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Cambridge Rocky Horror: 
A Tale of Silk, Silliness, and Sexual Shenanigans

BY ROBERT J. CANNATA

Approaching the midnight hour, Harvard Square becomes leaner, though not losing the energy it thrives upon. The shoppers and tourists have scurried home hours ago, leaving fragments of food wrappers, ATM receipts, and Daisani bottles in their wake. This is still the People's Republic of Cambridge, and on a chilly Saturday in November the Ivy League proletarians reclaim their boroughs. Outside a café, Harvard lawyers and MIT programmers in London Fog peacoats huddle around steaming lattes, waxing political, philosophical, or inane over unused granite chess tables. Police officers patrol with a relaxed air (this ain't Dorchester, after all), their insignia shining orange in the pale street lamps. Late-night commuters sprint home toward the Red Line subway as it rumbles in beneath their feet; but for a handful of bars and coffeehouses, Cambridge, like Boston, has an early bedtime.

But leave the station, the Harvard bookstore, and the shopping drags behind and turn a left down Church St.: you’ll find the mice stirring. While children of international affluence sit two blocks away, wrapped in cashmere scarves and Lycra gloves, local kids with South Shore accents stand with ironic grins outside the Loews Theatre, unfazed by how little their fishnet shirts, cheap plastic bodices, stiletto heels, miniskirts, and choke collars protect them from the blustery winds. Nevermind what the girls are wearing. They group together in tight circles in a long line, pressed up against a plain brick wall. An empty church and the houses of some very tolerant people line the opposing street. As always, parking is terrible in Cambridge and cars line the entire drag. But the kids don’t stray far from the ticket line, waiting for the front doors to open.

A woman in her mid-fifties gives me a half-annoyed look as I ask for a ticket. She’s heavy-set, missing two top teeth, and wears too much makeup in
an attempt to cover up the sagging skin under her eyes. Her Loews Theatre polo shirt is a faded navy blue and a size too large for her. She snatches my $8.50 with a quick jerk and slides my change and ticket under the bulletproof glass with a dismissive air. She does the same for three other customers before she returns to a paperback novel. I don’t make out the title, but the silhouettes and glistening knife on the cover lead me to assume it’s a murder mystery.

A sample of our cast against the wall: the majority of the patrons are in their late teens and early twenties, but I notice five or six in their thirties. The talk is largely juvenile and sexually frank: I hear more about “money shots” while waiting in line than I ever needed to. The colder weather has driven the majority of the fifty some-odd patrons to bundle up a bit. There are fewer extreme costumes than I’ve seen in the past, but I attribute this to the time of year: the last week was the Rocky Horror Halloween show, which brings out the greatest numbers. So, most of the “lifers” are probably taking the week off. Still, about fifteen people are dressed up in the signature Rocky garb.

Specimen #1: A young man of about seventeen years. He’s Caucasian—as was almost all of the group, the largest minority being Asian—and about 5’8”, thin build. His hair is a dark black, but I suspect it’s dyed, though his eyebrows are very dark as well. The hair is medium-length, but spiked up with high-hold gel or glue. He has a bright red “V” face-painted on his right cheek. No other make-up. He’s wearing a black leather collar with small, shiny spikes. His thin build is draped with a black mesh shirt which clings around the chest but goes loose at the arms. When not playing with his nipples (it’s cold tonight), he encourages others to do so, especially the girls in his clique. After two takers and six rejections, he gives it up. He also has a black leather bracelet on his left wrist. He’s wearing a black belt that holds up a pair of black raver pants: long, loose, and covered with clip-on watches, chains, keychains, and other shiny objects. His sneakers are blue canvas Converse All-Stars.

Specimen #2: A woman in her mid-twenties, she is also Caucasian, about 5’4”, of a medium but stocky frame, and has shoulder-length, wavy auburn hair. She is wearing large, elaborate earrings that dangle from her ears in a tassel of small glass beads. Her face is plastered white with dark eyeliner. She has a small nose ring. She is only wearing a lacy red bra and a tight black miniskirt. Her shoes are bright red heels with a pointed toe. Her crescent moon tattoo, located in the small of her back, is visible. She’s smoking a pack of cloves and talking to her small coterie, four others about her age, in quieter tones: the usual gossip about absent friends and enemies.

Specimen #3: A professional lifer. A Caucasian man of about 25 years, he towers over the rest of the audience at around 6’6” and has a thin, athletic build. He has mid-back hair that falls naturally in golden ringlets—real deal here, not a wig. He is wearing a dark navy dress that clings tightly to his frame, and shows about 70% of his back. It tapers to just below the knee, with a small slit on the left-hand side. He has somehow simulated about a small B-cup underneath the dress, and has shaved all hair from his armpits, back, legs, and stomach (you can see the sides of his abs). He is wearing black heels and walks in sheltered by a black faux-fur overcoat. Except for his height, his voice, his stature, and his strong jaw, you would easily mistake him for a woman—and a fairly attractive one—on the street.

