

# **Curtains Of Blood:**

**A Peek Behind the Phenomena of the Grand-Guignol**

Paul Z. Simons

Spring 2013

# Contents

History . . . . .	3
The Total Theatre Experience . . . . .	7
The Play is the Thing . . . . .	9
Some Musings . . . . .	11
And the Now Question . . . . .	13

“Eyes wide open! Eyes wide open!  
Do you not realize how much horror  
is contained in those three words.”

- from “In the Darkroom” 1911

Maurice Level & Etienne Rey

The images conjured by the mention of the Theatre du Grand-Guignol are ominous—oozing madness, amorality run riot, blood flowing in the aisles by the bucketful, and intricate sadistic revenges. One imagines the conclusion of a night at the theatre off impasse Chaptal with patrons stumbling out into the night and vomiting on the curb, and one or two of the more suggestible types fainting outright in the street. A little theatre situated in the north of Paris with its own house physician to tend to patrons overcome by the images, content, and presentation of the performances. The truth, of course, is somewhat different than the image, but the image lives on in spite of the theatre’s demise in 1962, the dearth of plays translated and available in English, or any language, other than French, for that matter; indeed the virtual loss of this entire theatrical tradition; considered by some as an example of incredibly bad French taste, like Jerry Lewis worship, taking the post-modernists seriously or inadequate personal hygiene. Regardless, the Grand-Guignol seems as dead as one of its own brutalized and tortured victims...yet perhaps the real fear of death is contained not in its reality, but in the ultimate distrust by the living that the dead won’t really stay dead for very long. And so it goes...

## History

Of course I didn’t jump into Grand-Guignol without having the strong feeling that somewhere buried in there were some deep, twisted anarchist roots. The theatre was, after all, located just off the Place Pigalle, the natural habitat of bohemians, drug addicts, revolutionaries, prostitutes, proletarians and assorted flotsam; and this in Paris—the Mother of Revolutions, and timed in the final decade of the 19th and first decades of the 20th century. Which immediately brings to mind the great anarchist terrorists Vaillant, Emile Henry and Ravachol, and from the individualist anarchist menu, the Bonnot Gang—who, among other havoc raised, engineered and perfected the motorized bank robbery getaway. And sure enough without too much digging one uncovers the “Theatre Libre,” the first artistic move towards what would become the Grand Guignol. The Theatre Libre opened its doors in 1887, and presented comedies rosse, short plays that showed various aspects of the lives and language of workers, and the underclasses. The theatre was above all meant as an experiment in naturalism, a theatrical philosophy which will percolate throughout the entire existence of the Grand-Guignol. The Theater Libre closed its doors due to bankruptcy in 1893, and one of its founders, Oscar Metenier, walked away from the whole experience with a few ideas. Why not stage what these Parisians appeared to enjoy? They read about violence, mayhem, and death daily in such scandal sheets as *Le Petit Journal*, the *Petit Parisien* and the *faits divers* sections of newspapers, accompanied by graphic presentations of the crimes described. Perhaps they’d pay to see some of the same. Further, what should ever really stop anyone from doing his best to offend the sensibilities of just about everyone? These two seemingly apposed notions

co-existing side by side in an intimate theatre of 285 seats and a stage measuring a meager 20 feet by 20 feet— may just yield some interesting artistic results, and a profit.

So Metenier opened the Theatre du Grand-Guignol in 1897, the name Guignol is slang for puppet, based in part on a popular puppet-character from Lyon (a Gallic version of Punch and Judy); therefore the Theatre of the Big Puppet. A brief note about the building, originally a Jansenist church it was deconsecrated during the Reign of Terror and probably used for one of the areas political clubs, in the early 19th century a blacksmiths shop, briefly a church again, an artists studio, and then a theatre. A photo exists (figure 1) from 1947 of an audience watching one of the plays and in it one can see the interior is decorated by fleur-de-lis and one can also make out one of the two wooden carved angels that adorned the side panels. From the very first season, Paris knew it was in for something new, an experience of theatre that wrenched you from your seat, that scared you out of your wits, offended your wife and turned your stomach. One offering from the first two seasons shows a general direction, the play is called Lui! (Jack) authored by Metenier. In it two prostitutes are reading the *Petit Parisien* and commenting on the story of a fellow prostitute murdered and mutilated horribly by a customer. Eventually a knock comes at the door—a new customer, Jack (of course everyone knows he's the killer—now it's just a question of time and method, the emotional roller coaster starts to climb the hill). The younger of the two prostitutes takes Jack into her boudoir—he pays for champagne, sleeps a bit, she finds the proceeds from his previous murder as she shakes down his pants— and just as homicide draws near the police close in and arrest him. A close call, not overly thrilling, nor particularly erotic—but a nice start.

After two years Metenier handed control of the theatre over to Max Maurey, who after familiarizing himself with Montmartre and its artists turned immediately to stamping the theatre as The Theatre of Fear. He was a master at playing on the public's impressions of the theatre and the hiring of the house doctor was done with much publicity and it figured in many of the early reviews. A cartoon from the era shows a doctor examining patrons before entry to ensure that they have a sufficiently stout constitution to withstand the horrors inside. Maurey loved the cartoon so much it was included in early publicity and playbill material. Metenier also introduced Maurey to Andre de Lord who for the next two decades would become the writer par excellence of the Grand-Guignol style. In virtually all GG revivals at least one, and occasionally several, of his plays are included. De Lord would always maintain a tone of naturalism in his works, and as the plays became more bloody and horror filled he sought out help in looking into the souls and psyche of the insane and the criminal; as an example, one of his collaborators was the psychologist and Director of the Laboratory of Physiological Psychology at the Sorbonne, Alfred Binet, the developer of the Binet Intelligence test (and De Lord's psychotherapist). A fact I find incredible, like having Jung on the set of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre to rework dialogue. A final example of this commitment to naturalism is the content of the plays, which avoid all supernatural causation; no werewolves or vampires at the GG. Rather what makes the plays so immediate is that much of the content is so damned possible; like being bitten by a rabid dog, or suffering a terrible vengeance by the hand of a jealous, crazed lover. Maurey also paid close attention to the unique stage tricks required to pull off a GG play. In this he was assisted by Paul Ratineau, effectively the theatre's stage manager, and a master of making the grisly happen (cheaply and effectively) on stage. The stage gags and tricks associated with GG are legendary and are written about by theatre professionals to this day. It is said that Ratineau and those managers who came later had perfected at least 9 different types of stage blood. Note that each type was for different kinds of

wounds, or effects, some flowed, some stuck to the skin, another type squirted. The most popular blood at the GG actually coagulated after application—it is known that this type required heating just prior to use and “scabbed” as it cooled. A neat fact understood by return patrons of the GG who when they heard whispered from backstage—“Edmond quick! Warm the blood!” knew that things were going to get intense—and soon. One other gag that was uniquely Guignol was the eyeball gouged from the socket. For this trick Ratineau used sheep eyes purchased from local butchers, they were drained of fluid and anchovies dyed red were placed (sewn? stapled?) inside. At the Grand-Guignol the stage eyeballs bounced when gouged and squirted horrifically when stomped on. Add to this the knives with retractable blades, scissors that squirted blood, artificial limbs hacked off and you have an idea of what the audience so feared, and had paid to see. Recall also that these stage tricks were being done within feet of the first row in the audience, and there were neither retakes nor do-overs—an eye gouge had to work for every performance, perfectly. Ratineau put his skills to making all these stage tricks effective and after his leaving the theatre several other masters of the trade stepped in and developed upon his promising start. The theatre and its troupe hit the big time, throughout the first decade of the twentieth century and right up to the start of the First World War. The Grand-Guignol became one of three theatre experiences on every tourists list for Paris, the other two being the Comedie Francaise, and the Folies Bergeres. This period, written about ably by Zerzan in his *Elements of Refusal*, was one of economic expansion, solidarity and working class agitation. The ancien regime in France and elsewhere cracked and split under the twin pressures of seething cultural and economic forces, the Third Republic showed increasing strain and even the election of Georges Clemenceau (an odd equivalent to Obama in many ways) from 1906 to 1909 could only slow the increasing rot at the core of the French state by offering a mild appeal to proletarian support. The Theatre thrived in this era and also defined itself against other theatrical experiences and even in some respects in contradiction to its own naturalist roots. The plays launched in this era include some of the tried and true guingoliere classics, like *The Light Housekeepers* 1905 (Autier and Cloquemin), *The Final Torture* 1905 (DeLorde and Morel), and *The Final Kiss* 1912 (Maurice Level)—more on the plays later. One thing all observers agree upon is that the theatre fit into the neighborhood, an area of commercial sex work, cocaine sniffing, hash smoking, opium eating, absinthe quaffing artists and déclassé intellectuals, and of workers just beginning to feel their strength after the long interlude of somnambulism between the Commune and the reorganization of the Left via the Dreyfus Affair. Within a year of the beginning of the First World War, Maurey had sold the theatre to Camille Choisy and a silent partner Charles Zibell. No explanation was ever given for the change, but the bloodletting in the trenches is said to have sickened Maurey and his early retirement may have been a general withdrawal from the world. He may also have felt that a Theatre of Horrors, after the global slaughter of millions may become redundant, or worse, boring for future audiences. Choisy had spent most of his life in the theatre performing in second-rate melodramas, though it was soon obvious that he was uniquely suited to administer the second decade of the Grand Guignol. Of all his achievements perhaps the most singular is to have established a “star system” for his genre. He was responsible for the retention and marketing of L. Paulais and Paula Maxa (figure 2), the two actors whose names are most associated with haute Guignol. The two originated many of the various roles most associated with the theatre, and Maxa’s autobiography contains an insiders perspective of the theatre during its apex of popularity. Of the two very little is known of their actual stage presence or acting styles, though much is made of the tortures they either perpetrated or endured on stage. It is said that Maxa,” was the

