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Movie Macabre

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Bard College

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Movie Macabre

**Senior Project submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College**

by

Brigid Pfeifer

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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MY INSPIRATION

My relationship with horror is something that has changed over the years. My first experience with the genre came from competing in scarecrow contests in my hometown. Each fall, businesses, clubs, families and individuals would present their creations all over Main Street. The scarecrows would then be judged on a variety of factors ranging from construction to originality and creativity. It's also important to note that tourists and young children would frequent Main Street to see all of the scarecrows. I got most of my inspiration from Tim Burton movies. This is because his films blended elements of horror with comedy. One essay discussing his filmmaking style writes "If you watch films like *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, or *Corpse Bride*, it's quite clear that they were all directed by the same comically macabre individual, Tim Burton. Experiencing his brand of cinema is a lot like walking into an abandoned amusement park, or a haunted carnival, or a nightmarish circus—it's entertaining—and even endearing at times, but it's also extremely dark and deeply disturbing"¹. For these reasons, his films like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Corpse Bride* were among the only "horror" films I watched when I was younger. Yet they were still able to introduce me to the most well-known horror icons and tropes due to Burton's own inspiration from the tales of Frankenstein and Dracula as well as other famous monsters. I thought Tim Burton like characters were appropriate for a competition that focused on creating a community and bringing together families while also celebrating the holiday of Halloween all over town. I therefore often did

¹ V Renee, "Burtonesque: Breaking Down the Gothic Cinematic Style of Tim Burton", *No Film School*, September 26, 2016

either recreations of his characters or scarecrows that riffed off of other famous characters or celebrities with a Halloween twist. For example, Elton John became Skeleton John and Albert Einstein became FrankEinstein. By the time I reached high school though, I noticed that part of being a teenager included frequently watching horror movies with friends. Only these were real, legit horror movies. Not Tim Burton movies that often parody these kinds of films. My friends and classmates would love discussing films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Child's Play*, and *Pet Semetary*. They would also go to the movies almost every time a new horror movie came out. I was turned off by this idea though. When I thought of these movies, I thought of stories where people would move into a creepy house. They would go check a place like the attic and some creepy person would pop out and scare them and this would happen throughout the rest of the movie. However, this is almost solely based on my experience watching *The Grudge* for a science project in middle school. We had the study the increase in heart rate during the jump scares. My friends decided to have a viewing party and we were practically screaming the entire time. I tried my best not to look too scared in order not to look like a chicken or anything in front of them. But it honestly scared me for life for quite some time. My only other experience for a while was when I saw the trailers for such movies. As part of these trailers, I saw people screaming in the theater and covering their eyes. It did not look like an enjoyable experience whatsoever. However, I was eventually forced into looking more into these films. My high school started creating a haunted house for the general public beginning in my junior year and it became a collaborative effort to create all of the rooms and what would happen in each of them. While completing research as part of my effort, I stumbled across soundtracks to horror movies on YouTube. I quickly became fascinated by them and

even listened to a few songs on repeat. The soundtracks to *Child's Play*, *Halloween* and *The Exorcist* were my favorites. They're actually very similar to each other. In the opening songs to each film, the same tune keeps repeating. Yet it's as if you're getting closer and closer to terror each time. The terrifying sounds rise but it's not like something completely unexpected is going to happen. The music is symphonic. It actually feels relaxing and it's making the viewer comfortable and ready to enter the world of the film. Alongside horror films, hard rock and metal music were favorite music genres for some of my classmates. Being someone who was obsessed with their iPod, I eventually looked into these bands and they began to dominate my playlist. I soon discovered shock rock. My parents took me to see Alice Cooper perform one summer and I was instantly hooked. I started to see similar artists such as Marilyn Manson and Rob Zombie. The reason I bring this kind of music up is because the performances of them, especially in shock rock, work a lot like a horror movie. This specific genre of shock rock is called such because it emphasizes on shock value. The performances may include violent or provocative behavior from the artists, the use of attention-grabbing imagery such as costumes, masks, or face paint, or special effects such as fake blood. By the end of high school/beginning of college, I began frequently seeing horror films at the movie theater like others around my age. Around this time, remakes of classics became popular such as *Halloween* and *It*. At the same time, the era of Jordan Peele movies like *Get Out* and *Us* emerged. In 2018, *Hereditary* was released. It was received with much praise especially for Toni Collette's performance as a miniature artist being haunted by her mother. However, when film award nominations came out, Collette was noticeably absent from multiple of them including the Academy Awards. Ironically, many best of the decade and century so far lists have included her performance in

the film and not those of actresses who were nominated for the Oscar that year. Furthermore, many compared her performance to that of Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby* who also was snubbed from the film industry's highest honor. The next year in 2019, many hoped that Lupita Nyong'o would make the short list for her dual performance in *Us*. Alas, she was met with the same fate as Collette and Farrow. When I started looking up the relationship between the Academy Awards and horror films, I learned that fewer than two dozen actors have been nominated for horror roles. Fewer have won and even fewer horror films themselves have been nominated for Best Picture. The most recent horror film nominee was 2017's *Get Out*. Yet *Get Out* has also been noted for having strong commentary on racism and its relevance today. *The Silence of the Lambs*, the only horror film to ever win Best Picture has been compared to being more like a psychological thriller and/or crime drama with horror elements. Is the Academy saying that pure horror films merely meant for fun and thrill aren't worth their value? What's also interesting though is that the most recent controversies have to do with actresses. It made me wonder, is there also this prejudice at times for women specifically in horror roles? We are in the #MeToo era where we are currently fighting for the rights and equality of women especially in the film industry. Women are fighting to get the same salaries as their male co-stars and not be forced into the dreaded "casting couch" where directors try to take advantage of aspiring actresses in places like hotel rooms. Both the rights of women and an issue-free film industry have both been struggles to achieve for decades. Can they perhaps intertwine?