Specimen #4: Yours truly. I’m a 5’10” Caucasian male, a lithe 165 lb. My eyes are blue, and I have toast-blonde hair that’s gelled into a cross between punk spikes and the ‘do sported by the singer from A Flock of Seagulls. No face paint, earrings, or otherwise. I’m wearing a black mesh shirt that clings tightly to my biceps and chest, but over this I’m wearing a black woman’s top made of a tight synthetic. It slopes considerably off the shoulder, and instead of a sleeve on the right-hand side, it has a leather strap and buckle. I’m wearing a short red-and-black plaid miniskirt, and haven’t learned to sit like a lady quite yet. As an accent, I have a
pair of novelty handcuffs clipped to two safety pins running through my skirt. I'm also wearing a black leather choker and a matching leash. I have two black knee-highs hiked up, and am wearing them over a pair of black leather combat boots.

I am quite a fancy, fancy boy.

Now let me get a few things straight. This is not a hobby. This is a study. And as absolutely hot as I look in my Rocky outfit, I'm far more likely to be found in a corduroy blazer with elbow patches than a fishnet shirt. Which makes it curious that I would get into this sort of thing. Well, close friends might not balk, but casual acquaintances would be shocked. But despite my Clark Kent day-to-day facade, I get a kick out of it. It plays with so many social roles. And, well, it's another experiment in identity, and if history is a guide, I can't keep away from those.

The parallax of public and private identity has always interested me, and even as a child I was intensely aware of the lenses around me. Even as far back as second grade, I would start fights and shift facades to escape the chains of nerdiness that rattled on my leg. Depending on where I was in life, I found new challenges and would try to adapt myself to them as they came. As a result, I've gone through a myriad of phases in a relatively short period of time.

The phases were many and diverse once I hit middle school. My cousin Ricky was the closest thing to a sibling I ever had, and his intense interest in sports became a focus of my young life. We were always decked head to toe in sports gear, but not of the home teams. No, that was too obvious. Only true aficionados like us would sport Florida Marlins gear during a blistery Massachusetts winter. A few years later, I immersed myself in martial arts. I wore a gi around the house. After that, it was military haircuts, collared shirts, and camo. I joined a military youth group and started planning to join the Air Force Academy. Until I grew disenchanted. Which lead into shabby band t-shirts and ripped jeans. And then silk Hawaiian shirts with corduroys. On and on and on.

The current phase? Metrosexual meets stuffy English scholar. Wait two more years and we'll see where else I end up.

Rocky Horror has taken on a special significance, however, because it focuses on two issues I have always found fascinating: sexual expression and gender roles. The reasons for sexual interest are...well, I'm a twenty-one year old male. The interest in gender roles requires a bit of explanation.

My father worked, and still works, long hours as a self-employed carpenter. Leaving at dawn, he'd often commute two hours up to more lucrative jobs in Newton, work twelve hour days, and drive back. At times I'd go five days without seeing his face. After all, we had a house to sheetrock, trim, and paint. I would never complain about or disrespect this sacrifice. The facts of the situation are this, though: without a brother to emulate, a sister to foil against, and without a lot of paternal guidance, and I was raised by my mother's exclusive example. As a young child I was notably feminine: mild-mannered, shy, and more prone to a quiet cry than an angry tantrum. Not that girls don't throw tantrums, but mine were less prone to violence and throwing things around than most boys. As adolescence approached, however, I realized that I would have to change to have a fighting chance out there. I took it upon myself to establish, by trial and error, a theory of masculinity.

From military hypermasculinity to sports fanaticism to my current flirtation (pun intended) with metrosexuality, I have spent a long time charting the waters of manhood and the thousands of expressions therein. What values are men expected to uphold in society, and how do they? How deeply do the social constructions of men's fashion, humor, attitude, and behavior connect to these values? And at base, how does the modern man balance his individualistic leanings with the social expectations of his gender?

Considering how often I kick these things around in my head, the chance to dress in drag and scream sexual innuendo in a crowded theater was appealing. What makes a kilt okay, but a plaid miniskirt not okay? Why are skin-tight
t-shirts okay, but showing a lot of collarbone taboo? Also, were there any rewards for acting this extremely? Although the cross-dressing men are the stars of the circus, there's an equally valid question to ask about the women: screaming sexually-charged jokes and commentary is primarily the domain of men, and drunk men at that. By displaying this sort of sexual aggression, what were the women getting out of the experience?

I can't exactly answer all of these questions yet, but it was with this inquisitive frame of mind that I approached the Rocky Horror experience. So let's go through a night at the theater and find out what makes men women and women randy.

