

BY RICKY BRANDON

It's no secret that Halloween is a favorite holiday for magicians. But are you having the fun you deserve on All Hallows Eve? When you were a kid, you eagerly counted down the days until October 31. Now, you probably just leave out a bucket of old Tootsie Rolls with a sign that reads "Take one."

Over the past five years, I have become known locally for having the hottest trick-or-treat house in town. The really fun part is that I get to live out my childhood magic dreams every Halloween. With a captive audience at my door, I can pretend I'm a Vegas headliner! For instance, I've always wanted to perform the Dancing Hank. This year, I am going to set it up in my garage and I'll probably do my routine about forty times on Halloween night. It will be the talk of the town all year long and I'll most likely end up on the local news.

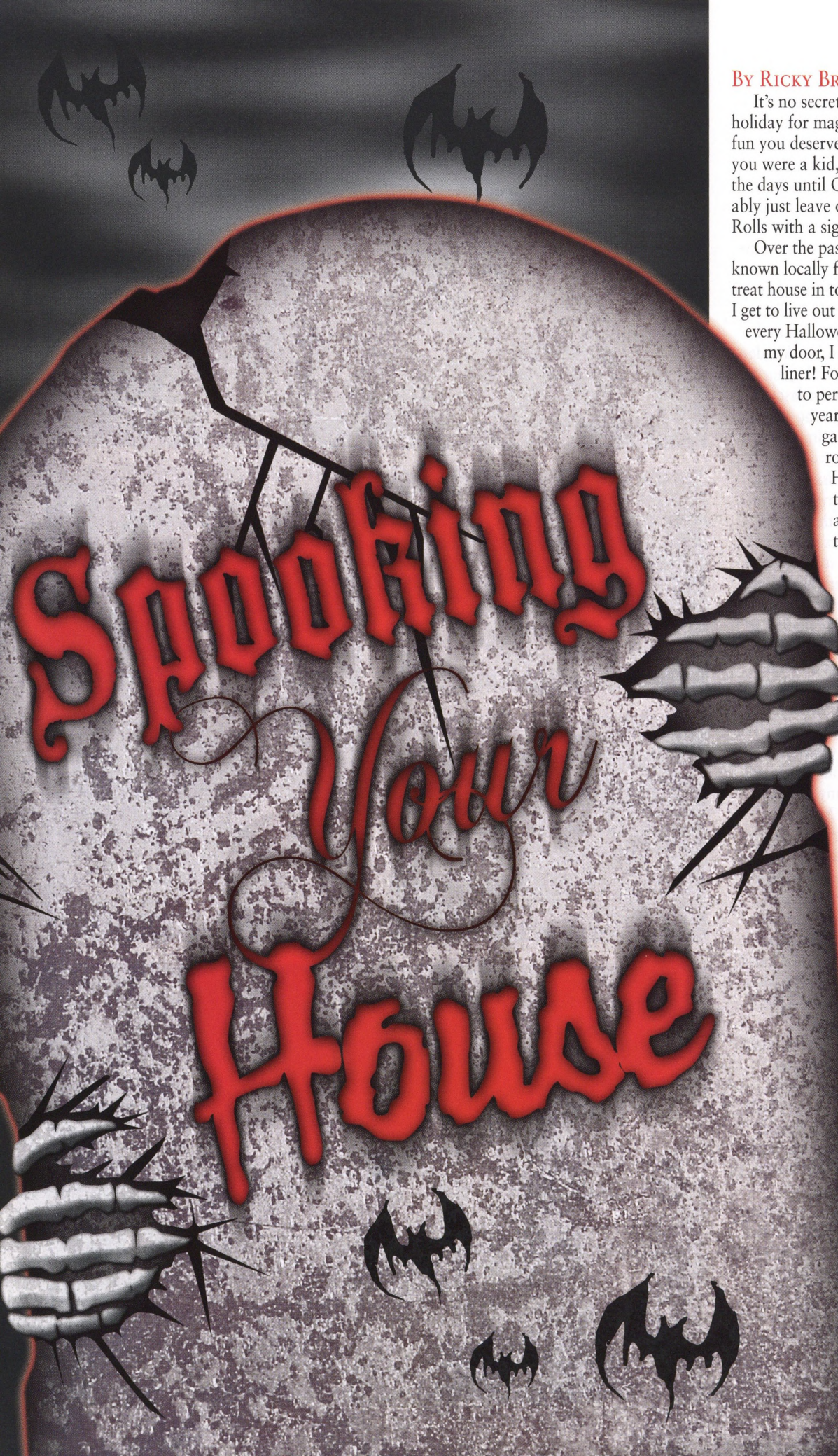
So here's the deal. Your neighbors expect — and deserve — to see something cool. They listen to your "I'm a magician" stories all year long, and Halloween is the perfect time to show off. Best of all, you can provide a variety of magical thrills on a very tight budget.

