

## Using Response Theory to Analyze *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: Whether brilliant, absurd or just plain offensive, everyone seems to have an opinion about the cult classic. Telling the story of a newly engaged couple who happens upon a group of outrageous aliens, *Rocky Horror* began as a stage show written by Richard O'Brien in 1973 and was later translated into a musical comedy horror film two years later, also directed by O'Brien. I will be using response theory – the belief that the film's meaning changes according to the viewer – because this is the kind of movie that doesn't have an obvious meaning to everyone. The way a viewer may interpret it depends on their age, gender, location, what year they are watching it in, what medium they are using to watch it, and of course, their core beliefs.

The film version of *Rocky Horror* came out in 1975 and was re-released a year later to play at the famous Waverly Theatre in New York City as a midnight movie on April 1, 1976. Over the next few years, it grew more and more in popularity, with people eventually beginning the tradition of dressing up as the film's characters and yelling lines at the screen. Soon props were introduced, along with a live stage show to accompany the film. This interactive experience became a tradition that is still around in most places today, making *Rocky Horror* the longest running theatrical release of all time. It wasn't that it was a "good" movie – not that it was bad, but it wasn't meant to be taken seriously – in fact, it was supposed to mock bad science fiction movies and the horror B movie, but it was the kind of film that was fun to see with a large group of people participating as an audience. I know people who saw *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* for the first time on television and didn't get it, and that's perfectly understandable. I have my own copy of the movie, but I almost never watch it other than at the Halloween midnight movie that Montreal puts on every year, because the ridiculousness of the movie is meant to be experienced with a group of people who share a love of the cult phenomenon.

The film came out near the end of the glam rock era, and it is obvious that in a way, *Rocky Horror* celebrates this genre of music. The character of Frank N' Furter, played by Tim Curry, has a style similar to glam rock icon, David Bowie. Ironically, Tim Curry's stylist on set of *Rocky Horror* was Bowie's too. In the scene right after the creation of Rocky, Eddie bursts in on his motorcycle and sings "Hot Patootie – Bless My Soul," alluding to the early days of rock n' roll, to which Frank N' Furter chases him with an axe and kills him. It was speculated at the time that the movie first came out that this was an allegory for glam rock killing classic rock n' roll.

Another big social issue at the time was homosexuality. In places that were apparently more accepting, like England and Canada, homosexuality had already been decriminalized in 1967, but the fight for gay rights in the United States really got going in 1969 and continued throughout the 1970s. This is why the release of a stage production like *Rocky Horror* and its subsequent cult film in the early 1970s was still controversial. Although it seemed like the movie was a hit with young adults who would flock to their on-campus college theatres for the midnight shows, it wasn't as popular with adults, but that was to be expected. Back then, as it still is today, young people tend to be a lot more open-minded and accepting of things than adults, most of

which who are still stuck in their ways or very religious. Just imagine what these people must have thought of the scene where we can see the silhouette of Frank N' Furter performing fellatio on both Janet and then Brad, whereas teenagers probably would have shouted at the screen and cheered them on. Adults saw the movie as a promotion for sex and rock n' roll, things that were frowned upon, but young people saw important messages and themes that adults just couldn't fathom, like homosexuality being a lifestyle to celebrate, not reject. Also, the scene where Janet tries to seduce Rocky while singing "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch me" was thought by some adults to be an encouragement for promiscuity, but women thought it was a great scene and saw it as an example of female empowerment.

People who watch *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* today can still pick up on some of these themes, though they might not be as relevant. Today, homosexuality is generally accepted, and it is considered absolutely normal to see gay characters on television and in movies. On the popular television show, *Glee*, gay characters Kurt and Blaine, who are in a relationship, are shown kissing many times, and it is insinuated that they have sex. This would not have been okay in the days of *Rocky Horror*, which is why it got so much negative criticism in the beginning. And sex isn't usually something to blush about anymore, unless you're someone's eighty-something year old grandmother or uncharacteristically uptight. That's why people who watch *Rocky Horror* today mostly see nothing more than an insanely wild, outrageous and fun movie with good music. But nevertheless, people still flock to the cinemas today like they did when it first came out in the 1970s, dressed up as their favourite character, with a bag full of newspapers, playing cards and toast, to celebrate the fabulousness of the cult classic that is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, no matter what the movie means to them.