

Start's Stories



Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary

Scaring up frights on 'Apolloween' nights

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Editor's Note: New experiences are the sole purpose of Mary Stortstrom's new monthly feature, "Stort's Stories." Once a month, Mary will dive headfirst into the many unique experiences the region has to offer and write a first-person account. Her adventures will be featured in the Living section on the third Sunday of each month. Suggestions for activities and experiences to try are always welcome from readers and can be made to Mary at 304-725-6581; 304-263-8931, ext. 138; mstortstrom@journal-news.net or @mstortstromJN on Twitter.

MARTINSBURG — On Friday evening, Oct. 9, you could say I was a working stiff, doing my best to serve up screams from a prop body bag in the Apollo Civic Haunted Theatre morgue.

Though I attended college nearby at Shepherd University and have spent more than two years roving the Eastern Panhandle for work, I had never been to the Apollo Civic Theatre, so this was a completely new experience.

When I arrived at the theater, C.J. Stevens, the 2015 Apollo Civic Haunted Theatre director, explained the details of the event. Stevens said the Haunted Theatre has a different theme every year, and this year's theme is "Fright Flight," a fear-filled world tour featuring an airplane ride, a West Virginia graveyard — complete with the Mountain State's legendary Mothman — a Bermuda Triangle maze and an encounter with a werewolf of London.

While I didn't have a role anywhere nearly as exotic, I was on the third floor of the theater in the morgue, adjacent to the insane asylum.

EXTREME MAKEOVER

Before I could start scaring people, I had to get into makeup — not to look pretty, but to look gruesome.

Michael McGee, a makeup artist who has worked in theater, TV commercials and haunts and other Halloween events for 30 years, was the mad scientist behind my transformation.

"The first thing I ask everybody is, are you allergic to latex?" he said.

I said no.

"OK then. Do you need those glasses to see?"

I paused, hemming and hawing. I told him I could go without my glasses, but things would be blurry. In the dark, it wouldn't matter anyway.

As I sat down in the chair, McGee shook a bottle of white liquid and began applying it to my left cheek and forehead. It was liquid latex, he said, used for special effects makeup.

The latex was cold when it touched my skin, and smelled like ammonia. McGee explained that ammonia is used to suspend the latex in liquid form; hence the stench.



Journal photos by Ron Agnir

Top left, Mike McGee, right, transforms Mary Stortstrom into Bloody Mary during opening night at the Apollo Civic Haunted Theatre. Top right, the finished Bloody Mary transformation is shown. Bottom left, Bloody Mary, center, is shown with several of the other guys and ghouls. Bottom right, Bloody Mary does her best to frighten Matthew Werhoff, 22, of Martinsburg.

While the latex was drying, McGee used a variety of sponges, brushes and colored face paints to draw dark circles around my eyes and veins around the patch of latex on my cheek.

Then, he turned the paintbrush around and began scraping away bits of dried latex with the non-brush end. I was really curious as to what he was doing, but I also wanted to enjoy the surprise of the "big reveal" in full, hopefully not recognizing myself in the mirror when he finished.

McGee "packed" the scraped away spots in the latex with a fake blood mixture, which had the consistency and look of grape jelly when compared to the liquid prop blood.

"One of the great things about Halloween and haunts is not only are we able to live out our childhood fantasies and fears, but we're able to enjoy it simultaneously," he said while finishing up the gaping wound on my cheek.

As we talked to pass time during the makeup session, McGee told me that he's noticed a significant increase in the number of youth who want to break into the special effects makeup industry, inspired by horror films, TV shows like "The Walking Dead" and the reality series "Face Off."

A few younger makeup apprentices worked under McGee, often coming over to his work station and asking for more blood, a specific color of facepaint, or a brush or other tool.

At one point, McGee and his wife, Paulette, were doing double duty, packing my wounds with the blood jelly while the other applied eyeliner and prop blood. It felt sort of weird to be fussed over like that, but I knew they had to finish up before the doors to the Fright Flight opened.

I finally got to admire McGee's handiwork, but with very little time to spare. I was a bloody, gory mess — and it looked great. When the blood gel had dried, it really looked like a big, nasty scab had formed over an open wound.

PLACES, EVERYONE

Unfortunately, I couldn't admire myself for too long, as I was quickly ushered upstairs with the rest of the asylum frighteners.

I got into position in my body bag, feeling slightly uneasy at the macabre nature of what I was doing. I knew it wasn't real, but I couldn't help but feel the smallest twinge of guilt, like I was making fun of death itself.

With everybody in place, the first group of visitors began making their way through the Haunted Theatre.

"The first group is downstairs; they'll be up here in about six minutes," McGee called out in a stage whisper, letting the cast of ghouls and asylum patients know to get ready.

A spooky sound effects CD, with loud heartbeat sounds, slamming doors and ominous organ music began playing, setting the mood, just as the overhead lights were cut off.

I laid there in the body bag, staring up into the black light above me, suddenly wondering if I'd be up for the performance.

Would I be a convincing corpse? Would it be realistic enough when I popped up to scare passersby?

"Think dead," I told myself, as a grin formed across my eye shadow-blackened lips, smiling at how ridiculous the thought seemed, even in my own head.

I'm not sure if it was the sound effects, but I could feel my own heart beating, leaping out against my ribcage. I was very nervous, and I think I was more scared than the first group to go through the Haunted Theatre.

I could hear footsteps on the stairs, and heard the tour guide

leading the first group through the third floor.

Banshees screamed, asylum patients rattled the chain-link doors of their cells, screaming for help. The asylum "doctor," who I could only gather was more butcher than doctor from the screams I heard coming from the other side of the wall, chased visitors down to the morgue.

The loud noises and chaos going on around me made it difficult to concentrate. I wanted to open my eyes and see who was coming and what was going on. A few times, an unexpected slam of a door (a sound effect) made me jump.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

A nervous wreck, knots in my stomach, I put my "game face" on — meaning I laid in my body bag as still as I possibly could, eyes closed with no expression on my bloodied face. This was the moment of truth.

I heard footsteps and felt the vibrations on the wooden floor. People were approaching.

"Help! Please, get me out of here!" I pleaded, sitting up suddenly, clutching the metal handrail that stood between me and the tour group.

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