

THE GRAIN STORE GHOST

by David Umbach

For over 100 years it had been *Traubenbach's Feed and Grain Store*. Long after we had turned it into *Celebration Playhouse*, the old timers in town still referred to it as "Ol' Traub'mbach's".

How well I remember those grueling weeks when we transformed the old building into a theater. I helped load two dumpsters with rotting wood, filthy linoleum, half-filled sacks of seed and piles of decomposing newspapers. From the second floor, we swept out ancient grain (mingled with mouse turds) from the bins, turning them into prop tables. We carted rusted farm tools out of storerooms that would be used for dressing-rooms. We emptied the office, at the top of the stairs and painted it green so we could have an official "Green Room", a lounge where the actors would wait to make their entrances.

The main store area on the first floor was where we created the stage and audience space. It was not a large space, even after removing all the cabinets and bins, but it made an intimate, "in-the-round" stage setting, and would seat around 100 audience members. When we had finished, no one would ever have known it was once a feed and grain store -- we had ourselves a theater!

I was not one of the original producers or directors of *Celebration Playhouse*, I was just a lowly actor with higher aspirations. I helped with the creation of the theater, but it wasn't until after it had been established and running successfully for six years, that the original producers lost interest and decided to hand it over to me, to manage. I had no experience in running a theater, but I had youth, dreams, and chutzpah. It was a lot harder than I thought, but I managed to keep the theater afloat, and directed several of the plays, myself. The audiences kept coming, seeming to be pleased with what they saw, and I was feeling quite proud of myself. That is, of course, when the trouble started.

One of the perks of being the producer of a theater is that the eager young actresses are falling all over themselves to get into your good graces. Now, I'm far from the Rob Lowe type, more like a plump,

Italian Richard Dryfus, but during that time I had girls a-plenty, and I was loving it.

One Sunday afternoon I was holding auditions for "Jesus Christ, Superstar" and enjoying the bevy of actresses who were trying out for Mary Magdalene. But when Gloria Babbs walked in and handed me her picture, I knew that she was something special. Her resumé said that she had been *Miss Black, Teenage New Jersey*, and I could see why. Miss Babbs gave new meaning to that (then popular) expression, "Black is Beautiful". I gave her the part because I thought she'd be sensational in the role. But even if her audition had been lousy, I would still have wanted her in the play.

We hit it off right away and we began going out together after rehearsals. Then one night we stayed in the theater after everyone had left and on top of the platform that represented Gethsemane we went, as they say, "all the way". I'm sure it was at this time that things started to go haywire at the theater.

The first odd occurrence happened on a night after Gloria and I had closed the local pub and I was walking her back to the theater parking lot to her car. We said good night and as her yellow VW pulled away, I noticed that all the lights were on in the theater. I was furious. "Dammit," I muttered, "doesn't Jay know that those lights just eat up money?" Our electric bill was outrageous!

I stormed into the theater calling, "Who's in here?" There was no answer. "HEY!", I shouted, "Why the fuck are all the stage lights on?" Still not a sound came back to me.

I went up to the lighting booth and saw that every dimmer was up full. I couldn't believe it. Our stage manager, Jay, was very trustworthy, and it was his responsibility to close up the theater. I shut off the board, muttering, "I'm going to kill that sonovabitch." But I thought to myself, "This isn't like him at all."

I felt my way in the dark, to the phone in the lobby, because I had forgotten to turn on the house lights and called Jay. I had obviously gotten him out of a deep, pot-induced sleep, "Yeammmm", he croaked.

"Jay, you asshole, what are all the lights doing on, in the theater? You left every dimmer up full!"

"What are you talkin' about, man," he said, waking up a bit, "I was the last to leave and everything was dark as a coffin. You must be hallucinatin', man."

After several minutes of not so witty repartee, I finally believed that he had indeed left the theater empty, locked and without light. So, who had turned them on, I wondered? Some sick fuck that was trying to bankrupt me, I thought.

I wandered back into the darkened theater, just to check things out, and here's where it got weird. I thought I heard someone behind me chuckling, very quietly. I spun around to an empty room and said, "Who's there?" Again, there was, no response, I shook my head, thinking, "It's been too long a night", and quickly locked up the theater and headed home.

Nothing dramatic happened in the next few weeks, but lots of little things occurred that, in retrospect, seemed significant.

One night before a band rehearsal, our musical director was ranting that the musical scores, usually kept in the band room, were gone. After a frantic search they were found down in the cellar. When Jay turned on the lights after he had set all the colors, he claimed that the gels had been switched around and that he'd have to do it all over again. One afternoon an actor came to the theater early to rehearse his dance number but when he tried to play the music, the theater's tape deck ate the tape.