After a few minutes of waiting on the street, a large Caucasian woman in her late twenties comes out of the theater, wearing a black shirt labeled "SECURITY." She wears round glasses, but is still intimidating and forceful and she paces up and down the line, sizing up the members and making crude jokes. She checks purses and bags, and goes over a few fire safety and "me-not-kicking-your-ass-safety" rules. She parries sarcastic comments with a forceful but good-natured wit. A few of the troupe actors come outside to help her, and after the briefing the crowd is let in.

We're hustled into a movie theater near the front of the complex, but I escape quickly to the bathroom, where I am privy to two men talking about a Bruins game as they apply black lipstick. The lobby is shaded in deep reds; it looks worn and about a decade since the last renovation. Still, everything is functional and the lighting is decent. The crowd pushes into the theater, making crude jokes and the occasional yelled obscenity. The pattern of reds continues in the theater—it's a plain movie theater with about 150 seats: a long, thin rectangle. The sound system is passable, but not the best the building has to offer. Dimly-lit sconces line the room as people take their seats: the aficionados get right up front. There is, however, a contingent of anti-front-row troopers that plop in the rear of the theater by the lighting table. The virgins, the regulars, and the innocent bystanders filter into the middle, usually towards the front.

SECURITY girl waits for the majority of people to be seated before calling out to the crowd again. She reiterates a few brief points, and then introduces a Rocky centerpiece: the Bag of Shit. For just a dollar, the interactive Rocky experience can be yours, hidden in a little brown lunch bag filled with, well, Shit: noisemakers, a bag of rice, toilet paper, candy, a straight flush, and a party hat. The Shit is what inspires the audience participation that makes the Rocky experience what it is. At specific points during the movie, you'll be expected to throw rice, don your party hat, and play with your noisemakers. The Cambridge Shit is fairly limited: more accepting theaters allow water pistols and buttered toast projectiles, among other things.

Once everyone has bought a bag of Shit (it's not really optional—if you don't buy a bag, you'll be singled out by the cast and targeted by the audience) from the Shit Girl and Shit Boy that work the aisles, the crowd settles in. Some virgins distinguish themselves by playing with their noisemakers or putting on their party hats immediately. The lights dim, and a spotlight fires up in the back of the theater. Like a black leather beacon, Dr. Frank N' Furter (or his facsimile) appears before the crowd in a black wig, boa, corset, heeled boots, and garter belt. The crowd goes wild. The Queen introduces himself, with a few wisecracks made from the regulars along the way (Frank: "Thank you all for coming tonight!" Regular: "I came twice!" Frank: "Jesus Christ! You've only been here for five minutes!").

Frank says his piece, and then the sound system fires up for the warm-up, or the beginning of the foreplay. "The Time Warp," A cheesy rock number created specifically as a play on campy, pre-made dances like "The Electric Slide," "The Time Warp" dance is simple enough that it can be done in the aisle of the theater. And obviously, it is. Usually there are about thirty takers per show, with a lot of surprised
onlookers. Drag queens, norms, and the else wise scantily-clad pour into the aisle and line up. Upon the instructions of the song, "It's just a jump to the left / And then a step to the right." Done and done. Then it gets tricky. The song goes, "Put your hands on your hips" and the crowd echoes "Or somebody else's!" and they all reach forward and hold the hips of the person in front of them, stranger or friend. The song continues, "And tuck your knees in tight. / But it's the pelvic thrust / That really drives you insane." At this point, the entire line becomes an undulating, connected pelvic thrust, swaying in one big, goofily sexual motion. Several dancers will call out orgasmically, or chant "Groupsex! Group sex! Group sex! Groupsex!" in time with the music until the thrusting is over. The chorus finishes "Let's do the Time Warp again!" and the crowd echoes "And again and again, fuck your mother!" before crashing to the floor for the next verse. They harmonize, make up lyrics, etc. During a tap dance sequence, to fill the void in vocals they've even made up a collective verse based on the song "Shake Ya Ass" by Mystikal: "Shake that ass / Watch yaself! / Show me what you're workin' with. / Danger! Danger! / 2-4-6-8, Show us how you masturbate! / 3-5-7-9, You know you do it all the time! / 1-2-3-4, Get your ass up off the floor!" until the chorus comes around again.

All this is meant to startle the virgins, and explicitly state what the night is going to be like. Also, it encourages more people to join in the dance when the song comes on later during the movie. Still, there is a gradual progression of sexual banter and build-up that's meant to loosen up inhibitions before the movie starts.

I am not known as an extremely inhibited person. Twice in my life, I have worn nothing but a pair of Santa Claus boxer shorts, a Santa hat, boots, and a smile around my college campus in the dead of winter as a joke. Still, I have to admit that the Rocky festivities at first put me off. I was nervous and prudish enough to not partake in the Time Warp on my first visit, and even skipped out on the virgin ritual (which will be explained later). Walking into a room full of drag queens for the first time isn't necessarily intimidating—it's disorienting. One doesn't really know what to expect, which is scarier than a sure, known evil. The lifers, who know the program by heart, don't offer much of a clue, too wrapped up in their insider conversations and blatant misconduct. Unless they have friends willing to guide them, virgins are left on their own. And it's the tension of the virgins that this show feeds on, and the gradual "loosening" of the virgins is the aim of the first twenty minutes.

