

THE BLACK DEATH THEATER TROUPE

by Jonathan Tweet



This article is for *Over the Edge*[™], a game of surreal danger in a twisted version of the modern world. It describes an avant-garde theater troupe that operates in the Edge, a bizarre and sometimes frightening city on the Mediterranean island of Al Amarja[™]. If you don't play *Over the Edge* (yet), take a look and see if you can't steal some ideas from this article anyway. Just change the location; alter the background; and add cyberware, vampire fangs, or whatever other props your game needs.

In the strange and dynamic environment of the Edge, all manner of artists flourish. Well, no, most of them don't flourish, but they do manage to get by — eating pork and beans, sleeping on ratty mattresses, and wearing worn clothes until they are too threadbare to give away to the poor. To them, these materialistic concerns matter less than the opportunity to spread their idiosyncratic visions, unique thoughts, and bizarre weltanschauungs among the unsuspecting populace. In the art crowd in the Edge, one drama company is recognized as the best and most watchable: the Black Death Theater Troupe.

THE BLACK DEATH THEATER TROUPE

"Question the is that. Be to not or be to?"

— One of the more experimental and less successful lines from a Black Death performance.

Type: Theater Troupe

Rep: In the art crowd, it is recognized as one of the best, its performances filled with

unusual approaches, near-schizophrenic ideas, and true inspiration. Outside the art crowd, few know about it.

Brief: A group of “starvers” (artists) who, under the direction of Rock Black, put on a vast array of plays.

Allies: Alpha Rho Tau, Sir Arthur Compton, Lydia Goodman, Delta Epsilon Theta

Enemies: None

Location: 2317 Varicose Lane #3, Flowers Barrio

Founded by Rock Black several years ago, the Black Death Theater Troupe has risen to obscure fame, while falling into perpetual poverty. A core of devoted theater-people provides the overall guidance for the group, while an ever-changing cast of newcomers and wannabes join and leave. The change from idealistic excitement upon acceptance to the troupe to the disillusioned search for a real job takes one month to two years, depending on the stubbornness and desperation of the fringe member of the troupe.

The troupe performs at Sad Mary’s Bar & Girl, in the Plaza of Flowers proper, at the D’Aubainne University, and anywhere else where free expression is encouraged and polished performance is not required. Sometimes tickets are sold for the performances; other times all that is required is a free will donation. Frank Germaine, the manager of Sad Mary’s, can often get the troupe to perform for free drinks and the publicity that his establishment is supposed to give them.

PERFORMANCES

Any of the following performances are within the capabilities and inclinations of the troupe. Ad lib or expand on them as you see fit. Thanks to Al Amarja’s “enlightened” economic laws, the troupe never pays royalties on plays they perform.

- **Gender-Breaking:** Performing a traditional play with gender roles reversed. The troupe might present Hamlet as a princess whose father has married his dead mother’s sister, for example.
- **Babble-Opera:** Performing an opera in “babble,” which is simply strings of nonsense syllables. This is seen as a way to get back at the Italians for forcing other

people to watch operas they can’t understand, and also a way to keep the audience from being distracted by trying to figure out what the words mean.

- **Inexorable Fate:** Performing a play in which the scenes are in reverse order, from last to first, so everyone knows how it ends, and the attempts of the characters to avoid the tragic climax are seen in all their futility. After all, most people who watch Hamlet or Death of a Salesman know how the play will end, so reversing the order of scenes merely gives the audience the same effect.
- **Blasphemy:** A performance that mocks something held sacred, such as the Koran, the Pope, or the dollar. The troupe once produced a performance mocking Monique D’Aubainne, Historic Liberator and Current Shepherdess of Al Amarja — a show that was cancelled after the first night. They have never since mocked the D’Aubainne government, for reasons they do not care to elucidate.
- **Collage:** A performance that uses characters and plot elements from various plays, sometimes scripted and sometimes ad libbed.

The troupe’s plays are light on costuming, lighting, sets, and so on. They are popular in the art crowd because of the tinkering that Rock Black does with the script, blocking, characters, and so on. The performances of Sentry are also often worth the price of admission.