No one connected these occurrences, but there was a definite tension around this production, that made everyone very irritable.

During a dress rehearsal, Gloria came to me and complained that she hated the women's dressing room and would not use it, claiming that it gave her the creeps. Now it wasn't a beautiful room, by any means, but actresses had been changing in it for years and no one else had complained. But when I questioned her further, she just said, "That room doesn't like me, and I'm not going in there again!"

When she said this, it was like she'd slapped my face, because it made me put my finger on something that had been alluding me. I was feeling lots of animosity at the theater, but it wasn't coming from the people in the production, as it sometimes does for the director. It was coming from the theater, itself.

Gloria and I continued to go out together after the rehearsals, but we both hurried to leave the theater as soon as we could, no more hanging around kibitzing with the actors. As a matter of fact, no one felt much like staying there late at night.

It wasn't until the day that "Jesus Christ Superstar" opened, that an event occurred which made me realize that the theater was in serious trouble.

There was a trap door that opened directly above the stage that had been cut into the floor upstairs. In this production, it was being used to pull Judas up through it, when he hangs himself. The cover over the trap door was always kept in place, except when the noose was lowered, and Judas was raised, because the hole in the ceiling lead right into the make-up room floor.

That afternoon, Gloria called me with the usual opening night jitters. "Dominick, honey, I can't stay around this apartment another minute. Could you let me into the theater early, so I can fix something on my costume"? Since I was still eager for every opportunity to be alone with her, I readily agreed and met her around 4:30. When we entered the theater, I took her hand and pulled her against me, trying to calm her nerves, as well as my lust. She responded shyly at first, but as I kissed her, she melted her body into mine. Then I felt her unzipping my fly, and I almost burst with excitement. We lowered ourselves to the floor in the ticket booth, and all the tensions of opening night were driven away by our passion. Then just as we were reaching a peak, we heard an enormous crash in the theater.

"Shit!", I cried, pulling up my pants, "What the hell was that?"

I ran into the darkened theater, turned on the lights and saw that a piece of scenery had fallen onto the stage. "Gloria, you go take care of your costume. I've got to put this damn cross back up."

As I grabbed a hammer, I heard her going up stairs to the make-up room, which she now used as her dressing room. The wooden cross was about 6 feet tall, and was supposed to suspend over the stage, like a canopy, until it was lowered for the crucifixion. It now lay on the stage, one corner chipped, but at least it hadn't broken completely.

Examining the ceiling of the stage, where it was supposed to hang, and I couldn't imagine how it had gotten loose from its fixtures. As I looked up, I noticed that the trap door was open, and I could see up into

the make-up room. I called up, "Gloria, did you take off the trap door cover?"

"What, honey, I can't hear you." she answered.

I shouted, "Come over to the trap door, I want to talk to you!"

She moved over to the open hole, peered down, and waved, "What happened, Dom, is the cross all right?"

I gazed up at her chocolate legs, able to see right up to her crotch, and said, "Whoa, the view from down here is spectacular! I'm going to let Jay take care of this damn cross; I'll be up in a moment and we can continue where we left off."

Just then she gave a grunt, as if she had been punched in the ribs. Her knees buckled, and she crumbled into the hole, screaming. She reached out to grab the floor as she went through, but she couldn't stop herself and she came tumbling toward me. I put my arms up, to stop her fall as much as to protect myself, but I didn't arrest her descent much. Her arms were flailing as she landed on top of me and her elbow smashed into my face. I fell backwards onto the cross, splitting it in two, and blood started spurting from my nose. She had twisted around so that she landed on her shoulder and as I heard a sickening crunch, she shrieked in pain.

We both lay there for a minute in shock and pain before I struggled to my feet and headed for the phone to call the first aid squad. As I was leaving the room, I heard her say, "Somebody pushed me!"

The rest of the night was a blur of emergency rooms and dressing rooms. We had an opening night to get on the boards and, as they say, "The Show Must Go On!", and somehow it did. Even Gloria, with her arm in a sling and massive amounts of pain killers, managed to say all her lines and sing "I Don't Know How to Love Him", getting a warm ovation. It wasn't until after the curtain calls and after the cast and crew had left for a party at *The Office*, that Gloria and I were able to talk privately about what had happened. She swore that no one was in the room with her, but that she had felt a powerful shove, which knocked the wind out of her and made her fall through the hole. "And the scariest thing," she said, " just before I got pushed, I think I heard someone whisper, 'Nigger whore!'"