MY ACADEMIC INTERESTS

When I first came to Bard, I wanted to gain the tools needed to focus on creating social justice theater after I graduated. I wanted to do something for theater that would be

inspirational, pioneering and above all create change. Much of the genre of social justice theater is derived from Theater of the Oppressed. Created in the 1970s by Augusto Boal, it focuses on techniques to use theatre as means of social and political change. This ranges from open dialogues in theatrical activities to addressing spectators as being part of the show. During my moderation board, I was asked specifically what kind of social justice I wanted to focus on. I had always wanted to focus on a little bit of everything. But at that moment, I replied by saying that I was particularly interested in women's rights. It was something that I personally identified with and I could therefore bring my own experiences to the table. Looking back, I took a couple of courses at Bard that related to the topic: History of European Women 1500-1800, Reproductive Health and Human Rights and Gender Theater. More importantly though, I realized throughout time that I was drawn to stories that focused on women: *Little Women*, *Persepolis*, *Mona Lisa Smile*, *Room*. While each significantly different in name, all of these center on female characters living in what are considered to be oppressed societies. In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi is a young woman living in war torn Iran. Actress Brie Larson's character in *Room* is kidnapped and is forced to live in a small shed with her young son. Julia Roberts plays a college professor new to Wellesley in *Mona Lisa Smile* in a time where female college students are groomed to be young wives and matriarchs of their families rather than pursue further study after graduation. Yet despite these obstacles, all of these women use their ambition and intelligence to get the outcome that they want in the end. The character Jo March from *Little Women* even becomes a published author in a time when other female writers were looked down upon. A quality that all of these women have is empowerment: The power to control their own destinies. Ultimately, when I had to come up with the topic for my senior

project, I thought about what would make me the most intrigued. Something that didn't feel like a chore to complete. Horror instantly came to my mind. Yet, I also wanted to tell an important message about horror. Not necessarily something like *Get Out* where the horror story is empowered by an important topic such as racism though. Rather, I wanted the horror itself to empower my project. In this sense, I started thinking about how the issue of women's rights already existed in horror in its characters and tropes instead of a story where the social issues come to haunt the characters. I started thinking: how did each of the famous female characters in horror come to be? I knew there were those like the Bride of Frankenstein, Carrie White, young Reagan from *The Exorcist*. At the same time though, some of these characters are drastically different from each other and those that are similar were generally introduced to moviegoers around the same time as each other. Additionally, I knew of a few terms for horror film characters such as a Final Girl. What is a final girl though aside from the fact that she's the last surviving female character in horror movies? When I decided to conduct research on my ideas and thoughts, I discovered this fascinating timeline of women in horror films including their types of roles and trends for their characters that occur in multiple films. It was as if there were stock characters for women in horror and it would be fascinating to look more into the history of it.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

When I first proposed my Senior Project, I wanted to create a one woman show. I had this great vision of portraying a strong, commanding narrator. My inspiration came from shock rock performers like Alice Cooper who are able create horror film character-like personas and tell scary stories to the audience through their songs and stage aesthetics. Only this time

around, it would be more like an academic lecture instead of a concert and presented by a woman rather than the typical male narrator. I wanted to emphasize on the social justice theater aspect by giving this entertaining presentation of sorts about the history of women in horror and how they've been oppressed for so long in their films. Yet, their roles have grown over the years and with our creativity and fight for good, they can continue to do so. I had so many different ideas on how to present this lecture. Perhaps I would have my narrator morph into multiple characters in the vein of solo performance. Or, I would recreate iconic scenes from horror films from my point of view and present them as part of the show. However, I also had the idea to do practically everything. I wanted to write and direct but maybe get some technical assistance from someone else along the way. I've generally been an independent person and at Bard, I started workshopping and presenting solo projects in different classes and shows. When I proposed this idea to Jonathan Rosenberg though who was my advisor at the time, he wasn't very enthusiastic about the idea. He preferred that I would take on two out of three of the major roles (Directing, writing and acting) and find someone else to collaborate with. This was likely for the best. I needed someone to get a second opinion from. But more importantly, I needed to learn how to collaborate with others in the sense of Bard student run theater. My solo projects didn't always succeed. I tried doing a 24 Hour Theater Festival at Bard but learned that without at least one other person in command, its longevity could only go so far. It was my passion project but I needed people who were willing to put in just as much effort and/or interest. They would be able to help me reach out to even more people on campus and know good strategies for event organization that I likely wouldn't have even thought about beforehand. Most importantly, if they were a year or more below me or knew someone of a

lower class level who was interested, I would have someone to take over the festival after I graduated. I decided to find someone to direct the project. Directing to me was my biggest weakness. I'm introverted and find it difficult to command the room and interpret my ideas to create a vision for the stage. Luckily, I instantly thought of the perfect person for this project and contacted them right away.

WORKING WITH ANGELA

I picked Angela to be the director of my Senior Project because of her strengths in behind the scenes work in general that I noticed from previous projects. From assistant directing and stage managing to lighting and costume design, she could do it all. She would definitely be an asset in helping me envision the aesthetics of the show and come tech week. I also knew that she had a similar interest in horror. When I was a Sophomore, I was going to assist her in set designing *Reefer Madness*, a horror comedy musical. It had the same campiness as shock rock, parodies of horror films and characters similar to those that I wanted to explore in my project. Unfortunately, the project was ultimately canceled due to a lack of instrumentalists among other issues. Nevertheless, I thought it would be an opportunity for us to work on a similar project. She immediately agreed to be my director and we started meeting throughout the remainder of the spring semester to talk about my ideas. It was during these meetings that Angela brought up the characters Vampira and Elvira, Mistress of the Dark. Prior to my introduction to these characters by Angela, I had only recognized them by their images. They definitely gave off a style similar to the Bride of Frankenstein and even Morticia Adams, but I didn't know their purposes aside from appearing on posters and attempting to create creepy facial expressions and positions. It turns out that in the mid 1950s, a woman named

Maila Nurmi attended a costume ball held by a famous choreographer as Morticia Addams. Nurmi won the costume contest that took place at the party and caught the attention of a producer who ultimately helped her create her Vampira persona. From 1954 to 1955, a Los Angeles television studio aired *The Vampira Show*. As part of the show, Vampira would introduce film goers to a B grade horror movie that she would constantly interrupt so she could torment her advertiser, drink from her poison bar, etc. Despite only airing in Los Angeles, the series developed a cult classic following and similar shows soon followed. In 1981, after the death of Sinister Seymour, producers decided to hire a female host as a replacement. This resulted in *Elvira's Movie Macabre*. In this show, the hostess is now revealing more cleavage and constantly makes jokes about the movies. This time, the show had a wider release resulting in several spin offs and lucrative items of merchandise. In an interview, Cassandra Peterson, the actress who plays Elvira stated "I figured out that Elvira is me when I was a teenager. She's a spastic girl. I just say what I feel and people seem to enjoy it"². I thought such characters had the perfect persona for my narrator character. The profession of horror movie hostess blended well with my idea of presenting a lecture to the audience while still in the vein of a shock rock concert. These hostesses had a sense of humor and played with different tactics to get the audience engaged while still getting to the point about the films they were mocking and why. Eventually though, we realized that this play would be better off having multiple actors in it. I kept bringing up how I wanted to portray the different characters that the narrator would explain to the audience. But considering my interest with the talk show format from Vampira's and Elvira's shows, we agreed that it would be clearer to have different people in those roles as

² "Elvira, Mistress of the Dark and Movie Macabre Hostess, Then and Now", Groovy History, July 16, 2019

if they were the actors in the horror movies that Vampira and Elvira would make fun of as part of their shows.

