

Newsday (Melville, NY) OCT-06 Fascination with fright: Celebrate wretched excess.
COPYRIGHT 2006 Newsday

Fascination with fright: Celebrate wretched excess.

Publication: Newsday (Melville, NY)
Publication Date: 31-OCT-06

COPYRIGHT 2006 Newsday

Byline: Denise Flaim

Oct. 31--Corey Minion is a 40-something guy with a house in the Cleveland suburbs, a baby on the way, and a day job that has something to do with medical software. And then there is his basement. Banished there at the request of his wife is the inventory for the side business that he runs from his site, minionsweb.com. Among the Halloween sundries it offers: webbers -- industrial-strength glue guns that use compressed air to shoot out gooey faux cobwebs; air cannons -- motion-activated booming props that deliver bursts of air to unsuspecting trick-or-treaters; flickering cemetery signs and "u-paint" foam tombstones. "I get to scare the snot out of little kids," Minion says of the holiday's appeal. "I get to give them that big, wide-eyed look when they're trying to navigate from the sidewalk to my front door. And their reward is a little bit of candy and some fond memories." His goal may be ever so humble, but there's not much else that's small-bore about Halloween these days. Once the domain of trick-or-treaters, the day has become, for young and old, one of the biggest holidays on the calendar -- and the second-largest decorating holiday after Christmas. Every age finds reasons to embrace this true festival of inversion, which allows us to turn pristine front lawns into cemeteries and soccer moms into Elviras, if just for one night. With no modern religious connection -- unless you count those long-ago Celts and the Samhain celebration that provided the pagan germ of the holiday -- Halloween endures. Some of the motivation is lighthearted. (When will those boomers grow up?) Some is a bit more macabre, like our willingness to at least make a curtsy in the inevitable dance with death. Billions and billions

Halloween infiltrates the aisles of CVS, where gauze-wrapped mummies beckon amid the Jolly Ranchers and Twizzlers. It creeps into home decor, from Martha Stewart's preciously themed magazines to McMansions outfitted with stretchy cobwebs. The National Retail Federation predicts consumers will spend \$4.96 billion this Halloween, compared to \$3.29 billion a year ago -- an increase the group attributes to "a surge in celebrating."

Even continental Europeans, never big pumpkin carvers, are donning costumes and handing out chocolate with such growing fervor that last year one small-town Austrian mayor called for a boycott of what he labeled a "bad American habit." Halloween has had its fair share of backlashes, most recently from conservative Christians who reject it as "Satan's feast day," and instead organize "harvest parties" to sidestep the occult and gore. Fear of being smote from earthly quarters informed the biggest setback in the holiday's history: In 1982, some Tylenol bottles were tampered with and their contents laced with cyanide, leading consumers to fret over the possibility that Halloween candy was next. But Halloween opportunists took fears of things like razor-rigged apples and turned them into cider. "There was a dramatic fall in the amount of trick or treating, but at that moment a lot of people saw an opportunity for alternate events for children and adolescents," says Nicholas Rogers, author of "Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night" (Oxford University Press, \$18.95) and chair of the history department at York University in Toronto. As the 1980s progressed, "the community haunted house appeared, with 2,000 of them at its peak." It was only a goblin jump from there to the

very 1990s idea of house decorating for a frisson of excitement within your own white-picketed empire.

After the national tragedy of 9/11, "there was some concern in the press about do we need fake scares when we've just had this terrible one," Rogers says. "But people said 'no, the show must go on.'" He says Halloween's greatest strength is its ability to meld with the zeitgeist, even amplify it. In the 1970s, the holiday became a colorful posterboard for gay culture and up-front sexuality, and its most famous display was, and continues to be, the annual Greenwich Village parade, where clothing is often optional. In the 1980s, the celebrations spread to college campuses, and then beyond: Even fusty Washington, D.C., is home to a costume promenade on East Capitol Street, a stone's throw from the corridors of power. How many kids? Those in the trenches say it's hard to measure Halloween's ebbs and flows from year to year. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the estimated number of potential 5- to 13-year-old trick-or-treaters in 2005 declined by 284,000 from the year before. And this year, hard-core haunters like Minion say the retail stores offered a less than stellar inventory, though his own business has never been better. Jack Santino, author of "All Around the Year: Holidays and Celebrations in American Life" (University of Illinois Press, \$13.50), says that using commercial barometers to measure a holiday that is entirely about creativity and self-realization can be misleading. Certainly, he says, Halloween's popularity has increased dramatically in his lifetime, thanks to the usual suspects, that demographic-bending postwar crowd. "I honestly think that a lot of things boomers enjoyed as children they didn't grow out of. It's a way in which a generation said to itself, this was fun, and why should we give it up?" One of the reasons Halloween is even more attractive to adults is that the pressure is off, Santino says. "Despite all the consumerism, despite all the candy and material stuff, one thing people always say about Halloween is it one of the least commercialized holidays. There's no gift-giving tradition, no social pressure. People just don't have this sense that I have to go out and shop and buy stuff and invite family." Because it asks nothing of us, Halloween is the ultimate blank slate. "Halloween always has room for everybody," Rogers says. "For children, it's a great time for fantasizing and dressing up. For communities, it's a time for neighborhood conviviality. And for older groups, it can be somewhat sexually charged" -- no surprise, then, that among the top 10 Yahoo! costume searches this month were "sexy" fairies and witches, as well as Playboy Bunnies and belly dancers. But behind even the most lighthearted -- or libidinous -- scary costumes and decoration is the realization that we are all headed, ultimately, to the most permanent transfiguration of all. All the holidays props -- the cheesy skeletons, the wind-battered ghosts -- wink at that mortality. And perhaps now more than ever, we seek to confront that blurry line between life and death. "Our cultural relationship with death is at an interesting point -- it's very casual," says Montana Miller, an assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, pointing to shows such as the recently departed HBO funeral series "Six Feet Under" and Sci Fi's serio-comic "Dead Like Me." "You die on those shows, but you come back as a ghost," she says. "There's a sense that death maybe is not so permanent, or so scary." Exhibit B, says Miller, are high-school defensive driving programs where grim reapers are anything but. In these re-enactments of car crashes, the hooded figure is a popular feature, going from classroom to classroom to claim his victims. "Instead of a whole lot of fear, I saw more a sense of fun and interaction," says Miller, who did her dissertation on the phenomenon. "Kids were like, 'Hey, pick me! I want to die!' And in the end, under the grim reaper's cloak is really your football captain." On the Internet, Miller adds, there is what she calls "blogging from beyond," when "people who have MySpace or Facebook blogs suddenly die, and their friends continue to visit their blogs and leave messages for them, writing them very casual letters about what happened at school today." A holiday steeped in irony, Halloween is at home straddling this line between life and death, real and imagined, right side up and upside down. "Halloween is supposed to be scary -- despite all attempts to control it, there's always a sense of danger, an outlaw quality," Santino says, adding that it's the only time of year when showing ritualized aggression to children -- if only leaping out of the shadows in a pirate

costume -- is acceptable. "There is something about being out there in the dark, testing the limits of taboos, and of the neighborhood. As long as there is an element of danger, even if it's safe danger, that thrill is still there."

All this just academic to Corey -- sometimes he signs his e-mails "Gorey" -- Minion, who today is readying his cable-flying ghosts, motion-activated crows and pop-up corpses for the crowds ahead. "We had 634 kids last year," he says proudly -- attendance was verified via button counter. "And that's not counting the ones that couldn't make it from the sidewalk to the front door." America's festival of death is alive and well, thank you very much.

Copyright (c) 2006, Newsday, Melville, N.Y.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Business

News.

For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.