Of course, only the “art crowd” really gets into Black Death performances. Most people are turned off by the low budget and the expectation that audience members think. Even the occasional nude scenes are not enough to keep the interest of the general public. Of course, some devoted fans pay just to see Belladonna.

SHELTERING SKY

Above Grim Kiichi’s Tools & Stuff, on Varicose Lane, one can often see (or at least hear) people on the roof — pacing about, yelling, fighting, arguing, and pontificating. This is the troupe at their headquarters, which they call “Sheltering Sky,” or just “Sky” for short. Black insists that the troupe do as much as they can on the roof of the building, includ-

ing rehearsals, management meetings, and parties. He says that cosmic rays promote creativity and that a roof blocks them, but no one is sure whether he is sincere in this, or just putting people on.

Black and the "core group" (including Belladonna, Sentry, Flu-ee Di, and San Violador) live on the third floor of the building, directly beneath the roof. They claim "squatters' rights" to the roof and get pretty huffy if Grim Kiichi or the pubes from the second floor want to use it.

On street level is a hardware store, Grim Kiichi's. Kiichi rents the upper two floors out, and he is happy to have the troupe because they buy their set supplies from him. Kiichi's store specializes in bolt-cutters, pry-bars, crowbars, skeleton keys, hacksaws, and other items useful for breaking and entering. Naturally, he has secured his own building quite well against such primitive methods of invasion.

The second level is rented out to a large gang of pubes (post-pubescent kids ages 11 - 17 who have declared themselves independent adults under Al Amarjan law). This gang is not violent and doesn't even have a name; it's just a makeshift commune with shifting membership for otherwise homeless pubes. Some of the pubes are happy to be near an exciting group like Black Death, but others are contemptuous of the troupe's lack of material success.

The third level is a huge area for the troupe itself. There is a kitchen, a bathroom, and some closets, but the rest of the floor is one large room. The troupe has erected blankets as partitions to break up the space and provide for private sleeping areas. The entire floor presents the image of dynamic clutter. (Housecleaning duties are poorly divided, so everyone thinks he does more work than the others, and not much ever gets done.) Scattered around the place are books, manuscripts, second-hand furniture, overflowing ashtrays, yesterday's (if not last week's) dinner plates, almost-empty bottles of cheap wine, a typewriter or two, dirty clothes, bottles of cheap aspirin, games, prophylactics (new and used), and party paraphernalia. A few metal lamps hanging from the high ceiling create pools of light surrounded by chaotic shadow. The smells of fried food, stale smoke, and unwashed bodies fills the place.

Music from a well-worn cassette player usually serves to cover the noise that rises from Varicose Lane below.

Living at Sky are Rock Black, Sentry, Flu-ee Di, and San Violador. (These four, plus Estella Belladonna are the "core group.") Other members of the cast may also be found there at any time of day. In addition, one might find any of the following non-members at Sky: adoring fans or wannabes from Alpha Rho Tau, adoring fans or wannabes from Delta Epsilon Theta, pubes from the second floor hanging out and hoping for a party, art-type friends helping out and hoping for a party, a public Goodman bennie, a creditor knocking at the door, and possibly Aleksandr Rominosky or another of Compton's bennies.

Unless the troupe is working on a secret project, newcomers are generally welcome at Sky, especially those who don't pose any kind of threat. Writers, actors, and other people in the arts either have to "pay homage" to the troupe or keep quiet about their own work. The troupe members have a truly annoying habit of spontaneously launching into a scene from a play they've done and laughing about it, or telling in-jokes — but if you can stand that, they are fun to hang out with. To insure a warm welcome, bring party favors.

FUNDING

Black has always been completely in charge of the funds. No one else in the troupe is valued or trusted enough to do the job. The troupe members grumble about how he divvies up the cash flow, but out of respect for Black, they grumble quietly and behind his back.

About half of the troupe's regular budget comes in from the performances, and the other half comes in from donations. The biggest contributor is Lydia Goodman, a wealthy island patroness/philanthropist, who helps Black Death as part of her campaign to help the arts. Her monetary contributions are small, compared to her gifts to other organizations, but Goodman is also helping in a special, secret way (see Tremor, below).