THE SCRIPT

Towards the end of the spring semester, I started working on the script. Angela and I planned to put on the play in the fall semester in a place like the Old Gym. We knew it was going to be easier to get a performance space that semester and it would go well with the horror theme if we got to go up around Autumn and/or Halloween time. When I first proposed the script to Chiori Miyagawa who became my senior project advisor, I immediately took advantage of the talk show style from Vampira/Elvira's shows. In fact, a lot of the play in this stage took elements, if not most of them, from these shows. I practically included every recurring gag from their shows ranging from having a pet spider and and their iconic quotes to playfully teasing crew members and talking to ghosts. I had the narrator character show "clips" to the audience from movies such as *Scream* as well as montages of different scenes of women from horror films in order to prove her point. Aside from interacting with the audience as well as crew members of her "talk show", she interview a couple of famous directors of horror films. The first interviewee was Wes Craven, the iconic director of movies such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Scream*. Most notably in his work, he mixed horror cliches with humor and satire. As a result, he played a major role in changing the direction of roles for women in horror films. Something that stuck out to me when looking him up was how he originally had women be the victims in his films. Then after his daughter watched one of these films, she told him "Dad, girls don't always fall down"³ It's interesting that a strong female influence in his life was the one

³ Andi Zeisler, "The King of Horror's Secret Feminism", *The Cut*, September 3, 2015

who pushed him towards this innovative idea and I included it in his interview with Vampirella as a driving force for his industry changing work. The second interviewee was Anna Biller. Angela brought her up in our meetings as she was a huge fan of a recent horror film of hers called *The Love Witch*, a movie similar to those such as *Jennifer's Body*. In *The Love Witch*, the main female protagonist is a modern day witch who uses spells and other kinds of magic in order to get men to fall in love with her though they come with disastrous results. There are several obstacles in her relationships often because of the men starting to show foolish behavior after beginning affairs with the protagonist. Anna Biller in particular creates films that explore the female gaze in cinema. This is a feminist film theoretical term that represents the gaze of the female viewer and often times the female characters and female creator of the film. I therefore thought of it as essential to discuss her work and these new tools that she brings to horror films. Eventually, I kept getting the same constructive criticism. I was explaining too much and not having scenes be interpretive. I was also trying to put TV and cinema on stage which would ultimately do more harm than good. The audience was going to focus on their media and technological aspects instead of what was happening on stage which is supposed to primarily drive the story instead of aesthetic extras. I honestly wasn't sure how to fix these issues at first but then I was told that the main character, even if they were narrating the story, had to go on a journey and learn something. This ultimately became the premise for the play. My Vampira/Elvira character, now known as Vampirella, would host her B-Grade horror movie show (which would be performed onstage by the actors instead of showing prerecorded scenes) as usual but then grow dissatisfied with the films she was discussing. In her opinion, the films are silly and poorly constructed and as a hostess she is tired of being nothing but eye

candy who would crack jokes every now and then. After being instructed to find the show she would like to present, she is taken away in a dream like sequence. This would feature three different scenes exploring three types of stock characters for women in horror that I had looked into at the very beginning of my project: The Weak Victim, The Final Girl and The Empowered, Sexual Girl. Instead of these being “clips”, Vampirella would interact with them as she tries to change the scenes for her own benefit. For example, if Vampirella noticed the weak victim doing nothing but fainting, she would encourage the girl to be more brave and confront the villain to see what would happen. Now, I also chose these three specific scenes to show because as recommended by Chiori, they resonated with my own journey in horror that changed over time as well. These were the scenes in particular: *The Phantom of the Opera*. This is my all time favorite Broadway musical. I knew about the show from a young age. Even though my primary horror experience came from Tim Burton movies at that time, I learned about this musical soon after I first started getting involved in theatre and would start learning about different musicals in my elementary school music class. I even created a scarecrow of the Phantom for my hometown’s scarecrow contest. This is another horror themed piece of entertainment that had the horror act as fascination for characters like the young opera singer Christine Daae as well as audience members rather than the Phantom constantly jumping out and scaring viewers with his face. The musical is able to have the viewers root for and sympathize with the Phantom instead of being scared by his appearance and threats from the majority of the show’s characters. Over time, I learned about versions of the story prior to the 1988 Broadway musical including multiple horror films from the silent and golden age of cinema. This is likely because the first filmmakers who created horror films often got their

inspiration from books such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. *The Phantom of the Opera* actually originated as a 1909 French novel by Gaston Leroux. Additionally, one time in my Gender Theater class at Bard, we were discussing how the show is actually very misogynistic. When researching this more, I realized that *The Phantom of the Opera* also followed the Beauty and the Beast archetype of golden age horror films. Christine Daae perfectly matches the young and beautiful innocent victim who becomes the object of affection to the Phantom who easily takes on the role of the monster with his gruesome appearance covered up his mask. Next was a mash up of films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween*. These were the films that I discovered throughout high school due to interest from others around my age as well as revivals of such franchises. The releases of the original films correlated with the rise of shock rock in the 70s, 80s and 90s which frequently incorporated horror elements. These films also introduced audience members to the final girl archetype created by those such as Wes Craven. While she would still interact with already existing horror types such as creepy male killers and weak female first victims, she was the only one to survive the killer at the end of the movie. Yet, while the final girl was able to change the ultimate fates of many iconic female characters, she is still problematic. In my research, I noticed that many scholars pointed out that the final girl was usually a tomboy and completely avoided sexual activity in order to not become a victim like her friends who were dating guys such as jocks. *Scream* changed that by having the main female protagonist be the first non-virgin to survive the killer, but that film is primarily on satire on horror stereotypes rather than an original product. In addition, many films, especially in the early portion of the final girl phase, usually had the female characters receive a more gruesome death than male characters would. This would usually be presented