most assassinated woman in Europe”, and that she had died 10,000 times in 60 different ways, and had been raped 3,000 times. Yes, raped—sexual violence featured prominently in the GG tradition and we will examine it later.

One of Choisy’s many innovations for GG was to move the acting into a far more plastic and changeable paradigm. Thus at the beginning of a horror play the acting may lean to the extremely natural, an almost lackadaisical acting style, but by the end as the horrors are unfolded and the blood flowed the actors had adopted an overtly emotional style characterized by sweeping hand/arm/shoulder movements, exaggerated postures and wild facial contortions. In general, critics seem to regard this as a part of the theatres change and growth—in the same way that German Expressionism would have its effect on the GG. The *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was produced in 1925, based loosely on the 1919 German film and authored, once again, by André de Lorde and a collaborator, Henri Bauche. Rather there seems an interest on the part of the GG troupe to maintain the naturalist theatre method within the fact that what is happening in the plot is something other than the Natural, as in being blinded by two old women in a lunatic asylum, self-diagnosed with rabies, and so on. The emotional and physical response in the natural world to such an event would also be exaggerated, off—turn around on a roller coaster and observe the faces and bodies of the passengers behind you. What seems more likely is that this theatre of naturalism was experimenting with ways to bring the responses to horror into a relatively natural, at least explicable, acting paradigm. What resulted may have looked melodramatic—but it wasn’t.

Choisy runs the theatre through 1928; his partner Zibell, facing bankruptcy, sold his share to Jack Jouvin in 1926. Jouvin and Choisy stayed together for two acrimonious—though productive years. Choisy left thereafter and Jouvin fearing that the success of Maxa could ruin the theatre let her go in the same year. Both Choisy and Maxa found other work in the then thriving market of small theatres in Montmartre and over the years Maxa would return for revivals and occasionally to work on new roles. Though it was said by the mid-1930s that her voice had suffered so much from her trademark bloodcurdling scream that her skills were a mere shadow of her previous over-the-top victimhood. Jouvin assumes control during a particularly difficult time for the theatre, crowds were thinning and the notoriety, while still there, was no longer a palpable, unavoidable presence. While not abandoning De Lord completely (he stages a De Lord play every year during his stewardship) he effectively removed the playwright as the literary force behind the theatre. Jouvin began substituting plays where physical violence was replaced with psychological and sexual menace. Jouvin himself wrote a majority of the dramas during this period, and for all his hard work the theatre maintained its slow, barely perceptible decline. By 1938 it was over for Jouvin and the theatre was purchased by Eva Berkson, an Englishwoman who staged comedies until the Nazi occupation forced her to flee to England. Almost everyone believed that because of the Nazi presence the theatre would be closed until the liberation—Choisy, perhaps reading the Germans better than most of the French, knew that those zany, bloodthirsty Nazis would just love a good Theatre of Fear, so he, Maxa, and a few members of the old cast and crew reopened the theatre, and staged performances steeped in de Lord and Metenier revivals. The Nazis were exactly what Choisy thought they were and proved just as receptive an audience as the Parisians. In fact, Hermann Goering attended at least one, and probably several, performances and though the genre was not wildly popular—it was acceptable for the Nazi occupiers and censors and far enough from Vichy for the French Right (always an ominous presence) to pay little attention. So Choisy and crew had a grand run until 1944. Even the Allies proved susceptible,

and George “Blood and Guts” Patton among others attended the theatre after the Liberation. Eva Berkson returned from England to reclaim her theatre in 1946, and there began the final downward slide—even the rehire of Paul Ratineau as director for the ‘46 and ‘47 seasons did nothing to halt the decline. The name Grand-Guignol had become something of a curse, or a theatrical albatross. The mood, post World War II, was very different than after the First World War when the theatre had passed through its apex of popularity and growth. Audiences seemed less—not more jaded—as if a trip to the GG was like visiting a cynical and senile uncle—a downer. Part of this is clearly the infection of American culture into Western Europe; the gee-whillikeristic worldview of the US troops and the assorted bureaucratic and ruling class flotsam sent to “revive” the Allied Countries via the Marshall Plan slowly became a raging cancer of anti-intellectualism, Christian moral sentiment, and Juicy Fruit Gum—and some of the most obvious victims of this infection was the GG, political and economic contestation, and any decent scholarship from the Europeans for decades. America’s Greatest Generation?—compared to what, primordial slime? I am reminded that Jacques Lacan began his seminars in 1951, and from the beginning the leering tri-circular face of Mickey Mouse seems an apropos symbol for his much hailed return to Freud and those final years of his in Orange County—just minutes from Disneyland. So by 1962 the theatre was finally closed—the last few years characterized by multiple owners—including Max Maurey’s sons at one time—and countless vain attempts to recapture the attention and imagination of Paris—suffice it to say Paris had been stripped of both as a result of the triumph of global capital. The last performances were in November of 1962 and on January 5, 1963 all scenery and props were offered at public auction. Grand-Guignol was no more—sort of.

## **The Total Theatre Experience**

One of the keys to the success of the Grand Guignol, over and above its obvious attraction as The Theatre of Fear, is its cobbling together of a total and totalizing experience. From the movement through the urban space to the impasse Chaptal, to the design of the theatre and stage right through to the restraints and torture/death visited upon the victim—all elements created an increasing paranoia, a boxing-in without escape, claustrophobia leading ultimately to a catharsis of almost sexual intensity. A few contemporary reviews of Grand-Guignol begin not with the lowering of the house lights; but with the walk from the Pigalle Metro station to the theatre. As an example, a review from the 1940’s;

“ Leaving the Metro at Pigalle, you had to walk down the Rue Pigalle between the ranks of fishnet stockings and cigarette smoke, in the light of the neon signs and the sound of music that emanated from the clubs lining both sides of the street. At the crossroads you took a right turn down the rue Chaptal. The contrast was alarming; darkness and silence, a sad street, curiously barely lit, without any shops, deserted. You could hear the sound of your own footsteps on the pavement. Three hundred metres further along, suddenly emerging on your right, the cite Chaptal, a narrow dead-end alley... culminating in the barely lit façade of the theatre.”

See also Figure 3 a view of the impasse Chaptal in daylight—note the narrowness of the alley, the termination of street into theatre. This narrowing or squeezing of perspective and space, with its accompanying restriction of movement continues upon entering the theatre. The layout of seating was designed such that most audience members, save the ones in the boxes at the rear or the balcony, were only a few feet from the stage (see Figure 1). Then as we are squeezed

into smaller and smaller spaces there is the stage of 20 feet by 20 feet, a cramped dark space lit (usually) with only splashes of light here and there to facilitate both the stage tricks, and also the sense of dread and closeness, an escape-proof nightmare. Finally there is the play itself, which telescopes not only space but time. As the horror approaches, time bends—moves alternately fast and slow, inexorably carrying audience and players forward to the finale with its spurting blood and bouncing eyeballs. At the level of space note that most of the plays include some type of restraint as the torturer or assassin does his work. In figure 4, from *Crime in a Mad House*, two old insane women gouge out the eyes of a pretty new inmate from jealousy and to release the mockingbird they believe is imprisoned in her head. Note the precision of the movement, the grasping of both hands by one of the old women while the other hag does her grim work. Such restraint is critical to the success of the theatre pieces, and it takes many forms—in *Au Telephone* (1925 and you guessed it—DeLord again, and a collaborator Foley) restraint is a function of distance, the businessman Andre away in Paris to complete some transaction listens helplessly on the phone as his family is slaughtered by “tramps” at their vacation home. Here the explicit inability to intervene—to stop the action and justly capture and punish the murderers is palpable. Andre is reduced to a spectator—another member of the audience as it were—experiencing just as the audience experiences—the horrible scene playing out on the telephone. In Figure 5 we see how this telescoping effect can be rendered graphically, thus as one approaches the theatre the squeezing and narrowness, the claustrophobia and dread expanding in direct relation to the loss of movement, the helplessness of total restraint. The final piece of this movement is then the staged instrument of restraint itself, the hands of the insane old woman, the listening piece of the phone, the hand-cuff, the anesthetic, or the French Consulate in Peking hemmed in by Boxer Rebels—terminating in the denouement, the bloody and final scenario; Grand-Guignol’s money shot. And the audience, as much as the restrained player on the stage, is helpless to intervene, to stop or slow the action, the feeling of being out of control, of falling into horror without benefit of either crash mat or helmet.

