

## THEATER BEAT

## Ho ho horrors: a very macabre Christmas

If you like your humor served black, "A Very Grand Guignol Christmas" offers a refreshingly adults-only alternative to perennial holiday froth. Following in the macabre tradition of the notorious French theater that pioneered the modern horror genre, the show alternates gruesome violence and farce, performed with panache, fierce determination, and impressive physical dexterity by the local self-styled "Andre de Lorde's Grand Guignolers de Paris."

The Guignolers are led not by Guignol dramatist de Lorde but by dell'arte and movement specialist Debbie McMahon, who directs and performs in this co-production with the L.A. Physical Theatre Arts Festival. McMahon's environmental staging sets out to re-create the ambience of 1930s Paris (at the peak of Guignol popularity). Early visitors are regaled by six vaguely sinister clowns and a pre-show demonstration of absinthe preparation — complete with flaming sugar cube — conducted in French.

At the show's core are two authentic short plays from the Guignol oeuvre, performed in a deliberately over-the-top (though not campy) style typical

of the period. Both pieces underscore the Guignol's significance as harbinger of the upended morality and dark psychological alleyways that remain horror staples. "These Cornfields" is vaudevillian slapstick about a smug optimist (Ramy Eleteby) who becomes the punching bag in increasingly violent feuding between a married couple (Jeremy Guskin, Dani O'Terry).

No good deed goes unpunished in "The Laboratory of Hallucinations," a classic Guignol melodrama of jealousy, revenge and madness involving a pallid asylum doctor (Kevin Dulude) who experiments on a patient (Ruthie Frank) by peeling away layers of brain tissue to explore the boundaries of sanity. Suspecting his wife (Tina Van Berckelaer) of infidelity, he exacts vengeance on the cranium of her hapless lover (Gary Karp).

Gory special effects notwithstanding, the evening's most artful elements are original creations drawing on the origins of Guignol as a medieval puppet character. McMahon performs the ballet of a life-size (i.e., "Grand") marionette whose all-too-brief liberation from her strings is set to Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre" and later mans



MARK BENNINGTON Grand Guignolers.

**BLACK HUMOR:** Michael Serwitch and Debbie McMahon star in "A Very Grand Guignol Christmas."

a wickedly funny hand-puppet romance about a *jeune fille* who loses her head to a Gaulois-puffing Lothario.

Tightly choreographed opening and closing ensemble numbers inventively mix frenetic Jazz Age dance and Moulin Rouge chorus steps with an underlying sense of impending doom — inviting us to ponder the unsettling connections between the psychic undercurrents of an era and its popular art.

— PHILIP BRANDES

"A Very Grand Guignol Christmas," Art/Works Theatre, 6569 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. 8:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Ends Dec. 22. \$15-\$25. (323) 871-1912. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes.