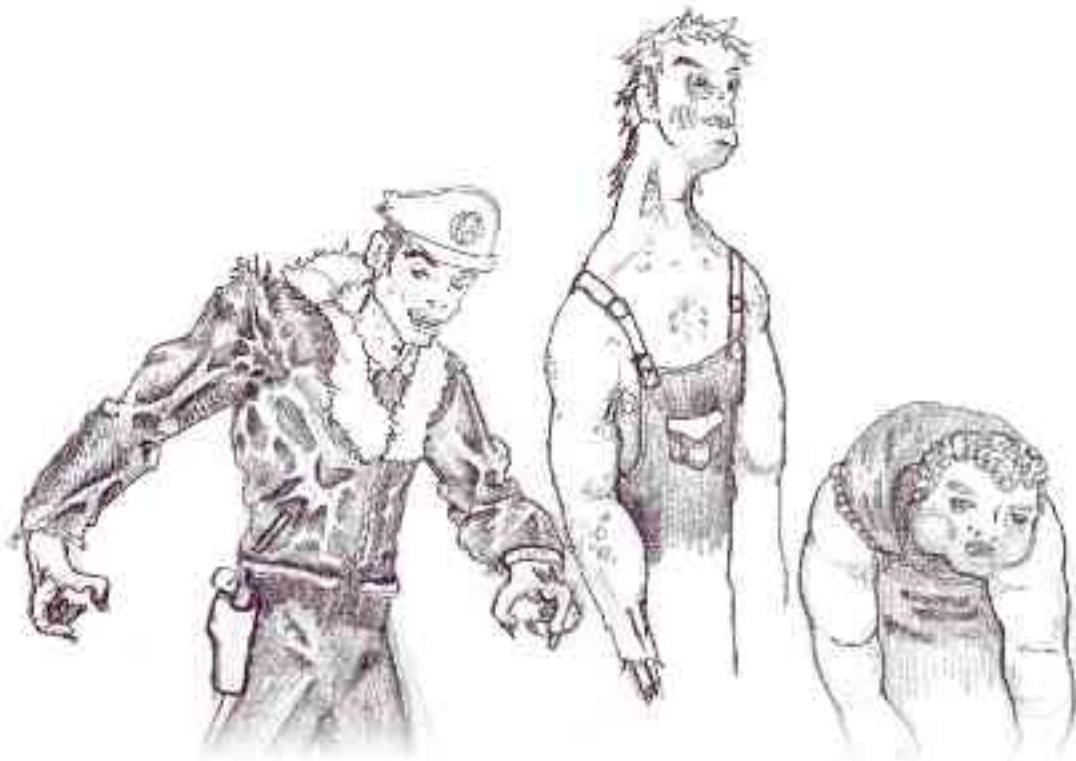


# THE UNBURIED DEAD

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Page numbers

## **The Unburied Dead Zombie Participatory Theater**

### **The client**

I envision that the ideal client for this production would be large, wealthy experimental theater troupe. I would hope that the group would understand that individual performance is not as important to the the piece as overall environment, and that the cast's role is aimed at evoking specific reactions from the audience/audience members. Inasmuch, the cast are more facilitators of the experience than “stars” of the show. Ideally, the troupe would have sufficient actors for the parts, as well as access to acceptable facilities for the buildings. Furthermore, this troupe would be established enough that ticket sales would generate enough revenue to pay for actors salaries.

### **The Overview**

The Unburied Dead is an attempt to bridge the gaps between horror movies, performance art, videogames and installation art. The play<sup>i</sup> leads the audience through a zombie epidemic similar to those found in movies like *Night of the Living Dead*. Originally (in terms of the promotion materials that the audience will see) billed as traditional theater, the play will dissolve into participatory theater<sup>ii</sup> and then into a pseudo-comical last stand.

### **The Audience**

The play's intended audience is largely the college-age horror movie buff, ideally someone who is familiar with the history of zombie films. Due to graphic violence, the play should probably be restricted to mature audiences only. Furthermore, due to the complexity of the actions, the audience size at each performance would have to be relatively small, on the order of 10 to 15 people.

