

A Brief History of Northern Nightmares

Greetings Halloween-O-Philes, Fans and Freaks! Here, you'll find everything you ever wanted to know - and maybe didn't care to know - about Zelenople and Harmony's annual Halloween Festival.

Ever hear of The Strand Theater, Zelenople's landmark cinema, built in 1914? Well, it's the reason that Northern Nightmares was created. The Strand had been vacant and decayed for nearly 25 years, but for the last 8, the non-profit Strand Theater Initiative has been working to revive the former one-screen movie house as a state of the art performing arts, education and community outreach center. That vision was finally realized with the completion of the first phase of construction, allowing The Strand to reopen to the public on July 16th, 2009. Of course, there's much more work to be done and you can learn all there is to know about this group by visiting their web site: www.TheStrandTheater.Org

There's a 'donate' button right there on the main page, so feel free to throw money at us at any time. The first phase of construction is done, but we have a long way to go and every little bit helps.

In the Spring of 2005, a group of Strand Volunteers were mulling over ways to raise money for the theater, when a few sick, twisted Halloween freaks realized that - with the exception of Cheeseman's Fright Farm (which is awesome) the area was bereft of haunted attractions in October. We wanted to raise money for The Strand, but we wanted to have fun doing it.

We knew we didn't have the resources to build a professional-level haunt, or even an amateurish one for that matter. We just didn't have the manpower to build and staff it. So we brainstormed on how could do something cool, keep it family-friendly, but still raise a few hackles on peoples' necks.

One of the volunteers happened to be perusing a copy of 'Weird, NJ' and stumbled on an ad for candlelight, walking ghost tours of Cape May, NJ. We'd also heard about similar tours in Gettysburg and thought it would be a great idea to do a tour of reported haunted locations in Zelenople and Harmony. Originally, we thought a horse drawn carriage - or even a hearse - would be the best possible mode of transportation for such a tour. But time and expense made that prohibitive. Then we heard about a group that had just finished restoring a 1947 Harmony Short Line Bus, which we thought would be perfect. We researched areas that were rumored to be haunted and found several that were located in publicly accessible areas.

We also thought, since we're renovating a theater, that we should find a place to screen classic monster movies. We'd already done that in October of 2004 on The Strand's rear lawn to help raise money for flood victims from Hurricane Ivan. But the fall weather made the notion of an outdoor film series dicey, so we talked to the owners of the newly opened Beecher's

Cafe. They were delighted to help us out and offered their balcony seating area from which to run the movies. WPXI even gave us permission to use the classic "Chiller Theater" name and our Monster Movie Marathon was born.

Finally, we wanted to have some live entertainment, so we contacted local dance schools. We thought they'd like to promote their schools by performing Halloween-themed dance programs near the bus stop to keep patrons entertained while they waited for the next tour. The Solid MOLD Dancers were born!

Everything was coming together nicely. Diane Smith of Harmony Colours designed us an appropriately creepy logo and the Northern Nightmares Festival featuring The Nightmare Tour, Chiller Theater and The Solid MOLD Dancers was coming together.

Still, something was missing. After all, we were trying to raise money for The Strand, yet The Strand wasn't even part of the festival. The movies moved to Beecher's and - even though there's a hard and fast rule that EVERY theater has to have a ghost, as far as we knew, we didn't have one.

Light bulb.

Why not have a creative writing contest where people tell US about a legend of a spectre that haunts The Strand? Then we'd use the winning entry as the finale of The Nightmare Tour in which riders would come face to face with the tortured - if fictional - spirit. It was an inspired suggestion and the writing contest has been a centerpiece of Northern Nightmares since its inception. After all, if a theater can have one ghost, why not several?

There have been a few changes over the years. The Harmony Bus no longer had proper insurance to carry passengers, so we now partner with Lenzner Motor Coach for a Trolley. The Trolley Stop has moved a couple times and is now located NEXT to the Fright Fest Tent at the corner of Rt. 19 (Main St.) and Rt. 68 (Grandview Ave).

We've also added a variety of activities under the Fright Fest Tent. Sure, we still have The Solid Mold Dancers, but we also have Ghost Story readings from the creative writing contest. We have live bands play, and of course, The UN-Beauty Pageant is a costume contest NOT to be missed! Watch this space for more announcements and info.

So we hope you come out and enjoy our annual festival, which grows a little bigger each year. We take a very tongue-in-cheek approach to the season and keep it family-friendly with just a few things here and there that might go 'bump' in the night....which is why we like to warn you to BE VERY AFRAID.....or not.