productions that enjoy seemingly secure popularity among the public. Such was the case with the midnight ghost show. Eventually, the genre declined due to several cultural factors, including an increase in the unruliness of young audiences, the closing off of some stages due to the popularity of the CinemaScope widescreen format, the rise of the drive-in, and the influence of television. During the postwar years, there was a gradual change in the deportment of audiences who attended the ghost shows, and the age demographic shifted so that audiences were primarily composed of young people, with fourteen-to-seventeen-year-olds eventually making up the bulk of the audiences.[45] Audiences became increasingly unruly, and this created a challenge for performers, who were uncomfortable trying to handle a rowdy teenage crowd. Audience behavior continued to degenerate into the early 1950s, and eventually some ghost-show operators had to alter the effects of their shows in order to

avoid the risk of injury to the performers. As Raymond Corbin (aka Ray-Mond) explains: "We learned very quickly. Originally I would put some luminous in cold cream and put it on the assistants' hands and faces to make them look like skulls. But they kept getting punched in the face—people would go after the luminous—so we began putting the skull faces on paddles."[46]Also, due to an increase in juvenile delinquency, many towns imposed a curfew on youngsters, making it impossible to draw a sizeable audience for a midnight show. By 1957, a little more than half of the 109 cities with populations over 100,000 had juvenile curfews.[47] The increased liability for theatres and performers alike and the obstacle created by curfews caused many theatres to stop booking the midnight productions.[48]

During the 1940s, the influence of television on American life increased significantly, and by the end of the decade, it was quickly overtaking movies as the most popular entertainment medium. In 1947, movie attendance began to slump drastically, and from 1946 to 1949, Hollywood's revenues plummeted by 21 percent.[49] During the next decade, Americans would purchase televisions at an incredible rate: in 1956, televisions were being sold at a rate of 20,000 daily, and by 1959, nine of ten households had one.[50] As television began to draw audiences away from movies, Hollywood looked for new ways to deliver a unique experience to the movie-going public. They introduced a plethora of new technologies that would offer an entertainment experience that could not be replicated by watching a small television screen. In 1953, for example, Twentieth Century-Fox introduced CinemaScope, which was the studio's attempt to compete with Cinerama, a wide-screen format that had been introduced in 1952 by independent inventor Fred Waller. Both formats required the installation of a wide, curved screen, but CinemaScope had an advantage over Cinerama, because it did not require the purchase of special projection equipment. Existing cameras could be fitted with a new anamorphic lens, so only a new screen had to be installed. This put CinemaScope well within the budgetary reach of many theatres, thus it quickly became the industry standard: "By the end of 1954, every studio except for Paramount, which had developed its own widescreen process known as VistaVision, had adopted the CinemaScope format; and by 1957 eighty-five per cent of all US and Canadian theatres had been equipped to show CinemaScope films."[51] The installation of the wide screens made the movie-house stages inaccessible, thereby effectively diminishing the number of viable venues for live performance.

In addition to becoming a factor in the demise of ghost shows by being a catalyst for the advent of widescreen film formats and the retrofitting of theatres, television also came into direct competition with the horror-stage productions in the mid-1950s, when stations began offering programs meant for the audience demographic that made up the largest segment of the ghostmasters' shows. In 1955, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* premiered on CBS television, and in 1957, Screen Gems acquired the rights to the backlog of Universal's monster-movie classics, which were released to the television-viewing public as "Shock Theatre."[52] The Shock Theatre movies were broadcast late at night and often hosted by comic, ghoulish figures that were very similar to the emcees of the midnight ghost shows.[53] These Shock Theatre productions offered horrific characters, shtick, and a horror film—some of the major components of the spookers. Americans could now watch their own personal "midnight ghost show" in the comfort of their own homes; they did not need to attend movie theatres to see monsters and ghouls. In fact, the performance styles and elements of midnight ghost shows and Shock Theatre were so similar that Philip Morris, a prominent ghost-show operator, became a television horror host with his show *Dr Evil's Horror Theatre*, which was seen on the East Coast from 1960 to 1968. While these television shows could not deliver the direct visceral sensations experienced during the

performance of a live ghost show, the similarity in subject matter caused many potential audience members to opt for the convenience of staying home.

