

## Grand Guignolers du Paris are bloody good at carnage

**C**HIPPER, holly-berry red — that's a heart-warming color for decking the halls this Christmas season. But blood red, gushing geyser-like from trepanned skulls, gouged eye sockets and liberated jugulars — that's how you celebrate "A Very Grand Guignol Christmas."

A suspense-driven French theatrical genre born in 1897 (*morte* by 1962), *Grand Guignol* (roughly translated as "big" — as in life-sized, as in people — "puppet show") combined melodrama with baroquely gory effects to create a wildly popular, cathartically visceral brand of theater that helped set the stage for horror films to come. It comes screaming back to life this Saturday, when "A Very Grand Guignol Christmas" inaugurates the first Physical Theater Festival at Art/Works.

Later festival performances will feature clowning duo Ten West (think commedia dell'arte and Charlie Chaplin, not balloon animals) and super-mime Mitchel Evans (think touches of Cirque du Soleil and performance art). But this weekend's doozy comes courtesy of the Grand Guignolers du Paris in an evening centered on "The Laboratory of Hallucinations," a horrific little number about a mad scientist conducting, um, invasive experiments. In keeping with the original European presentations — which incorporated sharp emotional swings for maximum histrionics — "Labo-

ratory" gets paired with the brief but frenetic marital farce "These Cornfields." And just to keep things festive, director/big puppet emcee Debbie McMahon has also woven in unorthodox "Nutcracker" references involving unhinged marionettes.

But wait. "McMahon" doesn't sound very *du Paris*. "We're playing with fictionalizing the whole event," says the director.

### A VERY GRAND GUIGNOL CHRISTMAS

**WHERE:** Art/Works Performance Space, 6569 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood

**WHEN:** 8:30 p.m. Sat., 7 p.m. Sun., regular performance schedule 8:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat. Ends Dec. 22

**PRICE:** \$15-\$25

**INFO:** For complete festival listings, call (323) 871-1912 or visit [www.grandguignolers.com](http://www.grandguignolers.com)

Billing themselves as a touring Parisian troupe, the Guignolers intend to lend Art/Works a 1930s speak-easy vibe, with real Gypsy jazz musicians, faux French bios and costume-clad ushers. Before the performance, an absinthe fairy will concoct batches of that infamous elixir.

Full immersion — in the body and in the moment — is key to physical theater, says event organizer Olya Petrokova-Brown. "It's the language of energy, a palpable energy and it's very organic, although I wouldn't say it's necessarily natural. The natural tendency of human beings is to move in a way that takes less energy. When actors emulate that, it becomes less

and less interesting to watch."

Trained at the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theater in Northern California, McMahon became entranced with this acting approach's grand gestures and striking tableaux as well as its knack for imparting a menacing tension. "It's satisfying not only to watch, but to perform," says McMahon.

"It's more kinetic than most theater. We're creating pictures, montages in space."

With this penchant for spectacle, McMahon and her festival cohorts are taking the opportunity to indulge what's "theatrical about the theater," she says — like a judicious (and unsettling) fracturing of the fourth wall, and, of course, the aforementioned

carnage.

"Doing these special effects live is much more effective than I even imagined," she says. "It's great to watch people watching us. They are stunned. They think we're not going to do it."

"But we do," she promises.

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"It's satisfying not only to watch, but to perform," says director-performer Debbie McMahon. Michael Serwitch is the puppeteer.