by having the female naked or in unflattering clothing soon after participating in a sexual activity. This would almost immediately be followed by them being murdered with blood and at times body parts being spurted everywhere. Finally, I had a scene from *Jennifer's Body*. Jennifer Check is probably the character that Vampirella can relate to the most and that is why the dream sequence concludes with this film. She's one of the more recent incarnations of a woman in horror. She can have fun, show off her style and engage in sexual and/or even villainous behavior without being completely shamed for it. Yet despite her at times villainous behavior such as with Jennifer killing several male classmates, the audience can still like a female villain in such films and sometimes even root for her. This is because *Jennifer's Body* is in the same vein as *The Love Witch* and other films that represent the female gaze as shown by filmmakers such as Anna Biller. While Jennifer seduces several of her male classmates, viewers are able to understand her intentions because they can see that the men are infatuated by her and take their interactions with her as an opportunity to take advantage of her body. In fact, it's shown that Jennifer first begins to possess her powers when a sacrifice and demonic exchange between her and Satan goes wrong. The sacrifice was intended for a virgin and because Jennifer isn't one, she becomes permanently possessed as punishment. When witnessing the abilities that Jennifer has despite the stakes against her, Vampirella finally realizes that she can be an agent of change and reinvents the show including the kinds of movies that she shows as well as her persona more to her own liking.

CASTING THE SHOW

I had my final version of the script completed in September and Angela and I held auditions soon after. We thought that this kind of show would generate a lot of interest due to

the popularity of horror and the movies referenced in the show but only a few people initially showed up. However, we did find people who could fit certain roles. First was Zoe Gonatas. Out of all of the auditionees for female identifying roles, she was the most willing to do anything we asked her to do while giving her adjustments. At the same time, she had a really good balance of appearing both innocent yet also empowering and demanding when she had to be. We cast her as Jennifer in *Jennifer's Body* as well as a female victim in the Final Girl mash up who is actually friends with the final girl yet still succumbs due to her lack of power and her sexual interest in her boyfriend. Next were Owa Hughes and Eamonn Welliver. Owa has natural comedic timing and made characters who one could easily hate such as the one dimensional jock and the fuck boy to be likable in a way that audience members could take the time understand their role in the story and why they think they can behave in an unacceptable way. We cast him as the female victims boyfriend in the Final Girl mash up and as the crude male high school student in *Jennifer's Body* who becomes Jennifer's next victim after an encounter in the library goes wrong. Eamonn meanwhile was very similar to Owa in terms of strong comedic timing yet also had a very strong presence in his audition that could easily appear as commanding on stage. We thought he would be a very good fit for the title character in the *Phantom of the Opera* scene as well as our Michael Myers from *Halloween* esque killer in the mash up. By the end of day two of auditions, we were still short at least two cast members. We thought we would have to recruit actors but the next day a few people came up to me and wondered if it wasn't too late to audition. From here we found our two remaining cast members: Sonita and Khadija. Sonita gave a presence when reading in the auditions that appeared to be terrified at what was going on around her and yet was able to convincingly tell a story with her emotions and body

language. At times, it was as if she was trying to fight off what was intimidating her and trying to find ways to not be scared. She was cast as Christine in the Phantom segment as well as the Final Girl. Last but certainly not least, Khadija ultimately became our Vampirella. She appeared to be very interested in the story that we were telling and asked many questions during her audition that would help her understand it more. This is very similar to Vampirella's quest. She may not understand her position or what's going on at first, but her natural passion for horror and curiosity leads her to get involved in the different movies in order to understand why everything is happening and to eventually find a meaningful show for herself. Although I was initially set to play Vampirella or at least appear in the play at some point, my final script had all of the actors onstage for most or the entirety of the show. As the playwright and someone who will be observing alongside Angela in the director's chair, I wasn't going to have a clear vision and thought process if I couldn't see the show from an audience perspective. This was completely fine though because although I've had experience in a variety of roles, I will say that I have been onstage for a majority of it and this would give me the opportunity to have a complete behind the scenes experience of developing a full length production. Additionally, everybody in the show (aside from Khadija) played a third role in the Vampirella talk show segment (Sonita, Zoe and Owa were B movie horror actors in similar roles that they have in the dream sequence while Eamonn played Vampirella's bossy director). Their presence in her talk show further presented the idea of this *Wizard of Oz* dream-like sequence if everybody appeared in Vampirella's reality as well as her fantasies.

PUTTING THE SHOW UP ON ITS FEET

When we first started the rehearsal process, we had two days per week dedicated to rehearsal. We initially thought it would be a good idea to have one day be focused on soft blocking so the cast could have an understanding of how the show was going to be completely mapped out prior to adding costumes and other technical elements. With people playing multiple characters and the scenes constantly changing, we wanted to make sure everybody had a clear idea of what was going on and what they had to do. The second day was going to be focused on character development. These characters are takes of famous horror characters and stock types and we wanted to have a strong focus on exercises that would help the actors understand them, especially if they weren't familiar with the characters and/or concepts beforehand. This would include creating character biographies in order to understand their characters views and beliefs as well as make these characters their own. For example, although Vampirella is based off of Vampira and Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, she is dissatisfied with her job and wants to make it more appropriate for a modern day audience. We also played several improv games that would not only focus on further character building such as differentiating each of their characters and putting materials from the character research into words, but also on creating a story and ensemble. The show had a particular narrative of Vampirella trying to understand what is going around around her regarding stories of horror and why. Everybody had to work together to bring it to life. There had to be reasons why Vampirella thought certain characters were acting silly through their behavior yet also times when characters said or did some thought provoking towards her. Some of it was already in the script but they had to be able to act out the scenes to further the intention. A lot of it was about personality, how they behave and act around other people, etc. In the end, it had to connect and be able to deliver

the message that we want to send out to audiences regarding the position of women in horror films. As we got closer and closer to the performances though, we realized the way we had organized rehearsals wasn't working. When the actors were focused on blocking, they weren't as focused on incorporating their characters personas and vice versa. We then combined a little bit of everything into each rehearsal. It definitely worked out for the better. For example, instead of having Angela tell everybody how to act, we asked them questions about their characters and/or did mini exercises to assist them while doing run throughs of the show. More incorporation of character development while blocking also meant there was less time to be nit picky and helped us focus more on the big picture. By the time we first did a run through for Chiori though, a few key elements were still missing. One of which was a lack of energy, Chiori then gave us an exercise to complete. We would sit in a circle and do a line through as quickly as possible but after each line, they had to say "Holy Fucking Shit!" At first, they forgot and we had to remind them but this sort of alertness helped them invest more into the story regarding what was going on at one exact moment and being able to bounce off of one another.

Something else that I was concerned about was the pacing. It's only a 25 minute show and sometimes actors weren't taking the necessary pauses to observe instead of going right into a line or action. So it was therefore about finding the balance to slow down during rehearsal which I believe was difficult at times due to the actors trying to memorize blocking and lines. Overall, the relationship between playwright and director was strong though. I did my best to give Angela free reign but there times where Angela was stumped on how to block part of a scene or how a character should deliver a line. That's when I gave my own suggestions. When we were both stumped, one of the actors had a strong idea or if we kept disagreeing, we put it

to the side and ultimately agreed to proceed with such scenes based on how outsiders may view them such as Chiori.

BRINGING IN THE CREW

Soon the time came to move into spaces such as Studio North and eventually the Old Gym and incorporate the remaining elements into the show that we wouldn't have been able to have without our hardworking crew. Among these people include Perry Zhang as our costume designer who went above and beyond in their job. Perry attended multiple rehearsals to see how the costumes they were designing could work with the actions as well as circumstances for the scenes such as the time period in regards to what would be considered in style, the personality of each character and the kinds of movies that each scene was based on. They also had very ambitious visions for a couple of costumes in particular such as designing a dress for Vampirella that would be inspired by captivating dresses off the runway combined with the bizarre, campy and sometimes horror like style of celebrities such as Lady Gaga. Her outrageous outfits that have included a dress made out of Kermit the frog dolls and another out of raw meat have shocked the public who are more used to simple yet glamorous fashion on the red carpet. Yet at the same time, they took into account the comfort level of each of the actors. Khadija wears a hijab and strongly preferred having it on for the show. Perry therefore made sure that the dress would be black in order to match the hijab and make the hijab part of her character. Vampirella had items such as a hijab and long sleeves in order to show that one does not always have to show skin to be style and appeal even though it's not necessarily a problem to do so. It's not at all like showing skin would be like committing a crime, but one does not have feel the need to do so either. We were also still able to incorporate high fashion

items such as feathers into her dress. Nick Bradley was extremely helpful with designing set pieces and being able to assist in acquiring props. He knew places on campus that I didn't even know about where I could find necessary yet complex items such as chairs, tables and even a bed. He was also knowledgeable in construction if we had to alter any items in order to match the horror aesthetic that we were hoping for. Denise Hall both designed and ran lights for the show AND filmed our final show. I don't know what we would have done without her expertise in these kinds of technology. She took into consideration the volume and color tone of the lights in each scene such as having black and white lighting in the Phantom silent film segment. She even designed a small lighting effect for the scene transitions that would show both the transportation into the next dream as well as give people enough light to change the set. Both Ari Agnew and Dani Wilder designed effective and entertaining sounds. Ari and Dani reached out around the same time as each other to do sound for the play, but we soon learned that they each had different strengths in sound design and thought it would be a good idea if they could work together. Some standout work included transition music that would match the theme of the upcoming scene and being able to find the sounds of body parts being ripped out of bodies.

TECH WEEK AND THE PERFORMANCES

For a while, I was confident about everything coming into place but once we finally reached tech week, I could not have been more stressed. Adjusting to the Old Gym space on top of finally executing sound and lights alongside transitions and cues seemed near impossible. We had three incredible stagehands come in (Catherine Lyu, Skylar Mitchell and Yaya Brown) to help with set and costume changes and even sound since neither Ari nor Dani were available

that week. Yet by Tuesday night, I still didn't feel anywhere close to 100% ready to open later that week. Some of us let our frustrations out, especially me. Angela pointed this out at the end of rehearsal on Tuesday and I knew that I had to acknowledge the situation and ease the tension in the space. I decided to kindly thank everybody involved for their hard work so far. I acknowledged the stress that I showed and proposed to initiate a calm and encouraging environment for the remainder of tech. Everybody agreed to this and the newlyfound positivity in the air showed during our final tech rehearsal. I felt much better going into the first performance. As for my actors, I gave individual reminders to people regarding the notes that Angela and I had for them but in a calm and encouraging matter and more as something to work on throughout each performance. Watching each show night after night, I noticed that everybody was getting more comfortable with everything around them. Even if there was a slip up, they acted as if it was part of the show, something I only briefly brought up. I was also nervous about attendance for each show. I knew I had trouble roping in an audience in the past. However, thanks to this large network of people that I now had and advice on the kind of marketing that would draw people in the most, we had strong crowds come in every single night. They seemed to understand the baseline of the academic yet entertaining lecture that I originally wanted to present by laughing constantly throughout the play and showing intrigue towards the different choices that we made to represent issues for women in horror and its dramatic changes over the years. Some of the most notable included the gory and dramatic killings of Zoe's female first victim and later Owa's student character getting what he deserves in the *Jennifer's Body* segment as well as cracking up over Vampirella's snarky comments and criticism regarding the horror film industry and her attempts to change each scene to her own

liking. In the end, I felt extremely satisfied overall with the execution of my senior project. I also ensured though to everybody else involved that they played a huge role in that success and that we came a long way from where we began. When I was a freshman, I never thought I could lead a full length, entirely student run production. Some of my actors had little experience with performing prior to this show. A lot of us have done some experimentation in the arts that have unfortunately not always ended in success beforehand. However, we managed to get past each obstacle thanks to everyone's dedication and understanding of what this play meant to me, the entire cast and crew and potentially the rest of the Bard community. I'm sure it was a memorable and great learning experience for all involved.