Next comes the pre-show, which varies and changes every three to five weeks. December means a Christmas theme, and Halloween played a prominent role in October. In November, however, we were treated to a more usual pre-show. The first act consisted of three men dressed in prison uniforms with mops, swaying back and forth to a '50s rock ballad parody entitled "Prison Bitch." They lip-sync a sort of chorus before the spotlight lights up two other men in prison uniforms who play the leads of Butch and Bitch in the song. Prison rape isn't a very laughable topic, but the extremity and parody of the situation makes it humorous for the purposes of blowing off steam. Plus, the already uninhibited laugh ludicrously, exonerating the more reserved to do likewise.

The first show tends to follow the theme of the sexually abstract joke: "Prison Bitch" is bizarre enough to get most people to emit a nervous laugh or two. Likewise, other first shows have involved lap-dance auctions and, at my virgin show, a series of juvenile, dirty ten-second jokes and skits centering around sexual themes. By drawing humor out of sexual deviation, the cast and audience put newcomers at a sort of ease, showing that, at very least, the culture has a sense of humor about itself.

When that's finished, another song chimes on entitled "I Know What Boys Like" by The Waitresses. It's a poppy song, and three male actors stand dumbfounded at the front of the theater. Three female actresses lip-sync while basically doing a minor striptease to each of them, pushing their advances
away coyly. It gets fairly hot and heavy towards the end, until Frank N’ Furter walks out during the last verse, holding hands with the golden-thonged Rocky and lip-syncing. A bit of molestation happens, and all the women (and Frank) end up respectively bending over their men and spanking them until the song ends. The crowd, expectedly, goes wild again.

While Frank and Rocky act as the punch line in this song, the majority of the song is more seductive than funny—it releases the exhibitionist proclivities of the established culture in a bit of a rawer form. Cat-calls and wolf-whistles abound, and the atmosphere communicates a randy building of tension instead of a comic release. A tension which is soon capitalized upon.

Lastly, there is the most sacred ritual of all. The Popping of the Virgin Cherry. In all Rocky theaters, this ritual is uniform and taken with utmost seriousness and passion. A “virgin” is, expectedly, a person who has never seen the show—not the movie, the show—before. They are called to rise—maybe 40% actually do, the rest are often coerced by friends or cast members—and the most innocent-looking and guiltily-looking are chosen. The Chosen Ones are lead to the front of the theater, and Frank asks for names, introducing them all to the audience.

Sometimes the cast is a bit sneakier in catching the shy virgins. Frank N’ Furter once asked the entire audience to rise. He went sequentially, asking people who’d seen 50 shows to sit down, 20 shows, 15 shows, 10, 7, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and finally none. Only then did the virgins know that they’d been cornered, unprompted and unable to escape Frank’s roving eye. Those who dress up are likely to be picked from the herd, especially the more attractive and scantily-clad. This is all about mob rule and entertainment. Second to the exhibitionists are the norms—the girls in gray sweaters who cling to the armrests of their chair as Frank approaches, the jockish guys wearing baseball hats and nervous smiles. The audience seems to delight in the contrast, and likes to be constantly reminded of their own surreality. Plus, as one Rocky kid noted, “innocents make the best faces.”

The virgins are lined up at the head of the theater, girls on one side, boys on the other. This is to encourage the sort of homoerotic behavior the crowd adores. One by one, Frank—petting and feeling as he goes (he spent almost thirty seconds playing with my hair)—asks for names and yells out to the audience, “Everyone say hello to ______!” to which the audience responds, in an eerie parody of an AA meeting or children’s TV show, “Hello ______!” There are exceptions, however. I interviewed one young woman who went fully through the virgin ritual. Amanda is a 19 year old college student, and, while not necessarily shy, has a quiet demeanor. She was dressed in a pair of knee-highs, heels, and black lingerie, with a button-up shirt cast open. She also happens to be naturally buxom, which, according to her account, elicited a rally cry of “Jump-ing Jacks! Jump-ing Jacks! Jump-ing Jacks!” from the crowd when she was introduced. Surprisingly, the women scream these calls as loudly as the men, sometimes louder. Despite the titillating shows, this is less about sexual arousal than breaking social boundaries.

