

## HALSTED STREET HALLOWEEN PARADE

The Halloween Parade project got started because of a water main project. As PR guy for the Chicago Department of Water Management, my job was to work with the small business community to make the job go easily, and ensure their needs and interests were addressed. We all became friends.

At the conclusion of the project, none of us wanted the friendships to die, so I accepted an invitation to help them develop their new neighborhood web site. In the course of doing this, I was introduced to the producers of that year's (2003) Halsted Street Halloween Parade. This parade started out as a little costume contest. It is now the major Halloween event on the North Side. It draws up to 40,000 people. It marches right through Boy's town, and the spectators are as much a part of the show as the parade participants.

Me: What is this year's theme?

Them: Evil Clowns.

Me: Hey, I was a clown in the seventies.

Them: You want to lead our parade?



There is only one answer to that question. I got with some friends (Dan Simborg and Justine Light), and we decided to go for 30 evil clowns. We contacted professional make-up artists at local theaters and told them we wanted to treat them “like concert pianists” for the evening. We got a local theater on the parade route to donate its space. We got them great make-up, lighting, mirrors and a stage. We filled the audience with volunteer evil clowns, and the artists could choose their subjects at will. Everyone not drafted could make up each other. We called the theater “Clown Central”, and also had free pizza, a clown rock band and a couple of video crews.

Dimitre ([www.dimitre.com](http://www.dimitre.com)) set up in a corner with a photographic space to make museum-level portraits of the finished clowns. He even shot through a frame made of fluorescent light bulbs to achieve a “squaring” of the pupils. This gave the artists [documentation of their work](#)—something they too rarely get.

One pair of friends—Marvin Marzocco and Matt Atwood—said that instead of being Evil Clowns, they would like to bring fire to the parade. The established Chicago fire troupe (Wildfire) was performing in Las Vegas, so Matt and Marvin organized a troupe called SPUNN ([www.spunn.org](http://www.spunn.org)), which became the premier fire troupe in the region. It still performs.

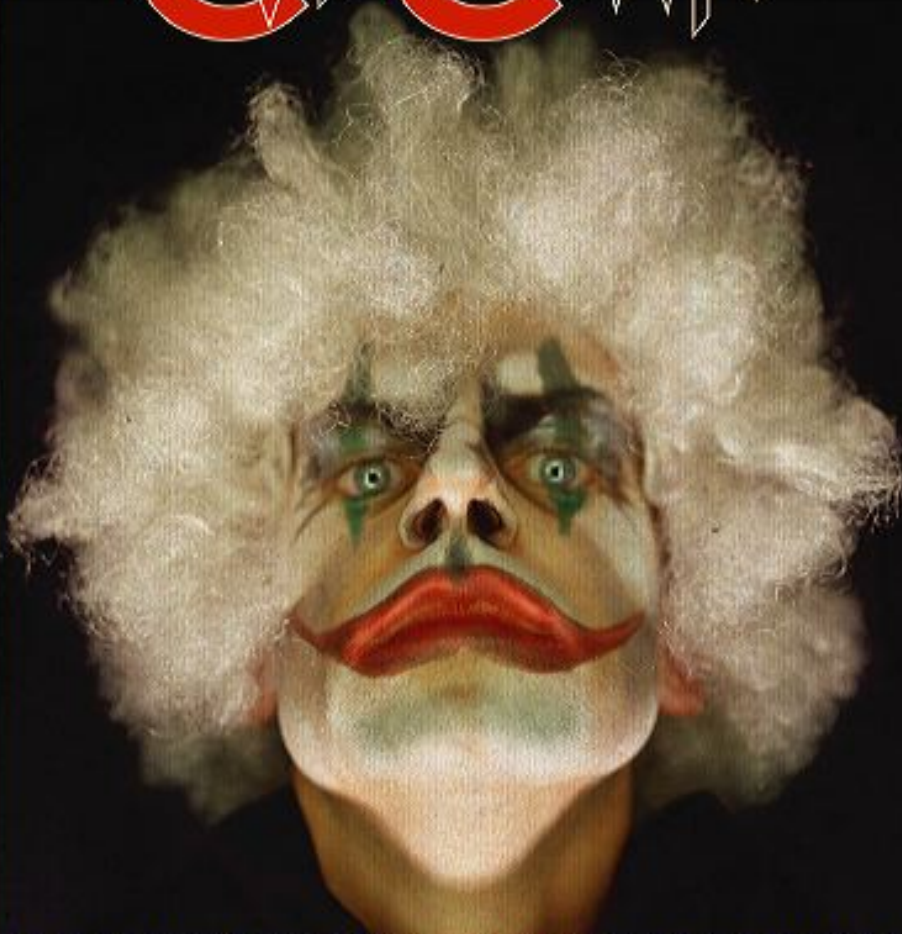
Before long, we were able to enlist legendary performance art troupes like People’s Republic of Delicious Food and Typewriter. The theater group Collaboraction—which had run into City inspection problems with their haunted house—sent its full cast of 30 costumed scary types over. Other artists joined in, and we were about 100 strong with plenty of fire in front of 17,000 people.

