

THE KING OF COSTUMES: PHILIP MORRIS

by: Brandon Lunsford



Charlotte's reputation as a stiff and buttoned up banking town isn't entirely warranted, but you wouldn't necessarily say that we are a place where the weird and fantastic is commonplace. That's what makes it so incredible that Philip and Amy Morris have called Charlotte their home for the last 60 years, and that we are fortunate enough to be the headquarters of Morris Costumes. I think everyone can agree that Halloween is the best holiday of the year, and there isn't a better place to be than their flagship store on Monroe Road when it's time to get scary. You can rent or buy about any costume you could think of, from astronaut to zombie, and they have the best makeup and wig selection around. Even when it's not the season of the witch, you can find a wide range of dancewear, or every item you would need to become an amateur magician.

The store is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, but the story of the man (and woman) behind it is even more fascinating than wandering through its rows of horror and magic.

Philip Morris was born January 8, 1935 in Kalamazoo, MI, and an early encounter with the famous magician Harry Blackstone Sr. hooked him on show business for life. He began doing magic shows in his neighborhood for family and friends, and by age 12 he had already made his first radio appearance on the Junior Junction show on ABC. At 14 he was already supporting himself financially with appearances on various stages and shows, and in 1952 he joined the whip-wielding cowboy star Lash LaRue's travelling show as a publicist and "barker." For the next year he toured around the country with LaRue and earned enough money to marry his high school sweetheart Amy Strong, and eventually the troupe made a stop in Charlotte. Morris and his new wife were planning to follow the tour on to California when local booking agent T.D. Kemp offered him a two week gig as a magician, and they ended up settling here instead.

In Michigan they had heard a lot about the South and the demand for the shows that Phil wanted to do, and they saw it as an unexploited market where he could carve out his niche. At this point Morris had gravitated toward a more stylish and sophisticated stage performance popularly called a "ghost show" or "spook show." Popular since the 1920's, the ghost shows included standard magic performances but were augmented to a more macabre level that incorporated the audience. They usually began with a lecture on the spirit world followed by magical routines and grisly illusions, and during the grand finale the entire theater was completely blacked out in a sort of mass séance that featured ghosts and ghouls soaring over the audience along with creepy effects intended to terrify the

senses. The aim was not only to entertain but also often helped to debunk fakers claiming to be real spiritualists by exposing the methods of their illusions after the show. The "ghosts" were actually props painted with luminous white paint, and Morris had a couple of them to show me when I interviewed him. He also had an amazing collection of old flyers promoting his show that promised thrills and chills and even threatened to reward a lucky patron with a "real dead body," which Morris says was actually a chicken's body in a tiny coffin.



Adopting the pseudonym of Dr. Evil and using Charlotte as a home base, Morris launched his own traveling circuit and performed his show around North America for over 30 years and over 5,000 performances as "Dr. Evil's Terrors of the Unknown." The ghost shows eventually waned in popularity, but Morris was already conquering the newest frontier of entertainment. In the late 1950's, the famous Universal horror films from the 30's and 40's were released as a package on television as Shock Theater, and the soaring ratings led to ghoulish hosts like Vampira and Zacherley introducing the movies and becoming horror icons. Many large cities had their own local horror hosts that would navigate the evening's feature film and provide eerie segments and commentary during the commercials. On Friday nights at 11:30 on WBT in Charlotte, horror fans were glued to their sets for Dr. Evil's Horror Theater, with Morris as Dr. Evil fully equipped with a fez and a monocle as he summoned viewers to thrill at the features.

What began as a Halloween episode of a program originally intended as a children's show became so popular that a double feature was added, and the live show was filmed into the early hours of the morning. Dr. Evil's Horror Theater ran from 1960 until 1969 and spawned its own fan club of devotees, and is fondly remembered today by Charlotteans who were first introduced to the famous horror monsters through their television screens late at night.

