

Masque of the Plague Years

The grunt gallery and the Public Dreams Society team up to revive Poe's timely fable of decadence and denial in the face of death

Resilient realist Glenn Alteen oversees the production of *The Masque of the Red Death*, an undertaking more cursed than *Macbeth*.

BY NAOMI PAULS

"They say *Macbeth* is a cursed play," says Glenn Alteen, lowering his voice, "but I think I've come up with an even more cursed one." He unclasps the chain around his neck to display a small gold skull, complete with articulated jaw. He found it lying on the ground the same day he finally located—after much searching—a warehouse in which to produce his multi-disciplinary adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Masque of the Red Death". An ongoing exhibition featuring regular participatory performances, *The Masque of the Red Death* is open daily from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. at 1460 Burrard Street. The exhibition runs for a month, while performances take place Thursday to Saturday from October 31 to November 16.

Spooky, frightening, even macabre...*The Masque of the Red Death* is all those things. Yet the cackles of laughter that punctuate Alteen's discussion of his project indicate that, despite major set-backs and unnerving coincidences (a close friend who was to have been involved in the project is now dying of AIDS), he has not lost his sense of humour during the two years it has taken to bring his dream to fruition. Alteen confesses, between gulps of coffee and pulls on consecutive cigarettes, that the process of administering 40 staff, plus volunteers, has been an incredible amount of work and that the major scope of the project has been a challenge for all involved.

It was the timeless quality of Poe's story, as well as its timely message about decadence and denial in the face of death, that made Alteen want to bring it to life. "The story isn't much," he says. "It's the way it's written, more than anything. It's essentially just this morality tale about this prince who locks himself up in a castle and tries to avoid the plague, and has this big party, and has it in these seven rooms." But it's the seven rooms—each a different colour—that were, as Alteen puts it, "the kicker", providing a visual hook on which to hang his rendition of the tale.

Alteen, curator of the grunt gallery, chose seven artists to interpret each of the seven rooms, which have been constructed in a 4,500-square-foot warehouse under the Burrard Street Bridge. "Poe describes them as ballrooms," says Alteen, "so I really felt strongly that you had to feel a sense of spaciousness in them." The rooms range in size from 450 to 900 square feet, and the artists had free rein to develop their own themes. Marina Szijarto, in the Blue Room, will incorporate imagery based on a Guatemalan graveyard and the Mexican Day of the Dead, while Steven Graham, in the Purple Room, will evoke the glitter clubs of the mid-'70s, before the spectre of AIDS. The fearful Black

Room, by David Asmodeus, draped in black velvet and housing the all-important clock, will most closely resemble Poe's vivid yet appropriately vague descriptions of the seven chambers.

From the beginning, Alteen conceived *The Masque of the Red Death* as an interdisciplinary, audience-participation production. To assist with realizing those aspects of the work, he enlisted the co-operation of the Public Dreams Society, known for its participatory public-art spectacles. Paula Jardine, artistic director of Public Dreams, co-wrote the script with Alteen—working from the artists' statements—and will direct the performance. But Alteen isn't saying much about that, other than it is not like theatre as anybody would know it.

Not only the players—a mix of actors from alternative theatre groups and independent performance artists—will be masked and in costume, but so will the audience, attending as the revellers at the ball. Alteen admits, with his trademark giggle, "The big 'if' in this is what the audience is gonna do once you put them all in a mask. The audience has an opportunity to act like a character, and how much they, as a whole, take that opportunity will really be fairly interesting.

"My feeling is that if we can get people to read the story, we can get people to participate. If you read the story, I don't think you can help but go down and see what's goin' on."

While Poe's 1842 story may have been based on a real Parisian ball held a decade earlier during a cholera outbreak, his dark fable about Prince Prospero's denial of the Red Death resonates just as strongly today. As Alteen says, "It's not just AIDS. I mean, the cancer, the environmental stuff, all that stuff is about our denial to believe that we are coming to an end, that we are consuming faster than it can grow back.

"There are certain messages on the wall that we choose not to read, like Prince Prospero. I mean, he really is us."

If it all sounds a bit bleak, Alteen has a caveat. "We're not planning to depress everyone for months afterwards, or anything like that," he says. "I think people will be adequately amused by the whole thing and will maybe look at things a little differently than they did before...maybe. Maybe not."

And there's that cavalier laugh again—not unlike the hoot of a resilient realist flying in the face of adversity or death.

Due to the demanding scope of *The Masque of the Red Death*, the grunt gallery will be closed for November's First Thursday art night. However, the November 7 Masque performance should serve as an adequate stand-in.