After introductions are made, the contest begins. Either one or two virgins will be selected each night, so the other ten to twelve need to be eliminated by trial. The first trial being, as demonstrated in the “Time Warp,” the Pelvic Thrust Competition. The line of virgins is subjected to thirty seconds of constant pelvic thrusting to show their sense of rhythm, their lack of shame, and mostly their embarrassment at the entire situation. Many try to hide it, overcompensating by wildly flailing their bodies like a patient under a haywire defibrillator. Unless they’re exceptionally good-looking, these are usually ridiculed and eliminated. Others are meek, barely moving and exchanging nervous glances and angry accusations with their friends. These are often kept around for token entertainment. Then there are the fluid sex gods with hips of steel who get the crowd on their feet. These, obviously, stay.

Sometimes virgins are good thrusters and receive cheers
and propositions. Sometimes a group is so bad that the audience boos them down half-way through, and Frank sends almost all of them back into their seats. Frank exerts most of the control here, although if he weeds out an unusually cute or entertaining virgin the crowd will attempt to veto his decision by booing him. They have about 50% success.

Next comes the second trial, where the virgins must "Dance Nasty for the Wombat." The Wombat is never clearly defined, but many experienced Rocky kids will slowly chant "Wooommmm-mm-baaaatttt, Wooooooommmm-baaaattttt..." as Frank prepares the virgins for the trial. The lights fire up, and a random trance or house techno track will pour out over the speakers. Then, to strobos and flashing spotlights, the virgins bump and grind and, on occasion, even strip to please the audience. While I was dancing nasty for the Wombat, another man reached up around my waist and clung his body up against my back. To push the envelope of social acceptance, homoerotic dancing usually gets the best results. I played along for five seconds or so until one of the female virgins grabbed me by the leash and dragged me over to an activity that, while more personally fulfilling, didn't please the crowd as much as my momentary boyfriend had. I took two good female friends, Caitlin and Tina, to their virgin Rocky experience, and they ended up dancing nasty together in order to avoid the random encounters I was subjected to. As a result they were loved by the audience, even if they weren't dressed up as extremely as I was.

After the nasty dancing is done, the final eliminations are made. Frank gives this a much more democratic air, petting each virgin lovingly and listening to the crowd reactions to decide their selection. The crowd seems to give approval based on four factors: Physical Attractiveness, Outfit, Shamelessness, and Dancing Skill. I was the male runner-up, and the last one eliminated. This was because I am in decent shape and was wearing tight, outlandish clothing, which gave me Attractiveness and Outfit points. I was also pretty Shameless, too. Dancing Skill was moderate, but my Shamelessness gave me an edge on that, too. I was beat out by a man wearing street clothes, however. This happened because, well, he began to take them off. And, as I remarked to a friend after the show, I couldn't compete with those abs. So although his Outfit rank was low and his Dancing Skill was nothing to shout about, his Attractiveness and Shamelessness were extremely high.

My busty friend Amanda, however, scored highly in all categories and was chosen as the female virgin of the night. This entitled her to the ritual deflowering, which, like the communion of Christ, is imparted symbolically to those who don't necessarily participate in it. Through Amanda, all the virgins in the room are deflowered. The process begins with the revelation of the Cherry--a large red balloon about the size of a beach ball. The clitoris jokes are obvious, usually two or three audience members are asked to "warm her up" by licking the balloon voraciously. Then, with sacramental reverence, Frank ushers the two virgins up on a box in the front of the theater. They cling to each other, barely able to balance on the box. To the delight of the crowd, Frank spreads apart their legs and shoves the balloons as close to their crotches as he can get. Alternately, he might bend both over and place it between the two of them. Then, the implement of popping can vary—teeth are usually the most popular, but once a zealous Frank assaulted the balloon with several pelvic thrusts until the pressure popped it.

Like a gun, the pop of the balloon starts a frantic cheering, and signifies the beginning of the race. The new are initiated, and the release of tension by that pop signifies the lessened inhibitions of the virgins and regulars alike. The stage is set, finally, for the show. The ex-virgins, either blushing or grinning profusely, are ushered back to their seats, and a victorious Frank addresses the crowd, "Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready for the Rocky Horror Picture Show?"

The lights dim and the movie projector clicks on. The audience cheers, and faux-Frank screams at the top of his
lungs, "What the fuck do you want?!" The crowd laughs and chants, "MUP-PETS! MUP-PETS! MUP-PETS!" Next thing you know, an old pre-movie short featuring Jim Henson's Muppets comes on. Elmo, Gonzo, Ms. Piggy, and their cohorts remind you not to smoke in the movie theater, how to exit, and to keep quiet in a kitschy song best relegated to kid's movies. Again, the use of childish innocence in such a perverse setting greatly delights the crowd. Some audience members sing along, some swear ("What happened to your fucking neck?") they yell at Cookie Monster) at the screen, and the new people look around, realizing what they're in for. And the calls begin.

"A long, long time ago!
In a galaxy far, far away!
God said, "Let there be lips!
And they were good lips!"

