

## **‘Brand New Ancient Legends’: Creating Werewolves for a Welsh Halloween**

**Richard J. Hand, University of East Anglia**

### **Abstract:**

Research and pedagogical interest in Grand-Guignol and popular horror performance at the University of South Wales has led to the commissioned creation of an annual public Halloween event for a council in Wales. In 2015, the event took place at a Nature Reserve with the theme of ‘Werewolves’. This article gives an account of this Practice-as-Research project, in which a large ensemble developed skills in various areas: writers investigated the lycanthropic folklore and culture of Wales and beyond; performers trained in storytelling and physical performance; and a technical and stage management team facilitated the overall experience. This article gives a detailed account of the cultural context, creative process and final production of the 2015 ‘Werewolves’ event. In so doing, it demonstrates how an ensemble working intensively on a focused project with a willing audience can present an example of a negotiated horror world through which the seeming oxymoron of a ‘brand new ancient legend’ can be inaugurated.

**Key Words:** Halloween, Wales, Werewolves, Practice-as-Research, Grand-Guignol Theatre, Popular Horror Culture, Immersive Performance

Since 2011, the Drama Department at the University of South Wales (USW Drama) has been commissioned by Cardiff City Council to create a walkthrough horror performance for the city's Halloween festivities. The annual project has mapped closely onto the department's research strength in Grand-Guignol horror theatre.<sup>1</sup> The Théâtre du Grand-Guignol – the Parisian 'theatre of horror' – opened in 1897 and survived until the early 1960s. The theatre presented horror plays interleaved with comedies, which took the audience on a journey of extremes, that the theatre dubbed *la douche écossaise* ('The Scottish Shower'). The theatre's repertoire of horrific spectacle was always based on the 'real' rather than the supernatural. The Grand-Guignol was interested in 'human monsters': in other words, although it would not feature Transylvanian vampires, it would be interested in serial killers with a taste for human blood. Similarly, 'transformation' was extremely important for it: not as humans into wolves, but rational people into maniacs. The principle Grand-Guignol actors were distinguished by their ability to make such journeys of psychological (and physiological) mutation. The evocative venue (a deconsecrated chapel), the labyrinthine streets that surrounded it and its use of (pre)show gimmickry enhanced the terror (and titillation) of attending this most notorious of theatres. The *belle époque* Grand-Guignol is a powerful antecedent to the immersive culture of haunted attractions and walkthroughs, including our Halloween projects.

The interest and expertise in Grand-Guignol has led to the development of a final year theatre module on 'Popular Horror Performance', in which the Halloween outreach commission has been an integral component. Each year, approximately 40 participants form an ensemble that produces a Saturnalian event suitable for a public audience. Each year, this creative team develops a promenade performance comprising spectacle and storytelling. In the true spirit of Halloween, these events overturn and re-imagine the public spaces they are using into something uncanny and defamiliarised. Between 2011 and 2014, the Halloween event took place in Roath Park, a Victorian city park in Cardiff. Themes included *Witches* (2012), *Zombies* (2013) and *Ghosts* (2014).<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the Halloween event moved to a new Cardiff location: Forest Farm Nature Reserve. This evocative site comprises seventeenth-century farm buildings and a vast acreage of conservation space. The themed events of *Zombies* and *Ghosts* worked well in a Victorian city park, indicating that these monsters can thrive (un)healthily as urbanites. However, the nature reserve setting, on the very cusp between the city sprawl and the genuine countryside demanded new monsters. To this end, USW Drama (with the approval of the council) decided the unsuspecting public of Cardiff,

who start buying tickets for our Halloween events in the summer, deserved tales of a different monster: *Werewolves*.

A central inspiration for this emerged from Leslie A. Sconduto's account of the potency of the werewolf:

Lurking at the edges of our imagination, in the darkened corners of our childish nightmares and in the shadowy forests that border our towns and villages, the figure of the werewolf in popular culture still conjures up frightening images of violence and bestiality. (Sconduto 2008: 1)

As Sconduto indicates, the werewolf can inhabit the wooded areas that *border* or *surround* the urban domain, precisely as Forest Farm does. For our audience, it is a short and simple



**Figure 1: Poster for the 2015 Halloween event created by the Drama Department at the University of South Wales for Cardiff City Council**

journey from the city to the nature reserve, but it is a realm where suddenly houses, streetlights and urban clamour vanish and shadowy woodland and unbridled wildlife take over. In this regard, the werewolf was the most apt monster to choose for this event: the lycanthropic journey from human to animal – from the civilized to the animalistic – seemed particularly fitting for the audience venturing from the city to the shadowy and ominous outskirts of the urban. In addition, Sconduto's location of werewolves in 'the darkened corners of our childish nightmares' is a helpful concept. In the intense experience of our Halloween events, we have always worked on the principle that the audience needs to 'grasp' a sense of narrative and drawing on a deep-set icon of horror – the werewolf – can be effective to this end. Moreover, the

Halloween experience is promoted as a family event and finding a monster that is recognisable to children (genuine and 'inner') would be effective.

