H.P. Lovecraft returns to Providence

DAVID BRUSSAT

The Lovecraft phenomenon that has returned to Providence is far larger, and perhaps even more eerie, than most of Rhode Island could imagine before last week’s celebration of the renowned horror writer’s life and work — called the NecronomiCon, after Lovecraft’s fictitious bible.

At last Thursday’s convocation in the First Baptist Church (whose teachings Lovecraft renounced as a boy of 8), speakers vaunted his fame, which may be eerie above all because it is so little recognized in his home state. Lovecraft is properly elevated at least, I think, to the level of Poe, his own forebear as a writer of mystery tales, and Lovecraft may be as revered and influential around the world as the bard of Baltimore (who made love to the poetess Sarah Helen Whitman in the stacks of the Providence Athenaeum). Stephen King says he models his writing after that of Lovecraft.

But even such gods of literature as Shakespeare did not experience a resurrection as eflorescent in its breadth, if not its height, as that of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937).

I was certainly unaware, ante-NecronomiCon, that Lovecraft’s writing (like that of Shakespeare) has inspired many film adaptations. But I was also unaware that Lovecraft’s work has probably inspired more aspiring writers to embrace (or copy) his style of writing than has Shakespeare’s work — granted, the Lovecraftian style is more easily mastered.

Lovecraft trails far behind Shakespeare in generating scholarly analysis, of course, but has the immortal bard launched a global network of board, video and dice games? And while devotion to Shakespeare may resemble a cult in its intensity, I do not believe that he has spawned a religion, as Lovecraft has.

Central to the plots of much Lovecraft fiction are its ghoulish gods, alien life forms with tentacles, gills, unblinking eyes that protrude, and other oozy, fishy qualities. Most essentially, these inhabit not just Earth but the cosmos, and are either indifferent or inimical to mankind. Indeed, they seek to eradicate us. Many Lovecraft plots imagine a solitary man’s effort to confront the forces of Cthulhu, Lovecraft’s primary quasi-religious monster/ethos.

I am assured by NecronomiCon impresario Niels-Viggo Hobbs (who is also a marine biologist at the University of Rhode Island) that Lovecraft (who went to Hope High School) based his horrifying phenomena on scientific fact, as then understood. Unlike Hollywood’s “standard ‘man in a spandex suit’ with some prosthetics added to his face,” says Hobbs, “Lovecraft’s monsters are far more imaginative, and yet rooted in the realities of biodiversity.”

A scholarly field has arisen to examine the otherworldly in Lovecraft’s work. Some students of Lovecraftian believe that he might have been, unwittingly or not, a transmitter of actual cosmic spiritual essences — an apostle likened by some to those of Jesus Christ. Some Lovecraft acolytes bow down in all seriousness to worship the spirits that Lovecraft’s fiction evokes. Hobbs says that maybe 3 to, at most, 5 percent of Lovecraftians “believe there is some apostolic truth to his writing.”

Be that as it may, after two weeks’ immersion in Lovecraft’s prose, I find the tales to be lively, eloquent, erudite, riveting, difficult to put down and hard to forget, let alone to dismiss. Even its horror unfolds in a natural, almost matter-of-fact manner, with protagonists who struggle to avoid admitting its reality.

My main interest in Lovecraft remains his architectural writing about Providence. His novel “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” contains his most exhaustive description of his native city. It is next on my reading list. Lovecraft wrote an estimated 100,000 letters, many very, very long and filled with detailed architectural, urbanist and cultural lore of New England.

In his letters more than in his tales, his naivete — his racism and his fear of cultural, sociological and architectural change — are vented. The 20,000 letters that survive, if reproduced entirely, would take up 300 volumes. Lovecraft also wrote many travelogues, some published, of his trips up and down the East Coast.

In her scholarly presentation at a panel on Sunday, Providence native Sarah Zurier, a historian at the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, expressed regret that Lovecraft never secured a job as a preservationist. We’d certainly know more about old Rhode Island, and more of it’s historic architecture might survive — but would Lovecraft have continued to write horror?