One of the consequences of this squeezing inward is that the audience is effectively pushed onto the proscenium stage, simultaneously bringing the actors down into the audience, ultimately blurring the line between spectator and player. Paul Ratineau’s sound design further facilitates this blur. He became a master of using minimal sound effects to great advantage, as in the explosions and far off sounds of struggle associated with *The Ultimate Torture*, a drama which takes place during the Boxer Rebellion in a French Consulate. The rebels movement closer and closer to the consulate is evidenced both by script and sound, and again the space becomes rapidly smaller as this occurs. Ratineau found that he could also use sound effects from the rear of the theatre and these, while utilized sparingly, had the effect of tearing down the fourth wall completely and turning the audience into one of the players, a character mostly silent and observant, but acknowledged and occasionally vocal. This tearing down of the Fourth Wall is also evidenced by the occasional comment from the stage to various audience members. Bernard Charlan, an actor, was to recall that during one performance he was distracted repeatedly by a couple in one of the booths who were engaged in some very heavy petting causing him to shout out from the stage, “You enjoy yourselves in there!” The audience also had something to say and as the theatre and its repertoire became increasingly familiar, a group of devotees sprang up called the *guignoleurs*. This amorphous group knew all the plays, actors, and probably some of the longer monologues, were notorious for shouting out “Assassine!” at the antagonist, and could recite the number of faintings that had accompanied any given play. Hand and Wilson note that players



and management alike, while not encouraging it, tolerated such heckling. Another consideration is the suspension of disbelief, the real goal of many dramatists is the individual psychological response where what is happening on stage is taken not as art, or representation, but as fact—the Real. In one sense the number of faintings may be a base count to the number of persons who had suspended disbelief; as the authors above note, the suspension of disbelief was often followed by the involuntary suspension of consciousness. There is a video on youtube illustrating an audience morphing into performer (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehqppDekEgA>), it is of one of the Vienna Philharmonics New Years Day concerts which always conclude with the Blue Danube, and the Radetzky March. During the playing of the March the audience traditionally claps during the martial reprise. In this video, the audience has lost their motivation and the conductor Carlos Klieber turns slightly to the audience and waves his baton twice, as if to say, we are playing here—where are the hand claps required by this piece? The audience in response dutifully begins keeping time again. Finally there is a single piece of video available of a play from the Grand-Guignol (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dN06iALMTk>), from the Italian shockumentary Ecco. The stage production presented is unclear, but appears to be a telling of a Bluebeard or Svengali type story, with an innocent and pretty young redhead as victim. In the piece one sees the Svengali character lure the woman to lie down, hypnotizing her, he then looks out into the audience—for two full beats—before returning to his victim and making a small incision on the arm closest to the audience. The victim rises slightly and screams, the Svengali character again re-hypnotizes the girl, reaches off-stage for a hacksaw— faces the audience a second time for two full beats—then proceeds to cut the arm off which also includes one final look into the audience. The effect of the glances at the audience are to bring us onto the stage, to make us feel a part of the action—and our identification is not with the victim and her impending doom, rather we are enticed onto the stage by the madman and in our joining the scene we become his silent accomplice.

## **The Play is the Thing**

And what of content? What actually is in these plays? What would an evening at the Grand Guignol be like?

Working in reverse order, an average playbill at the Grand Guignol would encompass between 4 and 6 twenty-minute plays; mostly one acts, with an occasional longer offering. These then were staggered between a horror/drama/hallucination and a sex comedy. This mixture, dubbed “the hot and cold shower” was intended to wind the audience in knots—from the tingly anticipation of where the climax of the play may lead to raucous laughter grounded in a lightly erotic comedy. The application of emotional stress and anticipation relieved by the tonic of erotic play, a very Hitchcockian mix. And like Hitchcock, the Guignol troupe were cognizant of just where and when to raise the ante on horror for maximum emotional effect, and on eroticism, for the maximum of relief and détente thereafter. This formula, hot and cold, laughter and tension, was repeated at least twice, and sometimes three times, the finale of the last horror play (the end of the evening’s performance) was always saved for the most disorienting, nasty piece of torture/death the troupe could produce. Thereafter, a few curtain calls, wild applause and the audience leaves, glancing on occasion over the shoulder to make sure that none of the horrors from the theatre are following them home.