Our theme is always kept secret from the public, the audiences merely anticipating a 'Halloween experience' and our loyal fans knowing that it will be different every year. That being said, we enjoyed giving a playful clue. Our poster for the event (Figure 1) featured a baying wolf silhouetted against a full moon; a classic image, one of horror and Halloween. Some might realise that there would, indeed, be a full moon during the final week of October 2015. Some might have realised that we were giving the audience a strong clue as to the theme of the event. However, for many the poster managed to keep the event's contents secret, ironically by being so blatant.

As well as organising a professional standard public event, the Halloween projects represent distinctive Practice-as-Research activities, which permit an exploration and critique of a diverse range of topics and methodologies. More precisely, the Halloween project would demand developing expertise in storytelling, writing and immersive horror performance wherein skills of narrative and performance practice need to mesh with the natural environment. Furthermore, as a public commission, the project needed to be taken out of the campus and into the 'real world', the audience encountering the 'tip of the iceberg' without needing to see the research and the pedagogy that lies beneath the surface.

A central plank of the research drew on Shira Chess's exploration of the phenomenon of the 'Slender Man'. Drawing on C. R. Miller's work on rhetorical genre as a form of 'social action' where 'individuals communally negotiate generic expectations, themes, and styles' (Chess 2011: 375), Chess explores the development of the Slender Man as a conscious web- and blog-based attempt to create a 'new' monster in which an open forum for fiction and Photoshop-manipulated images facilitated, extraordinarily rapidly, a collective adoption, evolution and crystallization of a mythos. Despite the fact that our Halloween project is a much more 'organic' and non-digital event, with very little web presence beyond basic advertising and booking information on the city council's website, there could be a similar opportunity to detect the development of a similar phenomenon, animating ancient mythos and culture in order to create the seeming tautology of a 'new legend' for a specific event and context. With a large ensemble working intensively on a focused project, could we witness an example of a 'negotiated' horror world?

Part of this impetus has an anecdotal basis: in the 2014 Halloween show at Roath Park ('Ghosts'), we invented a story of a spectral violinist from the Victorian era who had killed himself in the park due to unrequited love, but can occasionally be heard at night playing mournful melodies on his violin. We used an eerie recording of violin music and then the

musician would appear from one of the park's arbours. Our storyteller-guide for this section would always begin his tale with 'Have you heard about the ghostly violinist?' The audience would say 'No' and he would begin to recount the story. However, in the fourth performance the response was different and some members of the audience said 'Yes!' Was this just bravado, cheeky teenagers showing off to the storyteller and the nervous audience in equal measure? Or was this a different phenomenon? In other words, had word of our phantom violinist spread by the time of our fourth show? Had passers-by heard the spectral violin music before coming to see the show themselves? Had the story circulated between audiences, with earlier spectators telling later ones 'what to expect'? Whatever the reason, this demonstrated a fascinating dimension to the project: the potential for mutability, not only how audiences can be different, but how an instant folklore can seem to be inculcated: in a few short weeks we can inaugurate and witness a 'brand new legend'.

### **Context for Creation**

Welsh culture abounds with tales of lycanthropy. The *Mabinogion*, the epic Welsh story cycle, was written down from the twelfth century onwards but emerged from the more ancient oral traditions of Welsh myth. Frequently in the *Mabinogion*, people transform into different people, animals or monsters. This theme would be central to our project: we would need to create narratives of (in)voluntary transformation, beginning with an exploration of the topic through seminars and workshops. In an Arthurian legend within the *Mabinogion*, King Arthur seeks the cubs of the she-wolf Gast Rhymhi ('The Bitch of Rhymhi'), a princess transformed into a wolf for her sins. God briefly transforms her back into human form so that the king can acquire her wolf-cubs for his retinue of hounds (Edwards 1902: 103). In another tale, the sorceress Ceridwen pursues a man called Gwyon after he steals the secrets of her magic. They shapeshift into numerous animals until Gwyon becomes a grain of wheat, which Ceridwen, as a hen, eats. The seed makes her pregnant (Monaghan 2014: 84). This early example of a 'Wizards' Duel' is a thrilling example of the fluidity of transformation, tussling gender and gender-based power as much as it does species. This dynamic was immediately appealing for our project: our object of terror should be the gender-neutral (even gender-fluid) *werewolf*, not the nominally gendered *wolfman*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Mabinogion* frequently evokes a genuine sense of *marvel* at metamorphosis. This is reminiscent of Karl Steel's analysis of the Bishop of Dublin's eleventh-century poem on werewolf attacks on sheep, which explains that the poem does not conclude with

