

Once a Ghoul, Always a Ghoul

Character Study

By COREY KILGANNON OCT. 19, 2012



CHILLER John Zacherle, 94, a former television horror-film host.

Julie Glassberg for The New York Times

FOR someone who became famous for looking dead, John Zacherle, 94, looks pretty darn good.

As a well-known host of horror movies during the early days of television, Mr. Zacherle must have gotten something right in the ghoulish experiments he conducted in his sepulchral laboratory. He is slim and spry and virtually wrinkle-free, and he lives on his own.

“The only difference is, back then I had to dress like an old man — now I don’t have to dress up,” said Mr. Zacherle, who became known among New York-area television audiences simply as [Zacherley](#) — the added “y” helped pronunciation — the host of “Shock Theater,” “Chiller Theater” and other revival horror-movie programming.

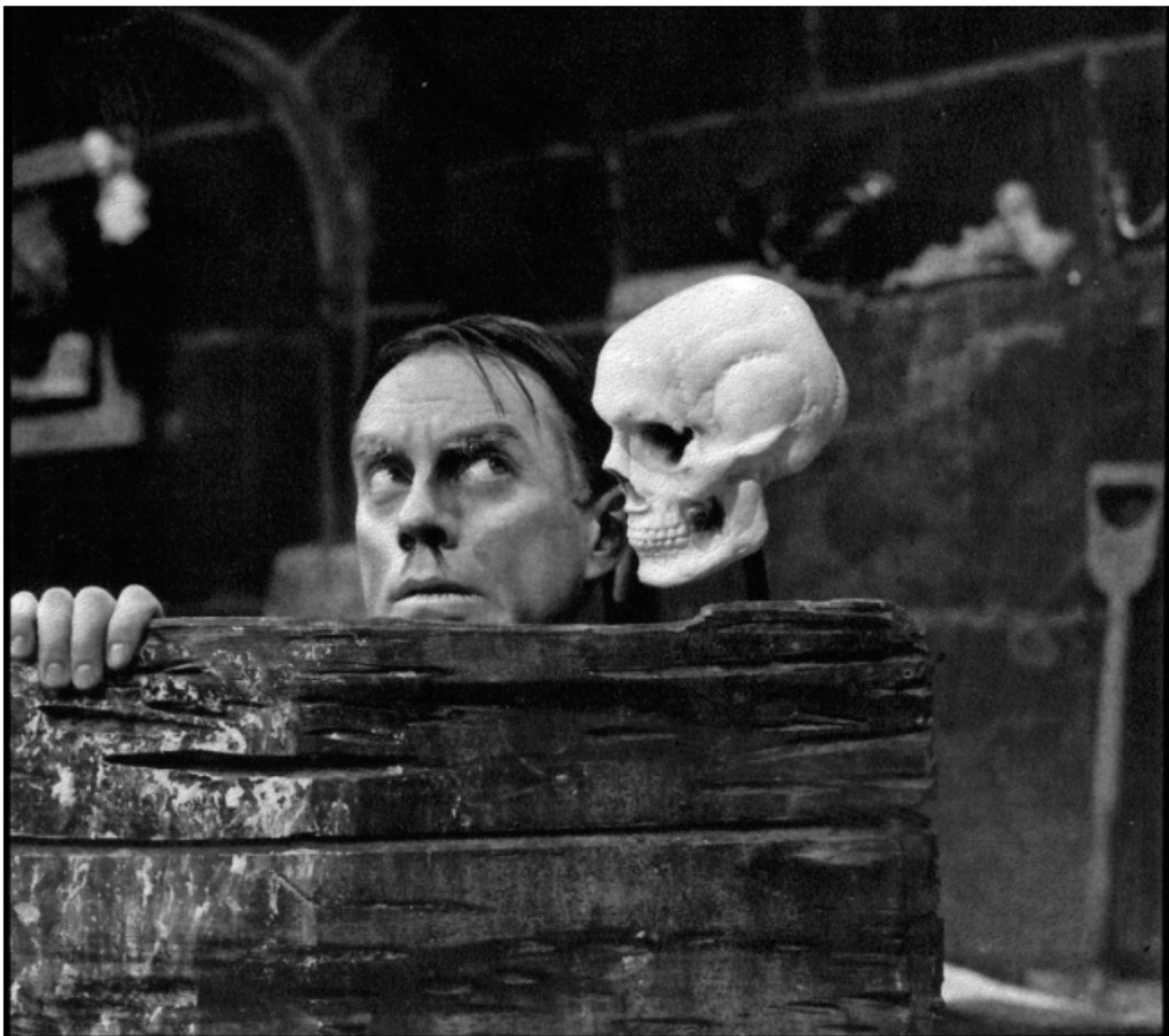
A half-century later, Mr. Zacherle lives in near-obscurity on West 96th Street in Manhattan, where he spends his days watching television and taking calls from old friends and fans.

