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CULTURE

I remember doing the Time Warp: The 'Rocky Horror Picture Show' turns 50

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HEARD ON MORNING EDITION



Alice Woelfle

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"Happy To Be Here" cast member performs during the screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* during the 2025 TCM Classic Film Festival at TCL Chinese Theatre on April 25 in Hollywood, California.

Jesse Grant/Getty Images

It was 10 p.m. at the Nuart Theatre in West Los Angeles, and Kayla Discoe-Creveling was hunting for virgins.

"We have a little tradition in *Rocky Horror* where we mark our virgins with a big old V."

A Rocky Horror "virgin" is someone who's there for the first time.

"We love consent," Discoe-Creveling said. "Cheek, forehead, or chest?"

She drew a large "V" on a young woman's forehead.

That ritual, along with camp and community, has kept *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* alive for half a century. The cult film continues to draw audiences at weekly midnight screenings around the world, not only for the fishnets and callbacks but also because the community it created offers a home for anyone who has ever felt like an outsider.

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Since its 1975 U.S. premiere, the film has inspired generations with its bizarre characters and infectious soundtrack.

"It's exotic, erotic, and neurotic," said Barry Bostwick, who played the earnest and naive Brad Majors. "It's got some of the best rock and roll that has ever been put into a musical."

The film opens with Brad proposing to his girlfriend, Janet, played by Susan Sarandon. They get caught in a rainstorm and are welcomed into a derelict castle by a weird butler who is also an alien. The couple's buttoned-up, traditional world is blown wide open when Dr. Frank-N-Furter, played by Tim Curry, struts past the stunned couple and throws off his cloak, revealing fishnet stockings, a garter belt and a black sparkly lace-up corset.

"When Tim Curry, as Frank-N-Furter, comes down that elevator and you just see

the sparkly shoe, the lips, everything, suddenly I realized the world was a lot bigger and a lot weirder than I had ever known," said Margot Atwell, editor of the new anthology *Absolute Pleasure: Queer Reflections on Rocky Horror*.

"*Rocky Horror* was my first experience with queer joy on a screen," Atwell said.

Curry, in a 2005 interview with *Fresh Air*, spoke about his approach to the character's famous wardrobe.

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"Never think about it as drag because it's not," he said. "it's just what people wear in Transylvania, just get over it."





Cast members of "Sins of the Flesh," from left: Nicole Cortese, Portia Martine, Kohlton Rippee and Tina Petrillo.
Peter Rizzo

In recent years, the film has drawn criticism for its use of dated and offensive terms like transvestite and transsexual, and for its depiction of sexual coercion, misogyny and disrespectful portrayal of disability.

"Do those mean that there's nothing we can gain?" Atwell asked.

For her, the answer is a no.

"Are there ways that we can contextualize the film for people but still take forward the parts of it that are full of joy and community and connection?"





Sal Piro speaks during a 35th anniversary screening at the Wiltern on Oct. 28, 2010, in Los Angeles. Piro saw his first screening in 1976 and led the fan club until his death in 2023.

Kevin Winter/Getty Images

Midnight screenings across the U.S. created a real life portal to somewhere different. They offered a place where people could meet others who might be like them.

Back in 1976, Sal Piro did just that. The former seminarian and aspiring comedian went to a screening at the Waverly Theatre in New York's Greenwich Village. He founded and led the Rocky Horror fan club until he died in 2023.

His sister, Lillias Piro, was 13 when he first took her to see it. She recalled the moment a moviegoer shouted out a line at the screen, and the entire theater burst into laughter.

"My brother thought to himself, 'Hey, let's come back next week and see if we can top this and make lines,'" Piro said.

Soon, regulars started showing up to the weekly midnight shows dressed in costume. They would act out the scenes onstage just below the movie screen, creating what are now known as shadow casts.

Those in the audience crafted a script of call-and-response dialogue with the film that audiences are still adding to today. An L.A. cast includes a pre-show

disclaimer about the offensive nature of the performance. Much of it is too obscene to publish.

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Lillias said her brother was always proud of being gay, and helped others feel proud of who they were.

"I know so many people to this day in my circles of Rocky Horror that still tell me they wouldn't be alive without Sal."

Austin Fresh plays Frank-N-Furter in the L.A. shadow-cast *Sins of the Flesh*. Over the past decade, Fresh has performed the role more than 500 times.