HOW THIS PROJECT CAN CONTINUE TO GROW

If I was able to go back and make changes though, I will say first and foremost that I regret ultimately rushing. Chiori warmed me about this and I realize it now in the sense of time management. I spent too much time married to one idea for the script and how we would run rehearsal up until close to the last minute when I finally understood the issues. If I had realized these mistakes sooner, I could have focused more on further enforcing the message of the play, especially so that audience members could better understand the show as a potential piece of social justice theater. During the final performances, I knew that people were laughing and having a good time, but did they actually understand WHY this was all happening? Did it at all feel thought provoking? Are people going to look at horror films differently after seeing this show and perhaps follow in suit of Vampirella and continue to create strong roles for women in this genre? I also struggled at times at being a good leader to be completely honest. In the beginning, I felt like I was being too nice with things that should have been taken care of and/or

enforced a long time ago: Line memorization, taking down blocking notes, actors conflicts, having items from home ready for costume fittings. I should have been much more strict about these from the get go because once in a while it would slow the process down. At the same time, this need to show tough love backfired around the beginning of tech week. I had a right to be worried about putting on a good show and making sure everybody was on track but while commanding the team, I had to stay calm and positive. Otherwise, it would rub off onto the rest of the environment. Again, I'm still amazed at how far I got. I was so used to working independently with my limited resources beforehand that I almost forgot about the benefits of working with a large group of people and all of the lessons that I was able to learn from the experience. I know that there's so much more to bring to the table with this show and it was an incredible opportunity to have during my senior year. I hope to work on this in some sort of capacity in the professional world. I think it would be good to do a workshop or staged reading followed by a Q and A with the audience. Or maybe go over the play with more fellow playwrights in order to get a variety of feedback instead of just relying on audience reactions. I then hope to produce this play in the theater festival circuit. While I now know what happened during my attempt to stage the show at Bard, I will also make sure to understand the conditions of working in a festival environment and how I will need to accommodate for my ever growing show. Ultimately, I hope *Movie Macabre* is able to one day point out the continuing need to further develop women in horror movies and that it just takes some creativity and a little bit of thinking to change the scope of horror forever.

Movie Macabre

By Brigid Pfeifer

CAST

VAMPIRELLA: Khadija Ghanizada

MONICA/CHRISTINE/BOBBIE: Sonita Alizadeh

GIGI/SUSIE/JENNIFER: Zoe Gonatas

DIRECTOR/PHANTOM/MASKED KILLER: Eamonn Welliver

BILLY/BRAD/BRYSON: Owa Hughes

(LIGHTS UP on a red velvet chair. There is a small table next to the chair surrounded by skulls and spider webs with a candle. Music plays as VAMPIRELLA enters. She is screaming as she slowly enters which concludes as she settles into her seat).

VAMPIRELLA: Screaming relaxes me so. Good evening. Don't worry I don't bite... in public. I am the mistress of the dark Vampirella. As you may recall, Sinister Silvius was recently called to the lord below us. But never fear, I will now be taking over as host for many nights to come.

(She makes a campy pose in her chair)

VAMPIRELLA: Tonight's film is Slumber Party Zombie Apocalypse. A 1979 B movie directed by Michael Powers, it tells the story of two high school girls who plan to stir up trouble by bringing (gasps) boys over. Only, the boys aren't you typical teen idols yeah yeah yeah you get point. Spoiler alert: They're the zombies. Jeez. I'm only getting goosebumps because they still couldn't think of original ideas back then.

(LIGHTS UP on the rest of the stage. Two teenage girls in sexy nightwear are lounging on the floor by their sleeping bags. They are doing the standard girly activities such as reading

beauty magazines, doing each other's hair and nails, etc. Every now and then, VAMPIRELLA pauses the scene to make comments about it).

MONICA: Hey, do you think I should wear that push up bra to school on Monday?

GIGI: Gosh Monica! Are you trying to send the guys to the hospital or something? Forget the nurse's office!

VAMPIRELLA: I don't even think the ER can cure boneritis. Get it? Boner? Itis?

MONICA: I'm trying to end up on Billy's arm.

GIGI: Ooo! Monica honey, you gotta show him what you're made of! And when you get him, he'll have more than YOUR arm... if you know what I mean.

MONICA: You think so Gigi?

GIGI: (Gasps) Monica, call him right now! You realize my parents aren't getting back till tomorrow evening right?

MONICA: Oh my gosh! I totally should!

GIGI: And while we're at it, tell him to bring a friend or two over. It wouldn't hurt to get some action on a Saturday night right?

VAMPIRELLA: Night right. Hey! You're Dr. Seuss! Too bad the actress who played Gigi spent the rest of her career as Mickey Mouse at Disneyland.

MONICA: A little hook up never hurt anybody.

GIGI: Exactly! I mean, you can't be the only guy magnet here.

VAMPIRELLA: Okay. I'm just gonna fast forward the rest of the dirty talk for our younger audience. Not every parent knows where their children are at 10:00.

(Doorbell rings)

MONICA: Oh my gosh! Gigi they're here!

VAMPIRELLA: Maybe we should keep track of how many times Monica says "Oh my gosh"!

(MONICA gets up and answers the door)

MONICA: (Acting flirty) Hi Billy.

BILLY (offstage): Hey Monica.

MONICA: Where are your friends?

BILLY: Uh yeah, about that, I kinda got to make a confession.

MONICA: What is it?

BILLY: I really like you Monica and I think we can go steady.

MONICA: Really!?

BILLY: Yeah but.. there's just something you got to know about me. At night, I'm not your ordinary guy. I'm a-

(BILLY enters the room as a zombie. MONICA screams. As BILLY begins to destroy the house, GIGI also begins to scream in terror. Soon, his antics become even more bizarre as he tries to eat the girls while they helplessly cry for help).

VAMPIRELLA: Okay. Obviously the makeup department was on a \$20 budget. That my minions is Chanel Rouge lipstick on his cheeks. Also, can't he destroy something other than the sleeping bags? I'm seriously concerned if that's the only kind of furniture Gigi's parents can afford. What are they? Traveling hippies? And don't get me started on them merely screaming for it to be over, are their IQs so low that they don't even know to call a neighbor? You know what? I'm really starting to believe that (out of character) This is a pointless piece of shit!

DIRECTOR: Cut!

(Bell rings on the set. BLACKOUT on the slumber party scene. The DIRECTOR walks up to VAMPIRELLA).

DIRECTOR: Khadija what do you think you're doing?

VAMPIRELLA: Am I supposed to be some siren who shows people garbage nevery Friday night?