### **Influences**

Obviously, the play draws on the rich history of zombie films and videogames. Other movie experiences like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or midnight showings of cult-favorite movies contain similar intentions to the Unburied Dead. The three feature-length movies from the *Evil Dead* universe<sup>iii</sup> comprise a story arc which functions similarly to that of the Unburied Dead: the audience is presented with a situation that that moves from straight horror into horror-themed comedy. Another major influence is the stage show presented by the band GWAR, who are notorious for violence and bloodshed that fully encompasses the audience, but never loses touch with its humor and performance art roots. Furthermore, the play has a number of parallels to LARPing<sup>iv</sup>, with participants acting out unrealistic scenarios in a mediated environment. The Unburied Dead also has intentions similar to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, in that it seeks to remove the fourth wall in ways that will be beneficial to the audience. Finally, the concept draws from other phenomena such as dinner theater or murder mystery, live action party games.

### **Its Niche**

Pop culture has seen a tremendous surge in the popularity of zombie related

products. Videogames and movies have a long-standing relationship with zombies, and now musicians are beginning to employ zombies as both subject matter and themes in their music. Musical groups like Converge, the Banner and Hollywood Undead all explicitly reference a number of iconic zombie movies. Furthermore, fans have adapted movies like *Evil Dead* and *The Toxic Avenger* into full-fledged musicals.

It may also be worthwhile to note some of the conventions that fans expect from zombie movies. For one, it is important that the play be as bloody as possible. Squibs and blood packets should be used liberally, especially if there is little worry over clean-up. Also, fans will expect graphic violence and dismemberment, so prop body parts would be suggested for maximum effect. Recommended usage would be exploding zombie heads for the sheriff character to shoot, fake arterial spray in the crowd, and fake limbs to be torn off and eaten by zombie extras.

### **Installation**

The *Unburied Dead* is a complex production requiring a large ensemble cast as well as extensive sets and props. Furthermore, complex make-up and gore effects will require more set-up time. Steps that will take significant amounts of time are: set building and dressing, making molds for zombie parts, casting props from those molds, rigging the props for effects and blood. Wardrobe is not particularly complex, but special care should be paid towards the proper Nerf Weapons. Ideally, the production group would provide enough Nerf Mavericks for each person, but due to current popularity of that model, the Nerf Firefly seems like a more realistic option.

### **The Play**

See the appendix for additional information. Certain aspects, like when or if a character is killed, or who leads what party, can also be changed from performance to performance, if demand for the play is high enough; or if suitable actors cannot be found.

The play is an offshoot of theater pieces in the vein of Participatory Theater, or Theater of Cruelty, in that it is an express attempt to remove the fourth wall. The idea is to create a sense of involvement for the audience by physically inserting them into the action that takes place on the stage.

### **Sample Walkthrough**

The following represents an ideal performance of *The Unburied Dead*.

The general audience congregates in the performance space's foyer, waiting for the doors to open. The usher will then appear from backstage, and address the entire crowd. He will first inform the audience that one of the actresses has fallen ill, and that she will be replaced by her understudy. He will then proceed to warn the audience that the play is not for those adverse to violence or bloodshed, and that all of the violence should be kept in context, and never practiced in real life. Unbeknownst to the audience, several of the people milling around the foyer will actually be the actors designated as plant zombies and victims. Concessions will be sold to offset some of the costs of the play, and to give

the atmosphere of traditional theater. Furthermore, this will give the audience a chance to see and interact with the “plant” audience members, which will establish them as non-performers in the mind of the paying audience.

The usher will proceed to seat the audience, and the play will begin. The curtain will open on the interior of a diner, with a waitress, Judy, serving a slice of pie to (and generally flirting with) the town sheriff, Mike<sup>v</sup>. In one corner sits Scottie, a James Dean-style teenage rebel, and his upper-class girlfriend, Ellen. In another booth sit Frank, a middle-aged businessman, and his secretary Harriet. The entire diner looks to the door as the pregnant Mary enters. They look back to their food as she sits down at the counter. They are startled again as Horace, a pot-bellied farmer, rushes in and insists on turning the news on. The waitress grudgingly obliges, and to everyone's shock, a newscast reports on a series of grisly crimes sweeping nearby communities. It seems that a rash of murders has been occurring, and in many of the cases, there are signs of cannibalism. The audience, generally used to this explanation as a prelude to a zombie invasion, should chuckle.

The sheriff, the farmer, and the waitress will all begin discussing various causes for the epidemic, while at the same time, the usher will dash down the aisles and onto the stage. As he enters the lighted portion of the stage, it will be revealed to the audience that he is covered in blood. He will speak about being attacked by an audience member, and then collapse, to be attended to by various on-stage characters. The waitress will then take a moment to address the audience, speaking about cast member safety, and that even with the excitement of a zombie play, it should be remembered that all of the participants are actors, and should not be harmed.