The plays themselves are difficult to render judgment on, primarily for the fact that so few have been translated into English. In all I count a total of 16 plays, out of several hundred, that are currently available to an English speaking audience, or theorist and while many are considered “representative,” it is doubtful that any such judgment could possibly be defended; our position is comparable to the man who has fallen from the terrace of the Empire State Building who was heard to remark while passing the 37th floor, “So far, so good.” An accurate assessment at the time, but more data will reverse the judgment. So let’s look at a few plays...

The *Ultimate Torture* cited above deals with a handful of colonials trapped in the French Consulate presumably in Peking during the Boxer Rebellion. The political content is almost pure Gallic xenophobia, the classic Western European “yellow peril” scenario. Assorted soldiers, volunteers and the consul D’Hemelin make up the visible contingent in the drama, behind a door are the women and children, including Denise—D’Hemelin’s daughter. As the Boxers draw closer D’Hemelin lets on that he will kill his daughter rather than allowing her to be raped and tortured by rebels. Bornin—a Russian who had earlier tried to get through the Boxer lines to safety returns with his hands cut off, he describes the tortures that await those who fall into the Boxers hands, fingernails pulled out, eyes gouged, decapitation; and then he dies. D’Hemelin brings his daughter out from the off-stage room, begs her forgiveness and shoots her in the heart. As the battle sounds grow louder, the inmates of the consulate realize that it is the forces of the Western powers fighting to get through to those trapped in the embassies and consulates. D’Hemelin realizes his terrible mistake and slips into inconsolable guilt and then insanity—the ultimate torture.

The *Final Kiss* (Maurice Level, 1912) is classic revenge Guignol, and probably the best-known and most re-worked piece of drama from the theatre. Henri’s ex-fiancée Jeanne in a jealous rage threw a bottle of vitriol (sulfuric acid) on Henri’s face disfiguring him grotesquely. He testifies for her in court and after serving a short six-month sentence she is released. He writes a letter to her begging her to come and visit him. She does, they both taunt and flirt with each other and finally Henri secures her in his arms, opens a bottle of vitriol and dumps it on her face. She falls screaming in agony and Henri pronounces himself revenged and says that they are both now alike—the perfect couple (Figure 6), his last words in the play are “Like me! Like me!” as he removes his bandages so the audience can get a good look at the too gruesome couple. Again, a very interesting piece for many reasons, note that his line comparing the two as the same is very true. She now resembles him physically and he has disfigured himself by the act of vengeance, which in turn now resembles her own tortured inner-self. This play was re-interpreted in the comics, one could say almost lovingly, by Al Feldstein and William M. Gaines, with drawings by Jack Kamen in the EC comic, *The Haunt of Fear*, Issue 11, January 1952. The title of the graphic interpretation—*The Acid Test*. Finally the Kids in the Hall filmed their take on the play and it may be the best adaptation so far, a recommended guilty pleasure (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QlBFpfShJc&feature=related>).

The *Lighthouse Keepers* (Paul Autier and Paul Cloquemin, 1905); Father and son are lighthouse keepers on their first day of a full month, no-outside-contact stint at a remote island lighthouse. As the play progresses the son begins to develop many of the symptoms of rabies, which is bad because a dog bit him before they left. Finally the father kills the son before he becomes a raging hydrophobe. The horror is that father must now spend a full month in close quarters with the decomposing corpse of his son before the relief boat returns.

The *Torture Garden* (Pierre Chaine and Andre de Lord, 1922; from the novel by Octave Mirbeau). Mirbeau was an anarchist who among other things was identified with the extreme journal

The Social War, and any number of anti-democratic publications. The novel *The Torture Garden* while a bit decadent, also has a glimmer of anarchist thought which makes it into the drama. The play is based on the final section of the novel, which tells the journey of a minor French diplomat Jean Marchal through Asia. He encounters and becomes enamored of Clara, who may or may not be a secret agent, but who is definitely the far side of wild—a sexual adventurer and sadist. In the play Marchal kills Li-tong a servant of the mandarin Han, and one of Clara's many lovers. Marchal and Clara visit the Torture Garden (off stage) where numerous ingenious tortures are interspersed with elaborate floral displays, and in the penultimate scene a woman is tortured by flaying while Clara, observing the torture, has a toe-curling orgasm and faints. Finally, the secret anti-mandarin, and perhaps socialist/anarchist Red Dragon Society, which includes the woman previously being flayed, take Marchal and Clara prisoner. Marchal is lead to safety; having killed Li-Tong he is a hero of the Red Dragons. Clara, having been unveiled as an agent of Han is then subjected to the Hot Needle Torture as the curtain descends.

