

# RKOcon 2022: National Convention Timewarps to PVD

RKOcon 2022 in Providence, held Wed - Sun, Aug 3 - 7, is a worldwide convention for “shadowcasting” theater troupes, hosted by the RI-based **RKO Army**, one of the largest such troupes in the world with about 30 regular and 15 semi-regular performers. Grounded in the midnight cult movie tradition that has grown up around *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, “shadowcasting” is the practice of dressing up in costume and acting out the action on screen as the film runs behind the actors, visible to the audience.

Usually rotating on a three-year cycle, Providence hosted the convention in 2013, 2016, and 2019. Due to the pandemic, the 2020 and 2021 events, which would not have been in Providence, were canceled, so it worked out that the 2019 and 2022 events in Providence are somewhat back-to-back.

“The nature of the *Rocky Horror* convention is that it is a community con as opposed to a [commercial] comic con. The people mostly know each other, however, we’re certainly open to new people attending and would welcome ... their patronage,” said **Roy Rossi**, cast director of RKO Army. At commercial cons, by contrast, “They’re there to sell, whereas, yes, we have vendors, but we’re not chiefly there for that. This isn’t a vendor con or a vendor-driven con. It’s not a star-driven con. And quite frankly, the stars of this con are the people who come from other casts.... We’re emphasizing the people who are going to be performing on stage.” Attendees can also participate in a number of scheduled panels and competitions.

In addition to *Rocky Horror* (1975), the convention will “shadowcast” a number of other films, including *Shock Treatment* (1981, the little-known quasi-sequel to *Rocky Horror*), *Repo! The Genetic Opera* (2008), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), *Reefer Madness: The Movie Musical* (2005), and *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008). Most events will be Thursday, Friday, and Saturday (before 5pm) at the Hilton Hotel, 21 Atwells Ave, in downtown Providence, except for the “main event” performance of *Rocky Horror* at the capacious Stadium Theater, 28 Monument Sq, Woonsocket, beginning at 7pm Saturday.

While seeing various actors from around the world take turns in the stage roles, a practice known as “con casting,” audience members will be encouraged to shout out lines and hurl props at appropriate times during the movie. Prop bags will be sold, \$3 each, containing items whose significance will be immediately understood by devotees: toilet paper, a party hat, a sponge, a newspaper, playing cards, a noisemaker, cardboard toast, a paper plate and a non-latex vinyl glove.

Attendance is strong despite the pandemic and consequent two-year hiatus, Rossi said, removing the ability to “ride off the coattails of some of the other big conventions. At this point, we have to create the coattails.” Registrations to attend the full convention are slightly ahead of expectations. “Right now we’re at about 260. I think we’re going to get to 275, which is more than we thought.”

“The lack of a con in the last two years has not helped. If people think there’s a bunch of pent up need to go to a convention, they should think again,” Rossi said. “If you figure every con, you lose people and you gain people, all we’ve done is lose people, because it’s two years of attrition in between.”

RKO invested substantial effort in crafting a COVID-19 policy that is posted on the convention web site.

"The bulk of the events are in the [hotel] ballroom and will be mask-mandated. That's where 85% of the events will be," said Rossi. The vendor area in the hotel will also require masks. Otherwise, attendees inside the hotel but outside of those two areas will have the option to wear masks or not: "People will still do their own thing outside of the ballroom." The Stadium Theater has their own policy and does not require masks, Rossi said, and he expects at least an additional 300 tickets will be sold to the general public for the main event on Saturday night.

The cast took a break from performing rather than try to operate virtually during the pandemic. "Shadowcasting has to be done live or it doesn't really work. We had a couple of those things like 'The Stay At Home Show,' but that was kind of a novelty gimmick more than anything else," Rossi said ("A Toast! RKO Army Raises \$4,100 for RI Pride Food Drive", by Michael Bilow, May 11, 2020).

RKO has been helped enormously by breaking convention habits and expanding the repertoire into other shows. "If we had not made that controversial decision in 2013, and we were just pumping up *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* with *Shock Treatment* on Friday, you can scratch out 30% of the attendance, maybe?" Rossi speculated. "A lot of people are coming to the con because they're getting a chance to interact, not just at *Rocky Horror*, but other areas. What we've discovered is that people like getting up there and not just doing *Rocky*... and that's driving a huge part of the excitement of this con."

Rossi created a video presentation in 2017 called *The RKO Horror Show* that will be run at the con, a Ken Burns-style moving stills sequence that started as a slide show with actual slides in the 1990s. "It celebrates the movie, the music and a little bit of the history, the local history of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Rhode Island," he said.

Rossi is uniquely qualified to elucidate the history of the show, having stayed personally involved since 1981. It first screened locally at the Showcase Cinemas in Seekonk, Mass, in 1978 for a few months, he said, before moving to the Cinerama on Hope St on the East Side of Providence that same year. (The Cinerama was razed years ago and a CVS pharmacy is now at the site.) "It ran there for four years, which at the time seemed like an eternity," Rossi said. "I was aware of the opening night, but I elected to stay in college. I was focused on getting my degree, so I didn't actually go until I literally went the week I graduated, Memorial Day weekend of 1980."

Rather than perform with the Providence cast of the time, Rossi and some friends began what would eventually become RKO Army. "The lineage of this cast begins in Newport, at the Jane Pickens Theater in the early fall of 1981." A succession of casts started and faded out at the Cinerama, he said, and at the last night the theater operated before it closed down in 1983, Rossi said, "Our cast actually performed in the very last show there.... It was uninvited. We just came in, did it. We found nobody there. We just did it.... That was the very last movie they played."

Asked whether, out of everybody in the world, he might have seen *Rocky Horror* performed by a live shadowcast more than anyone else, Rossi said, "There's a very strong possibility, because I don't know." In the early days, the show was twice every week on Friday and Saturday nights, around 100 shows per year. "By 1990, or by 1991, I probably hit 1,000.... I've got to be past 2,000." As almost all of the pioneers retired from involvement, including *Rocky Horror* Fan Club founder **Sal Piro**, Rossi said, "I've probably done the show more than anybody now."

Rossi's friend **Bob Andoscia** got him into *Rocky Horror*, he said. The ancient technology of the 1970s was limiting. "[Bob] played the music on the vinyl and maybe we had 8-track by then. Maybe I had a

cassette. Just playing the music, enjoying the music, but not going until I graduated,” Rossi said. “It was him going, basically him and his sister... The concept of people getting up there and performing while the movie is going on fascinated me.”

The DIY aesthetic was particularly intriguing, he said, because there were no formalities or restrictions. “We could just get up on our own and start doing something. It was a new phenomenon... and the fact that we could do it, it seemed like a lot of fun.... We didn’t have to go through anybody like [auditions] or something, just get up and do it.” Unlike live theater with scripts and directors, “this was more like going to a club and dancing.... They play songs, and you can dance to them.” Things are more organized now, he said. “Back then we were, I would say, socially, completely uninhibited - for better or worse.” *For full information for RKOcon 2022, including schedules and ticketing information: [rkocon.com](http://rkocon.com)*