She then was the first to express what had been hovering around my mind for weeks, saying, "Honey, we got a mighty mean ghost in this

place. You better get rid of it, or your theater is going to go to shit. I can tell you that I, for one, am not gonna work here again after "Super Star" closes, unless you can assure me that that sucker is gone for good!"

I didn't want to lose Gloria and I certainly didn't want to have the theater fail. So, the next day I talked to my friend Arnold, who had told me that he "dabbles in the occult." When I explained to him the bizarre happenings at the theater, he was fascinated. "Wow! that's really cool, Dom. Can I come over and check it out?"

"All right," I said, "but more important, do you know of anyone that can get rid of the fuckin' thing?"

"Well, there's this institute in Upper Saddle River, that deals in ghosts and ectoplasm and poltergeists and all that shit. I think they even do exorcisms, to get rid of any unwanted spirits."

"Great! How do I get in touch with these people?"

"It's called *Supernatural Studies, Inc.* Mostly they just investigate paranormal events, making a collection of them for a book they're putting together."

"But can they really expel the things, if you ask them to?"

"I guess so, but first they'll probably check the place out, to see whether it's really something supernatural. After that they'll advise you what can be done, if anything."

So, I made a call to Upper Saddle River. After much retelling of the events, they agreed to come down and have a look.

On the Wednesday morning that they were to arrive, no one was in the theater but me. As I waited for them, I was ambivalent about how I felt. On one hand, I really wanted to solve the problems at the theater, but on the other hand, to call the Ghostbusters! It seemed ridiculous. I was speculating whether they would look like Dan Ackroyd and Bill Murray or the funny midget lady in "Poltergeist". Then suddenly, in walked a tall, thin, serious looking woman, who thrust her hand at me and said, "How do you do, Mr. Pizzo, I'm Sarah Madderom." She had her hair pulled back in a bun, wearing black horned-rimmed glasses. She would win no beauty contests.

She introduced her two male associates, who reminded me of college accounting majors. They paid little attention to me as they opened their briefcases and took out notebooks and cameras.

Ms Madderom got right down to business. "Mr. Pizzo, do you have any other events to report to us, now, that you didn't tell us on the phone?" she asked in a brisk, no-nonsense manner. I said that I didn't, but that I could show her around the theater and point out where the various happenings took place.

"By all means, Mr. Pizzo, but once you do, I would appreciate it if you would let us do our work and be as quiet as possible."

"That's fine with me.", I said, as we entered the building.

Nothing much occurred when I showed them the lobby and the stage, but when we went upstairs, Ms Madderom let out a gasp. "Oh, goodness," she whispered, "there is definitely a presence here". She walked slowly around into the make-up room, feeling the walls as she went. One of her assistants started scribbling in his notebook, and the other one uncapped his camera.

I stepped into the room after them and the woman said, "Ahhh! And it's a very angry presence, too. I do believe, Mr. Pizzo, that it's hostility is directed at you!"

"Do you mean to tell me, that this ghost is specifically mad at me? This is crazy. What did I do?"

"I couldn't say, Mr. Pizzo," she said with a school-marmish sneer, "but I do not think we'll find anything out with you in the room. I suggest that you leave the building and come back in about an hour."

I agreed to meet them in the lobby at noon. After drinking too many cups of coffee in the local diner, I returned to the theater. They were waiting for me in the lobby and I could tell from the self-satisfied expression on her face, that Miss Sarah had been communing with the spirit world. "We were very fortunate," she began, "the presence was quite communicative once you left the room."

"You mean it talked to you?" I asked.

"Not precisely, but we asked it many questions and it, or I should say, 'she', answered by knocking 'yes' or 'no' on the table.

"That thing is a woman?" I asked,

"Yes. It seems that the woman lived in this house when it was first built, in the 1840s. She was married to the man who ran the store downstairs, and they lived upstairs. Her husband seems to have abused her, which is fairly common in female spirits. She was beaten to death by him in the room you now have labeled 'Woman's Dressing Room'."

"But why did it push Gloria through the trap door?"

"It's hard to get exact information with just 'yes' or 'no' answers, but we did ask her how she felt about the girl who was pushed, and we determined that she was angry with the girl for something that she had done."

I had a feeling that it had to do with sleeping with me, but I didn't want to tell them about that, so I said, "I can't think of anything that poor Gloria could have done to merit being pushed through a hole in the floor! What else did you find out?"

"Not much. But she did let us know that she has never before been moved to show herself; not until you came here."