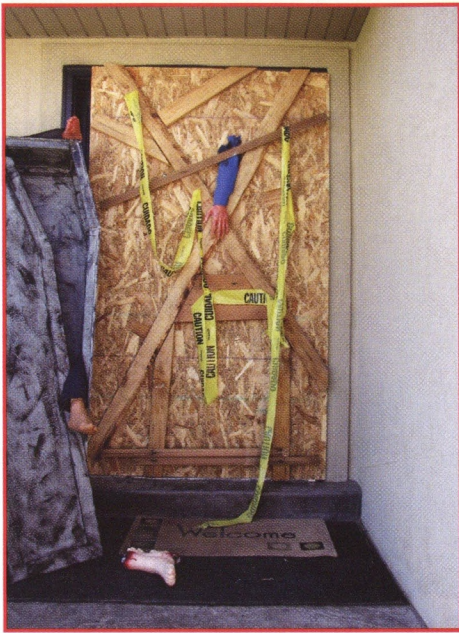
This is a how-to guide and brain dump of my twisted Halloween ideas. The goal is to take classic old illusions and modify them to be performed at your front door. This sampling of ideas is meant to get your creative juices flowing.

Front Door Metamorphosis

This effect is very similar to a Substitution Trunk — without the trunk. When trick-or-treaters gather at your front door, do some shtick, raise a cloth, and morph into someone else, then reappear behind them with a bowl of candy.

The budget is \$30 or less. You'll need a sheet of plywood, some nails, two long carriage bolts with nuts, a latch, two hinges, a blanket, and some old scrap wood.





The idea here is to make your front door look all boarded up and abandoned. No way in and no way out. The sheet of plywood is attached over the entrance, covering the outside of the doorframe and secured by bolts to the 2 x 4, which is braced against the door-jamb inside. At the bottom of the plywood, cut a doggie door that you can easily fit through, and hide it by nailing scrap wood at odd angles over the seams. Complete the look with the rest of the scrap wood and maybe even some yellow "Caution" tape, then spray paint the word "Condemned" somewhere over the door. Now you are ready to perform the Metamorphosis illusion right at your front door.

Your assistant is inside the house, just behind the boarded-up entrance. When you raise the blanket, making sure your angles are covered, keep it at waist or chest level while your assistant opens the doggie door and crawls out, ready to make the switch. Raise the cloth over your head, then duck down while your assistant takes your place. When the assistant drops the cloth to waist level, you have enough time to go through the hidden door and close it behind you. Now run like crazy through the nearest alternative exit and make your way behind the group. If your assistant does a good job of engaging the audience, they will not see you until the big finale, when you suddenly reappear behind them.

Disembodied Ghost Head

In this effect, the floating head of a ghost takes up residence in your window, where he sings and tells jokes.

The cost is between \$20 and \$50, depending on size. You'll need either a sheet of clear Plexiglas or a wood frame and some shrink plastic used to insulate windows, plus a video player, a TV, and a video camera to record

yourself. You can get creative with this, but I'll describe the easiest way to set it up.