At this point, a zombie will appear from backstage, and the sheriff character will draw his weapon (a Nerf brand Maverick) and shoot the zombie in the head. The zombie character will actually be a dummy rigged to explode and splatter fake brains all over the stage. At this point, the sheriff will remind the audience that the only way to re-kill the undead is with a shot to the head. Following this, in the crowd, the plant zombies will begin to stir and move towards the exits. Some will begin to attack other plant actors, taking advantage of the darkened theater to deploy various gore effects. The characters onstage will see this, and call for the audience to follow them backstage. While the audience is herded backstage, the sheriff character will dispatch the few remaining zombies.

When all of the survivors (actors and audience combined) have gathered backstage, the actors will lead a discussion on what to do next. The businessman, Frank, will ask to go to the local market for supplies and medicine for his lover, who has been injured in fracas. The sheriff will suggest that the group go to the local gun store in order to better arm themselves. The waitress will suggest a third option, that the group remain in the theater for safety's sake. One of the plant audience members will then suggest that the group split up and return to the theater when the tasks have been accomplished. The characters will then ask the audience to divide themselves into three groups, one to

remain in the theater, one to venture to the gun store, and one to go to the market.

The exterior at night will be lit by streetlights, and if necessary for safety's sake, floodlights. At one end of the street, a car will be in flames, and zombie extras will wander about in the distance. It will be up to the cast members to guide the audience groups to their respective destinations.

### **The Gun Store**

The audience members who choose to accompany the sheriff to the gun store will be led out a side door, and down a small alley to the back of a small shop. The sheriff will then direct the audience members to locate as many guns as they can find, preferably one for each audience member. Rather than fake firearms, the group will be equipped with Nerf guns, chosen for price, safety and availability. After locating the guns, the group will then return to the theater.

### **The Market**

The second group will be led out onto the street by Frank, the businessman. They will see a few zombies milling about at some distance, and will sneak into the market undisturbed. There, Frank will tell them to locate food and medicine. Having found those, the group will return to the theater.

### **The Theater**

The final group, those left in the theater, will begin clearing furniture in an attempt to make the space suitable for a last stand. This will involve tending to wounded characters and clearing space for the returning parties. In the mean time, the zombie corpses will have mysteriously vanished.

### **The Final Showdown**

Once all of the survivors have been reunited, the Nerf guns will be distributed. The sheriff character will then take the group out into the back lot to teach them how to properly use the Nerf guns. Again, he will stress that the only way to truly kill the zombies is to shoot them in the head. As the tutorial ends, the cemetery next door will begin to stir. Zombies will enter from the graveyard, as well as from the streets surrounding the lot. As the group begins to fight off the oncoming zombies, the plant characters will begin to run back into the theater, only to be killed by zombies emerging from the inside. Having slain the zombies outside, the audience will return to the interior, and slay the few remaining zombies. With this done, the group will snack on the food that was recovered, and the play will end. Finally, the audience will be reminded that in order to maximize the effect, the interactive portion of the play must remain a secret.

### **The Cast**

The core cast of the play is actors for the following roles: the sheriff, the waitress, the businessman, his secretary, the two teenage lovers, the farmer and the pregnant woman. As stated earlier, it is important to note that these roles are very flexible, and the play is scalable to the intended audience size. So, a larger audience will require a larger

cast to properly corral and guide that audience through the story points. But, if the audience is smaller, the cast and sets can be scaled down accordingly.

In addition, the play will require approximately 6 “plant” audience members, who will cause disruptions in the audience by acting like zombies or attacking other cast members at predetermined times. Also, the production will require ten additional cast members to act as zombie extras throughout the course of the play. Finally, a significant number of technicians, approximately ten, will be required for lighting, props and safety. So, a total of approximately thirty members will be necessary for the actual performance.

### **The Sets**

The overall footprint for the play is quite large, comprising of three buildings and two empty lots. One building will function as the main stage of the play, containing a foyer, seating and its own stage with a diner interior. The empty lot behind the theater will butt up on an intersection, at which will be a small grocery store, a gun store, and a cemetery. Other major set pieces include wrecked cars, fake tombstones for the cemetery, and a wrecked car, which may or may not be set on fire, depending on safety.