DIRECTOR: Khadija, you're not just SOME siren. You're Vampirella. The mistress of the dark. The scream queen. The glamour ghoul. You have to seduce the audience into finding the fun in these silly movies.

VAMPIRELLA: Silly is an understatement.

DIRECTOR: Look, we were forced to also make you a producer on this project. If you don't like it, do something more meaningful to you. But don't make it a snore fest. This show is meant to be an escape from politics and everything bad that's going on in the world. But uh, can you figure it out by the end of lunch? Because if you're still throwing a hissy fit, you're gonna be back on the streets of Tinseltown like where I found you.

VAMPIRELLA: You mean signed back on to that new Marvel franchise.

DIRECTOR: Cut the sass!

(He exits. VAMPIRELLA sighs and sinks into her chair. She begins removing jewelry from her costume. Suddenly, an electrical malfunction is heard. LIGHTS UP on the 1925 silent film version of *The Phantom of the Opera*. On stage is a bed and a creepy looking desk filled with sheet music. The red chair is gone. Black and white lighting adds to this effect).

VAMPIRELLA: What the? Hey! Where did my chair go?

(The PHANTOM slowly enters holding a lantern)

VAMPIRELLA: Is this some sort of punishment for my “hissy fit”?

(The PHANTOM approaches VAMPIRELLA)

VAMPIRELLA: Hey there. When do you come on in the freak show?

(The PHANTOM stands still in silence)

VAMPIRELLA: When do you come on?

(Silence)

VAMPIRELLA; Is this some sort of method acting or something?

(Still Silence)

VAMPIRELLA: (Getting up and trying to leave) Nevermind. Forget it. I don't have time for this-

(The PHANTOM grabs VAMPIRELLA's hand)

VAMPIRELLA: Hey! I don't want to play any of your stupid games right now.

(The PHANTOM leads VAMPIRELLA to the bed)

VAMPIRELLA: Oh so this is how it is around here? That's it! I'm done! I quit this gig! I should expose this studio to the Post.

(CHRISTINE enters. She appears to be naïve and beautiful. She is curious about the PHANTOM. He leads her to his desk).

VAMPIRELLA: Like I said before, I'm not following it nor am I in the mood to play this game.

(The PHANTOM begins to write. CHRISTINE watches in awe. Her attention begins to focus more and more on his mask. CHRISTINE slowly takes it off. Suddenly, the PHANTOM turns

around to reveal a grotesque face. CHRISTINE pantomimes screaming. She runs off as the PHANTOM tries to grab her. VAMPIRELLA checks her hearing. As the PHANTOM grabs CHRISTINE she gracefully faints. The PHANTOM then carries her to the bed. She mirrors Sleeping Beauty. He caresses her and then returns to his music).

VAMPIRELLA: (Poking Christine) Um, excuse me?

(CHRISTINE slowly awakens)

VAMPIRELLA: How come you didn't let anything out with your scream? You know, no shrieking or any sort of noise that could break someone's ear drum?

(CHRISTINE pantomimes her reasoning but VAMPIRELLA can't follow)

VAMPIRELLA: Okay do you mind breaking out of character for just one minute?

(CHRISTINE nods her head)

VAMPIRELLA: Cool. Can you tell me what's going on here?

(CHRISTINE points to the PHANTOM)

VAMPIRELLA: I give up. Okay.... Let me guess. Were you acting curious about what was beneath his mask?

(CHRISTINE nods)

VAMPIRELLA: And he wasn't too thrilled about it.

(CHRISTINE nods again)

VAMPIRELLA: Well he didn't seem like the object of your nightmares before you took the mask off. Why don't you just try returning it to him?

(CHRISTINE appears indifferent)

VAMPIRELLA: And if he causes you any trouble, make sure you let out a blood curdling scream like this.

(VAMPIRELLA demonstrates)

(CHRISTINE slowly walks up to the PHANTOM. As she is lifting the mask towards him, he turns around again. CHRISTINE lets out an actual scream).

VAMPIRELLA: She had it coming.

(BLACKOUT as another electrical malfunction is heard. LIGHTS UP on a more modernized bedroom. It's nighttime).

VAMPIRELLA: Where the heck am I now? This doesn't look like my dressing room at all.

(Moaning noises are heard. The bed appears to be moving)

VAMPIRELLA: What the fuck is that?

(VAMPIRELLA grabs a random item for defense as she approaches the bed. She quickly takes off the covers and begins whacking her item at who's now revealed to be a half naked man and woman)

BRAD: Ow! Hey!

SUZIE: Bobbie what are you- who are you?

BRAD: Yeah! Are you Bobbie's goth friend that she never told us about?

VAMPIRELLA: Who's Bobbie?

SUZIE: She's my best friend.

VAMPIRELLA: Look I don't remember this part of the script. I just thought I was making fun of the movie from the sidelines.

SUZIE: You're watching a movie?

BRAD: There's a script?

(There's a knock on the door)

SUZIE: That must be Bobbie now.

(SUZIE answers the door)

SUZIE: Hey Bob-ahhhhhh!!!

(A masked Michael Myers like killer enters)

VAMPIRELLA: Calm down. It's probably just that Phantom guy with a different mask.

BRAD: There's a Phantom guy?

SUZIE: Get away from me! Get away from me! Brad! Help!

BRAD: It's alright babe. I'll save you from this freaky dude.

(BRAD charges towards the MASKED KILLER. However, the MASKED KILLER instantly chokes him to death).

SUZIE: Brad! Nooooo!!!!

(The MASKED KILLER walks towards SUZIE)

SUZIE: What should I do? What should I do?

VAMPIRELLA: There's so much you can do right now! Call for Bobbie! Escape through the window! Fight him back!

(As the MASKED KILLER approaches, SUZIE throws a pillow at him to no effect. The MASKED KILLER strikes)

SUZIE: Ahhhhh!!!!!!

(The MASKED KILLER brutally murders SUZIE. Blood explodes as he cuts through her body. Guts can be seen coming out. Soon SUZIE is dead).

VAMPIRELLA: Well, it was a start.

(Suddenly, BOBBIE, a tomboy, bursts through the door)

BOBBIE: Suzie? Brad? What's going on? (Sees their dead bodies on the floor) Oh my God!

(The MASKED KILLER approaches BOBBIE)

BOBBIE: Back off jackass!

