

Freak Show, an Autopsy

Coroner: Nina Teerilahti

Freak Show, a larp held in an abandoned amusement park in Finland. The larp told the story of the last *freak show* and explored otherness through a romantic gothic horror setting. The participants played a family of outcasts and freaks who struggled to survive in a hostile world. The story ended with the devil coming to take them all to perform for him forever.

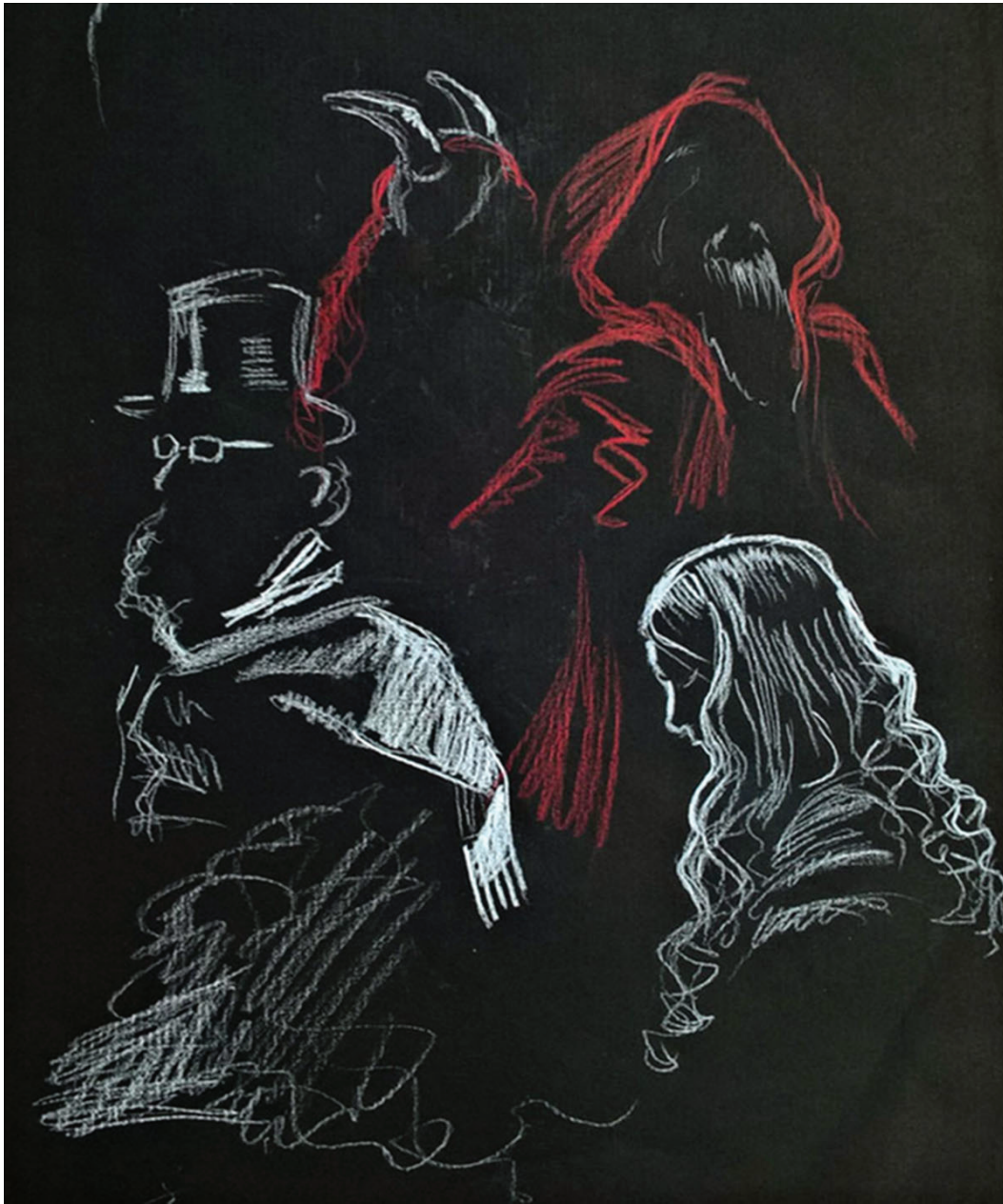
Time of death: 18.9.2017 between 19:00 and 22:00.

