

The Grand Guignol

“You have paid your money, you are here to witness horror, most gruesome, and you will not be disappointed. Make no mistake, there is nothing magical, supernatural, or paranormal in what you will see. Please, though, have no fear; for no matter what your mind may tell you, these are all just deceptions and trickery, designed to entertain your basest desires.”

André waited for the translator to echo his words to the waiting crowd, and cursed himself for failing to learn his patter in French. He didn't want to learn another language, and he didn't think he owed it to his Parisian audience, but he envied the additional worldliness and class it would help him project if he ever returned home.

Among the Parisians of 1921, he had passed himself off as André the Magnificent, a renowned stage magician from New York. Some of the other ex-pats would have heard the concealed strains of Oklahoma if they hadn't

been so inebriated. Even worse, they might know that the real André the Magnificent was about thirty years older and had disappeared from society years ago. The André they saw had learned everything from the old man, though, and saw no reason not to take his name when he was gone. It sounded much better than George, a name shared by at least twelve other members of the younger man's family in Enid, Oklahoma.

Our André welcomed his assistant to the stage and helped her into the box at the center of the spotlight. As he had done for hundreds of shows, he twirled the box around, so everyone could see her head sticking out one end and her supposed feet sticking out the other. It wasn't an original trick, but this venue allowed him to add a twist. He brought out the saw, allowed a few excited audience members to feel the sharpness of its teeth, and clanged it loudly against the box to show how solid it was. Finally, he started to saw his assistant in half, and she began to scream. As she screamed, blood dripped out of the bottom of the box and pooled in vivid colors on the clean stage floor. Her screams turned to gurgling moans as red liquid bubbled from her mouth, and finally, he separated the box in two, allowing guts and overflowing blood to splash out onto the ground. The moans and dry heaves behind him were drowned out by laughter as a few of the weaker patrons fled the theatre. Moments later, stagehands came out and whisked away all evidence, allowing his beautiful assistant to get cleaned up before the final curtain call.

In 1897, Oscar Méténier opened Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, known simply as the Grand Guignol, in the same tourist-laden Paris district

where Moulin Rouge would open a couple of years later. In the early 1900s, he transferred it to Max Maurey — for reasons that are still unknown — who made it famous for a trademark type of naturalistic horror. On the small stage erected in the former chapel, up to two-hundred and fifty audience members, or *guignolers*, would gather to watch a lineup of alternating brutal horror pageants and silly comic shows. Most of the plays centered on themes of infidelity and jealousy, which alternately led to slapstick comedy or bloody vengeance.

The Grand Guignol was famed for the realistic scenes that featured severed heads dropping to the stage, bit players being cooked in acid, and actors gouging out eyes with spoons. One character famously had her face repeatedly pushed down onto a red-hot skillet, where it sizzled loudly and smelled of burnt flesh.

Though the theatre was always clear that everything was safe, and all the actors returned at curtain calls to show themselves unharmed, the brutality was often too much for casual spectators. Audience members would regularly vomit in the aisles, and the Grand Guignol averaged two faintings a night for most of its run. Max Maurey even used this to his advantage as a marketing ploy when he hired doctors to stand by at performances.

What the Grand Guignol really specialized in, besides stories of the macabre and ludicrous, was live special effects. They used red rubber hoses and sponges soaked in animal blood, a bald cap to simulate brain surgery, and hand bulbs to squirt blood through a hollow in the spoons that were used to gouge out false eyes. Their fake blood came in nine different shades,

and even coagulated and made scabs as it cooled. Most importantly, they relied on sleight-of-hand to pull off these tricks in such a close environment, palming bags of fake acid and switching bloody implements under the close eyes of the audience.

When he came to France following the First World War, André the Magnificent had big dreams of being the next Houdini, who himself borrowed the name of French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. After failing to make a name for himself on the big stages, he was more than happy to join the Grand Guignol's tight-knit troupe after he met the fair Violette.

She had been an understudy when he first saw her on the stage, and he had seen her clumsy attempts to hide a bloody facial prosthetic before having "acid" thrown in her face. After the curtain call, he had caught up with her and showed her how to conceal the rubber piece fully like it was a magician's scarf, and then demonstrated a few misdirections for the final reveal. Max, constantly looking for cheap talent, had seen the hearts in André's eyes and hired him that very night to train the actors and oversee the illusions, in exchange for a meager salary and stage time between plays to hone his act.

Soon after, André gave up his cheap hotel room and found an apartment for Violette and himself, and she became his assistant for his interstitial magic acts. With his teaching, she also grew to be a rising star in the horror dramas, and André was happy that more people were finally

seeing the beautiful ingénue he had fallen in love with. Sometimes, late at night, he would stare at her alabaster skin in the moonlight of their small apartment, see the dark strands of her hair falling across her cheek, and wonder how he had gotten so lucky. Other times, he wondered if he actually could be that lucky without everything falling apart.

It was a miserable, rainy night when it all fell apart. It had been almost a year, and André could increasingly be found at the bar next to the Grand Guignol before the late show. He would either be commiserating the slow death of his career in the corner, or attempting to impress the tourists with false stories of bravado in the war he had dodged; pretending to be an American soldier who had stuck around.

On this particular night, he desires instead to see his fair Violette, and he slipped up to the hallway outside her dressing room. He stood before the door, about to turn the knob, when he heard a man's voice. André couldn't understand the words, but the voice of Violette's reply was the passionate one she used to reserve for him. She couldn't even fake that one on stage, and he realized she hadn't spoken that way to him in a month. He wanted to burst in the door and catch them in the act, but he found himself wilting. André the Magnificent might push the door open and demand answers, but George from Enid didn't feel like he had ever deserved Violette. As he was thinking, the door started to open, and he ducked around the nearest corner.