And, on cue, the red Rocky lips fade onto the screen. The crowd cheers, and the phenomenon of Audience Participation begins.

While the Audience Participation is impressive enough in itself, the history behind it is extensive and well-known by true Rocky aficionados. I did a little bit of digging at two of the online Rocky nexuses, rockyhorror.com and Cosmo's Factory, the largest unofficial fan-run Rocky Website. I've done my best to paraphrase it from these sources for you, though like any subculture's history the details tend to be contested and vaguely-defined.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show is a movie based on a very similar play written by Richard O'Brien, who plays the character of Riff Raff. The play was a moderate hit in London in 1973 and in 1975 the full feature film we adore was produced. The movie was tested in a few cities across the United States and bombed terribly. It was shelved and largely forgotten.

In the depths of Greenwich Village, at the Waverly Theater on April Fool's Day of 1976, a young advertising executive for Fox convinced the theater manager to use Rocky as the midnight picture show. Before each show, the movie soundtrack would be played (as the "Time Warp" still is) to warm up the crowd, and the relaxed, party atmosphere was established. A group of regulars began to establish themselves in the front row of the balcony seats, and on Labor Day weekend of 1976, the first "call back" was invented. A guy named Louis yelled "Buy an umbrella, you cheap bitch!" at Susan Sarandon as she walked through the rain, and Rocky was changed utterly.

As the weeks rolled by, people made more and more comebacks. By Halloween of 1977, dozens of people were dressing up as characters. Random audience members began to lip-sync to the soundtrack at the pre-movie warm-up, and this later developed into the skits we see in the pre-show.

Thirty years later, The Rocky Horror Picture Show has grown into a bestial organization and franchise, sporting hundreds of showings internationally and establishing itself as the quintessential midnight movie. Every five years, Las Vegas hosts a Rocky Horror Picture Show National Conference, where show managers and fanatics congregate with religious fervor. From Cosmo's Factory, one can download full scripts of call backs from over a dozen regions: New York, Balboa Island, Cleveland, Finland, Germany, Sacramento, and of course Cambridge are examples. And these are only cultures strong enough to have a canonical, 42 page, transcribed script of call-backs. Which, mind you, are organically always changing, so only expect about a 75% accuracy rate with the Cambridge script.

The tradition of screaming at the characters on screen has become a living, breathing oral tradition, with its sages and village elders to carry on the tradition to different cities, different shows, and different decades. In my six weeks at Rocky, several of the lines had changed considerably. At one point, Frank N' Furter is floating in a rectangular pool, the
floor of which is covered with a replica of Adam and God's fingers touching, a la the Sistene Chapel. The first line I heard was a classic, "You're telling me that all that stands between Man and God is a gay downr But, over the weeks, another line took over that was more clever, "Michealangelo! Jesus Christ, I said the ceiling, not the pool! Ah well. I guess that's what I get for having a Turtle paint my ceiling." Speaking as a former devotee of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, I can attest that this line would resonate far more clearly to my generation than the connections of Eden and the Sistene Chapel ceiling which, sadly, is a reference many of the younger people missed or didn't quite appreciate. As generations pass, the pop culture of the time overrides previous references, creating in itself a sort of pop-culture history: note that the Star Wars reference of "a long, long time ago" has stayed around since the late 1970's, but although Fay Wray, the screaming vixen of King Kong, is specifically mentioned by Frank in one of the songs, the callback to the line "Whatever happened to Fay Wray / That delicate, satin-draped frame / as it clung to her thigh..." (Like a homesick abortion!) has nothing to do with her career, while the callback used two decades ago (She went apeshit!) did.

Current events also play heavily into the callbacks. At one point in the movie the camera scans over an empty theater. After the Red Sox won the ACLS against the Yankees, a few screamed out, "Hey, it's Yankee Stadium during Game 6!" to the hollers of the audience. Local color is everywhere, too. As Rocky is playing with lighting switches during a part of the movie, the crowd calls out "One year at MIT! Two years at MIT! Three years at MIT!" Harvard, right next door, gets a decent amount of ribbing, too: the crowd here is rarely composed of the cosmopolitan students that attend the prestigious universities that Cambridge is laden with. Although many students attend Rocky at some point in their time here, the die-hards are comprised primarily of locals, if accents are a guide. Students don't stick around long enough to keep it alive. Callbacks can be a dog-eat-dog, evolutionary world, too: someone from another town called out a line that was a New York line and was quickly and forcefully shot down by the locals, who repeated the local line even more loudly than usual. These competitions between audience members are far from rare: there are even front row/back row wars that go on, each throwing insults back and forth:

Front Row: Where's the best place to fuck?!
Movie: "...in the back row..."
Front Row: Fuck the back row!
Back Row: Fuck the front row!

FR: We fucked you first!
BR: We fucked you better!
FR: We took pictures!!
BR: We took pictures and sent them to your mother!!
FR: We took pictures and sent them to your grandmother!!