Inception

We crawled through a small gap in the fence. Suddenly we were outside everything: law, society and all things normal. There was no one to define us, judge us or get offended by our existence. I saw the thrill and joy ignite in his eyes. It was freedom. We ran and laughed. The twilight in the run down, abandoned amusement park seeped with tragedy, magic and wonder. But the deeper we ventured between the forgotten, deteriorating buildings the sadder we felt. Laughter changed into a sense of longing and lost memories. It seemed like the place was telling us that the terrible price of true freedom is always abandonment. The moment moved me deeply. It resonated with a hidden truth, and I knew I had to share it.

Birth

“So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein—more, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*



Freak Show larp documentation drawing by Aarni Korpela.

Breaking into Wasalandia with my friend started the *Freak Show* larp project in November 2016. I felt a manic need to create a way to share the experience, a feverish drive that reminded me of Victor Frankenstein and his quest to create life.

After the initial spark the concept of the last freak show and a deal with the devil emerged over a few weeks. I contacted the owner of the ruins. He agreed to

have an event at the site and gave me the conditions and a rough budget. In the end of the month I had nothing but an idea and nine months to make it happen. It was madness. I made rough project plans and budget sketches and decided it was worth a shot. I could not guarantee that my creation would not be a monster, a shadow to hunt me until all eternity, but if enough people wanted to take this chance with me, why not. Fearless ventures into the unknown are my specialty.

After the publication of the idea, the *Freak Show* larp raised discord in social media. The project was thought to be disrespectful and insulting because of its subject. The reaction was as if we were robbing graves and bringing dead bodies back to life, and I did feel as driven to follow this path as doctor Frankenstein did. My goal with the *Freak Show*, as with all my art projects, was to make the world just a tiny bit better, take away some fear and add some compassion.

Our ability to create the event without being insensitive or even hurtful was mistrusted. It was publicly demanded that our crew should have members of the minority about which we were creating a larp. As creators we were pressured to out our connection to being a freak and our experience of otherness to justify creating the story of *Freak Show*. Demanding organizers to lose their privacy is cruel. We did not agree.

It was also demanded that our representations of this minority should be realistic. Larps aren't real or realistic. Reality doesn't have a limited duration and safety rules. Believing that larps could give you a realistic experience is insulting towards the people who experience the real thing. The intent of the larp matters far more than the level of realism achieved.

Creating public pressure towards stories of minorities in larp will make the visibility and status of minorities worse. The fear of being offensive should not become crippling. It will end up pushing the already marginalised people even deeper into the margin.

Seeing how much fear just the idea of a freak show larp ignited, I think the project was important. Living through stories will increase understanding and compassion, and if we want to move the limits of normal into more humane positions, we need to tell stories of people that are outside normal. We can't let fear or public pressure stop us. If I am wrong and my passion is insane, my creations will surely hunt me down, just like they did Frankenstein.

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Brains

“Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

I gathered an international crew to create the *Freak Show* together with me by posting ads on larp forums on Facebook. The budget was tight, so I could only pick five people. Out of 13 applicants I chose Alessandro Giovannucci, Dominika Cembala, Martin Olsson, Morgan Kollin and Simon Brind based on what they wrote to me about their skills, motivation and experience. I included one inexperienced crew member as I always want to give someone the opportunity to learn and grow.

Long distance work with a crew of varied backgrounds and nationalities was like sailing an unfamiliar ship in unexpected weather. At times it was hard to understand what works and what doesn't, and why. For me, the biggest challenge to overcome was to get every crew member to communicate about their problems so that they could be solved. We had so many different working and communication cultures, that mixing them and building a new functional one was difficult, a process that continued throughout the project.

One of the best decisions I made was to have a video call meeting every week throughout the whole project. As we had such varied ideas about how to work together or create a larp and could never meet physically, this face to face contact was essential to run the project.

During the nine months of production there were miscommunications, surprising life events and lack of motivation. On the other hand, there was pure creative joy, enthusiasm and strength in combining varied skills and backgrounds. Whenever we had a crisis or a problem to solve, our diversity was a clear asset. Whenever we needed cumbersome things actually done in time, our lack of face to face contact was a problem. A multinational long distance crew is great for designing and not so great for actually getting the work done.