"In a very prudish society, being proudly half-naked is a statement," Fresh said. "And I didn't get all these lovely tattoos to not show them off."

They said *Rocky Horror* will always be there for people on a journey of figuring out who they are.

"It is so heartening to watch the same kind of self-discovery stories of sexuality, and gender expression play out repeatedly as new people come into Rocky Horror."

These days as LGBTQ+ people are under attack, Atwell said these performances are more important than ever.

"Places where people can gather in person and make these kinds of connections, and have the kinds of conversations that are being censored or shut down online."

Rocky Horror still plays at midnight in more than 200 theaters across the U.S. Fans are marking 50 years with special events and performances, and there's a new documentary, *Strange Journey*, out this week.

For Bostwick, the film is beloved because it's for everyone, and it's always a really

good time.

"Brad says in the beginning of this movie, 'It's just a party, Janet,'" he said. "That's what's happening every Friday and Saturday night around the world – it's just a party."

No matter what or who you are, the central message of *Rocky Horror* is for you. As Frank-N-Furter sings in one of the final scenes in the film:

"Don't dream it, be it."

The broadcast version of this story was produced by Paige Waterhouse and Phil Harrell, and edited for digital by Majd Al-Waheidi.

the rocky horror picture show

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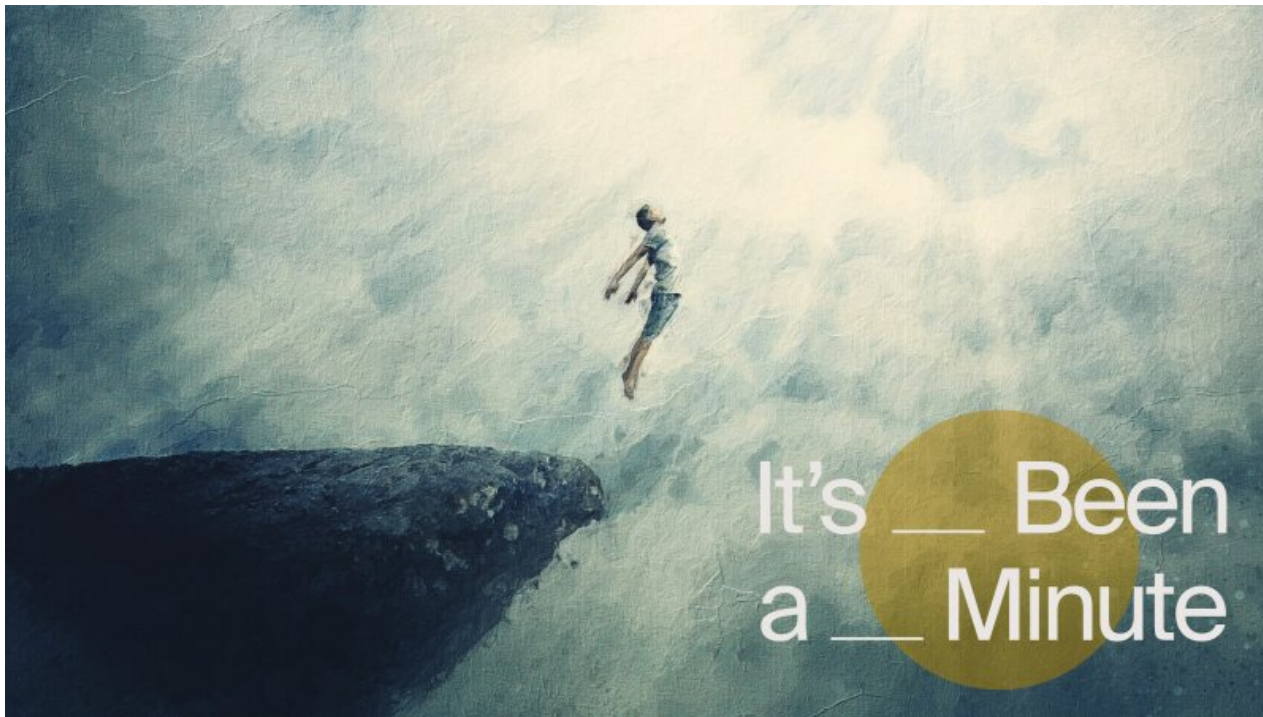
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