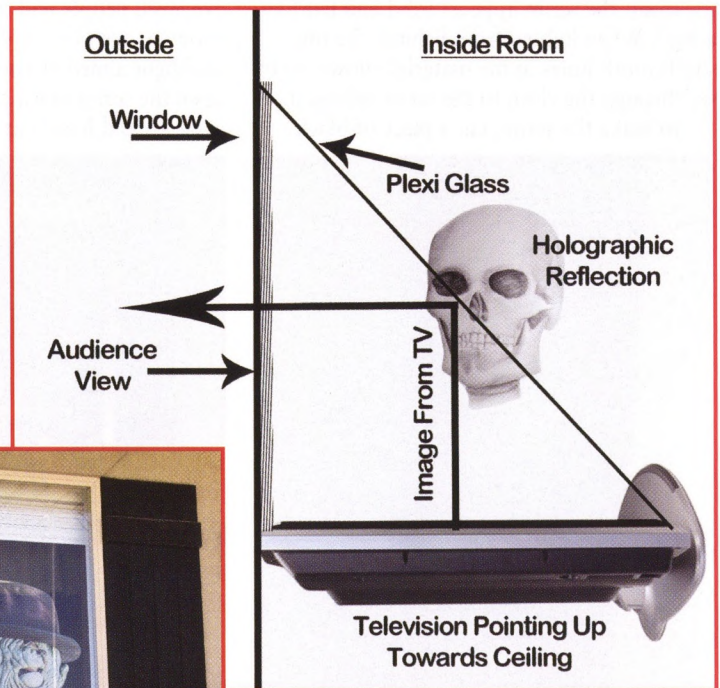
First, decide on a character for your ghost and make up your face to match. Record a video of yourself against a totally black background, and dress all in black so only your head shows in the center of the video. In character, tell your favorite corny Halloween jokes and sing some funny songs.

Next, choose your window and place your TV underneath it, with the television screen facing up toward the ceiling. The Plexiglas goes at an angle from the bottom of the TV to the top of the window. Hook up the video player, push play, and the video will reflect in the clear plastic, à la Pepper's Ghost. Run some audio cables to outside speakers for sound. You will also want to mess with the brightness and contrast settings on the television to

fade out the black background and make your face colors pop.

Set some props in the room behind your setup, to emphasize that you can see through the floating head. If you need to hide the edges of the Plexiglas, you can do it with those stretchy fake cobwebs, readily available at this time of year.

If you want to make a really *huge* version of this, like they have at Disneyland's Haunted Mansion, and you can't afford a giant sheet of Plexiglas, buy some heat-shrink plastic window insulation. This type



[Top] It looks like just a boarded-up doorway, but actually conceals a trap door. While a cloth is held up, the magician and assistant can swap places to effect a Metamorphosis-type change. [Left] The ghostly floating head, achieved with a Pepper's Ghost set-up, diagrammed above.

of window insulation can be found in home improvement stores or online. It's usually available in kits that include strong double-stick tape. Build a simple wooden frame from cheap lumber, use the double-stick tape to attach the plastic to the frame, then shrink the plastic tight with a blow dryer. When you're finished, you'll have a nice reflective surface; just be careful not to tear the plastic.

If you do a bit of research on the Pepper's Ghost illusion, you'll probably get a flood of ideas for other ways to present this effect.

Scrim Illusion Door

As the kids arrive at your front porch, the door becomes see-through and a monster appears — just in time to distribute treats.

This effect is budgeted at about \$25. You will need a thin black weed cloth from a garden store. You want the type of cloth with little holes in it. You'll be using tacks, staples, or tape to attach the cloth to your doorway. And you'll need two lights: one inside the house, near the door; the other positioned outside the door. The outside light should be dimmer than the one inside and it should be movable, so you can aim the light to best set the stage. A UV "black light" and neon-colored paint are optional.

This effect is based on a scrim, a semi-transparent piece of cloth that is used in theatrical productions. When lighted from the front, the scrim appears solid and flat like a wall. When lighted from behind, the tiny shark-tooth holes in the material allow you to see through the cloth to the scene behind it.

To make the scrim, cut a piece of black

weed cloth so it's big enough to cover your entire doorway. Hang the cloth in your open doorway, attached at the top only, using the tacks, staples, or tape. You might want to add some weights to the bottom of the cloth so it hangs without wrinkles.

Turn off the inside light and then experiment to find the best position for the outside light. The light in front of the scrim shouldn't be too bright or direct, because you don't want any of the front light to leak behind the scrim. Try putting the light overhead and pointing straight down, slightly in front of the cloth, or try positioning the light to one side of the doorway. Play around with the outside light until the scrim "door" looks solid and you cannot see through it from the front.

