Set Design & Theming FOR Halloween

Set design and Themeing are probably the most important elements to incorporate into your designs. It's really easy to just build a bunch of scary stuff and merely display it, and, I'll admit that I've been found guilty of doing just that for several of my haunts. However, it's even better if you attempt to add subtle elements within your displays to help tell your audience a story - a story that will help connect your haunt together, add realism, and provide a backdrop for your work.

There are many deciding factors that will limit (or enhance) your capabilities when putting together your sets, the most important being the layout of the space you have to work with, the materials you already have available, the time you have to complete the project, and your budget.

Probably the most often-used set or themeing element constructed by Home Haunters is the standard graveyard.
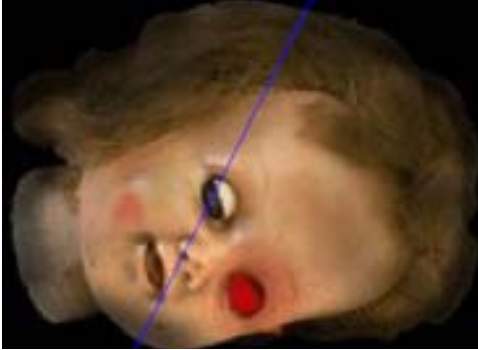
Why? Well, for several reasons. One, graveyards are traditional settings for paranormal activity.

Two, most people have front yards, which is where trick-or-treaters will trod through on the way to your door.

Three, the props are fairly easy to build: gravestones, iron fences, and such. I love the cemetery setting, and I continually work to update mine each year with new props and ideas. But for the purposes of this page, let's concentrate on a simple design idea as illustrated in the animated graphic above.

Perhaps you have a space in a walk-thru haunt or a view through a window from the outside looking into a spare room or a child's bedroom. A haunted room can be easily designed by adding cobwebs to old furniture, tattered drapes made from a light torn fabric, such as cheesecloth (this can be found in fabric or craft

stores), and other various props. But if you really want to creep someone out, try something like this: Find some old dolls or stuffed animals (clowns and Raggedy Ann work especially well). Alter the dolls by adding stains or creepy-looking eyes to them.

If you want to really get into it, try adding some red LED lights (which can be found at Radio Shack) in place of the doll's eyes to make them glow demonically! This is a great touch that can be applied to many kinds of props

But trust me, just having a bunch of evil-looking toys lying around is scary to LOTS of people. To further add to the theming, imagine that this is the room of a child who has unfortunately died at an early age, but his or her spirit still haunts the room.

Place a small child's rocking chair into the scene. If you can figure out a way to make the chair rock by itself, then you've got a really creepy prop. This probably wouldn't be too hard to do. Try a simple fan (this could also create a breeze for the curtains). Perhaps you could try to construct a device similar to the one used for the Flying Crank Ghost that could rock the chair using a small motor, some pulleys, and black string .

To complete the theming, add some other subtle touches. Try casting some unnatural shadows along the walls. Dimly light the room with flickering light or black lights. Add sound effects of a crying child or a music box. Display some old toy building blocks with letters on them, and spell out a frightening message.

Even creepier might be to use a live child actor to sit in the room in front of the rocking chair, innocently playing with the toys, unaware of the ghostly presence in the rocking chair behind them! The point is, let your imagination run wild. Try all kinds of ideas, but keep them confined to a central story or theme.

Work with ideas that you can incorporate into the spaces you have available. I actually have access in my home haunt to a view through a window into the attic! I've often thought that this would be a perfect spot to try an idea like this. The window is seen from the driveway just over the garage, and you could easily view a haunted rocking chair moving back and forth among the clutter in the dark room.

I hope this example, even though it is filled with more than a few really bad horror movie clichés, has helped convey the message that theming matters. And

speaking of bad horror movie clichés, remember that loads of inspiration can be found in some of your favorite scary movies & books.

My idea for this setting came from 1979s The Amityville Horror. Read the book, it's better than the movie.

TIP: it always helps to be able to draw. Sketch your ideas on paper before you start building - trust me, it helps you visualize. You don't have to be an artist, you just need to be able to use a pencil and paper.