Little Shop of Horrors
Little Shop of Horrors
book and lyrics by HOWARD ASHMAN
music by ALAN MENKEN
based on the film by ROGER CORMAN,
screenplay by CHARLES GRIFFITH
directed and choreographed by MARCIA MILGROM DODGE
June 22 – August 18, 2024
Wurtele Thrust Stage

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This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

“\nThe human race suddenly encountered a deadly threat to its very existence. And this terrifying enemy surfaced — as such enemies often do — in the seemingly most innocent and unlikely of places.\n
– Prologue, Little Shop of Horrors

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Thanks for your interest in the Guthrie’s Little Shop of Horrors. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
Setting
Skid Row. A decade not too long before our own.

Characters
Mr. Mushnik, a flower shop owner on Skid Row
Seymour Krelborn, a florist’s clerk
Audrey, a florist’s clerk
Orin, Audrey’s dentist boyfriend
Chiffon, a street urchin/Greek chorus member
Crystal, a street urchin/Greek chorus member
Ronnette, a street urchin/Greek chorus member
Audrey II, a heretofore unknown carnivorous plant
Bernstein, Mrs. Luce, Skip Snip and Patrick Martin, wooers of Seymour
Denizens of Skid Row
Voice, Not Unlike God

Synopsis
On Skid Row, Mr. Mushnik decides to shutter his flower shop due to lack of business until his nebbish employee Seymour shows him a new, exotic plant: a sickly flytrap named Audrey II (in honor of Seymour’s co-worker and crush Audrey, who, alas, has a boyfriend — the sadistic Orin). Seymour found the plant a few weeks earlier during a total eclipse of the sun, and while he can’t identify its species, he encourages Mr. Mushnik to display the plant. Sure enough, customers are drawn to it and, what’s more, they spend money!

As Seymour nurses the plant to health, he accidentally discovers the plant perks up when it’s fed blood. Seymour obligations but keeps this information to himself. As Audrey II’s fame and size grows, the shop’s fortunes turn around and Seymour is hailed a botanical genius. Then Audrey II suddenly speaks, making clear that the good fortunes are Audrey II’s doing — and if Seymour wants to see his dreams come true, he’ll continue to feed the plant the blood it needs. Hapless Seymour makes a Faustian bargain with the relentless plant, and soon Orin and Mr. Mushnik both disappear. Seymour successfully woos Audrey and basks in his fame and fortune, but only too late realizes the plant’s master plan.
Responses to the Play

Of all the films I ever directed, the one that has survived the longest as a genuine “cult classic” is the one I did the fastest and the cheapest.

It only took me two days on a leftover soundstage to shoot principal photography for The Little Shop of Horrors, but it has lived on for nearly 30 years now in midnight shows on campuses, revival cinemas, videocassette outlets and remakes for stage and screen.

One reason for its astonishing durability is that when I made the film, I was, as I believed at the time, virtually creating a new genre — a black-comedy horror film. …

The new mix worked, and I ended up with a “trilogy” of black comedies: A Bucket of Blood, then Little Shop and finally Creature From the Haunted Sea. … The credit for all three screenplays went to my main writer, Chuck Griffith. Taken together, these remarkably modest black-and-white films — with their loose, raw energy — were a major departure in my career. They added a sharper, more satirical edge to my films and brought a new level of awareness to my work. …

I shot between Christmas and New Year’s 1959, using the plant shop set for about 80–90 percent of the movie. I had to shoot so tight in there I couldn’t show the street outside. … I tried to get a fair amount of movement in the background — people wandering outside the doorway, busy customers inside — to open up the look as much as possible. That is why it became such an easy film to adapt to the stage. …

We shot the film under a different title, The Passionate People Eater, and then I changed it to The Little Shop of Horrors. The sneak audience loved the picture and caught on to the weird humor right away. The plant’s “Feed Me” became a hip line that kids picked up on. …

I thought the stage version was wonderful. It caught the spirit and youthful energy of the film. Running off-Broadway helped, since I always believed both my film and the musical would have been diminished with more expensive, slicker productions. It was reminiscent of a college humor show.

Roger Corman
How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime by Roger Corman with Jim Jerome, Random House, 1990
“Little Shop of Horrors” is drawn from a Roger Corman movie, which makes it a musical mutant, a hybrid of sweetness, cynicism and science fiction. It was a spring success at the WPA Theater and recently reopened Off-Broadway at the Orpheum Theatre.