"This is un-fucking-believable," I said, starting to get really pissed, "You mean that in like 150 years, I'm the first person she has played any of her nasty little tricks on? What the hell has she got against me?"

"Perhaps you remind her of her husband", she said with a smirk. "We may be able to ascertain this, when we meet her again. I propose we set up another appointment."

"No more Shirley Maclaine chit-chat, lady, I want you to get rid of this bitch, whoever she is. Can you guys handle that or not?"

"We may be able to do something, later on," she said imperiously, "but I feel that we could learn much more from another session."

"Look here, Ms Madderom, I have a theater to run, and I can't have my actors, or myself, being terrorized. Who knows what else this crazy ghost might try, if we let it continue? Please get rid of it before something even worse happens."

The two guys were huddling in the background, listening intently. They were obviously hoping for another chance to talk with Mrs. Casper, the not-so-friendly ghost. The woman thought a moment, and said, "How about this? We come in tomorrow evening and spend another hour trying to gather more information. Perhaps at that time we will find out what we can do to free the spirit from her earthly bonds."

"And when would you do this freeing business?" I asked.

"It's possible that we could accomplish it that very night, Mr. Pizzo."

The idea of solving the problem before the weekend, when we had three more performances, appealed to me. I agreed to let them listen to more table knocking if they promised to complete the job that same

night. After they left, I called Gloria to tell her what the Supernaturalists had said. She was quite giddy about it all and found it gratifying that there really was a ghost, as she had suggested. "How about I come over tonight after work and we can show that old lady, what us young folks can do."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Gloria, evidently she really doesn't like either of us."

"Hey, she can't do anything to us if we stay together, and honey, I got some good ideas of what we can do together!" She was in high gear and I'm afraid I let my libido overrule my ego. "All right then, bring those cute black buns over here around 7:00."

When her yellow bug careened into the parking lot, I was waiting outside the lobby door. No one else was going to come to the theater that night; the actors deserved a rest after last week's rough dress rehearsals.

She ran over to me and threw her good arm around my neck. "Hiya, honey," she said, "let's go talk to the ghost!"

"How are you feeling, honey, is your shoulder hurting you," I asked.

"Naah!" she said with a grin, "I feel great! Those pain killers are real good."

I realized that the pills accounted for her manic mood and I couldn't help thinking that they might be a bit of an aphrodisiac, too. So, I said against my better judgement, "O.K. baby, let's give the old lady something to be shocked at."

As we entered the theater, she pulled back a little, and said, "I don't want to go upstairs." Then she grabbed my hand and giggled, "Let's go back to Gethsemane." I followed her, knowing it was stupid, but she was being so sexy, I couldn't resist. My brain was definitely being controlled by my lower anatomy.

I turned the house lights on low, and we hastily undressed. We lay down on the Gethsemane platform that was center stage, under the cross. It was very exciting being naked on the stage with empty seats all around us. It gave us the feeling that we were being watched by an invisible audience, as indeed we were.

Gloria started to writhe and groan under me, more uninhibited than she had ever been. Suddenly she screamed, "Hey, Gramma, what do you think of your nigger whore, now?"

At that moment, the house lights flickered and went out, then the stage lights came on full power. There was a tremendous banging noise upstairs, like someone with heavy boots was running from room to room. I rolled off Gloria, and we both lay there frozen, unable to move. There was a loud crack, that sounded like lightning, and the cross that was suspended above our heads, broke free and came hurtling down towards us. One of the corners of the cross landed right on Gloria's face, crushing her skull like a cantaloupe.

I screamed and tried to run when the stage lights on the ceiling began jumping off their pipes and came swinging at me, hanging from their cables. One after another they pummeled me from all directions, wherever I tried to run. A large spotlight smashed into my head, knocking me to the floor, unconscious.

Evidently a passerby heard the commotion and summoned the police. They found me out cold and naked on the floor. They also found my beautiful Gloria.

My wounds were superficial, and I was out of the hospital the next day. Gloria was buried three days later. I never went back to the *Celebration Playhouse*, and it was closed forever. Ms Madderom and her crew were not allowed to return.

After I had recovered completely (at least physically), I did some research on the building that housed *Traubenbach's Feed and Grain Store* and found that the original owner was Angelo Pirelli. He was married to a woman named Phillipina, who had died mysteriously. It was also recorded that Mr. Pirelli had employed a young black girl as servant.

Soon after, the building was completely gutted and transformed into a high- tech insurance brokerage. One of their employees told me that they were having trouble keeping secretaries, particularly black ones. I guess Phillipina is still keeping watch over her domain.