‘condemnation, nor with an attempt to determine whether the werewolves are criminal, human, animal, demonic, or some other, hitherto unimagined category’, but prefers to conclude with the line: ‘we all wonder at the sight’ (Steel 2013: 272). Although the werewolf may be unnatural and lethal, it can must be *marvelled* at. These are just a few examples of the countless tales in the *Mabinogion* and contemporaneous literature, wherein human transformation forms the central core of a story and the focus of its *wonder*. In our project, it would be our intention to give the audience a sense of marvel and wonder in the alienated and extremely dark environment of a nature reserve at night. Forest Farm, a location well-known for country walks and school visits, is to be metamorphosed into a place of fantasy and the supernatural. Relaxing nature treks will become – for the spectators that willingly suspend their disbelief – a voyage into unreal wonders and perils. The rare birds, mammals and amphibians that visitors might see in the day, become replaced by night-time stories of impossible monsters.

In Welsh culture, myths of transformation are not restricted to ancient tales. Indeed, in identifying the particular efficacy of werewolf legends, Brent Stypczynski identifies a distinct continuity between medieval and contemporary werewolf anxieties which reflect ‘shared social and human concerns such as where the line between nature and nurture, or between humans and other animals, is drawn’ (2013: 2). In Welsh legend, transmutation and strange creatures recur in Nos Calan Gaeaf (the Welsh Halloween) and contemporary urban legends. Wales is a small nation with diverse geographical/historical features. It has some of the largest expanses of wilderness in the UK. As well as its ancient bardic folklore, and its proud literary culture, it is a nation with a significant industrial history in slate, coal and steel. It has a complex relationship with the neighbouring nation of England, profoundly embodied in the battles of Owain Glyndŵr (the last Welsh Prince of Wales), or in Devolution, or in international rugby. Wales continues to be a forum for myth where transmutation remains a core theme. Its folklore has long included mysterious beasts. Indeed, the Welsh national flag features the Red Dragon. In the 1790s there were accounts of a ‘black beast’ in Wales that terrorised the countryside. Sightings have continued to the present day, including in 2015 rumours of a puma (Wales Online, 2015), while one council cites strange sightings on its official website (Ceredigion County Council, 2016).

In performance media, lycanthropy frequently features in Welsh contexts. In the BBC radio play *The White Hare* (2009), the Welsh playwright Lucy Gough creates a performance that explores arcane myth and a starker, contemporary brutality. It is a horror tale about an

urban family that relocates into a seeming rural idyll in what is effectively a melding of the ‘horror genres of lycanthropy and witchcraft at one moment and, at the next, [...] the menaced “out-of-towners” in the tradition of *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah 1971)’ (Hand 2014: 159). Werewolves can be a safe horror cliché, as cuddly as the werewolf pups in *Hotel Transylvania* (Genndy Tartakovsky 2012), but in Gough’s play and elsewhere, lycanthropes can be terrifying. In Wales, there is also considerable folklore that is more modern in derivation. In locating the long genealogy of the werewolf, Sconduto aptly asserts:

Through the mists of time, we catch fleeting glimpses of the first werewolves, as if they were illuminated only momentarily by the light of a full moon partially obscured by clouds on a carefully constructed Hollywood sound stage. (Sconduto 2008: 7)

Sconduto alludes to the cinematic power of the werewolf in a metaphor that succeeds in capturing the essence of this long-lived monster. Just as lycanthropes stalk the *Mabinogion*, they emerge in the folklore that surrounds *An American Werewolf in London* (John Landis 1981) which was not, despite its narrative, filmed on the Yorkshire Moors, but in the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains of Wales. This example of a ‘hidden’ heritage in cinema is ironic, not just because the Welsh landscape is unmistakable to those who are familiar with it, but also because one of the most pioneering and emblematic examples of werewolf cinema, Universal Picture’s *The Wolf Man* (George Waggner 1941), is partly set in Wales. In the same year as *The Wolf Man*, Hollywood audiences would see *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford 1941). Both films create Wales on screen, but the realist family saga and social epic in Ford’s film is a stark juxtaposition to the supernatural and folkloric realm constructed in Waggner’s classic horror movie. In the Celtic nations, a passionately felt sense of history and distinctive landscapes has led to what we might describe as ‘the Celtic Gothic’. Within this, there is a panoply of monsters: Scotland has its beast in Loch Ness and complex human dualities explored in R. L. Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886); and in Ireland spectacular epic sagas and tales of leprechauns and banshees have special place. In the small nation of Wales, the remote hills, indigenous language and bardic traditions of storytelling have led to a powerful and enduring resonance for the dragon and also the lycanthrope, the human who can (un)willingly transform before our eyes.

In creating the 2015 Halloween show, the folkloric traditions of the werewolves of Wales provided a sandbox to work with, as rich and exciting as the evocative venue we had

been given. Having found numerous lycanthropes in Welsh-related legend, poetry, film and radio, we could embark on a creative journey to summon up our own credible monsters and believable folklore. Exploring an array of potential sources from elegant ancient narratives to playfully ironic cinema, we could use themes, tropes and motifs to develop a narrative adventure that could be *marvellous*, yet suitably frightening, immersing the audience into a direct experience of a *brand new ancient legend*.