There is something of an hierarchy that is created in this culture as well. The longer you're there, the more you're accepted and respected. I first called attention to myself by volunteering for the virgin ritual, although it was actually my third go. Considering I'd worn my costume the week before, though, one or two of the cast members had a look of slight recognition as I went up. Later in that show, the actor who played Frank N' Furter eyed me as he strolled the aisle, then hopped into my lap and began ruthlessly molesting my hair, face, and shoulders, shouting to the crowd that I had an erection under my skirt (which I most certainly did not, for the record). The next week, the actor playing Rocky, in all his golden-briefed glory, jumped into my lap and pinned my shoulders with his knees, the look of recognition in his eyes. He'd passed up three rows of victims before he saw me, recognized me, and struck. I was new, but a potential regular. Hence, I had to be properly introduced--by having his crotch slammed into my forehead at high velocity.

I was talking to a friend of mine, an Anthropology major who did significant primate research in Africa. She once told me that you knew a group of chimps had accepted your
presence when they approached you and began looking for parasites in your hair. I think there’s something similar going on here. While not formalized, there’s something of an initiation into this group—the lifers are rarely molested by the actors, and usually only trade snappy one-liners with them. Some of the die-hards are even recognized by the cast so much that they have anniversary parties for them before the show: when a die-hard has an anniversary of their virgin show, they are often designated as the Wombat, and the virgins are required to give them lap dances.

And about the actors. All the while, the entire movie is being acted out underneath the screen by amateur actors. They lip-sync, run around, and have even constructed temporary sets that they put up and break down from scene to scene. Both shows going on at the same time can be a bit disorienting, and so the actors will often modify the actions of the characters (like molesting me, for instance) to spice up the floor show. They might, for instance, spray water into the crowd during rain sequences, or do full sexual pantomimes to keep the audience attention.

The actors follow the same demographics as the audience. Some are high-school age, but the majority are college-age up to their late twenties, with the grizzled vets reaching into their early thirties. Women will often play men’s roles (the Narrator and Eddie especially), whereas most of the men are already dressed as women anyway. The entire acting troupe has a very old-theater feeling to it. With the crowd participation, the rollicking good humor, and the constant cross-dressing, Rocky has much more in common with Shakespearean comedy than most literati would have you believe. While the clean aesthetic of Shakespeare in history may be academically pleasing, the reality of the grimy peanut gallery in the Globe Theater turned out very much like these Rocky kids, with cheering and booing and loud behavior. The resemblance becomes more interesting if you consider that the iconic Tim Curry, the original Frank N Furter in both the movie and the play, made his name in Shakespearean acting.

Why would a classical actor sign up for such a crazy thrill-ride? In an interview I found on a Rocky fansite (considering the obscurity of the subject matter, more “academic” web sources are hard to find) Curry says, “It was a joke on horror movies and on the glitter rock movement that was so big back then—the androgynous sex, the Bowie/Jagger thing. But I didn’t camp it up—we decided from the beginning to play it seriously” (crunk4curry.tripod.com).

And, while not every seventeen year-old fan will appreciate the parody of mid-1970s glam culture, the tradition of joking with a straight face has certainly lived on. A good amount of the call-backs have a dry humor to them, and are often fairly sophisticated alongside the juvenile lines. For instance, during a dinner scene where Frank is serving up the corpse of the recently-murdered Eddie, Frank says of Eddie’s murder, “That’s a rather tender subject.” The audience responds, quite straight, “That’s a rather tasteless joke.” People don’t really laugh as much as grin wickedly. But just ten seconds later, as Magenta runs from the room screaming at the discovery of her cannibalized boyfriend, the crowd yells, at her screaming, “That’s what you get for masturbating with a razor blade!”

You don’t have to tell this audience they’re juvenile—they seem to know it, and don’t feel they have anything to prove. And, considering the dry wit they show in the middle of the immaturity, they really don’t. That’s why the show remains funny, and why grown adults can return again and again. This isn’t just regression to adolescence: it’s a theater full of legitimately funny people trying to one-up each other.

There are plenty of reasons that people frequent Rocky. Other than the outrageous behavior and the movie, the Rocky experience is a release of the cultural id—a place where you can yell “Fuck your mother!” at a random stranger and nobody gets offended. And anyone who drives regularly in coastal Massachusetts can attest to how often that impulse flares up in the space of a day. You’re not supposed to throw rice inside—here you can. As a woman, you’re supposed to
refrain from too many dirty jokes in public; here you can relish in them like a construction worker. As a man, you're expected to wear rougher blends of clothing and act with a certain low-key gruffness. Here you can cover yourself in silks and satins and walk daintily without fear of ridicule. In fact, you'll probably be encouraged.