The show’s hero (Lee Wilkof) is a timid salesman in an unlucky flower shop. He silently pines for a pretty shopgirl (Ellen Greene) and finds a path to romance and fame through his discovery of a strange new species of flora, a carnivorous cactus that looks like a shark-toothed avocado. This sinister centerpiece grows larger and larger — on a diet of human blood — until by the end of the evening it is threatening to engulf the audience.

The show is the mischievous handiwork of Howard Ashman (book, lyrics and direction) and Alan Menken (music), who also collaborated on the musical version of Kurt Vonnegut’s “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.” The score is a zesty mixture of rock, pop and Latin rhythms. Mr. Wilkof and Miss Greene are a charming couple and Franc Luz swaggers comically through a portfolio of cameo roles, but the scene-stealer is that people-eater, an animate object invented and operated by puppet master Martin P. Robinson.

Mel Gussow
“In the Arts: Critics’ Choices,” The New York Times, August 22, 1982

In 1976, Howard Ashman asked his friend Kyle Renick if he wanted to start a nonprofit theatre company. Kyle was the business manager of the American Place Theatre, and Howard was an editor at Grosset & Dunlap. Soon after they took over the floundering WPA Theatre and immediately put it on the map. The opening productions were an Albee adaptation of Ballad of the Sad Cafe and Gorey Stories, a revue mentored by Ashman that moved to Broadway.

Howard spent the next six years honing his craft as a writer and director, and he began a collaboration with Alan Menken, who he met in Lehman Engel’s BMI Musical Theatre Workshop, as his composer. In 1982, with Howard as author, lyricist, and director, Ashman and Menken created a show that had 25 commercial producers in hot pursuit. It was called Little Shop of Horrors, and I’ll never forget Kyle’s breathless phone call telling me he was considering me as a possible general manager. I rushed to see it that night.

What I saw was a certified hit. Hits have a swagger that nothing else has, and it was right there from the very first note of music to the finale. I ran home to call Cameron Mackintosh in London. He was, of course, asleep. I told him I had found a huge hit. “You have to do it. Everyone in town is after it. I’ll get you a tape.”

General Manager Albert Poland
on the original 1982 production
Stages: A Theater Memoir, 2019
From Mr. Corman’s charming throwaway film to the Off-Broadway stage success, “Little Shop of Horrors” has evolved into a full-blown movie musical, and quite a winning one. Directed by Muppet master Frank Oz, this large-scale new film version has just the right mixture of playfulness, tunefulness and blood lust. Never has any screen killer done his job as innocently as Seymour Krelborn (Rick Moranis). …

“Little Shop of Horrors” … isn’t uniformly entertaining, nor is its score always entirely audible; the musical dubbing is at times very awkward. But its best moments are delightful enough to make the slow stretches unimportant. Chief among the former is Steve Martin’s showstopping appearance as Orin Scriverello, the meanest dentist on the planet, and a man who is quickly and justifiably used as Miracle-Gro. …

Mr. Oz has opened up the musical quite effectively, giving the film a busy and genuinely three-dimensional look. … Among Howard Ashman’s better lyrics for Alan Menken’s score are those for the worried Seymour’s complaint to Audrey II: “I’ve given you sunlight/I’ve given you rain/Looks like you’re not happy/’Less I open a vein.” It’s not hard to understand this good-natured material’s durability or why Mr. Oz has been able to give it such a satisfactory new spin.

Janet Maslin

As his sharp lyrics attest, Ashman (who, sadly, died of AIDS complications at 40) was no dummy, and neither is [Director Jerry] Zaks. So while the show offers nonstop entertainment (I haven’t mentioned the Greek chorus of Chiffon, Crystal and Ronnette, here sporting updated, home-girl attitude), it’s not about nothing. A domestic monster that thrives on blood and devours everything (including its creator) may have been a comic metaphor for Communism in the red-baiting 50s, but we don’t have to look any further than tabloid TV and the murky war-making machinery in Washington to supply our own contemporary parallels. Little Shop of Horrors certainty isn’t Ph.D. thesis material, but the last scene, with blood dripping down the proscenium and the pod-encased principals warning “Don’t Feed the Plants,” does produce the kind of laughs that stick in your throat.

Don Shewey
“Little Shop’s Big Comeback,” The Advocate, November 11, 2003
[B]icoastal Little Shops constitute a coincidence almost as fortuitous as an asteroid carrying an invasive horticultural species hitting Earth. Seeing the East Coast and West Coast versions just weeks apart, I got a lesson in artistic interpretation, in the interplay between innovation and tradition, and in what a show is capable of saying if you have the courage to look into its green, taloned mouth and explore. …

[W]hen Pasadena Playhouse announced it was casting actors of color as Seymour and Audrey (Mj Rodriguez is Afro-Latina, George Salazar is Asian-Latino), and Black actress Amber Riley as Audrey II, the news made national headlines. In an interview with Broadway.com, Rodriguez said, “My casting shouldn’t be something that’s trending — it should be normal.” She continues, “It’s simply because this role is always played by a Caucasian, cis-gendered blonde woman. And now it’s being played by a Black, Latina, trans woman.”

While the West Coast Little Shop billed itself as modern and more “real,” the East Coast Little Shop’s aim was to bring 1982 to 2019. As director Michael Mayer told Vanity Fair, “I would say my goal with the production is to honor the brilliance of Howard Ashman as a director. … His original conception for the show is, I think, part of the reason it has flourished so beautifully over these decades since it first emerged.” …

If the mark of a classic piece of theatre is its ability to withstand reinterpretation, Little Shop of Horrors seems to be a classic. It can hold many worlds within it, just as Audrey II can hold many bodies.

Diep Tran
“A Tale of Two ‘Little Shop(s) of Horrors,’” American Theatre, October 18, 2019

The director Michael Mayer has a straightforward mission in this Off Broadway revival of Howard Ashman’s demented and beloved musical comedy (with music by Alan Menken), about a bloodthirsty plant in a Skid Row flower shop, circa 1960: to reclaim it from the nation’s high-school theatre departments and give it an impeccably faithful and professional production, as close as possible in spirit to the original Off Broadway show that Ashman directed, in 1982. The show succeeds beautifully, and everyone watching it and performing in it … seems to be having a blast. The script’s handful of domestic-abuse jokes strike a discordant note, but over all its pitch-dark Faustian shtick feels delightfully appropriate to these miserably venal times.

Rollo Romig
“Little Shop of Horrors,” The New Yorker, December 19, 2019
A Classic Birthed From B Movies and Late-Night TV

By Carla Steen
Resident Dramaturg

The late filmmaker Roger Corman was known as the “King of B Movies” — those schlock, low-budget movies intended for drive-ins and double features. Between 1954 and 1960, he directed 28 B movies, including Swamp Women, Attack of the Crab Monsters, A Bucket of Blood and, in 1960, The Little Shop of Horrors.

According to Corman, Little Shop came about as follows: He learned about a still-standing set from another film company. After shooting A Bucket of Blood in five days, he wanted to make another comedy-horror picture and now challenged himself to do it in two days. Corman rented the set and, with screenwriter Charles Griffith, devised a story reusing much of Bucket’s structure and tone, centering on a bloodthirsty plant. For the project, initially titled The Passionate People Eater, actors worked five days — rehearsing for three and shooting, indeed, for only two days (not counting exterior night shoots).

The film features feckless floral assistant Seymour with a crush on his co-worker Audrey (originally spelled Audry), their boss, the aforementioned bloodthirsty plant, a sadistic dental patient played by a young Jack Nicholson, and Mrs. Shiva, a floral shop regular.
because of frequent family funerals. (Keen-eared audience members will hear shout-outs to Mrs. Shiva and Corman in “Closed for Renovation” and “Call Back in the Morning” respectively.) Retitled The Little Shop of Horrors, the film cost $36,000 and became a moderate success.

Teenager Howard Ashman encountered the film in its second life as a cult classic on late-night TV. Lyricist-librettist Ashman met composer Alan Menken in 1978 through a musical theater workshop led by Lehman Engel, who recommended they work together. Their first collaboration, an adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut’s God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, premiered in 1979 at the off-off-Broadway WPA Theatre, where Ashman was Artistic Director. For their next collaboration, “I was looking for a project that had something special about it that nobody had done before,” said Ashman. “The idea of doing a monster movie for the stage — not a horror movie, but a monster movie for the stage ... I don’t think anyone’s ever done that, certainly not as a musical.”

After negotiating with Corman for the stage rights, the pair began the musical in 1981. They dropped many of the film’s supporting characters, expanded the role of the dentist and added the girl-group trio of urchins. Perhaps most importantly, they focused on Seymour, Audrey, Mr. Mushnik and the plant Audrey II while raising the emotional stakes (spoiler alert!) by making the victims of Seymour’s criminality those closest to him. Musically, the pair went retro, choosing styles fitting of the film’s 1960s period.

Little Shop of Horrors premiered at the WPA Theatre on May 6, 1982, under Ashman’s direction. Audiences were immediately enthusiastic, and the critical reception was positive as well. Hopes for a commercial run led to hiring a general manager, who put together a team consisting of theater producer Cameron Mackintosh, record producer David Geffen and theater owners The Shubert Organization. Little Shop moved from the 98-seat WPA Theatre to the 347-seat off-Broadway Orpheum Theatre in July and won Drama Desk, New York Drama Critics’ Circle and Outer Critics Circle Awards for Best Musical.

Successful productions followed in Los Angeles and London in 1983 before opening in more countries and languages shortly thereafter. Returning to its film roots, the movie musical was released in 1986. Through professional and high school productions alike, the musical remains popular, capturing the imagination of successive generations with its mix of comedy, horror, puppets and tuneful music. Dozens of productions are planned in the U.S., U.K. and Canada for the remainder of 2024 alone.

Little Shop demonstrates that one never knows where the next classic may emerge and from what inspiration: “The plant monster, Audry Jr., made a deep and lasting impression,” wrote Ashman, recalling the Corman film. “‘Feed me, Krelborn, feed me now!’ The words were never to leave my adolescent consciousness. Here, at last, was a monster I could quote! I mean, can you remember any of Godzilla’s snappy one-liners?”
Howard Ashman
BOOK AND LYRICS

A native of Baltimore, Howard Ashman was born in 1950. He found his passion early on, joining Baltimore’s Children’s Theatre Association while in grade school. In 1974, after graduating from Goddard College in Vermont and receiving his M.F.A. from Indiana University, Ashman moved to New York. In 1976, his play The Confirmation was produced at Princeton’s McCarter Theatre Center and the Annenberg Center in Philadelphia.

Ashman was a Founder and Artistic Director of the iconic off-off-Broadway WPA Theatre, where he conceived, wrote and directed a musical adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut’s God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, with music by Alan Menken. After its WPA production, the show moved to the Intermedia Theater for a short run.

In 1982, Ashman conceived, wrote and directed Little Shop of Horrors, again with music by Menken. The musical, based on Roger Corman’s 1960s-era horror flick, was immediately successful. It soon became a New York “must-see,” playing for five years off-Broadway at the Orpheum Theatre in lower Manhattan. The show played Los Angeles, London’s West End, Japan, Scandinavia and Europe, and it continues to be produced to great acclaim around the world today. It is currently one of the most-produced shows in American high schools.

In 1986, Ashman wrote and directed the Broadway musical Smile, with music by Marvin Hamlisch. Little appreciated at the time, Smile is now considered a lost gem of musical theater and performed by high schools and amateur theater groups around the U.S.

Turning his talents toward film, Ashman was pivotal in the renaissance of Disney animated musicals and the development of The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast and Aladdin, for which he wrote the lyrics with music by Alan Menken. During production of The Little Mermaid, Ashman discovered he was infected with HIV. Despite his illness, he continued to work, helping to give life to Beauty and the Beast, a film that defined the childhood of generations.

Ashman died of AIDS in 1991, shortly before the release of Beauty and the Beast. His awards include two Oscars, two Golden Globes, four Grammys, a Drama Desk Award and an Evening Standard Theatre Award.

[Little Shop of Horrors] opened at the WPA Theater in the spring of 1982 and as of this writing, it’s been running over a year at the Orpheum Theatre on Second Avenue, over eight months at the Westwood Playhouse in LA [and] several weeks at the Comedy Theatre in London’s West End. …

I’d been thinking about Little Shop in one way or another since I first saw the Roger Corman film on which it’s based. It was way past my bedtime on a school night and the beat-up black-and-white TV was working overtime in my teenaged den of iniquity, the pine-paneled clubroom of our split-level home in Baltimore. The plant monster, Audry Jr., made a deep and lasting impression. “Feed me, Krelborn, feed me now!” The words were never to leave my adolescent consciousness. Here, at last, was a monster I could quote! I mean, can you remember any of Godzilla’s snappy one-liners?

