



# Creating Zombieland

Theatre designers bring  
*The Walking Dead* to life

By: Catherine McHugh

Even the zombies have gotten in on the immersive theatre act. On an unseasonably mild first weekend in December, thousands of fans of AMC TV's *The Walking Dead* descended on the Meadowlands Exhibition Center to attend Walker Stalker Con, a zombie and horror fun fest founded by podcasters Eric Nordhoff and James Frazier and funded via Kickstarter in 2013.

Adjacent to the center, groups of wannabe zombies and survivors waited patiently, if somewhat nervously, in a tent for their turns inside *The Walking Dead Experience—Chapter 1*. Backed by *Walking Dead* comics creator Robert Kirkman's Skybound Entertainment, the 30-minute attrac-

tion drops participants into what feels like a small town on the night the breakout hit—when zombies began their rampage and the social order began to unravel.

After being given limited instructions on how to proceed, those who chose the “survivor” option enter in groups of seven before encountering a cast of actors and ticketed “walkers” (who, as part of the experience, get made up by the crew). Scenarios include guiding a participant via radio, code-breaking locked doors, and completing tasks while in a dark room full of free-roaming zombies.

Who better to create this world than a group of avant-garde theatre designers? Creator/director Michael

Counts joined *The Walking Dead Experience* when the producers enlisted his help on *The Walking Dead Escape*, an obstacle course with zombies that has become a fixture at Comic Con in recent years. Something of a pioneer in creating dramatically immersive installations on a large scale, Counts has created and directed a 10,000-sq.-ft. haunted narrative attraction that incorporates room-escape scenarios and interactive theatre.

Counts brought in a team of New York-based designers and technicians, including video and special effects designers Matt Haber and Phil Gulley, lighting designer Ryan O’Gara, scenic designer Katie Fleming, and

production manager/associate director Katie Naka. Counts' fellow Brooklyn-based theatre colleague, sound designer Caleb Sharp, also serves as the attraction's assistant designer and did a lot of 3-D modeling early in the design process.

"I worked on a lot of the conceptualization and ended up doing the sound design as well because it's one of my specialties within the world that we work in," Sharp explains. "We constructed six sets and a control room built into two tractor-trailers and five tents, including a projection tent."

Construction began in the fall of 2014 in Atlanta, which is where the first *Walking Dead Experience* was held over Halloween weekend. "As with many shows, a lot of the work was all crammed together in the last few months," Sharp says. "It was really hectic and the show is complex in the way that it runs. It's all self-triggering; there is no one person sitting there giving cues the entire time. It's an intelligent system.

"We do set up a control room at the beginning of the day with my QLab computer and all of the audio output," he continues. "It does take a lot of time to set everything up, but after a while, it became very self-sufficient and very reliable. Most of the time, I don't even have to monitor anything. That's the way that it's all designed to be."

On the design, Sharp worked closely with the video team, who took charge of the production's show control aspect. "They rigged up the whole thing with contact closures, similar to what you find in a home security system on doors. Light switches are triggers as well," Sharp explains. "They processed all of those and sent me MIDI triggers, which made everything pretty easy from my end on the programming side. I just told them which MIDI signals I needed and which node to send them on. We collaborated a lot, especially in the beginning, to set up the system in







the design stage to make sure everything was set for them and that we had a full plan to move forward.”

Because of this setup, there is a definite sequence to the show, which the audience variable can sometimes impede. “Whenever we have to pull somebody out, that can mess up the flow of things because certain doors will kill the cues from one room, or reset the video or lighting or sound in another room,” Sharp says. “So it can get very complex even though it’s very simple if it works in a linear fashion—as it’s supposed to—when people just walk through from start to finish and every trigger gets hit, then everything will hit its mark perfectly.”

The audio design includes no live microphones but there are a lot of prerecorded sound effects. “It was really convenient that we were building the show at the EpiCenter in Atlanta because they have a recording studio in there,” Sharp says. “So we just went there for a couple of hours and built it as we were building

the rest of the sets and everything else—with the actors that we had just cast. For example, in the first room, there’s an intro where the girl is whispering. We also did a lot of zombie recordings as we were putting our actors through Walker school and created a sound library for them.”

Sharp and company also created a lot of incidental sound effects. “There are a lot of gunshot sounds,” Sharp says. “So our video team created a great way of using wireless triggers for the actors to hold—they have a button to push as they are holding their guns. That cues sound effects that are also programmed to kind of layer up over the existing ambient noises. There is also a trigger for a zombie death sound at the end of their walks.

“I was really trying to go for a cinematic feel with kind of a minimal score,” Sharp continues. “It’s very much like you are carrying everything from outside and just trying to put yourself in the world of a zombie out-

break. So there are sirens going by and helicopters flying overhead. We have many independent zones of audio and they are all independently triggered. The audience moving through it triggers everything on and off. So the sounds follow the audience.”

Sharp uses mainly studio monitors for most of the installation. “The JBL LSR 305s are pretty typical studio monitors but they do everything as far as ambient sounds and are easy enough to hide,” Sharp explains. “That’s the big thing—audio doesn’t want to be seen here. We want it to feel like a movie set, not like a concert, so everything is hidden away. In the gunshot areas, we use a higher-powered speaker. We use the bigger Electro-Voice cabinets, stage wedge-style cabinets to get a little more power and provide contrast from those little speakers, creating a much louder boom and getting the desired effects there.”

The audio gear includes one Mac Mini running QLab 3, sixteen channels of audio, one Motu 828x, one Behringer ADA 8200, 12 JBL LSR 305s, and four EV SxA250s.

“It’s simple gear used in somewhat of an elegant way to achieve the desired effect,” Sharp says. “We don’t want this to feel like a TV haunted house maze—it’s more theatrical than that. That’s why I didn’t use a lot of stereotypically creepy effects, like zombie chain sounds or creepy ‘ERRRR’ noises. We have created something where the audio becomes a piece of the set. It makes the audience feel like they are in a movie rather than feeling that they are at a show.”

*The Walking Dead Experience* is currently touring the country in conjunction with the Walker Stalker Con with stops in Nashville (in January), Jacksonville, Orlando, New Orleans, Dallas, Denver, Chicago, Boston, and more as yet unnamed cities in the planning stages. 📻