Black has found a new source of funding. Six months ago, after the play "Massacre at Sodom," Black found one thousand dollars in cash in the mail, along with a note

that read “I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like,” signed “A.C.” Three months ago Black received another \$500 (and an identical note) after a street performance in which the troupe mimed the Mansom murders. Nobody’s fool, Black has figured that Sir Arthur Compton — a infamous, notoriously decadent and wealthy recluse — is rewarding the troupe for its more grisly and decadent performances. Without telling the rest of the troupe where the extra money is coming from, he has been directing Black Death toward more vicious performances in hopes of getting a few extra bucks from Compton. If Goodman were to find out about Compton’s funding, Black might have to make a choice between the two patrons.

JOINING BLACK DEATH

Joining the troupe is not difficult, but neither is it usually profitable. The troupe has a small group of “core” members and a large group of “non-core” members. Joining the non-core group means being willing to put in effort for very little personal and monetary reward, and one is informally invited into the core group by impressing the current core group members and by putting up with being a non-core member for a while. Rising in the shifting hierarchy of Black Death depends one-third on merit and two-thirds on getting the core members to like you.

GAME MODERATOR CHARACTERS

ROCK BLACK

Demiurge of the Troupe

Rock Black is the genius that founded the troupe and holds it together with energetic charisma. He insists that he is not involved in “art,” but in “radical information.” Without his tireless efforts — writing plays, adapting others’ plays, arguing with creditors, strong-arming stage owners, and dragging troupe members into line — Black Death would founder.

Northern European man, age 29, 180 cm, 80 kg. Black’s unkempt, curly black hair and beard are the first feature most people notice, and this mane frames his intense face. He

bears the expression of all men who cannot possibly make real all their dreams, even working 24 hours a day, partly because of the limits of a human body, but mostly because of the limits of society. When meeting creditors, arranging performances, and otherwise going about business, he throws a nice jacket on, but usually he is found wearing old, stained clothes.

Languages: Irish English, some French.

Attack: 3 dice plus penalty die

Defense: 2 dice plus penalty die

Hit Points: 18 (energy)

Traits

“On Fire,” 4 dice — Burning with the energy of inspiration, Black can get things done like no one else, including making creditors back off and getting troupe members to put their egos aside and get to business. (Sign: eyes burn with energy.)

Theater Genius, 4 dice — Writing plays, editing, directing, stage managing, etc. His only failing is acting (only 3 dice). He has gotten where he is because of a stubborn refusal to compromise his personal goals and a grim determination to be himself, so portraying someone else in a play is difficult for him. (Sign: uncontested head of the troupe.)

Energetic, 3 dice — He would have burned out long ago if he did not have vast reserves of physical and emotional energy. (Sign: always on the go.)

Unhealthy Lifestyle, penalty die — Poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, constant worries and frustrations, and a fondness for drugs (especially whiskey) has taken its toll on Black’s body. (Sign: an air of unhealthiness.)

SENTRY

Method Actress Extraordinaire

Sentry has been known to creep people out with her dramatic portrayals of various characters. She has an amazing and sometimes disturbing ability to take on new roles. In fact, while preparing for a part, she lives the life of the character, to whatever extent possible. The only major drawback to this intense method acting is that Sentry sometimes ad libs profusely during a performance, forgetting the script in favor of adopting the role and acting as she feels like

acting. (Tragedy may result some day if Black ever casts her in the role of a psychopath.)

Sentry's acting ability is so powerful that she usually gets the biggest or most demanding part in the play, even if it is a man's role.

If asked about her acting ability, she says she is the next step in human psychological evolution, as cleaving to single identity is a counter-productive habit evolved in simpler times.

Al Amarjan woman, age 22, 162 cm, 163 kg. Reddish-brown skin; short, straight hair; overweight. Her dress and general appearance change according to her current role.

Languages: Al Amarjan patois, English, Arabic, French, Italian, some Spanish and Russian.