### **Site Visit and Scoping: A Lycanthropic Location?**

Forest Farm is perfect as a location for a horror-themed event. Woodland opens out into meadows sweeping down to the River Taff. In its industrial heyday, the river would have been busy with industrial transportation, but the rise of the railway and then industrial decline led to a more tranquil status and a haven for wildlife. Today it is a seemingly remote place, a favourite location for twitchers who can see rare birds. At its hub is the seventeenth-century farmhouse with outbuildings nearby. The Farm specialised in dairy and closed in the 1960s, re-opening as a nature reserve in 1967. In researching the site, Thomas Ernest Broad's memoirs (1991) were enlightening. In 1908, what was then called a 'lunatic asylum', was built nearby in Whitchurch. This proved a useful point of allusion for this project: the tradition of the lunatic (etymologically, a person altered by the moon) could be an apt reference for our werewolves. It remains a psychiatric hospital to this day, its distinctive Edwardian tower a notable landmark in the area. The hospital once had its own farm and slaughterhouse (again, potentially apt for our horror narrative). Broad's account is driven by anecdotes, both amusing and dramatic (such as the fact that a fire damaged Forest Farm during the Second World War), in order to bring the Forest Farm district of the last century to life.

Broad's account takes an uncanny shift when he mentions the Forest Farm 'ghost'. Significantly, the reputed ghost is not, aptly, the spirit of a milkmaid or an escaped lunatic: Forest Farm is haunted by a roaring lion. There are no indigenous lions in Wales, yet this legend draws on the Welsh tradition of strange animal sightings, its roar vying with the cacophonous cry of the nation's mythic dragons. Alternatively, the lion may be the angry spirit of nature squeezed between the city and the industrialized valleys. Whatever the genesis of the phantom lion, the legend demonstrated a quality we had already detected in Forest Farm: as an uncanny realm, it conjures up thoughts of ferocious beasts. To this end, for our



public festivity we decided to let the lion slumber and draw on an iconic monster more familiarly associated with popular Halloween: the werewolf.

Extensive visits to Forest Farm facilitated planning and mapping of the walkthrough. The site is maze-like, with paths twining around a well, a large courtyard and various farm buildings, while other pathways snake past ponds, foliage and woodland that feature many trees that are centuries old. Eventually, a specific route was decided on and timed. The accurate timing of the walkthrough without stories enables us to have a sense of each scene's duration. Precise timing is an all-important process to ensure that the performances run smoothly without any delay that would impact on the performers. Large-scale Halloween shows need to be slick so that the audience is carried through the experience coherently and the ensemble is on cue. This part of planning is logistical more than creative: measuring distances and time; considering points-of-view and access.<sup>4</sup>

### **Team and Process: Structuring and Developing the Halloween Experience**

The Halloween experience would feature eight key stopping points/scenes in addition to framing devices. After this skeleton structure was established, we could plan the stories and design the atmosphere of our Halloween experience. To this end, our core team of forty performers entered into a rigorous process of training and rehearsal that would allow them to specialise in one of a number of roles:

- Writers
- Storytellers/Guides
- Character performers and movement performers
- Technical designers and assistants
- Stage managers and ushers

Our cluster of **writers** conducted research, exploring legends of werewolves in general and Welsh ones in particular. The writers investigated a wide range of texts from the *Mabinogion* and Celtic myths to local history and urban legends. They watched films about lycanthropy. Next, the writers and the **storyteller/guide** group learned how to tell stories, drawing on Amy Spaulding (2011) and Richard Hand and Michael Wilson (2016). The storytelling concentrated on suspense and the uncanny, sitting in a circle by candlelight to recount urban legends, ghost stories and personal experiences. Participants learnt how to develop narratives

that were eerie, thrilling and even amusing through crafted evocation. Next, we worked on structuring narratives, including detail and ‘colour’ to engage all types of listeners.

Determinant factors such as duration, atmosphere and formula were mastered. We also worked on humour, in the Grand-Guignol tradition of *douche écossaise*: making listeners laugh within horror can be a moment of reprieve, or a devious way to disarm them prior to the next shock. The training of our storytellers was emphatically designed to be in a ‘trickster’ tradition. Appositely, there is also a trickster tradition to the werewolf as Stypczynski reveals when he distinctively draws on Jungian theory to pronounce the ‘inextricably linked’ association between the trickster and the shape-shifter and lycanthrope (2013: 10).