As the 1950s progressed, another factor that complicated the process of designing a lucrative ghost-show tour was the US population's migration from the cities to the suburbs. Following the war, many Americans found themselves with disposable income and a growing inventory of items on which they could spend it. Families began purchasing houses, cars, and appliances in record numbers, and a burgeoning automobile culture took shape as cars were now a necessity for those living outside the reach of public transportation. The motion-picture industry's answer to this population-scattering trend was the drive-in theatre. Although drive-ins had been around since the 1930s, they came into their own after the war and into the early 1950s.[54] Walk-in movie-house entrepreneurs who saw their audiences steadily diminishing were less likely to take the risk of booking the "added attraction" of a stage show when it still might not guarantee them a full house. As bookings at walk-in movie theatres fell off, some ghost-show operators tried to maintain a steady business by adapting their performances to the drive-in theatres. This was a failed experiment, however, as they soon discovered that it was impossible to replicate the atmosphere and tactile experiences of a midnight ghost show in a large, parking-lot-type venue. With the increase in unruly young audiences, the decline of viable venues, the direct competition from television, and the rise in popularity of the drive-ins, the heyday of the spooker was over.

Conclusions

The study of midnight ghost shows provides a glimpse into how some performers were able to adapt their marketing and performance strategies to create a trans-medial synergy between staged shows and motion pictures, and to keep their touring careers viable at a time when many others were unable to do so. By "piggybacking" upon Americans' interest in séances and love of horror movies, ghostmasters were able to sustain their shows' popularity long past the decline of other forms of live entertainment. In addition to being unique examples of theatrical enterprise, these shows are also early examples of a midnight-entertainment trend that would continue into the 1970s with midnight showings of Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970) at the Elgin Theatre in Greenwich Village and George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which was playing midnight engagements across the United States by 1971.[55] The midnight-entertainment craze reached its pinnacle with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), a film that drew crowds of loyal fans to its midnight screenings. The midnight ghost shows—particularly those in the second phase that featured horrific and bloody illusions—were also early exemplars of a horror-fan culture that burgeoned during the 1950s. Spurred on by such publications as the 1950 E. C. Comics series *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Haunt of Fear,* and *The Vault of Horror* and perhaps also by one of the most well-known horror fanzines, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, which debuted in 1958, horror-fan culture continued to grow through the remainder of the century and has remained strong up to the present day.

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Notes:

[1] Mark Walker, *Ghostmasters*, rev. ed. (Boca Raton, FL: Cool Hand Communications, 1994), 82.
[2] Matthew Solomon, "Up-to-Date Magic: Theatrical Conjuring and the Trick Film," *Theatre Journal* 58.4 (2006): 595–615.
[3] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 169.
[4] Sources vary in setting the actual year of Peck's first spook show. Herman L. Weber claims that Peck originated the genre in about 1934, while Mark Walker states that Peck himself claims to have developed the spook show in 1929. See Weber, *Out of the Spook Cabinet* (Oakland, CA: Lloyd E. Jones, 1947), 5; and Walker, *Ghostmasters*, 21.
[5] "Ghostmaster" was a self-ascribed term sometimes used in advertising. It has become more commonly used to describe all spook-show performers since the publication of Mark Walker's history of the genre, *Ghostmasters*.
[5] "Ghostmaster" was a self-ascribed term sometimes used in advertising. It has become more commonly used to describe all spook-show performers since the publication of Mark Walker's history of the genre, *Ghostmasters*.
[6] Weber, *Out of the Spook Cabinet*, 5.
[7] Walker, *Ghostmasters*, 23.
[8] There is some debate among historians as to the actual ages of Margaret and Kate at the time of this incident. For an extensive examination of the Fox Sisters and the rise of spiritualism in America, see Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).
[9] Fred Nadis, *Wonder Shows: Performing Science, Magic, and Religion in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 113.
[10] Philip Morris, interview, in *Spooks-a-Poppin: The Ghost Show Racket Laid Bare*, ed. Jim Ridenour, dir. Jim Ridenour, n.d. VHS.
[11] *Atchison* (Kansas) *Daily Globe,* 14 May 1896, page 4.
[12] David J. Skal, *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 147.
[13] Les Daniels, *Living in Fear: A History of Horror in the Mass Media* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 130.
[14] Skal*, Hollywood Gothic*, 204.
[15] Walker, *Ghostmasters*, 83.
[16] Don Brandon and Joyce Brandon, *Memoirs and Confessions of a Stage Magician* (Hanover, VA: TAG Publications, 1995), 71.
[17] Walker, *Ghostmasters*, 100.
[18] Arthur Lennig, *The Immortal Count: The Life and Films of Bela Lugosi* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 351.
[19] David J. Skal, *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 110.
[20] Walker, *Ghostmasters*, 42.
[21] This was the same effect used by William Castle for his 1959 movie *The Tingler*. Castle would have a few chairs wired throughout the movie theatre so that some audience members would experience the tingler's "horrible effect." He dubbed the gimmick "percepto." See William Castle, *Step Right Up: I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 151–52.
[22] Dick Newton, personal interview with author, 30 August 1999.
[23] Robert A. Nelson, *The Ghost Book of Dark Secrets*, 2nd ed. (Calgary, AB: Micky Hades Enterprises, 1972), 8.
[24] Jim Fitzgerald, "Tonight's a good time to get a little glow on . . .," *Detroit Free Press*, 31 October 1980, 16D, in Dr. Silkini fle, American Museum of Magic, Marshall, MI.
[25] Weber, *Out of the Spook Cabinet*, 23.
[26] Morris, *Spooks-a-Poppin*.
[27] Nelson*, Ghost Book,* 7.
[28] Lee Jacobs, personal interview with author, Society of American Magicians convention, Cincinnati, 16 July 1999.
[29] Nelson, *Ghost Book*, 7.
[30] Milbourne Christopher, "One Wizard's Wanderings," *The Linking Ring* 27, no. 9 (1947): 38.
[31] Nelson*, Ghost Book,* 8.
[32] Brandon and Brandon, *Memoirs and Confessions*. The person placed in the illusion was one of the magician's assistants.
[33] Walker, *Ghostmasters*, 51.
[34] Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University

Press, 2009), 90.
[35] Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 66.
[36] Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History Of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 67.
[37] Maltby and Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, 66.
[38] Brandon and Brandon, *Memoirs and Confessions*, 53–54.
[39] Robert Nelson, "The Ghost Show Business, Part 1," *Genii* 22 (February 1958): 209.
[40] Robert Nelson, "The Ghost Show Business Booking, Advertising and Exploitation," *Genii* 22 (April 1958): 282.
[41] Advertisement placed by ghost-show operator Card Mondor in *Genii* 12 (November 1947): 83.
[42] Jack Baker, "Dr. Silkini's Asylum of Horrors," in *Spook Shows on Parade*, ed. Mark Walker (Baltimore: Magic Media, 1978), 51.
[43] Charles E. Windley, personal communication with author, 30 December 1998.
[44] Nelson, "The Ghost Show Business, Part 1," 209.
[45] Walker, *Ghostmasters*, 57.
[46] Raymond Corbin, personal interview with author, Society of American Magicians convention, Cincinnati, 16 July 1999.
[47] Craig Hemmens and Katherine Bennett, "Judicial Response to a Not-So-New Crime Control Strategy," *Juvenile Justice: A Text/Reader,* ed. Richard Lawrence and Craig Hemmens (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 168.
[48] Philip Morris and Dennis Phillips, "Preface," in *How to Operate a Financially Successful Haunted House* (Pittsburgh: Imagine Inc., 1987), n.p.
[49] LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 294.
[50] Ibid., 296.
[51] John Belton, "Technology and Innovation," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema: The Defnitive History of Cinema Worldwide*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 266.
[52] Daniels, *Living in Fear,* 193.
[53] For a thorough discussion of television horror hosts see Elena M. Watson, *Television Horror Movie Hosts: 68 Vampires, Mad Scientists and Other Denizens of the Late-Night Airwaves Examined and Interviewed* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991).
[54] For a history of the drive-in, see Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992).
[55] J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 80, 126.