

Becoming a Vampire, or Almost Anything Else, in Live Action Role Playing

By SUSAN HODARA SEPT. 3, 2015

In late July, nearly 60 men and women from around the country pitched their tents in the campground at Croton Point Park in Croton-on-Hudson. They had come to inhabit the World of Darkness as players in the game “Vampire: The Masquerade.” From Friday till Sunday, they enacted their individual roles as members of a complex society of vampires — and participants in a LARP.

LARP stands for Live Action Role Play. A LARP is an improvisational game in which participants portray characters and interact according to a given set of rules. With roots in tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons, manyLARPs are set in elaborate imaginary worlds. LARPs are played indoors or outdoors, and last anywhere from less than an hour to a weekend or longer. The acronym can be used as a noun and a verb, as in: LARPers LARP in a LARP.

There are different varieties of LARP. Boffer LARP involves lots of physical dueling with foam swords and Nerf guns, and may draw several hundred participants. In theater LARP, the action is more story-driven, the number of players smaller and communication verbal, with combat (if it occurs) resolved through nonphysical methods like a round of rock-paper-scissors. In some LARPs (like “Vampire: The Masquerade”), players devise

their own characters; in others, they are assigned characters with defined traits, motivations and goals.

With no script or audience, each LARP has its own premise and structure, but all LARPs are, at their core, grown-up versions of make-believe.

“It’s like when I was a kid and I went outside and picked up a stick and became anything from an adventurer to a mad scientist,” said John Isabella III, a LARPer and mechanical engineer in Cortlandt Manor. “Only now I have a character to play.”

Mr. Isabella, 26, recently played a machine intelligence called Serpentine in the theater LARP “Inheritance.” The character and the LARP were written by Warren Tusk, who grew up in Briarcliff Manor and now lives and works in Manhattan. Mr. Tusk, 30, was introduced to LARP as an undergraduate at Harvard, where he studied religion and folklore; he went on to earn a law degree and a master’s degree in bioethics. Elements of his diverse education are evident in the 14 LARPs he has written or helped write, six of which are available through his company, Paracelsus Games, named for a 16th-century German alchemist.

The themes Mr. Tusk tackles reflect the broad scope of LARP subjects. “The power of fiction and invention,” he said, beginning a litany. “The role of religion and doctrine. The benefits and dangers of separating oneself from humanity. The eternal quest for purpose, and the lengths to which people will go to find it.”

Not to mention romance. In 2006, Mr. Tusk completed what would become his best-known game, “The Dance and the Dawn,” a gothic fairy tale in which the elegant but brokenhearted Ladies of Ash and Lords of Ice gather at a midnight ball in search of true love. “There is a lot of dancing, and a lot of talking while dancing,” he said. “It’s an extremely structured game, which makes it good for first-time LARPers.”

Mr. Tusk has invited the public (first-time LARPers included) to don

their courtliest attire and participate in a run of “The Dance and the Dawn” on Sept. 12 at **ARC Stages** in Pleasantville. There are 13 roles: six ladies and seven lords. Before the players assemble, they will respond to a questionnaire to facilitate casting, and then be sent information including character and setting descriptions, details of game mechanics and suggestions for costuming (which is optional).

For those who prefer bloodier topics, “Vampire: The Masquerade” LARPer play monthly at Victor’s Bar & Grill in Hawthorne. The game is adapted from the tabletop version, with LARP rules by Mind’s Eye Theater. Players are members of **Under the Rock**, the local chapter of an international network of World of Darkness games called **One World by Night**, and newcomers are welcome.

LARPs are overseen by what some call “gamemasters,” others call “storytellers” and Mr. Tusk calls “orchestrators.” Between these coordinators’ proclamations of “Game on!” and “Game off!” players engage with one another in pursuit of their designated aims. Mr. Tusk had this advice for new LARPer: “Above all, take the game seriously and let yourself get into it. Don’t be afraid of people laughing at you. Just sink into the character and go from there.”

As a writer, Mr. Tusk considers LARP an artistic medium. “From an author’s perspective, one of the interesting features of LARP is that you are not allowed to come to a single answer,” he said in an interview. “You create multiple characters who believe different things and who are trying to accomplish different things, but unlike a playwright, you do not get to determine how it ends. You provide some constraints on your characters, but they make their own choices. What happens is in their hands.”

The value of a well-crafted LARP, Mr. Tusk feels, lies beyond its characters and content. Of LARP authors, he said: “We invent fake worlds full of fake people — that’s what literature is. And those things come to matter, not just because they might theoretically influence our real-world lives, but simply because they exist and they are beautiful.”

For enthusiasts, LARP can be a form of entertainment, a hobby, a means of social interaction or a source of intellectual and emotional engagement. For many, it offers a temporary sampling of an alternate identity. “It’s a nice way for me to get out of my own skin,” Mr. Isabella said. “I work at my job all week. I’m an introvert by nature. When I’m playing somebody else, in a sense I’m not myself for a while. I’m not as reserved. I push forward.”

Mr. Tusk suggested another view of the impact of LARP. “More than anything else,” he said in a later email, “LARP is really good at making people care. They are actually participating in a story, so they think harder about it. They end up caring about things that might not have meant as much to them before. Identification with their character is cranked up to the maximum that literature allows (at least with present technology), and that’s a powerful thing.”

“The Dance and the Dawn,” Sept. 12, 6 to 11 p.m., at **ARC Stages**, 175 Tompkins Avenue, Pleasantville. Tickets: \$20. There are 13 roles available. To register or for more information: paracelsus-games.com. “Vampire: The Masquerade,” third Sunday of every month, 2 to 8 p.m., at Victor’s Bar & Grill, 500 Commerce Street, Hawthorne. Fee: \$5 to \$7. For more information: undertherock.owbn.net.

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