After this, we worked with our **character and movement performers** to dramatize these stories – or pieces inspired by them – into spatial contexts, leading groups of volunteers on walkthroughs on campus. Gradually, our stories and the overarching narrative began to take shape. Meanwhile, movement performers undertook dance workshops.<sup>5</sup> This was particularly pertinent when we knew that two of the narrative stages required ensemble movement: the ‘Moon Ritual’ and the ‘Final Transformation Scene’. We explored aspects of the highly structured for the hypnotically rhythmic patterns of arcane ritual to the wild and chaotic moments of entranced transformation. This put into practice the duality that exists in the werewolf that Patricia MacCormack argues as the ‘oxymoronic’ relationship between lycanthropic individuals and packs (2013: 305). In our Halloween cycle, similar dualities would exist between individually recounted stories and structured ensemble sequences.

Meanwhile, the **technical designers** and their **assistants** made trips to the location to assess technical requirements, including stage lighting to be placed inside the farm buildings and outdoor lanterns, and other handheld torches that might be required by the performers. For a public performance with a large cast taking place in the outdoors at night, care was taken to ensure everything was safe without compromising the necessary Halloween atmosphere. Therefore, the **stage managers and ushers** had a key role from the beginning of the process, overseeing all component groups and ensuring that all would cohere successfully. The stage managers had an overview of the event, liaising with the council the arrival of the audience and the subsequent smooth running of the experience. They would also have an integral role in resetting the performance, the ensemble relying on their strict scheduling. The ushers were assigned particular ‘zones’ of the walkthrough and observe the

audience (ready if any spectator needed to be escorted safely away), and smoothly hand over to the next usher when their section was complete.

### ***Werewolves: the Narrative Journey***

The best stories change in the retelling, the most successful trickster-like storytellers meld and merge their accounts, working with their captive audience. Therefore, we will not transcribe the recounted tales here as ‘verbatim script’, but indicate the structure that the teller embellished and the audience’s experience. Through this account of a Practice-as-Research event, we will see an approach to creating brand new ancient legends.

### **STAGE 1: Arrival and Anticipation**

The audience arrives at the Forest Farm carpark and are led by lantern down the closed public thoroughfare. On one occasion, a toad crawling across the path to the shock of some visitors is an unexpected but invaluable impromptu moment. Indeed, this surprise amphibian



**Figure 2: Forest Farm (daytime): the farmhouse**

performer was a shock for the ensemble as much as the public; in the open air context of the nature reserve it is impossible to control every environmental factor and reaction. At such a moment, nature and context melded into the fabric of our storytelling, providing evocative texture and detail. Turning the corner, the audience witnesses the

farmhouse (Figure 2), its windows illuminated in eerie light (Figure 3). The audience queues alongside the building (Figure 4), focusing on the gate that will be their entrance. The



audience stands at the threshold of experience: like a theme-park turnstile, or the Dantean ‘Abandon Hope’ gateway, there is a boundary between known-world security and the realms of dark fantasy.

However, the experience had already started as evidenced

in one spectral moment: the lantern of the guide chatting informally to the queue momentarily illuminates the ‘Farmer’: a be-suited man with a flower as purple as wolfsbane in his lapel.

Only a minority detect the ‘apparition’ but those who do discuss it, causing a mood of



**Figure 4: Forest Farm (daytime): turning the corner...**

**Figure 3: Forest Farm (Halloween): the farmhouse**

disquiet: in an immersive performance, point-of-view is more selective than dictated but even those who ‘missed it’ become aware of others’ comments about this ‘ghost’. Once all is ready, the council make a health and safety speech:

Please, you must stick together and keep to the path... It’s Halloween and anything can happen...! If you need to leave, the ushers will escort you to safety.

This is an example of how preshow regulations can have a calculated effect in creating a mood of foreboding. Once again this showed the influence of theme-park rides and the Grand-Guignol, which used framing gimmicks like house doctors and a host, dressed all in black, who talked to the audience before they entered (Antona-Traversi 1933: 33).



**Figure 5: The first storytellers... (Luke Rose and Jacqueline Stewart)**

## **STAGE 2: Crossing the Threshold**

The gate creaks open and the audience enters the Farm. A nook of saplings





**Figure 6: ‘The story of Forest Farm...’ (Luke Rose)**

forms a natural cage and the audience are led inside. Two storytellers greet the crowd and recount the story of the Farm (Figures 5 and 6). A seemingly factual account of the farm’s owners, the Sullivans (a deliberately fictional invented name), begins to shift into the uncanny: the audience is told of a fire that happened in the 1940s (which, as some locals might know, *did* happen) that killed all the residents (in fact, no-one died). This was an example of effective uncanny storytelling: the real becomes gradually distorted. During Halloween, the truth need not get in the way of a creepy story. After this tragedy, when the farm was rebuilt, Mr Sullivan was seen working on the farm, well-dressed ‘in a suit with a purple flower’, despite

‘official records’ reporting that his corpse was found in the ashes. Depending on where they stand, some audience members might have caught another glimpse of the Farmer: at one point, he wanders past the sapling nook. Some of the audience is being misdirected into a ghost story. This deliberate misdirection is an effective storytelling device: the audience can be misled as a way to build up greater surprise when the uncanny payoff occurs. A similar device features in *Grand-Guignol* and subsequent popular horror that deploy ‘red herrings’. On this night, the audience is being prepared for a spectral vision, only to have the paw of the werewolf on their shoulder.

