

halloween

# It's a Real Scream!

High-tech Haunted House  
Will Leave You Breathless

By Christopher Cussat | Photos by David Pinchot

**MANY PHANTOMS AGO (AS LEGEND HAS IT)**, Jack Slaughter was the director of a local asylum for the mentally disturbed. One fateful and especially dark evening, he had somewhat of a falling-out with one of his patients. Jack proceeded to electrocute this patient with whom he had a disagreement. Although some thought that the patient's death was accidentally caused by the proscribed electro-treatment of the time (shocking as it may sound), most believed that it was the result of something more sinister. Jack had snapped, and thus began his blood-lusty destruction of the asylum and his torture and extermination of all the patients who resided there.

No historical records remain of these horrible incidents that occurred, because no one had the stomach to describe what happened on paper. But what continues to stand is the building's structure, now fittingly named Scream Asylum. To this day, visitors can still see the visages of Jack's demented thoughts and actions in disturbing detail. Some have even testified that they have seen Jack himself roaming the asylum's long hallway, chainsaw in hand, looking for new patients to 'treat.'

This year marks the sixth anniversary of the opening of Scream Asylum, a high-tech haunted house located on Trader Jack's flea market property in Bridgeville. This dark attraction is the creation of L5, an exhibit and animatronics company whose office and workshop are also located on the same site. Scream Asylum is the main attraction of Scream Fest, L5's month-long festival that hosts three interactive haunted houses, live entertainment and music, carnival rides, food and lots of frightful fun for the whole family.

## Life-like Fright

Animatronics are simply animated electronics and are sometimes called entertainment robots, according to Clifford B. Rohal, owner of L5. This type of technology is akin to what one would experience at Disneyworld or in other amusement parks. Rohal explained, "We create fantasy characters that can be people, creatures, monsters, animals or whatever



A Scream Asylum patient awaits release.

through automation, movement and sound, we bring them to life."

But the process is more than technological, creativity and artistry are also required to bring fantasy alive. "We design everything and construct all of the animatronics and exhibits here," said Rohal. The L5 staff works together as a sophisticated team of mechanical and electronic engineers, artists (sculptures, painters and actors), sound designers, computer programmers and teachers.

Anyone who attends Scream Fest can easily see the results of the quality work done by these highly-skilled professionals. For example, there is an incredible amount of detail built into Scream Asylum, which causes it to feel eerily real. Such realism not only makes it very scary, it also truly creates a fantasy experience for every visitor. Rohal added, "Hands-down, we're the most artistically and technically-advanced haunted house in the area. Being that we're an exhibit-animatronics company, you'll see things here that are first-class – things that you'd usually only see at a larger amusement park. We're one of a kind."

There are actually three separate haunted houses at Scream Fest: Scary Place is perfect for young horror fans and the faint-of-heart. It's a tongue-in-cheek spoof of haunted houses, following the pace of a classic, comic-horror movie. Scary Place is filled with haunted house gags and a few startling surprises, especially the twist at the end!

For those who are a bit more courageous, there is Maniac Mansion. This maze-like, dark attraction will have visitors wandering through the mansion while being chased by terrifying creatures. Maniac Mansion's monsters are all live actors, but many take their murderous roles very seriously – so beware!

And finally, there is Scream Asylum itself, full of scary animatrons and frightfully live actors. As a result of years of refinement and upgrades, the asylum is rich with amazing, artistic detail. This, as well as a highly creative plot and original story, effectively bring the characters to life – and death!

Scream Fest is definitely one of our area's 'must-see' events during the Halloween season. "We're probably the



An animatronic monster.



largest festival in this region," noted Rohal.

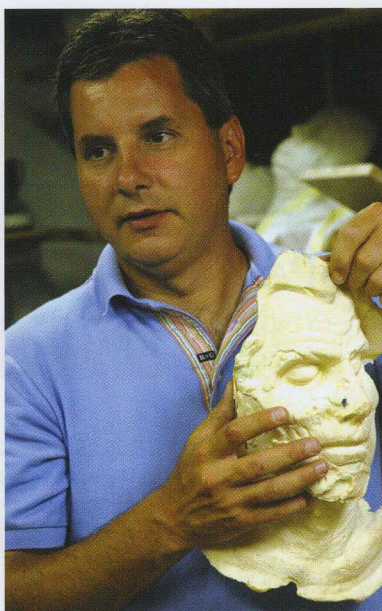
Throughout the past year, the L5 team has feverishly worked on a top-secret, super-scary surprise for this fall's Scream Asylum. And the addition of another room will introduce a brand-new special effects animatron to the asylum. Said Rohal, "We've ramped it up to be the most technical and artistic scare-section of a dark attraction that you'll find in the tri-state area."

### Scaring and Caring

What is even more impressive than the work L5 does to create the largest horror festival and one of the best haunted houses in the area, is their commitment to giving back to the community. They accomplish this through fundraising for local organizations and causes (some Scream Fest proceeds are always donated to the Presto Volunteer Fire Department), as well as by offering an internship program for local youth.

Rohal explained, "We have a nice volunteer program for kids and we motivate young people to get involved with engineering, technology and the arts." He continued, "We have kids who come down and volunteer as actors in the haunted house, help do the make-up or even get involved on the engineering side."

Evan Zatezalo is the Personnel Director in charge of the volunteer program, which attracts around 200 volunteers annually. "Every year it's great, you meet new kids, help them out and teach them what you can," said Zatezalo, who enjoys coaching youngsters on how to act scary. "Scaring somebody is like telling a joke. I try to instill that into the kids, and it's great to see them develop [into



L5 owner Clifford Rohal prepares a plaster cast that will become a mask.

effective actors] during the haunted house."

The L5 team also encourages young people to do well in school if they want to intern at the haunted house. Such dedication to the community and a desire to help children develop seem to be an unwritten mission of L5. "We try to make it a community thing [for the kids]," added Rohal. "They get to volunteer and be a part of something that is pretty beneficial to the whole community. We offer kids a nice, clean, safe place to not only have fun, but to learn something as well."

What started out years ago as a hobby-haunted house that Rohal created on his driveway and in his basement for the entertainment of his neighbors has turned into a huge community event and flourishing business. Between 15,000 and 20,000 people attend Scream Fest each year. The event continues to grow as an increasing number of bands (they had over 20 perform last year), rides and vendors request time and space. And L5 is always looking for volunteers of all ages.

In addition to Scream Asylum, L5 has also created interactive exhibits and attractions for the Pittsburgh Zoo, Kennywood Park and the OK Corral Museum in Tombstone, Arizona. They also worked on the special effects for the movie, *The Mothman Prophecies*, filmed here in Pittsburgh and the surrounding areas.

This year, Scream Fest will run from September 27 through October 29. For more information about Scream Fest and Scream Asylum, or if you're interested in volunteering, please visit [www.screamasylum.com](http://www.screamasylum.com). •

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