In the darkness of the hallway, he watched the light spill out from Violette's room as the leading man of the Grand Guignol, Claude, stepped out. Tall and handsome, Claude had a reputation for seducing the tourists passing through their little district, and André hated him even more as he watched him buckling his belt and striding away down the hallway. Violette stepped out to watch him leave, still wearing the sheer nightgown she must have entertained him in, and André slunk back into the shadows. He saw the look on her face, even as she turned away from him, and he knew this was not the first time Claude had visited her backstage.

Slipping away, André went downstairs for his drink and found himself alone in a dark corner of the bar. He thought about how much he had loved Violette, and his mind ran through snapshot memories of their times together. Then, he started to replay the memories to look for clues. He thought about Claude, and how he was constantly setting out to upstage André between the plays, and wondered if that's what he had been doing backstage as well. Most of all, he thought about himself. He wasn't really André the Magnificent; he was George from Enid. This had all been a dream, that had become a nightmare, and he was ready to wake up. Before he did, though, he needed to make sure he could never be forgotten.

An hour later, the stage was set for the horror show, and André performed with his usual precision. He hardly made eye contact with Violette, except to give her the necessary signals for parts of their act. In the harsh light of the stage, Violette's eyes looked alien to him. Smudged with mascara, it looked like she had attempted to cover up the remnants of tears by reapplying her makeup too many times. He thought she was endeavoring to look at him with the same love she always had, but all he could return

was a cold stare as he cut her in half, stabbed her with spring-loaded knives, and spilled rubber guts and fake blood onto the stage.

After the last comedy skit of the night, the audience called for an encore, as they did on most nights. Surprising everyone, André stepped onto the stage with a flourish. After a moment's pause, he loudly called for his dear Violette, as he still referred to her. She stepped onto the stage, wearing the long, dark dressing gown she regularly wore after cleaning off the congealed blood. She was obviously dressed for a curtain call, but André assured her it was okay. He said she wouldn't need to fit in any boxes or contort her body for this final trick.

With no practiced patter, André was completely silent as he arranged the set for the encore. Once he had everything in place, he turned to the audience, who should have been restless, but had grown only more curious after a night of increasing brutality and absurdity.

“For an encore, I would like my beautiful Violette to take center stage and perform one of my tricks, for I will be her victim — I mean assistant.”

Violette showed a moment of confusion before she forced a stage smile across her face. They had improvised similar setups before, and she strode into the spotlight with practiced poise. Dropping into French, she tried to remember André's usual patter about the French Revolution and great inventions as she showed the crowd the guillotine that André had rolled out. For a demonstration, she let the blade drop on one of their stage dummies, and the internal blood bag sprayed red mist into the air as it split open, and the wooden head hit the ground.

André kicked aside the bloody remains of the dummy, ignored the safety switch, and pulled the blade back up to its deadly starting position. With practiced movements, he laid down and allowed Violette to lower the stocks, locking his neck and wrists into position under the sharpened steel. Without the safety switch set, André knew that the blade would not disengage at the last second. He would feel no pain, but his brain would continue to function for a crucial few seconds as he saw Violette's face one last time. When he was researching his patter for this trick, he remembered reading that anticipating the blade would make it hurt, as the body was too primed and tense, so he tried to relax his muscles as best he could. He imagined his final moments and dreamed that his final act would be written about for decades to come.

He wondered if, mistaking him for the original André the Magnificent, the New York Times would even write up a blurb. He thought about how they would be giving credit to the old man, and he wondered if he had made a great mistake. George began to wonder if he actually wanted to live, if at least to not make the wrong man famous, but he realized it was too late. Any moment, she would pull the rope and spill real blood across the stage.

After some more ruminating, he realized that Violette had not moved to the rope, and he was still alive. He wondered if she had seen through his ruse, become overcome with guilt, and was about to free him. His heart began to lift with love and appreciation for life as he waited for her arms to wrap around him.

He heard the sudden burst of applause, but he couldn't see what was happening. The stocks held his head firmly in place; he could only see the reaction of the audience as they looked to stage right and clapped. He felt the top of the stocks come off, and he grew angry and despondent when he felt two large, strong hands lift him to his feet. He knew Violette had not saved him, and he turned around to see Claude smiling and hamming it up for the crowd as he tried to upstage André one more time.

After being roughly set to the side, André watched in stunned silence as Claude laid down where he had just been, and Violette locked the stocks in place. After a dramatic kiss on Claude's lips, she walked around to the rope that would release the blade. André found himself shuffled out of the spotlight and into the shadows.

As André the Magnificent slipped out the side door and walked away from his old life, Claude's head rolled down into the audience. The doctors on standby turned out to be paid actors as well, but it didn't matter. The audience believed they had seen the best effects of the night, and only the employees of the Grand Guignol knew what had really happened. Fearing being shut down after a tragic accident, Max paid the cast and stagehands well to never speak of it, and nothing was ever published in the New York Times or elsewhere.

The man once known as André the Magnificent, and named George at birth, returned to the states a week later with a new name. Fearing going home penniless and a failure, he eventually found work with a traveling carnival as a barker. After hours, when he pretended to be more drunk than

he was, he loved to tell the locals about his time as a lead actor at the Grand Guignol. He said that's where he got his name, Claude the Invincible.