MASKED KILLER: No one can save you now sweetheart.

BOBBIE: Stand back. I'm warning you.

(The MASKED KILLER is about to stab her when all of a sudden, BOBBIE sneaks up behind him).

MASKED KILLER: What the?

(A fight sequence occurs in which the MASKED KILLER desperately tries to kill BOBBIE a couple of times but she either always gets out of the way in time or attacks him with a random item. Eventually, the MASKED KILLER meets his demise).

VAMPIRELLA: Wow. Where the heck did you learn all that?

BOBBIE: It's easy. I follow the three basic rules.

VAMPIRELLA: The three basic rules?

BOBBIE: Number one. You cannot survive the movie if you have sex.

VAMPIRELLA: (Looking at SUZIE and BRAD) Makes sense.

BOBBIE: Number two. You may not survive the movie if you drink or do drugs.

VAMPIRELLA: I never really thought about it that way.

BOBBIE: And number three, you may not survive the movie if you say, “I’ll be right back”, “Hello?” or “Who’s there?”

VAMPIRELLA: Wait a minute. Have I done that?

BOBBIE: Welp. I guess you’re fate has been sealed.

(BOBBIE exits)

VAMPIRELLA: I mean I don’t think I used those terms exactly. How much longer is this nightmare? I don’t know what that casting director was doing in picking me for this-

(BLACKOUT. Yet another electrical malfunction. LIGHTS UP. A male student named BRYSON is doing his homework. VAMPIRELLA awkwardly stands still for a few seconds but then attempts to approach him).

VAMPIRELLA: Uh. Hi there- Aw! Dammit!

(VAMPIRELLA throws a mini internal hissy fit)

BRYSON: Hey beautiful. I like a girl with fury.

VAMPIRELLA: Yeah. Thanks a lot. Now some goon is probably gonna stab me.

BRYSON: I can protect you.

VAMPIRELLA: I don’t think so.

BRYSON: Hey. I’m not the captain of the wrestling team for any old reason... Is that sexy look of yours for me?

VAMPIRELLA: Back off!

BRYSON: Hey. Hey. I’m just saying. You don’t just dress like that for no reason.

(JENNIFER CHECK from Jennifer’s Body enters)

BRYSON: Hey gorgeous.

JENNIFER: Whatcha doing?

BRYSON: Oh. I'm available if that's what you're asking.

JENNIFER: You doing your homework?

BRYSON: Uh...

JENNIFER: Well, I can be your tutor.

BRYSON: That would be nice.

JENNIFER: If you do good, you'll get more than a gold star.

BRYSON: Oh yeah...

JENNIFER: Do you know Shakespeare?

BRYSON: No. Not really. But it sounds hot.

JENNIFER: Mmm hmm. Try to translate this sentence, To thine own self be true.

BRYSON: Uh, take your shirt off?

JENNIFER: Oh too bad.

(She seductively disembowels BRYSON)

BRYSON: Hey! I never liked you anyway you skanky bitch!

VAMPIRELLA: That's not what you said a minute ago.

BRYSON: You're just another slut! Who's the next guy gonna be huh?

JENNIFER: Whoever wants to take advantage next.

BRYSON: Well... (To VAMPIRELLA) You're a slut too!

VAMPIRELLA: Oh for the way I dress? It's just a costume you know. I'm an actress.

BRYSON: Oh... an actress eh? Do you role play at all?

VAMPIRELLA: Why do you treat women like they're a- actually, I tend to role play once in a while.

BRYSON: So what are you thinking of? Nurse? Babysitter? Dominatrix?

VAMPIRELLA: I was thinking more along the lines of a teacher or librarian.

BRYSON: Mmm. Forbidden fruit.

VAMPIRELLA: Oh yeah. And I see a young man who needs detention.

BRYSON: Lay it on me baby.

VAMPIRELLA: I think a spanking is a proper punishment.

BRYSON: Are you gonna go easy on me?

VAMPIRELLA: Not at all. Are you ready for it?

BRYSON: As I'll ever be.

VAMPIRELLA: (grabbing his book) 1... 2... 3! (She hits him in the head with the book knocking him out).

JENNIFER: Damn. It's like you know the trick to tame the beast.

VAMPIRELLA: Well, I kinda learned over time... Do you know how to get back to the Vampirella set?

(JENNIFER snaps her fingers. BLACKOUT. The following is heard offstage).

VAMPIRELLA: I want to craft her out of history.

DIRECTOR: This isn't supposed to be an educational lesson.

VAMPIRELLA: I was thinking among the lines of a mirror... of our society.

DIRECTOR: Interesting. Ed Wood might be a good starting point.

VAMPIRELLA: Well, have you ever heard of Anna Biller? Anne Rice? Jennifer Kent? The Soska Sisters? What about Mary Shelley?

DIRECTOR: Not at a drive in theater I haven't.

(LIGHTS UP on a remake of the slumber party movie. It's the end of the film. MONICA is walking alone in the middle of the night. She stops. She is now at her house. She rings the doorbell and GIGI answers. GIGI attends to MONICA).

GIGI: Did you find your little brother?

(MONICA stays silent. GIGI takes out a deceased male head).

GIGI: If only my grandpa could hang this up on the wall.

(The girls softly, nervously laugh)

GIGI: I'm beat.

MONICA: (To herself) No shit.

GIGI: Monica?

MONICA: He was a good little boy.

(MONICA's face is revealed as a zombie. BLACKOUT except for VAMPIRELLA)

VAMPIRELLA: We've been discussing a sequel but I'm not sure about the big screen. How does a comic book sound? Or a coffin table book? (winks). Well, that's our show for tonight. I hope at least Zombodie enjoyed my directorial debut. Next time on the Vampirella Show, I'll be providing commentary on Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* and Jordan Peele's *Us*. That's right. A creature double feature except only a herd of humans are in them. Goodnight my minions...and unpleasant dreams.

(BLACKOUT. End of play)



Vampira (Left) and Elvira, Mistress of the Dark (Right)



The 1925 silent film version of The Phantom of the Opera



Just a few of the many final girls. These five are from of horror movies of the 70s, 80s and 90s



Jennifer Check from Jennifer's Body



The Phantom of the Opera



Final Girl Mash Up



Jennifer's Body



Final bows



The cast of Movie Macabre

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