

Haunted
An Immersive Experience

By Zoe Settle

There are several interpretations of the word haunted. There is the sense of haunting something, a place, or physical appearance of being haunted, like in the eyes. There's a frequent place, being continuously present in an unpleasant circumstance, a persistent memory consuming the mind. It visits habitually, it remains unwelcome, it nags, it lingers, and it's more than just spooks and shudders.

This piece deals with the feelings of lingering and longing.

Show Notes

We are in a dreamy, grey wood. There is a magic glimmer of light throughout the forest. There is cloud cover all around but the sun longs to poke through, and there is a chill in the air. The trees are in full fall, with various degrees of leaves hanging on, all of them in yellows and oranges. There are traces of fog around that ebbs and flows around. Although this could seem unfriendly, this wood is safe.

Everyone is in flowy white save for the Painter (in a bold mixture of primary colors), the Friends (in greys) and Amy (who wears darker colors a hoodie).

While the following is chunked out by character, the actual form of the show would have each paragraph be a separate scene; no one character's scenes will ever happen back-to-back.

For casting, this show is open to all people. A firm ensemble of people is needed to support the named characters. Diversity is pertinent.

Finally, in this show, magic is real and very present. The Spirits are always present to lend help, to guide. While darkness is here, it will not harm you.

The Lovers:

It's almost as if it's from a dream, but not quite. There are five stories. The first is of a pair of female lovers, Eve and Delilah, who run throughout the woods. Their run starts the show off as the audience descends into the forest. At first, the Guide mentions them off hand as we see them run through, giggling. They were lovers, forbidden in their time, so they would sneak out each night to meet each other. The next few encounters with them are much the same and each time we get a little more of the story. We finally happen upon them in a silver clearing where we witness a breathtaking pas de deux. As the dance progresses, we learn their story. One night the two stole out to skate in the moonlight. As they danced, Delilah fell through the ice and the weight of her dress dragged her down before Eve could get help. Their pas de deux ends with Delilah fading away leaving Eve to cascade down to the ground, alone. The group moves on, and the final portion of their story is shared. Eve was too distraught to go on and ended her life to be with Delilah. She now wanders the woods reliving that moment over and over. The final installment of their tale is revealed at the conclusion of the play.

The Friends:

A group of five students are roaming the woods for a film project, circa 1993. They decide to make a documentary over the curse that was supposedly on the woods. We see them joke around about all the alleged people who have gone into the woods and were never seen again. Rather than seeing this acted out in front of us, TVs will be mounted on trees so that we watch what is happening far away. Eventually they split up to take some time to find other places to film. The screens show as each of the five goes their own ways, one right towards us. He disappears off screen and shortly appears at the end of the path. Billy calls for someone and wanders past, not noticing the group. The TVs show static, distracting, as another member of the party approaches from a different direction. She does notice the audience and approaches to talk. She is someone stuck in a moment that keeps repeating. It is stiff, not robotic, like a broken record. Daisy only notices us in soft focus. She explains the origins of the project as pieces of footage play. She finally snaps to and apologizes, continuing down after the boy.

The next time we encounter the crew, one of them is missing-- the boy we saw earlier. They want to leave to find someone to help, but the girl we met earlier insists on them staying to try to find Billy. They split further, agreeing that if help or Billy is found they'd meet back at the same spot. Ken stays with Daisy and the two continue to look for Billy. We watch them wander the woods on TVs that are lined along the path that the audience takes for almost the rest of the piece. At any moment, one could look at the screen and see where they are.

The final installment comes when the audience rounds a bend to find Daisy in a clearing with staticky TVs flickering footage of the other group members' faces. She speaks to us a final time. This is even more chopped and stiff. She always gets stuck at this part where she can't quite reckon what happened. Everything else is still. She is agonized, as if there is screeching in her head, but we don't hear a thing. She speaks of never encountering her friends again after they were split up. They didn't find Billy before nightfall, and in the darkness her and Ken separated out of fear that they wouldn't find Billy. Her face flashes on all the screens. The air is sucked out of her. She tries to scream but we don't hear anything. She tells us she doesn't remember what happened, she doesn't remember, and then she's gone, like a candle being snuffed.

We hear the wind whistle through the trees as we realize how unfriendly the woods can be. No one made it out, but Daisy waited for days and days hoping that one of her friends would be able to find their way back to the meeting point. Eventually she was too weak to get up and perished.

The Painter:

This segment is different in that it simply revolves around an artist. He is not unlike Vincent van Gogh. The first time we encounter him, he is simply standing, staring at the trees above him. He is not too far off, muttering to himself about it not being right. We learn that he has secluded himself from society, though he was never much a member of it to begin with. He lives with the constant fear of being misunderstood by others. He sees magic, but can never put that feeling down on canvas, and it haunts him. As we observe, he talks louder, now as if to someone, but still not us. "Beauty is pain," he says as he discusses the yellows of the leaves, why he always says that yellow is his favorite color, even though no one could ever understand why. "it lights up the small moments, and I am never without sunshine" He says it looks lovely with blue. He talks about it so simply and elegantly that after hearing it, one would never look at yellow the same way.