### **The User Experience**

The overall goal of the *Unburied Dead* is to create an experience that would otherwise be reserved for the few surviving characters in low-grade horror movies. The experience is intended to be a complex path that plays off of many of the conventions of the genre and medium. As the “standard theater” portion of the play begins, the audience should be lulled into the state of attention that is usually associated with plays. The various interruptions should generally irritate the audience, to the point that when the “plant” characters begin to leave their seats and attack other characters, the audience would react as if the character is simply another member of the audience, and not a part of the play. When the play transitions into the backstage area, the audience should immediately sense that the play is actually interactive, and treat it as such. When the audience finally gets to battle the zombies, and thereby switch from passive observer to active participant, their enthusiasm level should be such that nearly all of them will be quoting Bruce Campbell<sup>vi</sup> and Roddy Piper<sup>vii</sup>. The overall goal of the project is to let the audience know that the play is really about fan service, and providing them the opportunity to act out scenarios from their favorite genres.

The overall experience of *The Unburied Dead* has to walk a fine line. It must make the audience feel that they are an active part of the events unfolding, but at the same time, it is not intended to be a “sandbox” experience. As such, the play can be closely equated to books in the vein of “Choose Your Own Adventure,” where the reader is able to choose which path to follow, but is never really able to deviate from that path. The experience is not about violence, scares or bloodshed, but replicating the feeling of the surviving hero; a feeling that no other medium has yet to attain.

### **Key Points**

As intended, the audience's experience is roughly analogous to the hero's journey,

wherein the character is called to overcome a great obstacle in his life, and thereby save the world from destruction. Admittedly, it is a bit of a stretch to equate the likes of Ashley J. Williams<sup>viii</sup>, but nevertheless, the core idea of the zombie genre is that ordinary people are able to survive because they keep their cool. Another key point of the play is the convergence of horror and comedy. The intent of the play is to create a space which turns shock and horror into comedy, while always keeping the audience an active participant in the events that unfold.

### **Storyboard of Experience**

See attached for storyboards and diagrams, as well as the *Half-Life 2* prototype level. The digital version exists to show a mock-up of a possible layout for the performance space.

### **Technical Requirements**

The *Unburied Dead* is a resource-intensive play, requiring a large, open space adjacent to three buildings which the audience will have full access to. The largest building will house the stage, and will require enough room to construct a set of a diner's interior. The other two buildings will serve as the gun store and as the supermarket, respectively. Each will need shelving and miscellaneous furniture, as well as simple props to complete the small town illusion. In addition, the play will require enough Nerf guns to arm the cast as well as the audience. The supermarket will also require fake medical supplies and food for the one party to receive. Also, make-up and gore effects will be required for the zombie cast members, as well as the special effects.

### **Personnel Requirements**

In addition to the core cast members, the project will require a significant number of extras and crew members. Carpenters will be required for set construction and tear-down; make-up and special effects artists will be required to create the zombies and related effects. Obviously, a large number of extras will be needed to play the zombie characters. The audience will be forgiving of repeated zombie characters<sup>ix</sup>, so it will be possible to recycle some of them, but a number will still be needed for the final showdown.

### **Projected Budget**

As stated earlier, this budget has been drawn up with the expected client (and their actor and location situation) in mind. This budget expects a nightly audience of ten to twenty members, and approximately 15 cast members. Obviously, if the facilities permit, many of the costs for the locations can be offset. Ticket revenues will be used to fund the actors and technicians salaries, at the going rate for the available actors.

#### **Budget:**

Cleanup/Preparation for foyer/stage:	location specific	~\$2000
Cleanup/Preparation for supermarket:	location specific	~\$2000
Cleanup/Preparation for gun store:	location specific	~\$2000
Junk car (non-running, purchased from junkyard)	-	~\$250

Nerf weapons for 20 people	~\$25 each x20	~\$500
Fake tombstones + fencing		~\$500
Fake Medical Supplies		~\$100
Makeup, fake blood, special effects		~\$100
Food Supplies:		~\$100
Building materials for interior stage:		~\$2000
Promotional Materials:		~\$500
Total: Approximately \$10000		
Personnel:		
Main Cast: 10 weeks * \$30/hour * 30 hours per week * 7 people		~\$63000
Zombies: 5 weeks * \$20/hour * 20 hours per week * 16 people		~\$32000
Crew: 10 weeks * \$30/hour * 40 hours per week * 10 people		~\$120000
Personnel Total: \$215000		
Grand total: \$225000		