I set three design guidelines for the project:

- Does it create play or enhance immersion? If not, don't do it.
- Does it give players tools to explore the themes? If not, don't do it.
- Treat characters and the subject of being a freak with respect and dignity.

These guidelines helped us focus on the right things. In the end we were happy to notice that almost everything we created for the event actually came into play. What we did affected the player's experience directly, there was no work done in vain.



Freak Show larp documentation drawing by Andrei Kedrin.

Skin

“His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, ... his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

The practicalities of the event were almost completely decided for us by the owner of the site. We had strict limitations and high costs. In many cases this meant that we had to do something badly or not do the event at all. For example we had to buy food from the owner and it had to be served at his hotel at certain times, not at the site, which was far from ideal.

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The site itself was an actual ruin and under the bombardment of vandals, the current and the new owners and multinational companies connected to the deal that was negotiated in the meantime. Over half a year, large structures, furniture, windows, doors and even staircases disappeared, electricity and water became unavailable where they should've been and some areas got into far more rapid decay than anticipated. The site was out of control. We had to accept that, even though much of the extreme situations came as a surprise, such as one of the largest usable inside spaces being totally covered in a thick layer of soap, courtesy of vandals.

The ruin of Wasalandia would never be a safe game site by any standards, but this project was for sensible adults who could take responsibility for themselves. There were dangerous materials and places. In exchange, we had the freedom to rearrange and actually build things. The site was vast and filled with buildings and random items. It was overwhelming. In this larp real, actual exploration and building was a major part of the game and the players enjoyed it immensely.

From a player perspective the abandoned Wasalandia and the actual circus tent with its sound and lighting equipment were half the game. The players did actually build different usable spaces during the game and practised and performed in a real circus tent. The atmosphere of the site and tent was intense and the struggles to create a new home for the *Freak Show* and the joy of finding usable items and furniture were real.

The magical wonderland the players managed to create in the ruins during the game blew us all away. For example, the players got the wheel of fortune and lights working in a building that was supposed to not be usable, built a space with red lights and roses for intimate burlesque shows, found a full clown costume and built a cathedral in an old restaurant. Using the site in any way we could imagine was truly a unique opportunity and experience.

Muscles

“I was dependent on none and related to none. The path of my departure was free, and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

Our greatest success in the *Freak Show* was getting the players we had. They were very motivated, amazingly talented and created a beautiful story and experience. Getting great players was not pure coincidence.

We designed the application process to search for motivation and capability to create with us. We were not interested in any other qualities like age, gender, experience or country of origin. We knew that in the timeframe and resources we had, we could not create everything but were heavily dependant on players creating their own game for themselves. This game would be a sandbox, a chance to play what you create towards a fixed ending.

We designed a blind casting, where you applied to a certain character. The characters were described with a few inspirational sentences and the player was to develop the character further and send us a short text about it.

After the signup closed all crew members voted for each application and the highest scores got in. It was easy to pick the most creative and motivated sounding applications. Many of them moved us or made us inspired and excited. The applications were also a great starting point to develop the characters further with the players.

Heart

“I shall commit my thoughts to paper, it is true; but that is a poor medium for the communication of feeling. I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine.” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

In creating anything I find motivation the key factor. Everything else follows with more or less work, but without motivation nothing happens. In the *Freak Show* we focused on creating the players motivation to create an experience that would inspire and move them. This is why we chose to create characters together with players in a discussion.

The character creation video calls with players were one of the most amazing experiences in the project. At it's best they were enthusiastic brainstorming, player and writer driving each other on and creating an amazing story and person together. With this discussion and letting the player affect everything each character became an amazing piece of art and far better than any writer could have created on their own. The player's motivation to play the characters

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that had been handcrafted to fulfil their wishes was high, which of course affected the larp immensely. Motivated and enthusiastic players create magic.

Lungs

“Anguish and despair had penetrated into the core of my heart; I bore a hell within me, which nothing could extinguish.” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

The themes of *Freak Show* were otherness and being an outcast. They were born from that first moment of inspiration. As outcasts the freaks had magic and freedom, but the price was terrible and they were slowly perishing, just like the ruins of Wasalandia.

