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'Rocky Horror' at Lincoln Center, With Headphones

By DAVE ITZKOFF AUG. 9, 2015

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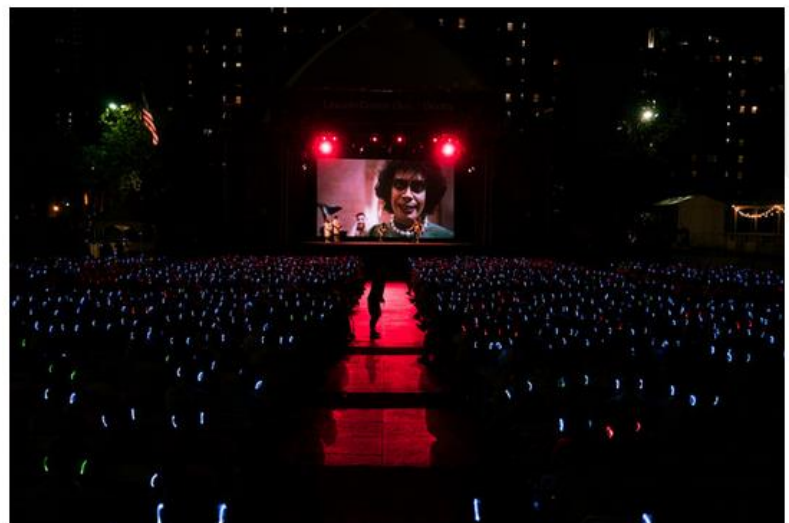
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It is a cinematic ritual that unconventional film fans have shared in for nearly 40 years, but it has probably never been presented quite so unconventionally.

On Friday night in Damrosch Park, the darkness of a giant cinema screen was pierced by a disembodied set of [crimson lips](#) that began to sing an opening incantation to some 2,000 moviegoers. In unison, this crowd chanted along, intoning an a cappella tale of science-fiction monsters and corrupted youth.

Outside observers of this strange sacrament at the Lincoln Center Out of Doors festival would have noticed that something was missing from this showing of "[The Rocky Horror Picture Show](#)" — namely, the audio from the movie.



Tim Curry on screen in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" and a sea of headphones at Damrosch Park at Lincoln Center on Friday night. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

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But the seemingly absent soundtrack could be heard by the audience members who wore wireless headsets that glowed green, blue and red, in what Lincoln Center described as a “silent” screening of “Rocky Horror.”

The result was partly an anatomical dissection of [the cult worship surrounding the movie](#) and partly a tribute to the film’s enduring, endearing goofiness.



Mariel Davis, center, and Avi Deutsch rock out to the “Time Warp” number at a screening of “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.” An Rong Xu for The New York Times

Jill Sternheimer, Lincoln Center’s acting director of public programming, said in an interview before the screening: “The actual movie might be quaint. Going out late and dressing up in crazy wigs and makeup, that’s never going to be quaint. I don’t want to live in a world where that’s quaint. It’s a rite of passage.”

“The Rocky Horror Picture Show,” Jim Sharman’s 1975 film adaptation of Richard O’Brien’s stage musical “The Rocky Horror Show,” tells the story of [a virginal couple](#) (played by Susan Sarandon and Barry Bostwick) who spend a life-altering, libido-awakening night in the castle of [Dr. Frank-N-Furter](#) (Tim Curry), a cross-dressing mad scientist with an omnivorous sexual appetite.



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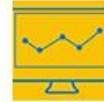
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In the four decades since its release, the film has come to be regarded as much more than a campy salute to B-movies, rock 'n' roll and surrendering to absolute pleasure.

The “Rocky Horror” experience has evolved into an anthropological case study, in which fans adorn themselves in the revealing garb of the show’s characters, stand in front of the screen and re-enact the film; and audience members seize on every awkward pause to shout out their own sarcastic dialogue and comeback lines, turning the one-way process of moviegoing into an interactive event.

(Yes, they still throw toilet paper, playing cards and pieces of toast at the screen, too.)