## Some Musings

First, it must be said that I can find no discussion of the Grand-Guignol anywhere by any theorist of note—which is odd, given where it was and when it was—not even the avant-garde—Dada, Surrealist axis had much to say. The same with the politicals, Sartre, Deleuze, the Situationists are stonily silent on the Grand-Guignol, which is a real clue that somewhere in there something interesting is hiding. There are two very different ways that critical theorists interact with horror as a cultural artifact. First, it is irretrievably reactionary, as individuals trying to break outside of bourgeois morality are slaughtered and tortured to drive them back into the arms of Capital and society—think early slasher cinema where hormone-redolent teens have sex and then endure decapitation by masked maniacs. Then there is the other side—Emma Goldman started this critical engine, where each of the tortures shown is merely a reflection of the brutalization rampant in society and hence horror is a mirror held up to the fanged and drooling visage of Capital. Guignol falls outside both of these though. First, while revenge is a part of many of the dramas, there are a significant number that are utterly amoral—Good does not triumph, Evil has its way, and that's just how it is. And in the revenge pieces there is a certain symmetry to the vengeance, hence the acid scarred face of Jeanne pays back Henri's disfigurement, or Clara's death by torture avenges her sadistic fantasies made real. No one returns to the bosom of society, unlike the heroines in the slasher films who, while injured, live to fight on in the sequel. There seems to be little in the plays that even imply that they are to be taken as examples of the brutalization of Capital, Clara who may be bourgeois, hangs out in the roughest bars in Asia, loves torture, and has a Chinese lover; hardly an identifiable ruling class villainess. Additionally there is not a single play I could find that included a maiming or death by a machine, or as a result of greed—which would have made an obvious statement about the dehumanization of society. So classic critical theory as applied to horror seems worthless when discussing what went down at the Theatre du Grand-Guignol. But what is relevant? First I believe is the incredible competence of the pieces as written, and as played. GG was a writer's theater—the written and spoken word, plot and nuance brought each play to a unique level of craftsmanship and consistency. There is a coherence to the classic Guignol plays that one rarely encounters in other theater ensembles, or even within the oeuvre of any given playwright. This expertise is matched by the actors, who play day in and day out

some very difficult pieces which span the range from light sex farce to grim blood streaked hallucination daily, twice daily for matinees. Finally the stage manager and effects crews provide an example of excellence and experimentation in order to make the unreal real. And where does all this theatrical competence lead to? To making the audience believe that what is happening on stage—is happening. This mystique still obtains decades after the last curtain call, as I was preparing this essay a friend asked about any accidents during performances where actors might have been harmed. And that question asked in 2012 really is the crux of the thing, when you have so successfully abolished disbelief, and in this case instilled foreboding, then you have achieved the artistic goal, the *raison d'être* for the whole endeavor; there is to this day a haunted fear that at the Guignol victims really were dismembered and flayed and had acid dumped on their faces. Odd that anarchism has a similar effect, where long past the heyday of Haymarket, and the IWW, and the Up Against the Wall Motherfucker chapter of SDS, that the word anarchy today produces a similar haunted political fear in the uninitiated. In the case of anarchism, however, the real glue that sticks it to the popular conscious is made up of either the dread of a lawless, stateless society (chaos?), or the example of anarchists as being nothing if not committed, principled, and relentless political opponents capable of just about anything. Horkheimer mentions just such a mechanism in *The Eclipse of Reason* when he illustrates how the dominant culture, in order to limit dialogue to acceptable parameters, makes some words and concepts virtually unusable and as such, he continues, these words revert to their magic form becoming something feared, unmentionable—the darkness on the other side of the Real. And Capital and its media, in the final twist, portrays them as such in order to decisively relegate them to oblivion.

