

Preparatory Activities

Three **Preparatory Activities** are suggested below, in addition to --or instead of-- providing students with materials from the **Background Information** section: plot synopsis, playwright's vision, director's comments, production design, puppet design and manipulation, artist bios, Core Resources or Weblinks for that section.

1: The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari :

Watch this film, which is only 70 minutes long, available on video and DVD in most public libraries, or for under \$10 from Indigo. Made in 1920, this was the first important silent horror movie, and both the film's design and the use of the narrator's point of view to 'see' the actions were influential in both the writing and design of *The Babysitter*. It is intensely theatrical and compulsively watchable-- and on virtually all of the top hundred films ever made lists. It is worth seeing not only for these reasons but because it is a near-perfect example of German Expressionism, which was a very influential art, theatre and film movement in Europe from about 1910-1930.

After viewing it, discuss the stylized set design and early film acting techniques--which are not that different from theatrical acting of the same period and genre; when the class sees *The Babysitter* they will easily 'connect the dots.'

The Film's Background:

After World War I Germany turned its large and effective film propaganda unit to post-war film making by creating the huge UFA studio: its intent was to control the German film market, which prior to the war had been flooded with films from Denmark, France, Italy and America, but also to compete for the huge international film market. As all these films were silent, language wasn't an issue: the infrequent dialogue bits could be easily translated and inserted into the film. UFA concentrated on three genres: the adventure serial featuring spy rings, clever detectives and exotic settings; the sex exploitation cycle of "educational" treatments of such topics as prostitution and homosexuality; and the popular historical epics of the pre-war period at which Italy had excelled. This last was the most popular at first, with *Madame Dubarry*, an epic of the French Revolution made in 1919, which was shown to critical acclaim in most markets except France. Its director, Ernst Lubitsch, was the first European director wooed to Hollywood.

After that UFA undertook to produce an unconventional script by two unknowns, Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, who wanted it made in an unusual stylized way; the three designers suggested it be done in Expressionist style. As an avant-garde movement, Expressionism had first been important in painting, starting in about 1910, and had been quickly taken up by theatre, literature and architecture. Theatrically it can best be expressed as a method of designing a production to express visually the core emotions and themes of the play, rather than creating a realistic set which 'looks like life' or an impressionistic set-- a few columns and a ramp for a Greek temple, for example-- which uses symbolic or familiar elements to suggest a location.

Made very inexpensively and directed by Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was an enormous international hit, spawning other films which utilized expressionism and making the German film industry an overnight success. The plot is convoluted and, in combination with the design, very scary in spite of its silent techniques. Basically, a man named Francis relates a story about his best friend Alan and his fiancée Jane. Alan takes him to a fair where they meet Dr. Caligari, who exhibits a sleepwalker, Cesare, who can predict the future. When Alan asks how long he has to live, Cesare says he has until dawn. The prophecy comes to pass when Alan is murdered, and Cesare becomes the prime suspect. Cesare creeps into Jane's bedroom and abducts her, running from the townspeople and finally dying of exhaustion. Meanwhile, the police discover a dummy in Cesare's cabinet, while Caligari flees. Francis tracks Caligari to a mental asylum where it is discovered that he is its director, who had hypnotized Cesare to reenact murders. But the ending is totally unexpected. . .

The film's style is unique: angular shapes are distorted and exaggerated unrealistically, actors wear heavy makeup and move in jerky, slow, sinuous patterns, and characters do not simply exist within a setting but form visual elements which interact with it. In *Caligari*, the expressionist style functions to convey the distorted viewpoint of the doctor, a madman in an insane asylum--played by Werner Krauss-- and we see the world as he does. Cesare, portrayed by Conrad Veidt in a dancelike portrayal, is mesmerizing, and the entire film has a disoriented, dream/ nightmare feel to it. Later expressionist films, like the German film *Nosferatu*, made in 1922-- the first Dracula movie--created stylized situations for fantasy and horror rather than using it as a narrative perspective.

2: Top Ten Rules for Slasher Movies

Have each student select a slasher film to view independently-- they may well have seen several of them already. For a list of possibilities, direct them to the weblink to [Eric Woolfe's Inimitable Annotated Slasher Film Index](#) in the **Background Materials** section, or to the [Silent Screams](#) weblink, which includes a far wider variety of horror and suspense films. They can probably find many other sources of possible films by googling various horror websites.

In class, brainstorm what seem to be the hallmarks or the essentials of the Slasher films they have seen: this should include information related to the following questions:

- who are the major characters? which of them are well developed?
- where and when does the story take place? is this important?
- what does the slasher look like, what is his motivation, and how does he/she/it usually behave?
- who are the typical victims and what do they do to deserve to die?
- what are typical plot actions and events? do they seem to be sexually motivated?
- how does the film end? why? who is the hero and how is this unusual?

Then, through discussion, reduce this to what they agree are the Top Ten-- which can be done in classic 10 to 1 Letterman style or in the more conventional 1-10 mode. Suggest that they watch *The Babysitter* carefully to look for the existence of the Top Ten within its plotline.

Followup after seeing the play might include going back to their Top Ten and discussing the ways in which doing a Slasher plot on stage--and with puppets!--is different from the Slasher genre as seen on film, and what the reasons for this might be.

3: Exploring Urban Legends

This would be the most lightweight, quickest and easiest way into *The Babysitter*, as it requires no classroom or individual film viewing. If the group seeing the play is not a class, it would be possible to do this on the way to the theatre via casual conversation.

Define an urban legend-- (see [Core Resource #4](#) for background and associated weblinks) and give an example. Ask students to relate one of those they have heard, with particular care to where they heard it, from whom, and what their source's 'connection' to the legend was--eg., did they hear it from someone who claimed to be involved or to know the person involved, or it was on tv, or online, or heard at camp or at a party.

After listening to several of these, discuss what they seem to have in common, and why it is they are so easily believed and passed on, and suggest that they listen closely to *The Babysitter* --in which there are 33 urban legends scattered about--and consider why these particular examples are so pervasive in situations where kids want to scare each other-- sleepovers, campfires, late nights at parties.

If time permits or the kids are interested in learning more, give them the [Core Resource #4](#) from the **Background Information** section and ask them to go to one of the websites mentioned in it and find an urban legend they haven't heard before to bring to class. There are print versions which can be downloaded, and photos and videoclips purporting to 'prove' some of the more graphic legends-- like the one about the python who swallowed a man.

This could lead to a wider discussion on how computer generated film and photo software like Photoshop can produce 'altered reality' via skilful editing-- and has already resulted in faked scientific results being published in reputable journals, and war footage on TV which has been doctored to suit a political agenda. Do they see this as harmless fun-- like most Urban Legends--or does it have more worrisome potential? How DO we know what we can believe?