You can paint on the front side of the fabric with fluorescent spray paint or brush paint. Make a swirl pattern, write scary sayings, or whatever you want. Light the front with a black light. You can buy these at Home Depot; get the long tube kind. The black light tube will cost from \$12 to \$15 depending on the size. This option makes for a very spooky effect and the door will look solid with very little effort.

For your performance as the appearing monster, stand just behind the scrim, with the inside light off. When you see someone arrive at the door, turn on the inside light. Because the inside light is brighter than the outside one, the scrim will become see-through. When you suddenly appear right behind it at eye level, people will freak out. To make you show up even better, you could turn on a flashlight aimed at your face. After the scare, open the scrim like a curtain — just push it aside — and hand out the candy.



Some Other Ideas To Get You Thinking

Is there a place at your house that would be ideal for a levitation or suspension? Perhaps the angles are just perfect as people look in your front door or into your garage. Remember, this is for one night and you have total control of the environment. You could rig up anything.

Do you have something in which to make the candy appear? A Duck Pan, Change Bag, Drawer Box, or Mirror Cabinet?


Have fun with those really cheap door mirrors from discount stores. Can you make a Mirror Box, Decapitated Princess, Mirror Table, or Headless Woman?

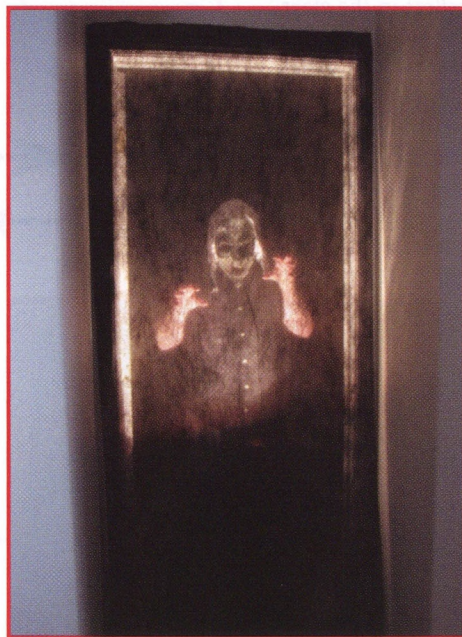
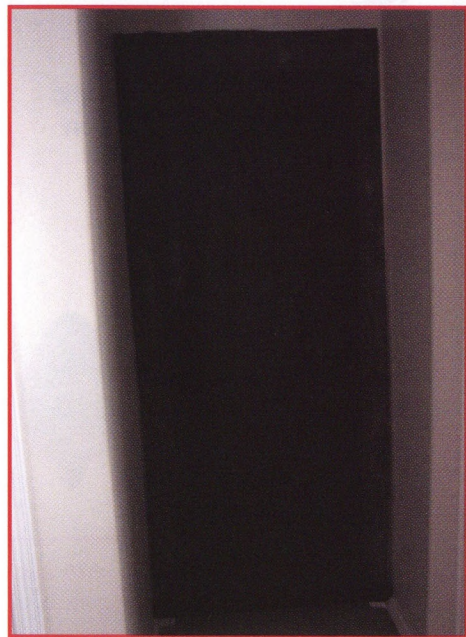
Use an old garden fountain pump connected to some hose to make a barfing zombie. Break open some neon highlighter markers and let them sit in a bucket of water. You now have glowing toxic waste when you add a black light. Want to make it even more gross? Find little plug adapters called "flashers" or "winkers" at the hardware store; they're made to flash Christmas lights on and off. Attach one of these to your pump, and your zombie will spew fifteen times a minute.

The point here is to apply some outside-the-box thinking to how you present magic. The results are very rewarding and, if you can tip off the local news, you just might book a few shows from the free publicity.

Happy Haunting! 

Ricky Brandon assisted top illusionists for nearly twenty years. His favorite memory is helping Mike Caveney perform the original Dante Sawing with Moi-Yo Miller. He currently works as a creative marketing consultant.

Videos of these effects and more are available at the WebSource page at www.MAGICmagazine.com. 



The black weed cloth attached to the doorway appears dark and solid when lit indirectly from the front [left]. When a brighter light is turned on behind the scrim [right], the ghoulish apparition suddenly appears. [Top] A zombie figure vomits out a stream of glowing green liquid.