Another popular segment in his travelling show as well as the TV program was the "girl to gorilla" act, which involved an illusion of a girl in a cage that transformed into a gorilla and crashed out to terrorize the audience. The cost of a well-made gorilla suit in those days was so high that Morris decided to make his own, a decision that would lead to perhaps his most enduring legacy: Morris Costumes. Once while Philip was out touring Chicago, Amy saw an ad in a trade magazine for a costume shop that was going out of business there, and she convinced him to stop by and snatch up the remaining stock. Amy had previously sewn costumes for various dance companies in town, and sometimes she would get calls for costumes to rent since no one else in Charlotte was doing it. Phil and Amy began making their own gorilla suits for the show using synthetic fur and latex molds that Morris was trained to make by his friend Don Post, called by many the Godfather of Halloween and the creator of some of the first

latex masks.

He brought the stock back never thinking it would become their business, but they were so good at it and the demand was so high that suddenly Morris Costumes was born.



After outgrowing the basement of their home on Kistler Avenue they opened their first commercial location in 1965, and then moved to 3108 Monroe Road before building the current retail store at 4300 Monroe in 1988. They also operate a distribution warehouse in the University area and another location in Mooresville, and they staff and manage the Halloween Express stores that pop up in Charlotte every October. Morris Costumes is the second largest supplier of wholesale costumes in the United States, and sells to over 10,000 retail stores, national distributors, television studios, and motion picture companies around the world. Their catalog is a dictionary-sized tome of costumes, masks, special effects, magic tricks, and props that has become an essential bible for the industry. It's a massive empire, especially considering that it started so humbly out of a basement. I gleefully make a pilgrimage to Morris Costumes on Monroe every Halloween, but it wasn't until I went to interview Philip and Amy for this article that I got to see the most incredible part of the store that is hidden in the back; the haunted house.

The ghost shows that Morris helped to pioneer were the forerunner of commercial haunted houses, and he is such an authority on the matter that he co-authored a book called How to Operate a Financially Successful Haunted House in 1985. He correctly anticipated the growth in the scare industry, and Halloween is now second only to Christmas as the largest commercial holiday bonanza in the United States. There is a haunted mansion or a cursed mill or a spectral forest on almost every corner these days in October, but everyone knows they aren't really that scary. It's usually just a bunch of cheesy sound effects and a few guys in cheap slasher masks jumping out and trying to get some half-hearted screams. Well, I'm here to tell you that Philip Morris has built the real deal in the

back of his store.

He has constructed a sophisticated and extremely realistic throwback haunted labyrinth that would amaze even the most jaded skeptic of today's haunted houses. He gave us the personal tour at around 2 pm on a Saturday without any of the sounds and effects even operational, and I was still a little creeped out; I can't imagine what it would be like at full tilt at midnight on a Halloween night. Around every corner was another horrible wonder that taken as a whole creates a truly interactive horror show: there's an alien dissection room, a haunted garden and graveyard with hooded grinning skeletons, an asylum, a dungeon, an Exorcist room with a thrashing animatronic Regan, a terribly creepy child's room with broken leering toys, and even a laboratory for the insidious Dr. Evil himself. Morris has painstakingly built this masterpiece over time, and he will lovingly tell you the story behind each room and every gruesome effect. It's simply the coolest and creepiest haunted anything I've ever been in, and my photographer and I were agape the entire time as we discovered wondrous hidden passageways and amazingly detailed props.

The only problem is that it's not operational anymore. Morris used to open it up to the public every October a few years back, but eventually the headaches involved in getting the proper permits from the city became more trouble than it was worth, and now it is more of a permanent display to showcase the store's new products and technologies, sort of a museum to Philip Morris. If there is a man in Charlotte who deserves a museum, it is Philip. After talking to him and his wife I was really just left amazed at the life they have led. He and Amy have just entered their eighties and have been married 60 years, but they look and seem about 20 years younger. They both possess boundless energy and enthusiasm for what they are doing, and it's infectious.

The business has become a family affair; their son Scott is the distribution center's general manager, and their daughter Terri manages the office, and their grandsons run the Mooresville location. Most days you can find the couple themselves in the shop working; they look great, they look happy, and they're showing no signs of slowing down. If this city ever seems a little bit boring or a little stifling and you want a taste of the weird, the bizarre, and the wonderful in Charlotte, go visit Morris Costumes and talk to Philip and Amy. If you're lucky, you might even get to meet Dr. Evil while you're there.

Sources:

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The vintage photos are courtesy of Philip Morris. The newer images are by Grant Baldwin.