He still makes occasional appearances at horror conventions, especially around Halloween. And this week, Mr. Zacherle will once again break out his long black frock coat, his Victorian jeweled ascot and his ghoulish makeup and appear at the [Chiller Theater Toy, Model and Film Expo](#) at the Sheraton Parsippany Hotel in New Jersey.

“Let’s face it — I’m nostalgia,” he said, noting that many of his teenage fans are now old themselves.

Mr. Zacherle’s zany antics provided lead-ins and segues to commercials accompanying the horror movies. Coupled with a sound-effects man, Mr. Zacherle would spoof the film being shown and interact with his supposed sidekicks off-screen. “The studio couldn’t afford to hire more actors,” he said.

Mr. Zacherle’s real-life lair for the past 50 years has been a fourth-floor, rent-controlled, one-bedroom apartment — \$285 a month — that is awash in souvenirs from his long, strange show-business career. The place has a seemingly endless supply of old monster movie magazines with him on the covers, and statues and illustrations of Zacherley, many of them sent by fans.



Mr. Zacherle in the 1950s. Louis Nemeth

He presides over it all in a tall-backed chair that seems a perfect throne for horror-film royalty. His only visible ailment is the arthritis that has gnarled his fingers. “Too bad I didn’t have them back then,” he said, jokingly.

Mr. Zacherle, a lifelong bachelor, has outlived his four siblings and has no relatives nearby. He lives on his modest savings and a pension, but he is hardly morose. He is still Zacherley, always kidding and concocting mischief. On a recent weekday, the phone rang during “Judge Judy.” It was Channel 13, doing fund-raising.

“Sorry, I can’t understand what you’re saying,” he said with a wink and hung up.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, Mr. Zacherle served as a quartermaster in the Army during World War II, after which he began pursuing acting and radio work in Philadelphia. In an early live daytime Western called “[Action in the](#)

[Afternoon](#),” he played an undertaker in a long black coat, which appealed to producers of “Shock Theater” on the local Channel 10. They hired him in 1957 to wear the same coat and play a spooky character called Roland, who did corny gags while hosting the films.

With his arched eyebrows, his pointy teeth and a deep, sinister laugh, Mr. Zacherle was a natural.

After a year, he moved to New York City and was hired in similar roles at several stations during the next decade. His horror shtick resonated with monster mania, and Dick Clark named him the “Cool Ghoul.”

Mr. Zacherle recorded horror-themed rock songs, including “[Dinner With Drac](#),” which became a minor hit, and a version of the song “Monster Mash.”

In the mid-1960s, he was hired to host, still as Zacherley, an afternoon teenage dance show called “Disc-O-Teen” that was broadcast for three years. The show — think “American Bandstand,” Transylvania-style — attracted bands like the Lovin’ Spoonful, the Young Rascals and even the Doors.

“Jim Morrison looked at our weird set and mumbled, ‘This is the damnedest TV show I’ve ever seen,’ ” recalled Mr. Zacherle, who hobnobbed with rock legends and became a regular at concerts at the Fillmore East. He became a rock D.J. on stations like WNEW and WPLJ before finally retiring in the early 1980s.

On his desk on Thursday were CDs of Led Zeppelin and Stevie Ray Vaughan, along with a photograph of Mr. Zacherle and Ringo Starr. On his windowsill was a statuette of Jerry Garcia.

“I had a lot of fun with him,” he said, and returned to watching “Judge Judy.”