### Timetable

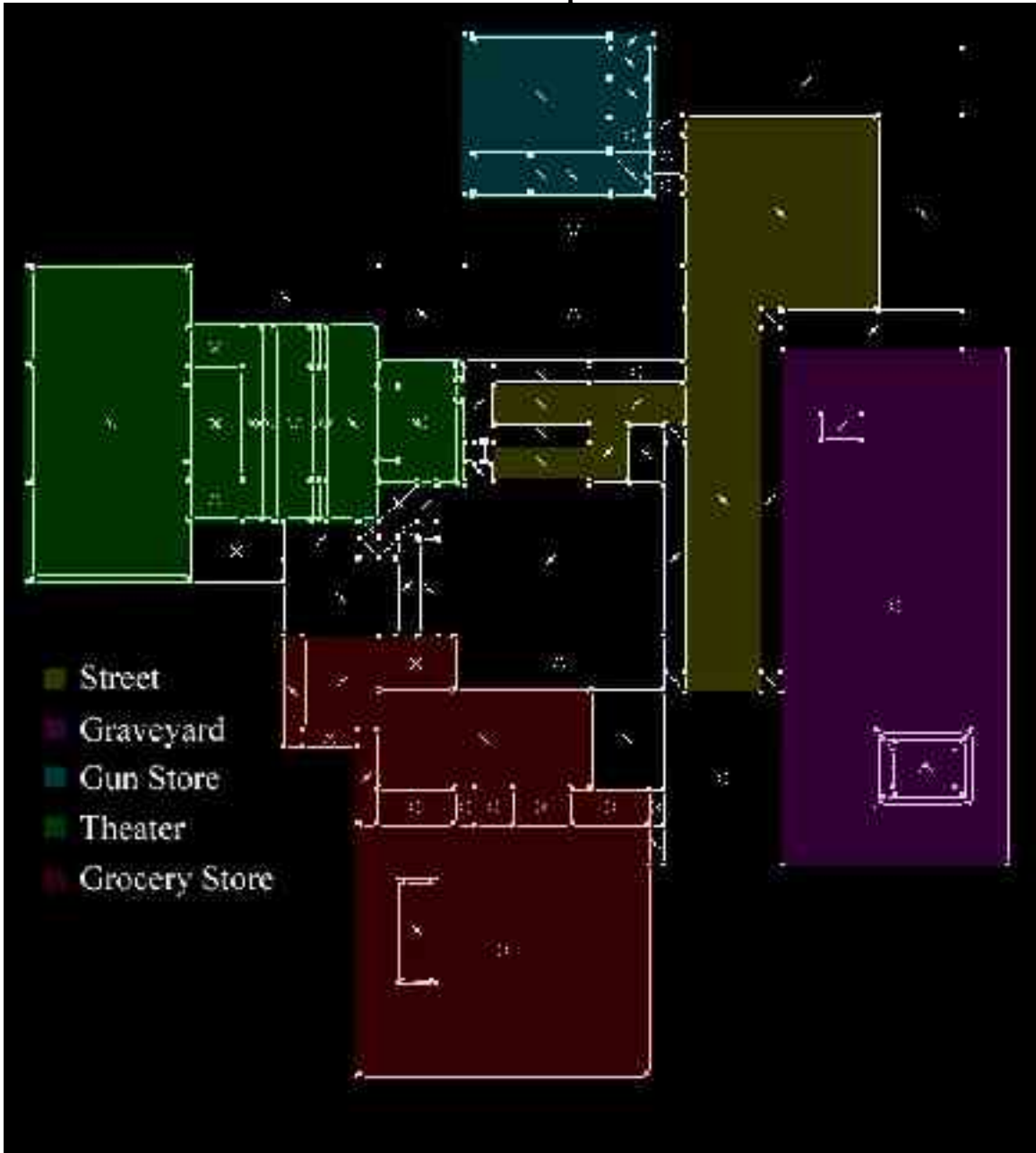
This timetable is set around a hypothetical premier date for the play, referred to as Z-Day, a fairly common nomenclature for the initial day of zombie attack.