H.P. Lovecraft deserves his own museum in Providence, or at least a gallery, if not an entire wing, of the fictional Rogues Island Museum that ought to inhabit at least part of the South Street Station, now called Dynamo House. The neoclassical-style building, erected in 1912 but vacant today, will remain haunted until its one true mission is revealed and embraced.
Correction

In my Aug. 15 column, "The latest upbeat downtown update," I described the sign for the old Narragansett Hotel Garage as silver. The color is not final, as implied, but part of a process to restore its original appearance.

David Brussat is on The Journal's editorial board (dbrussat@providencejournal.com). This column, with more illustrations, is also on his blog Architecture Here and There at providencejournal.com.
ART

EVENTS

ART Night — Gallery & Open Studio Tours of Bristol and Warren. Thu. Catch the trolley from one of the many trolley stops from 5 to 9 p.m. For more information go to artnightbristolwarren.org.

ART

GREATER PROVIDENCE


ASZ20, 33 Mathewson St., Providence. Project Space: “Concurrence,” recent sculpture and paintings by Max Van Pelt. Closes Sat. Wed-Fri 1-6 pm, Sat noon-5 pm.

Bert Gallery, 540 South Water St., Providence, 751-2628, bertgallery.com. Prints, paintings, photographs and other works from the 19th century to the present, with an emphasis on New England artists. Wed-Fri 11-5 pm, Sat noon-4 pm.

Cade Tompkins Projects, 198 Hope St., Providence. 751-4888, cadetompkinsprojects.com. Solo exhibitions by contemporary emerging, nationally recognized and international artists from Rhode Island, New York and elsewhere. Sat 10 am-6 pm or by appt.

Candida Clayton Gallery, Hope Artiste Village, 999 Main St., #105, Pawtucket, 533-8825, candidataclaytonstudio.com. Works by emerging and established Rhode Island artists. Wed 6-9 pm or by appt.


Haffnerreff Museum of Anthropology, Manning Hall, 21 Prospect St., Providence. 863-2065. Archaeological and ethnographic exhibits, including “The Spirit of the Thing Given: The Collections of Dwight B. Heath and Anna Cooper Heath.” Tue-Sun 10 am-4 pm.


Pawtucket Arts Collaborative at the Mill Gallery, 560 Mineral Spring Ave., pawtucketartcollaborative.org. Members’ Exhibit. Closes Sept. 5. Thu-Fri 3-7 pm, Sat-Sun 1-5 pm.

Providence Art Club, 11 Thomas St., Providence. 331-1114, providenceartclub.org. “Shadows Over Thomas Street,” works by 20 artists as part of NecronomiCon Providence, a survey of writer H.P. Lovecraft’s representation in the visual arts. Closes Sept. 6. Mon-Fri noon-3 pm.


Yellow Peril Gallery, 60 Valley St., Providence, 861-1535, yellowperilmedia.com. “PROXIMITY,” a solo exhibition featuring sculpture, performance, photography and installation work by Hao Ni. Closes Sept. 15. Thu-Fri 3-8 pm, Sat-Sun noon-5 pm and by appt.

EAST BAY/NEWPORT

Alta Luna Gallery, 297 Hope St., Bristol, (401) 688-0396, altalunagallery.com. Works by interdisciplinary artist Linda DiFrenna and abstract and impressionist painter John Irwin. Opening reception Thu 6-9 pm; closes Sept. 20. Tue-Sat 10 am-6 pm, Sun noon-5 pm.

Bristol Art Museum Exhibit at the Rogers Free Library, 525 Hope St., Bristol. Bristol-themed paintings by Jesse Thompson (Main Floor; Quiet Room); 2D works by Eleanor Sabin (Main Floor) and photographs by Matthew Clooney (Community Room). Closes Oct. 2. Library hours.


Donovan Gallery, 3895 Main Rd., Tiverton. 624-4000, donovangallery.com. “Summer Light,” new works by Deborah Quinn-Munson and Jeannine Tangney, along with works by more than 20 other artists. Closes Sept. 3. Tue-Sat 10 am-5 pm, Sun noon-5 pm.


Imago Gallery, 36 Market St., Warren. 245-3348,