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John Zacherle, Late-Night Television Host With a Ghoulish Perspective, Dies at 98

By WILLIAM GRIMES



John Zacherle as the playfully spooky Zacherley in the 1950s. Louis Nemeth

John Zacherle, one of the first of the late-night television horror-movie hosts, who played a crypt-dwelling undertaker with a booming graveyard laugh on stations in Philadelphia and New York in the late 1950s and early '60s, died on Thursday at his home in Manhattan. He was 98.

His death was announced by friends and a fan [website](#).

Mr. Zacherle, billed as Zacherley in New York, was not the first horror host — that honor goes to Maila Nurmi, the Finnish-born actress who began camping it up as Vampira on KABC-TV in Los Angeles in 1954 — but he was the most famous, inspiring a host of imitators at local stations around the country.

As Roland in Philadelphia (pronounced ro-LAHND) and Zacherley in New York, he added grisly theatrics and absurdist humor to the entertainment on offer, which more often than not was less than Oscar quality. He became a cult figure, making star appearances at horror conventions across the Northeast.

Dressed in a long black frock coat decorated with a large medal from the government of Transylvania, Roland introduced, and interrupted, the evening's film with comic bits involving characters who existed only as props in his crypt-cum-laboratory.

John Zacherle in 2012. Julie Glassberg for The New York Times

There was My Dear, his wife, recumbent in a coffin with a stake in her heart, and his son, Gasport, a series of moans within a potato bag suspended from the ceiling. A large blob of gelatin tied up in cheesecloth was Thelma, a high-strung amoeba who cheated at checkers and responded to the command "Heel!"



At intervals throughout the evening, Mr. Zacherle performed mini-skits with his stock company, treated viewers to recitations from his opera "Draculare" or taught conversational Transylvanian. ("The skull of my aunt is on the table.") Sometimes, through camera trickery, he seemed to jump right into the film, appearing as a Tyrolean fiddler, a body on a morgue slab or, in "The Mummy," a mysterious figure in a fez behind a beaded curtain. At the end of the program, he would bid his audience farewell with the signoff "Good night, whatever you are."

John Karsten Zacherle was born in Philadelphia in September 1918. His father, George, was a bank clerk, and his mother, Anna, was a homemaker. He did not grow up on horror films — his father did not approve. He claimed not to have seen the original "Frankenstein" or "Dracula" movies until he showed them on

television. In a bit of foreshadowing, though, his father tended cemeteries after retiring from his bank job.

After graduating from Germantown High School, Mr. Zacherle enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned an English degree in 1940. He enlisted in the Army at the start of World War II and served in England, Italy and North Africa with the Quartermaster Corps, rising to the rank of major.



Zacherley on the cover of the June 1960 issue of Famous Monsters of Filmland. Warren Publishing

Returning to Philadelphia after the war, he joined the Stagecrafters, a small theater troupe in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood. Before long he found work doing commercials for local drug companies.

“I guess my first horror gig was posing for before-and-after pictures for some new tranquilizer,” he told The Daily News in New York in 2000. “In the ‘before’ shot, I was chasing my wife with a carving knife. Then, after I took the pill, I was a kind and loving husband.”

In 1953 he began appearing as characters on “Action in the Afternoon,” a live western series shot in a vacant lot behind the studios of WCAU. “The idea was to get somebody in trouble on Monday, and either get him out of trouble, shoot him or hang him by Friday,” he told The Daily News in 1959.

One of his recurring characters was an undertaker named Grimy James, whose frock coat came in handy when the station bought a collection of 52 old horror films from Universal. The station manager, reviewing his new acquisition, decided that most of the films were so bad, he would have to build a show around them to add entertainment value.

Mr. Zacherle put on the frock coat and, in October 1957, went to work as the host of “The Shock Theater” (later simply “Shock Theater”), bringing with him an endless supply of sight gags and ad-lib patter.

A rabid fan base developed. When the station held an open house, expecting about 1,500 viewers to turn up, 13,000 stormed the studio to meet the Cool Ghoul, as Mr. Zacherle was known. In March 1958 he recorded a single, “Dinner With Drac” (a “Monster Mash” before the fact) — “For dessert there was bat-wing confetti, and the veins of a mummy named Betty” — that made the Top 10.

Its sequels, “Eighty-Two Tombstones,” “I Was a Teenage Caveman” and “Monsters Have Problems Too,” were less successful.

In late 1958, Mr. Zacherle moved to New York, “flapping in on leathery wings of fame,” as The Journal of Frankenstein, a monster magazine, put it. He took over “Shock Theater” at WABC, Channel 7, and added a “y” to his name to avoid confusion about how it should be pronounced. After the show tripled its ratings in the first year, it was renamed “Zacherley at Large.”

When WABC had run through its stock of horror films, Mr. Zacherle took his act to Channel 9 and then Channel 11, where he became the host of “Chiller Theater,” “The Mighty Hercules Cartoon Show” and, briefly, “The Three Stooges Show.”

In 1965, WNJU, a new UHF television station broadcasting from Symphony Hall in Newark, put him in charge of an afternoon dance party called “Disc-O-Teen.” The show simply grafted Mr. Zacherle’s “monster of ceremonies” persona onto a low-budget version of “American Bandstand.” Somehow, it managed to attract well-known groups like the Lovin’ Spoonful, the Young

Rascals and the Doors during its three-year run.

“Jim Morrison looked at our weird set and mumbled, ‘This is the damnedest TV show I’ve ever seen,’” Mr. Zacherle told *The New York Times* in 2012. He moved to the New York album-rock radio station WNEW-FM in 1967 as a morning D.J. and two years later began hosting a program at night. He later worked at another rock station, WPLJ, and in 1992 joined WXRK, known as K-Rock. That job ended four years later when the station changed its format from classic rock to alternative rock.

Mr. Zacherle, who leaves no immediate survivors, wrote introductions for the horror anthology “Zacherley’s Midnight Snacks” and a sequel, “Zacherley’s Vulture Stew.” He also provided the voice of a drug-dealing, brain-eating parasite in the 1988 horror comedy “Brain Damage,” and appeared as a weatherman in “Frankenhooker” (1990), dedicating his forecast to “all you mad scientists out there.”

“I can’t imagine how it all happened,” Mr. Zacherle told *The Philadelphia Daily News* in 2015. “I look back on it and say, ‘My God, I’m 96 years old, what the hell have I been doing all these years?’”