

Sexism is Scary

Take Back Halloween event features fun activities that provoke discussion about gender stereotyping

by Cadence Mandybura October 30, 2014 12:00 AM



Photo courtesy of Sue Bell

Zombies, ghosts and demons, move over. Scarier stuff stalks our streets every day. Put it in a spooky room on All Hallows' Eve, and you get a patriarchy haunted house.

That's just one element of a new event called Take Back Halloween, organized by Hillhurst United Church and Urban Curvz Theatre. Pam Rocker, affirming and creative co-ordinator at the church, says the idea was sparked by a Halloween costume aisle where she saw sexy costumes designed for toddlers. It made her and Urban Curvz artistic director Jacqueline Russell question what's shaping our choices at this time of year, and whether there are alternatives to explore. Add some feminist theatre and film, a costume contest, plus lots of candy and popcorn, and you get Take Back Halloween.

Although it deals with serious issues, the event is meant to be fun. Aimed at ages 13 and up and held in Hillhurst United Church, it starts at 7:30 p.m. and runs about two hours so that it won't conflict with late-night Halloween parties.

The evening starts with a tour of the aforementioned haunted house. "It's a humorous look at the things that are really terrifying," says Rocker. "The patriarchy haunted house could be like walking down the street."

There will be catcalls, flaming bras and a feminist graveyard, and spookier exhibits like a mad scientist creating the perfect woman, the multi-tasking mama and an "I Don't Need Feminism" game. Following that, Urban Curvz will present some short theatrical pieces created specifically for the event, and will screen the documentary *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Supheroines*.

Rocker has already heard some criticism aimed at the event, primarily centred on the apparent contradiction of supporting women's freedom to wear whatever they like, while at the same time indicting them for dressing too provocatively. But Rocker says the event is not at all about controlling how anyone dresses, explaining that there's a fine line between sexuality and sexualization.

"Sexuality is beautiful, and we want to be attractive... and there's nothing wrong with that. But sexualization is completely different, because then that breaks you down to one thing, which is to be desired sexually," she says.

"It's not about these angry females saying, 'oh my gosh, you need to cover everything up.' It's saying, 'could we think about some other alternatives?'"

That's where the feminist costume contest comes in, which encourages attendees to create costumes that are empowering, clever and creative. (Rocker's finalists for her own costume are Ellen DeGeneres and a graduate of Buzzkill University, inspired by one critic's comment about the event.)

The issue goes beyond sexualization, though. Rocker describes a pair of firefighter costumes she saw, with the boy's version having a proper helmet and the girl's only a decorative fascinator. "I wonder sometimes if we understand that the kind of message that we're sending is, what we care about is what [girls] look like, and what we care about with boys is what they can do," she says.

And while amped-up sexiness is often aimed at girls, boys can be affected, too, and not only through pimp daddy costumes. "We often don't talk about it in terms of gender stereotyping for guys, but the thing is that men are also made fragile and insecure by a distorted sense of what success is."

Maybe there are boys out there who would rather be unicorns than supermen, just as there are girls who want full firefighting gear.

Appropriately for Halloween, the repercussions of sexualization and gender stereotyping can be pretty scary. "It's really about saying how we honour men and women as whole people because as soon as we don't, we dehumanize them, and as soon as we dehumanize them, we treat them very badly," says Rocker.

"To have a night where we make it fun, and we make it interesting and give you candy and popcorn at the same time — I think that is the whole point of it."

Take Back Halloween runs October 31 at Hillhurst United Church.

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- See more at: <http://www.ffwdweekly.com/life/urban-living/sexism-is-scary/#sthash.Wsr7UEQQ.dpuf>