Midnight screenings made a youthful impression on Ms. Sternheimer.

Growing up in suburban Ohio, she had “a nice mom” who “would drop me off at 11:30 at the movie theater and come pick me up at the end.”

“She probably waited outside,” she added.



Wireless headsets aglow during the film. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

This summer, Ms. Sternheimer and her Lincoln Center colleagues wanted to pay an alfresco tribute to “Rocky Horror” while respecting the noise ordinance that prohibits amplified sound after 10 p.m.

For a solution, they looked to the Out of Doors festival’s previous silent disco events, in which participants dance in relative quiet while listening to D. J.s on personal headphones.

“Someone’s jumping up and down to a Run-DMC song; another person is dancing to Donna Summer,” Ms. Sternheimer explained. “We like it to singing in the shower, because, very quickly, when you have the headphones on, you lose abandon.”

In addition to providing similar hardware for its “Rocky Horror” devotees, Lincoln Center recruited a shadow cast: members of [NYC RHPS](#), the fan group that performs at screenings on Friday and Saturday nights at the Bow Tie Cinemas in Chelsea.

Tom and Ashley Amici, the group’s husband-and-wife co-directors of (who doubled as Brad and Janet at the Lincoln Center event), said in an interview that this outdoor showing presented unusual challenges, but none that were any stranger than a typical night of singing and dancing in their underwear.

Mr. Amici said it would be up to individual cast members, who wore earbuds to hear the film’s soundtrack, to decide whether they wanted to deliver their lines and songs aloud or just lip sync. “Some people sing along to their comfort level,” he said. “Some people just mime it. It’s really the performer’s choice.”

Ms. Amici said she would not try to mimic a distinctive shriek that Ms. Sarandon’s character unleashes at her first sight of Dr. Frank-N-Furter.

“I don’t want to take away from the audio of the movie too much,” Ms. Amici explained. “Because she kind of sufficiently screams on her own. I just do it at a normal, conversational level, so that way it’s not too distracting from what everybody else on the stage is doing as well.”

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Coral Weber and Ian Murphy at the screening. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

While this floor show was transpiring, two cast members, Eric Garment and Torii Pasternak, were offstage, performing their own callback dialogue into microphones that were broadcasting to audiences' headsets. (Moviegoers had the option of switching off this channel and listening only to the sound from the movie, but why would anyone do that?)

Mr. Garment said that in the days before the screening, he had been editing a script, trying to retain the lines that would be funniest to "Rocky Horror" virgins and veterans alike. (Among personal favorites, Mr. Garment cited one that calls attention to a glaring continuity error in a scene of disrobing, known as Brad's "amazing unbuttoning and rebuttoning shirt.")

"We're also being really careful not to dominate the movie," he said. "We understand that the whole experience includes the movie. We can't overtake it by dropping a line every three seconds."

He added, "We'll be using our inside voices."

Friday night's event did not quite live up to its "silent" billing: During the performance of "[Time Warp](#)," the signature musical number of "Rocky Horror," Damrosch Park echoed with the sounds of moviegoers singing along and their feet slapping the ground as they jumped to the left and stepped to the right.

At other times, the crowd seemed totally mute, the stillness broken up occasionally by laughter at a joke heard only by them or the sound of a lone audience member shouting out a callback line or a favorite swear word.

After the movie, Mariel Davis, who was seeing "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" for the first time, said she had gained a satisfying introduction to its traditions.

"It is really strange when you're doing it with headphones on," Ms. Davis said. "There's probably a lot of energy that you would get from being in a bigger group environment that you wouldn't get from being in isolation, essentially."

Indicating her headphones, she added, "These things squeezed my brains out through my nose."

Jahn Dusenbery, a member of a "Rocky Horror" fan cast from Pennsylvania that had attended the screening, declared the headphone experiment a success.

"That made it a lot more effective for people who wanted to follow the show," he said. "For loudmouths like us, who basically just yell obscenities, they had a really good idea to keep it focused. And if people didn't want to hear us, they had that option."