One difficulty when dealing with Grand-Guignol is the damned ambivalence of the whole experience, its utter lack of pretension and silence on larger historical or spiritual forces. There is an amorality to many of the plays which stretch the very meaning of the word. The very silence on all things social, political, and economic is thundering, particularly given the theatres geography, and background. It struck me then that perhaps this is not a measured, Gallic ambivalence (*schadenfreude*?) on the part of the writers, players, and management—perhaps this is a choice, a deliberate refusal to play the guessing game of politics and ideology. And if it is a choice, a stubborn refusal in light of all that's wrong with both left and right in France, then perhaps the Guignol was for several decades the post-left institution par excellence in Europe. Note here that this type of refusal, far from being a further sign of alienation and hence Capital's doing, moves beyond the Zizekian Ur-belief that all things ring when struck—with the chime of ideology. Rather, there are glaring examples of people, institutions, and events that move in a critical fashion beyond the confines of severe ideological constraint. Does this resonate then, almost palpably, with the greater and greater narrowing of movement, perspective, and time noted in the Grand-Guignol total experience? Also it is necessary to dispel the one objection that such a choice could be motivated by an "art for art's sake" justification. This is possible, that the removal of the theatre and it's works beyond the realm of ideology may indicate the simple avarice of the owner who would rather count money than worry about theory—and this moves the theatre back into the realm of Capital, and hence ideology. The problem is that such a choice inherently also places the theatre squarely onto the false shifting battleground of left and right—and if that's the case where then is the play extolling the virtues of the proletariat...or the French army? They don't exist, and you can't have one (the non-choice of left—right) without the content to echo it (the patriotic or revolutionary play). So taking this refusal of politics, hence as a post-political statement, as fact for a moment what does the theatre provide to us as an example of a post-left

institution? First, as mentioned, the theatre was precociously meticulous in its craft, its survival was a function of its integrity; second, it was blind to class in its appeal, on any evening minor Magyar aristos sat next to absinthe besotted artists; third, the plays were written to be both intellectually and sensually communicative, whether you were disgusted by the blood (the irrational) or by the rapid, effective plotting (the rational), the emotive result was the same—fear; last, there was a coherence between the psychogeography of the city, the theatre, and the context, the fact that at the termination of the impasse Chaptal a theatre rose up out of the street, a theatre of fear, blood, and sperm such that none other could have taken its place at that time is testified to by history.

## **And the Now Question**

So what of now? Where are the cultural repercussions of the Grand-Guignol today? Before the answer, a disclaimer—yes, all horror films, horror stories written since 1920, and all other horror cultural artifacts have some small piece of Grand-Guignol in them, even the current middle-east war which looks more and more like a decades long snuff film than it does the real tragedy that we feel must be happening, has also had some guignolesque moments. However, there are only a select few pieces of culture that look and feel like the Guignol; as an example the 50s French film—Eyes Without A Face, especially the gruesome face-lift scene, and the death of Louise by scalpel. In yet another French film, *Les Diaboliques*, particularly the scene where the not-so-dead husband Delassale rises out of the bathtub and scares his ex, the not-so-widowed Christina, to death. I'll be hated for saying it, but Alice Cooper and his earlier permutation as necrophiliac, the stage antics with guillotine and babies, and his use of makeup are all very Guignolesque. The uber-zine *Answer Me!* presents some very apt Guignol moments particularly in the Rape and Suicide Issues. And speaking of rape, where does sexual violence fit in with all this. In the Guignol plays my understanding is that the victims were mostly nuns and virgins, thereby a dual stigma is attached to the violation. The act transgresses not only juridical law per se, it also violates moral, religious and traditional sexual codes, thereby increasing its impact twofold. The real question remains— was the GG misogynist, or was it purely misanthropic, such that when it came to women, men and sexual mores the greatest violation possible was chosen, at the artistic level, to portray. I have no answers for this question, but will state revulsion is revulsion regardless of what act is being presented, torture or rape. And revulsion, terror, and fear were the emotive destination of any Grand-Guignol drama. Finally the new film “God Bless America” directed by Bobcat Goldthwait has some purely Guignol moments and is recommended for your viewing pleasure. In one scene a victim is attempting to elude Frank and runs into a butcher knife held by Roxy, the teen protagonist. Roxy's face is sprayed by blood from the wound, and after the victim falls she raises her hands in an adolescent victory hand pump, like one sees at high school football games—brilliant.

So, there it is, the Grand Guignol with all its warts and wounds attached. Is there a place for such a theatre now? Probably, especially if attuned to the mess we find ourselves in, and not as some lame mirror held up to current social mores and economic privation. Rather as a theatre that pushes the false options of left/right, good/bad into the background, and brings center stage a language and content grounded in what will be necessary to destroy this whole mess, and to ensure it never, ever returns.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Paul Z. Simons  
Curtains Of Blood:  
A Peek Behind the Phenomena of the Grand-Guignol  
Spring 2013

Modern Slavery #2

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**