We benefited from the fact that Red Moon Theater was unable to create its annual Halloween installation in Logan Square. It was also a beautiful night.

We knew we had done something novel. We had found a way for a community of extraordinarily talented artists to connect with a larger set of communities. One key was making sure everyone got what they wanted. The Chamber of Commerce got a grand spectacle and a huge crowd. The Make-up artists got full appreciation of their gifts and portraits for their portfolios. Performers got a huge audience. Fire spinners got to perform as part of a major civic event. The Water Management Department (and City as a whole) got new friendships going and served its customers in terms of their values. (By the way, you have not seen a look of concern until you have strolled into a commissioner’s office and told him you are leading an Evil Clown Parade in his name. Trust is everything at a time like that.)

LAKE VIEW EVIL CLOWN RECEPTION  
CELEBRATING THE ART AND ARTISTS OF THE  
7TH ANNUAL NORTH HALSTED STREET HALLOWEEN PARADE.

# EVIL CLOWN



FEATURING EVIL CLOWN PORTRAITS BY DIMITRE

**APRIL 22, 2004 • 6-10:00 P.M.**

BEING HELD AT **ROSCOE'S** 3356 N. HALSTED ST

SPONSORED BY • Roscoe's Tavern • Spine & Mother Body • TransAnnoia • People's Republic of Delicious Food • Environmental Encroachment • Typewriter  
Northalsted Area Merchants Association • Village Image • Chris Reiser • Lakeview East Chamber of Commerce • Hangle Neighbors Association • Drive Thru Studios  
Chicago Special Events Management • Collaboration • WVEP Theater • Leone's • Ann Sellers • Urban Exposures • The Make Up Artists • Music by Satan

**FIRE SPINNING ART *and* EFFEN VODKA**

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Some months later, we got the leader of the community group—a local tavern owner—to ante up for canvas to print dimitre's portraits 3' x 4'. We gave the artists [an opening](#) at the bar, and gave canvas prints to the artists and their subjects. We sold enough, too, to pay Jim Ludwig back for fronting the money for the canvas.

Two weeks after this, we were asked by a neighboring chamber to help with their “Jolly-palooza” Christmas Shopping weekend. We explained that we didn't think we'd get the same cooperation. Halloween is at night and its everybody's favorite holiday. This, by contrast, would be a sales promotion.

In the event, we were able to recruit modern dancers from Chicago to dress up and wander the business district with boom boxes. They would step into a store and perform an impromptu Christmas dance. They did this for an explicit commitment of in-kind sponsorship of their recitals. Therefore, a dancer could return to a store in March—remind the shopkeeper of the Christmas performance—and expect to get some help with costumes or reception food, or whatever.