I think of the number of times in conversations about relationships someone has said to me, "I just wish I could be a guy/girl for a day, just to know what's going through their minds." While there's no complete transformation here, Rocky allows its patrons to muddle in the great cultural divide between man and woman as much as they like. Women regulars show the same sexual zeal and aggression as the men, and the male virgins will often blush or balk as much as the females. There a sort of crazy equality in this theater, where the lines of propriety are thrown completely out the window, and everyone can mix and mingle and grope to their heart's desire.

It takes a while to get people in this mood, though. And that's why there are the elaborate, sexually-themed pre-shows. That's why the focus is a movie--it's easier to scream this stuff at a movie screen than a human being. That's why you throw rice and toilet paper--general zaniness needs to be established to bring people out of their shells. It doesn't work on everyone. Many people will enjoy themselves but remain observers who half-smile, half-dash out the door at the end of the night into the comfortable arms of society. Those who linger and return, however, are the ones the regulars are really concerned with: tourists pay the bills but aren't that important.

If you consider the focus on the virgins, you notice something else--as much as they are ridiculed and toyed with, the show is more for them than anyone else. The elders pass on their oral tradition for the entertainment and shock of the newcomers because A) it reaffirms the weirdness of the elders, which they love, and B) everyone remembers the confusion and amazement that hit them in their first Rocky experience, and they want to create it for others.

I took a group of newcomers to the show once, and we got there a bit late, so we had to settle for the back row instead of the generally more animated front row. At this point I'd gone several times, and knew about 20% of the call-backs. Which I hollered at the top of my lungs, so the newcomers wouldn't miss out. I hadn't even dressed up that week, but I acted more extremely because I had a corral of virgins to take care of. The same was done to me when I was a virgin--we had to sit off to the side, and my usually quiet guide started screaming much more than she admits she usually would. You'll notice it, too, the lone voice barking out from a mass of bodies, who often look at their friend with a sort of shocked amusement.

By getting an infusion of fresh blood each week, the Rocky experience keeps itself new and relevant--the call-backs change with the audience, and the veterans get a continual kick at the constant, weekly contrast between themselves then and themselves now, because they too were once clueless virgins. So, while there is a sort of elitism and exclusion in this culture, it is a gentle one that admits its need--due to its focus--on the new people. And, if one is outgoing and persistent enough, one will be molested and harassed until you've earned your entry into the culture. And, as you become louder and more confident in your mastery of callbacks you'll be noticed and accepted more and more. For kids who ride the breach of the gender boundary--as one may assume if they're even willing to dress up for this--this sort of inclusion is hard to find. Fetish clubs, drag clubs, and the like are catering to a different market entirely--Rocky kids are mostly weekend warriors, not careerists. In the madcap joke that is The Rocky Horror Picture Show, these people find their weekly release from the roles they have been programmed to play, and get a good laugh from the contrast they see from their own 9-5 lives.

Also, in the middle of the craziness, there is a real bond expressed here. My last Rocky experience was also the last
show for a beloved fan and cast member, a woman in her late twenties. She was just recently married, moving on with life, and had to travel to start her career after seven long years with the theater. The audience mourned as Frank announced the sad news, and some of the die-hards were on the brink of tears. She was a sort of Peter Pan, finally with growing up and leaving this fairy-tale world behind her. But they spent almost fifteen minutes properly sending her off, forcing the virgins to honor her with free lap dances and auctioned off a cast lap-dance to a member of the crowd for $45, the proceeds of which went towards her sending-off gift. It was, in a bizarre way, a very touching moment. At the end of the show, Frank walked her in front of the theater and she was given a standing ovation by new and old alike for her final walk up the aisle.

The movie lets out around 2:30 A.M. and the bizarre parade spills out into the sleeping Square. The bars are closed. The bus and subway have stopped. Nobody is left on the streets except for a few vagrants and random night wanderers. The kids don't get too out of hand, but the culture really starts to merge and mingle outside the theater, their sexual awareness heightened by two hours of debauchery while the influences of proper society are tucked away in bed. Flirting abounds, groping abounds, and even the occasional couple-for-a-night escaping into the dark is not an uncommon sight. There isn't too much of a hook-up scene, however: the rollicking, bizarre good humor that fills the streets is the main attraction. I saw more of this in early October during my first trip, whereas December was a bit too cold for all but the most die-hard. I would love to return for a few weeks in the summer, when the weather is kinder to the minglers. Nonetheless, cliques merge, break apart, and the people in street clothes will sometimes engage in the most bizarre behavior of the night. Eventually people shuffle home or bring their party elsewhere, but the weekly bond of lifers, actors, and virgins constructs and deconstructs with a renewed burst of energy, creating a flashy, trashy spot of agitation in the slumbering shadow of Harvard—a technicolor glitz of gender, sexual, and social transgression that gives the finger to the status quo, but welcomes its newcomers with a loving pelvic thrust.

Works Cited