### STAGE 3: DEEPER INTO DARKNESS



**Figure 7: Forest Farm (daytime): entering the bower...**



**Figure 8: The distressed young man in the bower... (Matthew Fenton)**



**Figure 9: He turns his back...**

been mauled (Figure 9). The wound might be a clue as to what is to come: only one kind of creature could have caused those slash marks... The fact this remains unsaid is a storytelling

The audience is led out of the nook and a jovial storyteller leads them on a short walk, through a hedge opening into a small, enclosed area with a bower (Figure 7). The storyteller continues the history of the Farm, describing the types of produce Forest Farm was famous for... Suddenly, in a 'jump scare' moment, a person appears behind him wearing a white tee-shirt (Figure 8). The man is distressed: 'I can't believe you let them come here – on this night of all nights...! With children too!' The storyteller apologises to the audience and asks the stranger who he is. 'I was on the last tour...!' This created a sense of 'story cycle', an example of contemporary myth-making. The stranger then turns to the audience and begs them to flee as he staggers away. The audience gasps as they see his back: he seems to have



**Figure 10: Forest Farm (daytime): the well**

technique that permits a plot to begin to germinate within a spectator's mind, rather than making everything explicit. Suddenly, another storyteller assures us that everything is fine: 'Let's carry on with our tour...'

#### **STAGE 4: THE WISHING WELL**

The storyteller leads the audience over to a well (Figure 10). Eerie light vivifies the looming trees. Two storytellers tell the 'Story of the Well' (Figures 11-13). They invite people to take a drink before pointing out that the well is sealed with an iron hatch and



**Figure 11: The story of the well... (Christopher Hollier)**



**Figure 12: The story of the well... (Jonathan Holder)**

chains. They recount how a bullied teenager drank the water and made a wish to become strong enough to fight back. The next morning, he awoke in his bed with no memory of getting home (here, the storyteller targets an audience member: ‘We’ve all had nights like that, haven’t we?’, which always gets a laugh). Just as the Grand-Guignol focused on possible monsters (i.e. deranged humanity), this storyteller’s joke locates horror in a real world of alcohol and aggressive masculinity. This also resonates with the werewolf narrative that is emerging. Dana Oswald argues that werewolves are ‘hypermasculine’ monsters that ‘exhibit traits of excessive masculine gender, a gender that

is reinforced and sometimes necessitated by the nature of the monstrous body’ (2013: 347). At this point we are beginning to detect the sense of a masculine monster, stalking a ‘real’ world of bullying, revenge and memory loss. However, as the evening proceeds, the gender dynamic will become more nuanced.

The storytellers tell us that the protagonist returns to school where he learns that one of his bullies has been killed by a terrifying beast. Each morning the teenager wakes up with no memory of the night before. He usually awakes in his bed, but sometimes he comes back into consciousness in strange places like that barn just behind the audience... The attacks of the beast continue, night after night. When all his tormentors are dead, the teenager assumes it will stop. But it does not. There are more and more attacks. This seems to imply that the



attacks occur beyond the cycles of the moon. This may seem to break one of the foundations of the werewolf myth, but as despite the arcane lunar associations, according to Chantal Bourgault du Coudray:

(It) was not until the Universal Wolf Man films of the 1940s that the werewolf's transformation was stressed as being subject to the rising of the full moon. (2006: 78)

In the story of the well, the protagonist realises his wish is now a curse. Taking another drink to undo his wish, he falls into the well. After this tragedy, an iron hatch was put into place. People have heard scratching and growling... *Listen carefully...* (a moment of silence in



**Figure 13: The story of the well... (Christopher Hollier)**

which the trees rustle uncannily). The seemingly sealed hatch is, in fact, unlocked so the storytellers lift it a few inches and slam it shut, the iron echoing loudly. The cacophony momentarily overloads the senses of the audience, disorienting them and signalling the explosive energy of the werewolf. After the nervous laughter has subsided, in another

'jump scare' the next guide greets everyone with a bright and breezy 'Hello!' While the man in the ripped tee-shirt was a jump

moment of suspense, this was disarmingly comic. This is another example of the Grand-Guignolian *douche écossaise*: partly a moment of light relief, it also had an important experiential function: regardless of the disarmingly cheerful guide, the audience must now be aware – with disquiet or delight – that they



**Figure 14: Forest Farm (daytime): the open area with brazier**



are straying into the territory of lycanthropy.