Attack: 2 dice plus penalty die

Defense: 2 dice plus penalty die

Hit Points: 16 (bulk)

Traits

Taking New Roles, 6 dice — Superb acting ability, as described above. (Sign: demeanor, dress, and mannerisms change, depending on the role she is taking.)

Overweight — Penalty die on strenuous physical activity and in social situations with appearance-conscious people. (Sign: overweight.)

TREMOR

Troubleshooter

Tremor is a bennie for Lydia Goodman. He poses as a member of the troupe, but his real role is to keep the troupe functioning. Mostly he smooths egos that get ruffled as they bump up against each other, but he also runs interference when outsiders have it in for the troupe.

Italian man, age 31, 168 cm, 65 kg. In good shape, handsome, alert.

Languages: Italian, English, German, French

Attack: 3 dice, X2 damage with cudgel

Defense: 3 dice

Hit Points: 21 (can take the pain)

Traits

Acting, 3 dice — (Sign: fan of Sartre.)

Manipulation, 3 dice — Reading people and manipulating their emotions. (Sign: listens more than he talks)

Fighting, 3 dice — Mostly unarmed and with small weapons. (Sign: in good shape.)

ESTELLA BELLADONNA

Star of the Troupe

The self-proclaimed star of the troupe, Belladonna believes that Black Death owes most of its fame to her; and she has gotten some of the troupe members to agree. She deeply resents the attention that Sentry gets for her acting ability. Belladonna is a Sommerite (a religious follower of internationally renowned rock vocalist Karla Sommers), and aspires to eventually achieve such fame herself.

French woman, age 24, 167 cm, 55 kg. Very attractive; thin; long hair dyed blond; imperious air.

Languages: French, German, English

Attack: 2 dice plus penalty die

Defense: 2 dice plus penalty die

Hit Points: 12 (wimpy)

Traits

Glamour, 4 dice — There's something about Belladonna that makes her extremely attractive, and she uses that natural something to full effect on the stage. She has forced Black to agree that he will never require her to be in a nude scene, as she believes that remaining covered amplifies her mystique. (Sign: very attractive)

Acting, 3 dice — Belladonna is a competent, though not extraordinary, actor. (Sign: refers to "my fans" in conversation.)

Wimpy, penalty die — She has usually managed to get other people to do what she wants and to bend to her wishes, so she does not have the thick skin or even physical toughness that most people have. (Sign: cries easily.)

FLU-EE DI

Underrated Playwright

Flu-ee Di is a talented poet, playwright, and author, thanks in part to her keen insight into people and their underlying motivations. Unfortunately, she is so self-conscious that she sees flaws in everything she does. With her help, especially on dialogue, Black has written some fantastic scripts, but no one, not even Flu-ee Di herself, appreciates her talent.

Tunisian woman, age 27, 158 cm, 49 kg. Dark brown skin, thin, short hair braided in “corn rows.” She favors lots of bracelets, anklets, and earrings that jingle.

Languages: French, Arabic, English.

Traits

Writing, 5 dice — While she has mostly done drama, she has written a small volume of very good poetry, which she refuses to let anyone see. (Sign: carries a note pad and stubby little pencil.)

Insight, 3 dice — She is good at seeing what makes people tick and in intuiting social situations. (Sign: asks probing questions.)

Acting, 3 dice (plus penalty die, see below) — (Sign: can recite many lines from memory.)

Self-Conscious — She is uncomfortable being the center of attention or letting others see her creative work. (Sign: rarely talks about herself)

SAN VIOLADOR

Cloak Wannabe

San Violador likes the troupe, but he has higher aspirations. He knows that there are secret societies operating in the world, especially on Al Amarja, and he hopes to join one some day, so that he can gain more power. In the meantime, he has insinuated himself into Black Death. Here he hopes to increase his acting ability (which, one day, he intends to use for espionage) and to make contacts in the Edge that will be useful to him once he is initiated into a conspiracy. He has heard of a conspiracy called “The Puppeteers,” and is interested in contacting them, but he doesn’t really know how.

Spanish man, age 25, 170 cm, 64 kg. Short, black hair; thin moustache; carious teeth.

