

## THRILLS & CHILLS

By Lisa Mulcahy, Stage Directions Magazine, October 2003

They're creepy and they're kooky, they're altogether ooky – you guessed it, we're talking about spooky lighting effects. This is the season to shock you audience's socks off! Maybe this month finds you stirring up bubble, bubble, toil, and trouble with a stage full of wicked witches or doing a sleek, sinister take on *The Phantom of the Opera*. Perhaps you're turning your theater space into a temporary haunted mansion for your patrons to stroll through and you're looking to give them a really good scare. Or it could be you're just intrigued to learn a few good spine-tingling tech tips that can be plugged into any show, any time of the year. Your solution? The right kind of vivid visuals – simple, spooky, lighting plots and techniques – can be terrifically effective.

Here's a round up of eerie eye-poppers which can be adapted for a wide range of spaces. These how-tos come complete with design, execution and product specifics. Keep in mind that although these SFX ideas are intended to be straightforward operationally, there should be no slacking off on observing proper safety procedures. The welfare of your crew, actors and audience always needs to be your first priority.

### TOP 10 TERRIFYING TABLEAUS

#### 1. The Graveyard Shift.

A cemetery setting needs to be lit just the right way to induce maximum shivers. Pat Dignan, director of production for Big Apple Production Services, a division of Big Apple Lights in New York City, has designed the perfect solution. Dignan first envisions a simple set: gravestones with a eye/backdrop surface or walls to be lit and some pumpkins and artificial foliage on the floor surface. "Begin with an ambient color wash for the graveyard surfaces and floor in a midnight-blue color," Dignan suggests. "Use a wash fixture like a fresnel or PAR for this purpose with Roscolux 85 or GAM 855. Create areas of light and dark by adding projected bare tree branch patterns. For this purpose, use an ellipsoidal fixture with a FAM 216 or a Rosco 77735 bare branch pattern. Focus these as sharply as possible, using a donut to maximize the sharpness of the pattern. Color them a moonlight blue (Roscolux 66 or GAM 720) to contract the ambient surround wash."

Next, add a mist or low-lying fog. "A mist will help the patterns stand out in the air as well as on the floor, whereas a low-lying fog is fun to walk through, especially with a carpet of leaves on the ground," says Dignan. A fog machine or hazer both work well for a general density. For low-lying fog, go with a dry-ice fog machine. Dignan would complete our graveyard visual by lighting the back drop with a dark sky-blue and adding a moon pattern in the corner of the sky.: "The backdrop can be lit from above or below with single cell cyc lights or multiple cell striplights using Roscolux 385. Use a frost or silk in addition to creating a smooth wash. A full moon can be added by using any ellipsoidal unit with an iris or a circle template focused in an area of the backdrop."

#### 2. Werewolf's Wonderland.

Speaking of full moons, they can also work great as a stark singular basic effect. Ellen Jones of the Liverpool, NY-based Syracuse Scenery and stage Lighting, expands upon the full moon as the primary visual effect in a scene. An accomplished lighting/scenic designer and scenic artist, Jones suggests Rosco Image Pro Gobo Slide Projector, which costs just \$249. "Here is a unit that slips into a conventional ellipsoidal that can give you a photorealistic color projection. And the slides are just \$35 whether you use one of the stock images or have a custom slide made."

#### 3. House O'Horrors

Setting up a great lighting plot for your walk-through haunted mansion is frighteningly easy, according to Evan Campbell of Dove Lighting Systems. "Since the typical Halloween haunted house is a "found" space rather than a traditional theater, you want to use small, portable equipment that can be hidden behind the set," he explains. "Our Scenemaster and Dimmermaster products are well-suited to this purpose. Designing the spooky effect is the same as designing other effects: it's all a matter of color, shape, and motion."

#### 4. Visit From a Vampire

Jones has designed lighting for a number of productions of *Dracula* over the years. She generously let us in on some ideas from her lighting plot for that show, which could also be used in any number of other shows. "I wanted dim lighting, but didn't want that warm amber look that can be created by low dimmer levels," Jones says. "To create a cooler color atmosphere, I used Roscolux 98 Medium Grey as a neutral density filter to cut the light levels uniformly, avoiding the amber drift. I also used that in conjunction with other cool gel colors from high side positions like Roscolux 64 Light Steel Blue and Lee 142 Pale Violet for the acting areas to help mold the actors' features and sculpt the bodies. From the front, I used Roscolux 98 on the actor's faces." Jones used fixtures to light upstage windows with leaf breakup patterns that moved with a wind sound effect to suggest rough weather.