Here are a few lessons from the experience:

- Comfort Level is everything. We needed to make certain the paid parade producers knew they were still in charge, and not being eclipsed. We also needed them to trust our judgment and reliability. We needed the police and the chamber to rely on us not getting everyone into trouble.
- We had to be certain everyone got what they hoped for. Money is not the only reward of value. The organizers had the responsibility to know each participant's hopes, and to make sure there was a realization of those hopes through the project. It could be good connections, the chance to prove an art form, the chance for a theater to endear itself to the neighborhood. Dimitre provided benefit to the make-up artists, so we made sure Dimitre got an art opening (along with photographer Mike Simborg).
- The art opening was also a reunion for everyone connected with the parade. That helped make the experience repeatable.

The next year, they asked us to do it again. We said we couldn't possibly top what had happened, so we went in a different direction:

We recruited the City's best underground VJ's and arranged for them to do rear-screen projections on the best windows along the parade route. The result was the parade passing through a gallery of moving Halloween images. We doubled the fire from the previous year.

(We had gotten the event production company to agree to work with fire dancers at other events, for pay. The production company did not come through on this, and that left a

sour taste in the mouths of some fire dancers. I made certain the parade sponsors delivered sincere apologies for this, and we went without fire for one year.)

The third year, we almost didn't join the parade (see above), but at the last minute, I found some improvisational actors who I wanted to help. We learned the theme would be "Alien Space Invasion", and we decided to dress them up as Martians and take the parade over. We got 10 vintage police cars to take part, and even staged a hostage scene atop a three story building. To make it all sensible to the audience, we invited them to bring radios and we had a pirate radio broadcast ala "War of the Worlds". We got real reporters to cover our takeover as a real news story—with all the surprises and glitches. We had anchors set up at the parking lot, and got some great engineering from the radio geek community in Chicago. We had two college radio students (Derek Dudek and Heather Frey) take on radio and production responsibilities. Once again, everyone got to bring their specialties into play and be appreciated for what they know and can do.



The fourth year, the theme was Disco Zombies, and we organized about 50 zombies for the occasion. The fire troupe Pyrotechniq joined in the producing role. The costume center was the Sew-Op ([www.sew-op.net](http://www.sew-op.net)), a community center founded by Kokopauli, and leader of the Burning Man community in Chicago. We were able to get a zombie fashion show on the local morning TV news (WGN), and there was plenty of fire that year.



This past year, we went with dragons, because the parade sponsors had dug up a dragon somewhere and wanted to use it. Our community dumpster-dove to get materials for a three-headed recycled materials dragon. The dragon was named Huey, Dewey and Puddles. Contact me for a full explanation of that. An art car from the Playa (Libido Lounge) was re-made into a castle with people dancing on the battlements. Plenty of fire, and a sense of extreme sport among the team.





## LESSONS

It is up to the organizers to know what all participants are hoping to achieve and make that possible.

Comfort level is everything when you are talking about fire. Police, promoters, and others need to be very comfortable that nothing will go wrong and they won't have to answer for saying "yes".

Cash is not the only medium of exchange. Value has to be real, but can be found in other places. Know your participants and serve them well.

A city official can do a great deal of good if he/she understands the goals, and wants to help broker relationships. A creative "official" can bring commercial neutrality and moral authority to the undertaking—and can help everyone keep "sharp elbows" at their sides.

Local artists and small businesses have lots of mutual interests that can be combined to mutual benefit. For example, if local performers put together a "clients night" program, small businesses could bring their best clients to an evening of entertainment under the auspices of the chamber. The performers get paid, the businesses get a bonding opportunity they wouldn't otherwise have, and the chamber gets the credit.

Credit is the most renewable resource on earth. Give it away liberally.

If you can't top your last performance, dream up a different one.

Make sure you thank people... and give people an opportunity to thank you.

Feel free to try ten things... knowing only about six may work. Nobody will miss the discarded four.

Let your artists be free enough to find their places at an event. And, don't ask them to do stuff that doesn't thrill them, unless they offer. The idea is to make whatever it is so fun they want to do it again.

Celebrate what you accomplish.

If you are the organizer, tie up loose ends yourself. And, always do folding chairs yourself. You are not above any task at hand.