And what on earth made me think a musical comedy lay there smoldering in the breast of such material? Who knows? But the thought must have occurred more or less immediately. I used to write a lot of musicals in those days, between the ages of twelve and sixteen. (I took some time off between seventeen and twenty-three, but that’s another story and no one’s asked me about it). I’d make a musical out of anything that moved. To Kill a Mockingbird ... The life of Charlie Chaplin ... And an “original” piece, called The Candy Shop in which a man fell in love with an evil talking plant.

Yes, I was A Teenage Plagiarist.

Thank goodness, and fear of jail, I got over it. In fact, my current musical version of Little Shop, though legitimately (and legally) based on the Corman film, in some ways bears little resemblance to its source. For instance, after beating my rhyming dictionary to a pulp, insisting it come up with an accurate rhyme for “junior,” I finally gave up and changed the monster’s name to Audrey Two. And the plot is pretty different, too. In the film, all the plant’s victims are walk-on actors who were obviously told to show up on the set and die as quickly as possible. In the musical, I make all the actors sing and dance a lot before I allow them to become plant food.

Howard Ashman
Playbill, 1983
Alan Menken  
MUSIC

Composer Alan Menken’s stage musicals include God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater; Patch, Patch, Patch; Atina: Evil Queen of the Galaxy; Real Life Funnies; Little Shop of Horrors; The Dream on Royal Street; Kicks; The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz; Beauty and the Beast; A Christmas Carol; Weird Romance; King David; The Hunchback of Notre Dame; The Little Mermaid; Sister Act; Leap of Faith and Newsies. He has also contributed to such revues as Personals, Diamonds and On the Record.

His film musicals include Little Shop of Horrors, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Newsies, Aladdin (1992 and the 2019 live-action remake), Pocahontas, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Hercules, Home on the Range, Enchanted and Tangled. His dramatic underscores for films include Life With Mikey, Noel, The Shaggy Dog and Mirror Mirror. He has contributed songs to such films as Rocky V, Home Alone 2: Lost in New York, Life With Mikey and Captain America: The First Avenger. Menken has also written numerous songs for “Sesame Street.”

Menken’s songwriting collaborators have included Howard Ashman, Tim Rice, Stephen Schwartz, David Zippel, Jack Feldman, David Spencer, Lynn Ahrens, Dean Pitchford, Glenn Slater, Chad Beguelin and most recently Benj Pasek and Justin Paul for the 2019 live-action remake of Aladdin.

Menken won the 2012 Tony and Drama Desk Awards for his score to Newsies. He currently has more Academy Awards than any other living individual, including four for Best Score (The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin and Pocahontas) and four for Best Song (“Under the Sea,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “A Whole New World” and “Colors of the Wind”). He has earned 11 Grammy Awards, seven Golden Globes, an Evening Standard Theatre Award and Olivier, Outer Critics Circle and Drama Desk Awards.

Other notable achievements include his induction into the Songwriters Hall of Fame and a Billboard number-one single (“A Whole New World”) and number-one album (Pocahontas). In 2001, he received the distinction of being named a Disney Legend. In 2010, he received his own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Reprinted from Music Theatre International and edited for clarity and style.
Howard was Artistic Director of the WPA Theatre, so we had a natural venue there for anything we did. First we had done \textit{[God Bless You, Mr.] Rosewater} there, and then \textit{Little Shop}. So we took our first run at \textit{[Little Shop]}, and it didn’t have the early ’60s and late ’50s-style rock-and-roll score. The few people who heard it thought it was strange, and Howard burned it to the ground, and we started again. Once we got that idea [rock and roll], Howard would just come in with song ideas. …

The first time around, we did something true to what was in the Corman film — “Feed me!”, this nerdy little voice. And then Howard came up with the idea of it being like “Howlin’ Wolf.” …

Initially there wasn’t much of an idea [of a style for \textit{Little Shop}]. We’d just come off \textit{Rosewater}, and we took our first take at this little tacky film. …

Howard just felt this show should be the dark side of \textit{Grease}. That we should basically tell the story through the vocabulary of one of those beach-blanket horror movies. A whole end-of-the-world apocalyptic sensibility. Howard was really attuned to style. Over the years, Howard sort of beat pastiche into me, and now it’s become part of my soul. But it was really on \textit{Little Shop} when we came up with that concept [the dark side of \textit{Grease}] that the show began to come together. …

How tongue-in-cheek do you want to go? The show you see now on Broadway, it’s a balance between the elements that may seem camp and comedic and, at the same time, things that are genuinely emotional and some genuine political statements that Howard wanted to make. …

It really is this tale about this nerd in a florist shop who wants this girl, and Audrey II is the vehicle. Unfortunately, it eats the world. But in that style, it’s really well told through this kind of rock-pop music.

