

Pennhurst Asylum Exploitation
Saturday, September 2, 2010

The event starts with a one mile drive through dark woods to the parking area then a half-mile walk to the back of the Admin building where you join the people waiting to enter.

First stop is the Ticket booth to purchase your "patient pass." I asked the ticket lady how many people had come tonight. She said they had 600 by 8 pm! Next is the long walk to the admin building, past two huge heaps of manure, a rusting children's play set with a soundtrack of little children's voices talking and screaming as they play. Then waiting in line. I waited 90 minutes to get to the front door of the admin building. While we were waiting a man in bloody overalls with a cloth bag over his head and large "hunchback" shuffled along carrying a large bloody club with nails protruding from the end. His job was to scare (entertain) people in line as they waited. The vast majority of the people in line were white, able-bodied teenagers.

At the entrance to the admin building was a man spitting and swallowing fire (circus theme?) and a radio station Xtu host playing county music and handing our signed Twilight prints (Vampire theme?) One person in the line up commented that he thought it did not make sense to have country music at a Halloween event because he did not find country music to be scary.

Once inside we were greeted by a nurse who entreated us to come along and get prepared for surgery.

The first room was the room filled with B&W professional PR photos of Pennhurst (e.g., administrators, psychology department, nursing, grounds etc.). The music was from the 1920s. As we filed past these photos a woman in the center of the room announced that she had worked at Pennhurst from the 70's to its closure in 1987. I asked her what she thought of the criticism of the event and she said that she was against the criticism. That "we should let what happened in the past go." She said she had taken a vacation day the day before (Friday) in order to speak at the court hearing in favor of the event.

The next room was filled with color photos of the ruins of Pennhurst. A specially made video played. The video began with Bill Baldini's expose of Pennhurst and ended with two "executions?" one by electricity of a male and another by a blow to the back of the head of a woman tied to a chair. In between were images of a person in a wheel chair being wheeled around the grounds, a woman eating a red bleeding round object I took to be a human heart, and the aforementioned "hunchback" escaping from a cage along with very unclear images of what I took to be ECT treatments and lobotomies. It was standard asylum horror movie imagery.

First room after the so-called "museum" is the Rorschach room. The man tells us to look at the inkblots projected on the wall because "your responses will determine which unit you will be placed in." Subsequent rooms included the cafeteria where body parts were served on plates, the dental suite where a man with a bloody mouth held wide open with a metal jaw clamp lay in the chair, the surgical suite with a woman on the table (I must have missed the point here), a nursery with a "mad" nurse holding a grey skinned "monster" baby crying out "why won't he stop crying?", the morgue where there was "always room for one more," an ECT/Frankenstein room in which a man was electrocuted and then jumps off the table into the crowd. All the while patients wondered around making bizarre noises, one caressing a large rats in her blouse, and nurses walked like zombies with their knees together and feet wide apart. The exit was via a long, tiled tunnel with hobo/homeless figures and more mad/zombie nurses.

There was much slamming of doors, people jumping out of the shadows and from around dark corners, half bodies, bodies hanging from the ceiling, blinking lights, and the crackling of electricity.

Martin