Scriptwriting and location scouting:	3 months prior to Z-Day
Script Finalized and set construction begins:	2 months prior to Z-Day
Rehearsals begin:	2 months prior to Z-Day
Purchasing supplies, any Nerf modifications:	1 month prior to Z-Day
Promotions and marketing:	1 month prior to Z-Day
Play Premier	Z-Day
Play Closes and sets are struck	Z-Day plus 1 month
Zombie Apocalypse, assuming the survivors cannot repopulate:	Z-Day plus 1 Year

### Appendix

Attached are a map of the overall set, as well as screenshots from a *Half-Life 2* mock-up, describing specific points of interest in greater detail.

# Area Map



# Storyboards



THE FOYER OF THE STAGE BUILDING



THE STAGE, WITH MINIMALIST DINER SET



PLAY SEATING, FROM THE STAGE



BACK STAGE



LOOKING OUT FROM THE STAGE DOCK



THE EXTERIOR OF THE GUN STORE



THE STREET, LOOKING TOWARDS THE GUN STORE



THE RUSTIC INTERIOR OF THE GUN STORE



THE MAIN STREET, LOOKING AWAY FROM  
THE GUN STORE



THE LOADING DOCK BEHIND THE STAGE



THE ALLEY BETWEEN THE GROCERY STORE  
AND THE STAGE



ALLEY BEHIND THE GROCERY STORE



GROCERY STORE STOCK ROOM

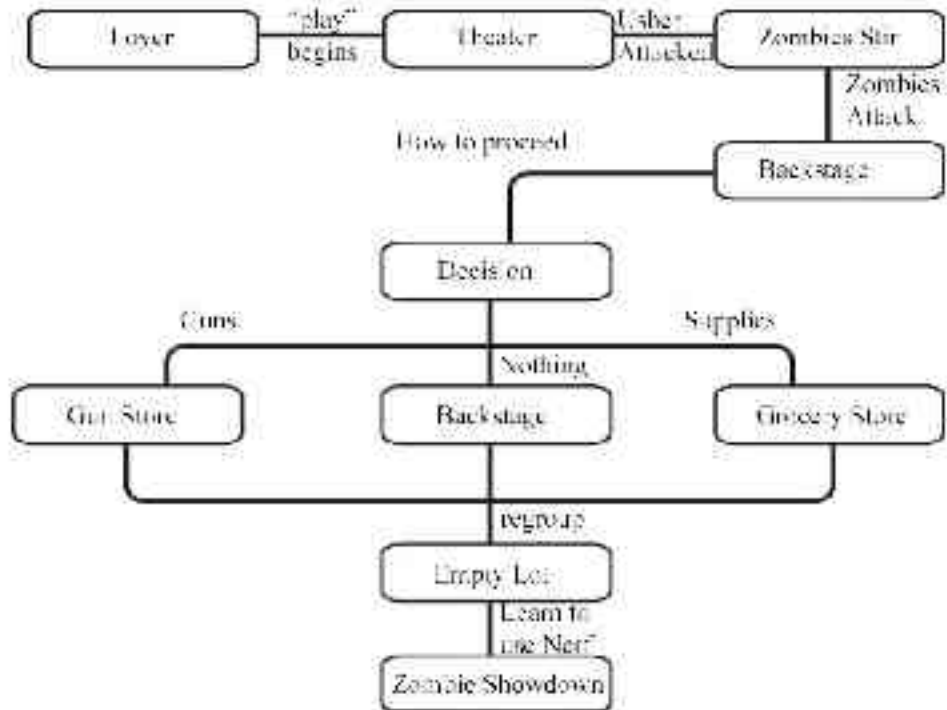


PROPOSED GRAVEYARD SET



INTERIOR OF GROCERY STORE

# Flowchart



- i Hereafter I will refer to the production as a play, for brevity's sake
- ii [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory\\_theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_theatre)
- iii Evil Dead, Evil Dead II: Dead by Dawn, Army of Darkness
- iv Live Action Role Playing, wherein performers act out fantasy role-playing games, complete with real armor, foam weapons, and fake magic.
- v It isn't too self-serving to name the hero after myself, is it? Oh well...
- vi Lead actor of the Evil Dead series. Icon of the zombie genre, known for quotes like "Come get some" and "This is my boomstick!"
- vii Lead actor in They Live. Famous quotes include "I came here to chew bubblegum and kick ass. And I'm aaaaalll out of bubblegum"
- viii Title character of the Evil Dead series
- ix In Night of the Living Dead, one of the main characters also appeared as a zombie extra