**Figure 15: Left and right, the gypsies with lanterns and knives commence their ritual. In hi-vis jacket, Gareth Stamp (Chief Park Ranger who commissioned the show grins in delight)**

## **STAGE 5: THE GYPSY CURSE**

The cheerful guide leads the audience down a path to an open area (Figure 14) with a group of ‘gypsies’ encircling a brazier with a lantern inside.<sup>6</sup>

Brandishing lanterns and knives, the gypsies spring into a ritual (Figure 15). The

gypsies draw on archetypes as in Universal’s *The Wolf Man*: these are not ‘real’ gypsies but playful stereotypes,

immersing audiences into the world of popular, doom-laden horror. There are a few moments of amusing banter with the audience, wherein the gypsies look for appropriate ‘subjects’ for their moonlit ritual, rejecting various candidates for being ‘too young...’ or ‘too unhealthy...’



**Figure 16: The victim chained to the crossbeam...  
(Scott Ridley)**

Suddenly, it becomes clear that they have already selected their ‘victim’ when light illuminates a young man chained to the crossbeam of a work-shed (Figure 16). The gypsies’ incantation seems to exacerbate his transmutation (a powerfully

managed physical performance). Breaking the circle, one of the gypsy women applies a pattern of (stage) blood on the victim's forehead and his transformation reaches a climax as he snarls and howls. The actor used physical theatre skills with a visceral intensity that was more thrilling than CGI or traditional special effects. The transformation was organic and 'real', shifting from delirium to seizure to a cold mood of malicious intent (Figure 17). The performance was reminiscent of the theatrical transformations required in Grand-Guignol denouements (where a character descends into madness); or in the remarkable virtuosity demonstrated in John Barrymore's transformation in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (John S. Robertson 1920). Amidst the audience's growing mood of unnerved excitement, the guide tells them to move into the courtyard.



**Figure 17: He stares hungrily at the audience as he transforms... (Scott Ridley)**

## **STAGE 6: THE MOON RITUAL**

The audience walks onto the courtyard's patterned cobblestones (Figures 18 and 19) and a new guide closes the gate behind the audience, which – in another arresting sonic moment like the well's iron cover – groans shut and then reverberates loudly. In the courtyard are a group of eight dancers in green caped gowns who have been dancing for a few minutes before the audience arrive. Indeed, audience may have already heard their pounding feet for



**Figure 18: Forest Farm (daytime): the courtyard**



**Figure 19: Forest Farm (daytime): the courtyard cobblestones**

some minutes, creating a sense of anticipation and, once again, an ongoing 'cycle' of narrative. Heavily rhythmic, they circle and intertwine. This is the Moon Ritual dance (Figures 20-22). While the dance becomes more urgent, the guide explains that legend asserts that the locality is perfect for werewolves. Moving the audience closer to the dancers, it is explained that ritual is an attempt to stop the lycanthropic transformations. Shockingly, the dancers start to transform, screaming in anguish. The guide panics: 'It isn't working! We have to leave!' The audience hurries out, the gate crashing behind them.





**Figures 20-22: The Moon Ritual Dance**



**Figure 23: The Farmer... (Nathan Vaccari)**

#### **STAGE 7: TOWARDS THE FINAL DESTINATION...**

Led away rapidly, the audience passes the gypsies who look anxiously into the crowd, searching for their evidently escaped victim. The hitherto headlong narrative now seems to be



**Figure 24: The final story in the barn...**

backtracking as we return on ourselves. This 'cycle' has the effect of putting us under the spotlight: is the monster hiding among us? Is it one of us? Soon afterwards as we are led towards the woods and some glimpse the gypsy's victim prowling in the undergrowth. We move past deserted livestock sheds – the Farmer, close and personal

now, stares at us malevolently as we walk by (Figure 23). We enter a large building: an old barn, this is now a birdwatch with discreet viewing-points in its walls. Three guides appear and tell us the final story (Figure 24) about how the Farmer's daughter went to the meadows

on moonlit nights. In her favourite pink dress, the girl spent all night in the fields. We suddenly hear a scream outside and the guides draw the audience to look out at the meadow (Figure 25). We see a woman in a pink dress staggering in the darkness, she screams again and is gradually surrounded by six transformed werewolves (performers wearing masks) (Figure 26). The pink dress creates a strong visual reference in the darkness, picking up torchlight effectively where – in the pitch black of the environment – the pink seems a vivid red. This was a conscious allusion to wolf folklore such as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ and horror film finales such as *Don’t Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg 1973). With the disarming enthusiasm of a naturalist like David Attenborough, one of the guides exclaims:

Don’t panic, we’re perfectly safe...  
What an amazing thing to witness...!  
The legends must be true!