He wanders off, and audience follows for a ways until he hears us, panics, and runs. Between the lovers and the film crew, we catch glimpses of him wandering through, searching for, or chasing something. We finally come upon a cabin and are sent inside. It is cozy and roomy inside. There is a fire crackling as we see the painter at work. There are windows out of which we see just how beautiful the woods can be. We do not see what is on his easel. He notices us this time but doesn't startle. He was expecting us. It is a comfortable silence at first, and as he works, he speaks to us. It is soulful and poetic. At first it is warm, like yellow. As he goes on, the yellow turns to blue and he says very simply that he will never succeed. He can never make his art how he likes, and that's why no one will ever understand. They

call him crazy for the way he speaks, but if anyone bothered to look, they would be able to see things as he sees it.

“I do have sunshine inside of me, even if it can’t be seen.
We all do.
For my part, I know nothing with any certainty,
But the sight of stars makes me dream.
I don’t fear the dark
The way others do
Perhaps it is because
I know it well
For as much sun as warms my heart,
The darkness claims my mind
And the two give me visions
So enticing that I want to live in them forever.
I’m not mad, you know. Not so mad at least
If anything, I make madness of myself
Paint and colors make more sense than any logic I have ever heard
When I use my words, I make a mess,
But any mess I make here
Is still beautiful to me
If I could touch one person
To show them the skies
The brilliance of the night sky
The waves, the swirls
There is so much there if your eyes can open to it.
I am cracking
But maybe that way
Now
Someone can see
My light shining through.
Another mess.
You will not think much of it
But to me this is beauty.”

He admits defeat, and slowly turns the painting around to face us as he exits. It is exquisite and heartbreaking all together.

The Woman:

We encounter Matilda on our journey. She looks as though she's been woken from a slumber in a start, circa 1952. She sees us and is disoriented enough to speak to us. She asks if we've seen someone. Matilda turns a third way and stumbles off. Matilda excuses herself, she "hasn't been the same lately". As she heads off, we hear a faint whisper of spirits.

Later on, we stumbled upon Matilda again as she runs through. We follow her and emerge into a clearing. There is a faint noise that grows over the course of this scene. Matilda is lashing around, seeing something we can't. There is a deep rumbling as an army crashes through the trees. Matilda is plagued by visions of ghost soldiers. We watch as they fall, presumably like they always do. Matilda goes frantically between the fallen, trying to save them, though she can do nothing. Even though her distress is real, it is clear she has done this exact sequence many times before. We are living out her nightmare right along with her. In the end, fog has covered the entire ground and all we see is Matilda, destroyed again. She won't be able to take many more of these attacks.

Much later, there is another clearing where we find Matilda tossing in her bed. There is a large window with French doors. We observe for a while then she wakes in a fit, calling for someone who isn't there. She finally has given up. Fully lucid, she wakes and walks out of the window.

The Dreamer:

We meet her and she almost looks like she could blend right in with the audience, as though she's lost. She comes along with the group for a spell. They chat about menial things like the weather. Somewhere along the way, the faint sound of a cello plays, which Amy hears and is struck by. She suddenly runs the other way from us.

After a time, we come across a nook in the wood. There is a majestic cello, seemingly playing on its own. The sound is beautiful and devastating all at once. Amy appears at the edge of the space, staring. She is frozen, unsure what to do. She begins to slowly walk to the cello as it crescendos, hand outstretched. She is just shy of making contact when something stops her abruptly. She turns and runs back the way she came. Amy loved music. It possessed her in a way nothing else ever could. However, she wasn't allowed to continue playing, and slowly it killed her. Music was a language that spoke to her in such a way that nothing else could make sense to her, and she was swept into a world where understanding was a stranger. Her dream deferred withered her to nothing, and now it follows her everywhere. Here, however, Amy is free to follow her music, and sometimes Amy is swept away completely into a musical haze, which are the moments she's most alive. On her best days, her music fills the woods.

We happen upon a clearing where Amy is fully swept away by her music. She moves with manic sleekness around the trees. We see her music come to life through the other spirits. When she creates, she breathes life back into the forest. After we meet her, we see glimpses of her through the trees whenever music swells.

The last time we see her is just before the end, she breezes by, exclaiming that Amy created this song just for us. The song playing is a variation on the song that was playing during the pas de deux between the two lovers. It is just a hair different than the last time we heard it, perhaps a third up or changing from a major key to a minor. Something that is subtle, but vaguely unsettling.

The Mirrors:

Regardless of the order the scenes are received in, every group's experience will end the same way. The Guide is very affected by Amy's song. If the interaction between Amy and the Guide happens before the final scene, the song will play again at its conclusion and the Guide will begin her speech. If the interaction happens after the final scene, Amy will exit and the Guide will begin her final speech. There are a few mirrors strung on the path as the Guide steps out of her role as the guide and into the role as a spirit of the forest. She is haunted just as much as everyone else we've encountered, and this has just triggered an episode. She drifts away from us, speaking.

“There was nothing I could do.
She was there and then gone,
In seconds.
I was destroyed
I couldn't continue without her
I tried but there
Is no way to live without your heart.
I thought that I could join her
But when I woke up
She wasn't here
Now I am alone I am
All alone

I always lose her.
I am keeper of these woods
To comfort and guide
Those that too can't shake
A shadow of something.
And in the end
We'll never leave.
But I can't help but hope
One day
It will be okay
To let us find peace"

The groups all are led to a giant clearing where all the trees are all covered in mirrors. One Guide goes to the center and the other sprits remain on the outskirts of the trees.

"We're all here because we lost something.
Because we left something
Regret something.
Will you join us?
Or will you leave us?"

The music swells a final time as the spirits fade into the trees and the mirrored doors open to reveal an exit to return to the real world.