Every character was a freak or an outcast, some visibly, others in other ways. There was deformity, mental illness, physical and mental disability, unaccepted love and sexuality, passion or power and unforgivable crimes. Otherness was woven into all characters, all had a strong reason to choose the hard life of an outcast and all characters had different emotional responses and coping mechanisms. These together created a network of viewpoints to explore the themes inside the game.

The players who played on a very physical otherness, like the conjoined twins, and thus felt the otherness in a very concrete way, may have gotten the most intense experience. Some of the others had a harder time connecting to the themes, as the family of freaks was very accepting and this made them feel quite normal. Having more interaction with normal people who treated them as freaks and outcasts would have benefitted the game.

Eyes

“I see by your eagerness, and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted. That cannot be.” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

I feel that photos never truly capture a larp, they are pale shadows compared to the experience. Larps are mandalas, made as perfect as they can be with extreme effort and then suddenly gone forever. All larp reproductions are flawed and lack the original essence, the true beauty that made the experience remarkable.

At its best, larp photography gives us tools to remember. At its worst larp photography gives us tools to gather validation in social media on the expense of the actual experience. I did not want photos of the *Freak Show* for two reasons: because I wanted to protect our players from the social media outrage caused by the subject of the game and because I did not want the need for good photos to take away from the focus of playing.

We used a group of artists to document the *Freak Show* larp by drawing. The artists were woven into the world by making them a meta-technique to represent the feeling of the end of times. In the game world the artists were watcher spirits that came to document the events when all is ending. They had black shroud costumes that hid their features. Whenever a watcher spirit stopped to draw a player, the player felt the gaze of God or the Devil on them. The watcher spirits were present for the last eight hours of the larp.

The watcher spirits worked pretty well. The situation was very challenging for the artists and at times overwhelming for the players, but all in all it was a good experience for both. In my opinion the drawings captured the mood of the game in a beautiful way. Fleeting impressions with heavy interpretation fit the *Freak Show* better than photographs. The unusual documentation method also gave the players a feeling that the event was something very special and unique, which added to the magic of the experience.

Cause of death

“ ‘But soon’, he cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, ‘I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pyre triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace, or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell.’ ” — *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

We rented a circus tent from a real small Finnish circus for the *Freak Show*. The day before the game I was watching them erect it. An old carnie, the tent master, was having a smoke and chatting with me as the Moroccan brothers were setting up the support beams. “It feels funny to have real circus people around as we are just going to pretend to be a circus for a while.” I said. The tent master inhaled smoke and looked at me in the eyes suddenly very serious, almost moved. Something shined behind the old man’s grey eyes. “I don’t think

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it's funny at all. You are not just playing." I was confused, but moved. He struck a chord. The tent master looked at the slowly rising tent that he had travelled with for decades. "That the idea of circus has inspired you to do this, that is truly beautiful." I held back tears. The old carnie smiled and took another drag.

I agree. What we did that weekend was truly beautiful. As all tragic, life-changing beauty, it also had to die to preserve its magic. The beauty of a larp dies as soon as it is born, leaving only echoes, vibrant after images that soon start to fade. It can't exist in any other way.

Re-animation

The *Freak Show* gave birth to lasting friendships, deep realizations, life-changing experiences, amazing artwork and beauty. Four people took tattoos after the event to always remember it. Can I take credit for these achievements? No. I did not make them. Would all of this have happened without me? No.

As a larp creator I see myself as a person who makes things possible. With the *Freak Show*, I think I made important experiences possible for several people. To me that is worth all the work, stress, trouble, critique and even hate I received for doing this project. I am satisfied that I took the chance and leapt into the unknown.

Will the *Freak Show* be re-animated? Perhaps, in another time and country, in a different abandoned place seeping with tragedy. If you know just the place, have the needed tools to bring a beautiful monster to life and want to take this journey with me, I'm open to suggestions. My passion to create false lives is still burning.

Links

Freak Show larp website: <http://martinolsson.github.io/freakshowlarp> (Accessed January 2018)

Freak Show documentation drawings: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B6zJauE8ICngUk1pRHhFNWQ4aVE?usp=sharing>



19, 9, 19

Freak Show larp documentation drawing by Kaspar Tamsalu.