#### 5. Frightening Lightning

In her design for *Dracula*, Jones created an electrifying electrical storm effect. "Act I closes with Meena's lover carrying her dead body in the doorway as the storm rages outside," she explains. "Fixtures outfitted with the strobe caps and other ellipsoidals with lightning gobos and Lee 202 for a very white light were used in combination with the wind-whipped tree gobos and sound effects. Quite effective! The audience's last image was a tremendous flash of lightning behind the performers, silhouetting them, along with a final clap of thunder and an instant blackout."

## 6. Motion Potion

If you want to throw some unsettling light motion across a stage tableau, Campbell has another great suggestion for you. “Depending on your budget, you can go with low-or high-tech motion effect,” he says. “I learned a good one from stagecraft archives on the web (check out <http://stagecraft.theprices.net/archives.html>). You hang a sheet of aluminized Mylar, blow a desk fan across it, and bounce a couple of lights off it to get wavy light all over the room.

## 7. Heeeeeeeeeere's Frankstein!

To create a powerful reveal of a major monster, Jones offers this trick: “When scrim is lit from the front, it is opaque. When lit from behind only, it becomes transparent and can be used to reveal a character or tableau to the view. The transition can either be a slow fade, so that the audience slowly becomes aware of the monster or ghoul, or it can be a dynamic staccato change. If accompanied by a loud sound, there is an opportunity for a very scary moment. The operator can achieve the quick movement by using a bump button on the lighting console, using regular strobe lights, or with the be Diversitronics strobe cap that goes onto a conventional ellipsoidal.”

## 8. Alarming Angles.

Knowing a couple of simple lighting angle tricks can pay off in big, scary returns. “The angle of the fixture in relation to the performers has a great deal of impact on the viewers’ response,” says Jones. “Backlight or side light that rims the actor can create an evocative look. If someone is lit from below, it reverses all of the shadows and creates a skull-like appearance to the face. The effect can be quite chilling.”

## 9. Myserious Mist.

Smoke or fog visuals are unfailingly scream-a-rific. If you want to incorporate some, always consult a dealer for expert safety and usage advice, and always go with an easily controllable model. “For ground-hugging fog, the Le Maitre Peasouper can’t be beat,” raves Jones. “And the company’s Maxi fogger give an air fog. It lists for only \$249 and it’s a quality, no-hassle unit.

## 10. Out of the Blue.

If you want to paint and light a backing tableau, the development of dichroic patterns gives you great new visual options, according to Jones. She suggests using an Apollo dichroic UV gobo which you use in tandem with an Altman Shakespeare or Strand SL. “It gives a controllable UV effect with some real punch that is focusable, dimmable, and doesn’t involve dozens of tubes laying around.” Jones says, “combine that with painting doen with UV paint like the Rosco Vivid FX or older fluorescent points and it’s dynamite. My favorite is the fluorescent blue, because the effect is really invisible before the light goes on.”

## EIGHT SAFETY ESSENTIALS

1. Observe fire precautions to the letter. Contact your local fire department and follow their expert advice. You must always do business under the appropriate fireproofing regulations. “There needs to be some sort of override that can immediately provide emergency lighting, and exits should be lit,” says Jones. “I used to work with a company in Chicago that did a commercial haunted house, and they were terrific about safety issues. Everything was made of metal or flame-retardant materials or coated with intumescent paint.”
2. Prepare for panicked patrons. At that same high-quality haunted house, employees outfitted with night-vision goggles were stationed above the space’s inner maze on boardwalks to watch for signs of overstress. “Of course, emergency lights were available at the flip of a single switch,” says Jones. “It was always amazing to me how many potential problems there were – patrons suddenly having anxiety attacks and so on. It’s not just the huge disaster you have to be prepared for, but individual problems as well.”
3. Protect your actors. “Never let performers work in complete darkness,” stresses Campbell. “You can achieve a satisfying darkness by temporarily fading to black, then raising a low-wattage safety light that has been gelled with several cuts of deep blue. You can use glow tape to mark any obstacles.”
4. Wet-tech all effects thoroughly, so your cast and crew are in total sync.
5. Ground equipment properly to avoid any shock hazards.
6. Never, ever immerse any kind of lighting or electrical equipment in water or operate if close to water.
7. Wear rubber-soled shoes and safety goggles for security.
8. Never allow any kind of lighting or electrical equipment to be set up or operated by an unqualified crew member. The technical staff you allow to set up and operate should be both expert and experienced. Never slack off when it comes to potential danger.