**Figure 25: Forest Farm (daytime): the meadow and ponds**

For the audience there is a dilemma: as a voyeur to what looks like becoming a horrific scene,



should we stand still? We have suspended our disbelief, of course, but what are we about to witness? In one of the challenges of immersive performance, the conventional ‘line’ or proscenium has been broached and we are complicit and our marginal view can become central. However,

**Figure 26: The girl (Jemma Scott) surrounded by the werewolves...**



‘hypermasculine’ and yet she also signals how monstrous hypermasculinity can reveal ‘the fragility of the category of masculinity and the ways in which such masculinity may be



**Figure 27: Run for your lives....!**

feminized in its  
hypersexuality’ (2013:  
350). In addition, this  
female werewolf alludes  
to feminist revisions of  
the masculine werewolf,  
as well as the revision of  
‘Little Red Riding  
Hood’ as a warning  
against the sexuality of  
young women. The  
encroaching monsters  
before us are a blurred

mixture of gender but are entirely lycanthropic. Together they howl, snarl and even *roar* like the fabled lion ghost. Suddenly, the werewolves turn from the woman come towards us (Figure 27). While the werewolves snarl through the window, there is a sudden commotion inside the shelter. One of the guides starts to transform in our midst. Mayhem! The werewolves howl and pound the shelter. We flee the shelter and through the large farm gate to find... The Farmer... who smiles warmly and holds out a bucket of candy saying ‘Happy Halloween!’ The show is over.

## **Conclusion**

When the cycle of Halloween performances is over, what is left? In writing about the Slender Man, Shira Chess explores how ‘individuals construct, debug, and de-construct a newly forming horror monster... (as a way to) examine ways that generic form is negotiated both through social action and pre-established expectations’ (2011: 376). Our Halloween performance also demonstrated a vibrant discourse between the social process of creation and experience; and the pre-established expectations and conventions of a Halloween performance. In Chess’s exploration we witness a remarkable twenty-first century phenomenon wherein ‘online spaces created a hyper sped-up version of storytelling that took place over weeks what might have ordinarily occurred over centuries’ (2011: 390). Although



infinitely more modest, our immersive performance project presented a microcosm of a similar phenomenon and was, arguably, an example of Practice-as-Research at its most efficacious. A large ensemble worked intensively over a few weeks deploying a full range of processes and techniques drawn from folkloric research, cinematic analysis, Grand-Guignol theatre, storytelling and dance along with expert technical and stage management support. The project exploited the darkness and disorientation of the commission's locale, taking the audience from light into the shadows. The process refined its narrative to create a rich experience, weaving and creating, honing and (aptly) *sharpening* this night of lycanthropy. The audiences walked into a mythic world of folklore and popular horror culture, and were drawn into their own movie, into their own cycle of legend. Stypczynski argues that in some examples of werewolf culture, the lycanthrope:

...represents a crossing of boundaries. It serves to question and reify the social structures that police transgressive acts, and it provides a vicarious psychological release valve for the shadow. (2013: 14)

For Halloween, the known world is turned upside down and in the most dangerous of carnivals, we encounter anxieties and embodied monsters. We aimed for our Halloween audiences to be frightened and thrilled by this experience and enjoy the cathartic and adrenaline-fuelled journey as they endure – and survive – an immersive tale of terror.

As an example of impact and outreach, *Werewolves*, the 2015 Halloween event, was a great success. Audience response was overwhelmingly positive: for individuals, families or students on their way to late night Halloween parties, the event struck a balance between lots of laughter and suspense with some legitimately genuine scares. Each story-stage succeeded in luring and leading the audience deeper into a labyrinthine experience. This, along with an effective technical design, transformed a nature reserve into something uncanny, mysterious and playfully frightening for a Halloween festivity. In so doing, we made a night of werewolves for a public Halloween: we made a brand new ancient legend, researching folklore and the stereotypes of a genre to create a fully experiential voyage, an immersive and celebratory journey.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author – formerly Professor of Theatre and Media Drama at the University of South Wales – has co-written three books on Grand-Guignol theatre (2002, 2007 and 2016) and explores the genre in theory and practice in both research and pedagogical contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> A short film of the *Ghosts* event is here: <http://tinyurl.com/zwxxygnr> and the USW Halloween is cited internationally between Stockholm and New York City in *Future Index* which identifies trends and inspiration for universities, employers and students: <http://tinyurl.com/j7yjs29>

<sup>3</sup> Despite the etymological root of *were-wulf* (Anglo-Saxon for ‘man-wolf’), the werewolf has evolved into a helpfully non-gendered term.

<sup>4</sup> Despite the logistical functionality of this stage, during one visit a rather surprising encounter occurred: a man arrived and joined us on our survey. He explained that he had lived in the Farm when it was partly used as a hostel for a long period in the 1980s. When we explained we were preparing the Halloween event he smiled, adding ‘There are loads of spirits here I can tell you. *Loads of them...*’ For the creative team, such moments of encounter began to build a folklore around the process itself!

<sup>5</sup> We are extremely grateful to Matthew Gough, Head of Dance at the University of South Wales for leading these.

<sup>6</sup> For health and safety reasons, a proposed real fire was forbidden.

<sup>7</sup> A short, impressionistic film of the *Werewolves* event can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/jsbrxh7>

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