Languages: Spanish, German, English

Attack: 3 dice, X2 damage with knife

Defense: 3 dice

Hit Points: 21 (tough)

Psychic Pool: 4

Traits

Fighting, 3 dice — He has some training and some street experience with fists, feet, knives, chains, and so forth. (Sign: long scar on back of right wrist.)

Acting, 4 dice — Perfectly comfortable in using these techniques off the stage. (Sign: feigns interest well.)

“Golpe de la Mente,” 1 die — A trick he learned from his grandmother to keep him from getting beat up by little Franquistas (fans of the Spanish dictator Franco) so much in school. It is a psychic force that strikes at the feedback corridors of the motor nerves, causing the victim to twitch slightly and remain unable to move for about one second. That’s enough time for San Violador to get a head start running or to slip a knife into someone. (Sign: grins when he fights, because he knows he can cheat if he needs to.)

NON-CORE MEMBERS

Various actors, set-workers, and amateur technicians are members of the troupe, though they are outside the “core.” Those that are into acting have scores of 3 or 4 dice, while others may be involved strictly in non-acting roles. Invent these GMCs, tailoring them to the needs of your series and your players.

STORY IDEAS

The Black Death Theater Troupe is like a well-moneyed mark in a poker game: You should milk it slowly and thereby get more out of it, rather than using it up all at once.

Before introducing the troupe into the main plots of your series, use them as background. They could perform at Sad Mary’s while the PC’s are there to make a drop. If you need to ad lib a conversation between two GMCs, let them be talking about SENTRY’s latest performance. They could be at the

Plaza of Flowers while the PCs are coming to meet with the Aries Gang. By introducing the troupe as background color first, you will make them mean more to the players when they enter the plot proper (and remember what Poe said about plot).

Once it's time to bring the troupe into the thick of things, you can take several approaches.

- A PC who is friendly to Goodman is hired to be the troubleshooter for the troupe. Tremor either can't take the strain any more, or is moving up to better things. As the troupe's troubleshooter, the PC first has to join the troupe, and then earn the members' trust. The PC may have to ease personality clashes between troupe members, talk a suicidal member down from a ledge, keep Sentry from being cast as a psychopathic killer, or discourage Flu-ee Di from reading her poetry at a poetry slam (because, if she found out how good her poetry was, she would leave the troupe). More dangerous responsibilities might include dealing with the thugs sent by people to whom the troupe owes money.
- An oil shiek wants to present Rock Black to his son for his birthday. The son is an aspiring (talentless) actor, and he wants a playwright of his own to work with. The PCs may be hired to kidnap Rock, or they may defend him against the kidnaping attempts. (Maybe the PCs can convince the kidnapers to abduct a rival playwright instead, to clear away some of Black's competition.)
- Romantic ties (and even sexual orientations) of the troupe members have been left up to you. If there's no one in the core

group to make a PC's heart beat faster, invent someone outside the core group. In a tight, ego-ridden group like Black Death, romance-driven plots could be quite tasty.

- Whatever. The troupe is fertile ground for player-driven plots or ideas of your own. Present the troupe, let the players jam a bit, and then change the troupe to fit the needs of the players.
- The troupe can be the focus for the PC group. Have each PC have some connection or other to the troupe or to avant garde theater, and the troupe provides an environment in which they can meet, interact, and possibly work together. You can even use the GMC's in the troupe as PC's, though it would only be fair to let the players change the characters a bit before playing them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In my own series, Rock Black read a book that drove him crazy, pulled a gun on Cheryl D'Aubainne, escaped justice, and was killed by a bounty hunter known as "The Mechanic." (Funny how the name of the troupe foreshadowed Black's demise; I hadn't noticed that until now.) Fortunately, space aliens (or were they higher-level spiritual beings?) had cloned him and left his clone to be slaughtered while the real Rock Black continued to write plays in the UFO and send them to the troupe. (So much for the foreshadowing.) These events led to the arrest, execution, resurrection, and eventual damnation of a tangentially-related PC. Since these events were mostly player-driven, it would be hard for you to duplicate them, but be prepared for the possibilities.