\textbf{Alan Menken}  
In an interview with Michael Riedel and Susan Haskins on \textit{“Theater Talk,”} October 31, 2003

Howard — especially in our work with Disney, but actually throughout our career, being a dramatist, being a book writer, and a lyricist and a director — was the one in our collaboration who would initiate the song moments. [He] would say, “Let’s write a song for this character, and I think it should do this.” Sometimes he’d come in with a lyric. Sometimes he’d come in with a title or a part of a lyric. And often he would say, “What would it sound like if we had this kind of music and it was at this time and it was serving that purpose?” And I’d give him music first, and then he would begin to work in a title line.

So we wrote in all possible ways. Not every collaboration I have is like that. The ones I have at Disney now, I’m the one who generally will initiate and pick the song moments. And that possibly comes from the torch being passed from Howard to me. …

It was a friendship. We were like brothers. There were a lot of dimensions to the relationship. When Howard had his director hat on and I had my composer [hat on, or I was] sitting in the pit playing a show and Howard’s in the back of the theater directing, that was one relationship. A very different one from when the two of us sat in a room and wrote together, and a very different one from when Janis, my wife, and I and Howard and Bill would have dinner together. There were just many facets to the relationship.

\textbf{Alan Menken}  
In an interview with Marty Moss-Coane on NPR’s \textit{“Fresh Air,”} February 26, 1992
Roger Corman
DIRECTOR OF THE ORIGINAL FILM

Filmmaker Roger Corman was born in Detroit in 1926 and raised in Los Angeles. He attended Beverly Hills High School and fell in love with the movies as a teenager. At Stanford University, he studied engineering (like his father) and wrote articles for *Popular Mechanics* and *Science and Mechanics*. Corman suspended his education to enter officer training for the U.S. Navy during World War II and served three years before returning to Stanford, from which he graduated with an Industrial Engineering degree.

Corman returned to L.A. to pursue his passion for writing and filmmaking. He spent time in various jobs at Twentieth Century-Fox before enrolling in post-graduate studies in English literature at Oxford University. When he again returned to L.A., he launched his directing and producing career. Between 1954 and 1960, he directed 28 so-called B movies, including *Swamp Women*, *It Conquered the World*, *Attack of the Crab Monsters*, *A Bucket of Blood* and, in 1960, *The Little Shop of Horrors*. In the 1960s, he received larger budgets and more critical acclaim for a series of horror films he directed, some based on the work of Edgar Allan Poe, a favorite author of his childhood.

A who’s who of notable actors appeared in Corman-directed or produced films — what Bruce Dern called the “University of Corman” — including Sandra Bullock, Ellen Burstyn, Robert De Niro, Peter Fonda, Stewart Granger, Pam Grier, Barbara Hershey, Boris Karloff, Peter Lorre, Jack Nicholson, Vincent Price, Mickey Rooney and Shelley Winters.

Corman left directing behind when he formed his own production and distribution company, New World Pictures, in the 1970s. His company distributed prestige foreign films in the U.S. As a producer, he nurtured several young directors who would make significant contributions to film, including Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Jonathan Demme, Ron Howard and James Cameron.

Corman produced or co-produced more than 400 films and continued to work well into his 90s. He had a number of acting credits, often in films directed by his proteges, including *The Godfather Part II*, *Swing Shift*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia*, *Scream 3* and *Apollo 13*.

Corman, often dubbed the “King of B Movies,” received an Academy Honorary Award in 2009. He passed away at age 98 on May 9, 2024.
I got the idea of combining horror with humor at a sneak preview of one of my films, when a sequence which was designed as a horror sequence worked very well and the audience screamed — really screamed — very loudly. And immediately thereafter, they laughed and got back into the film. And I thought, what they’ve done is they’ve reacted the way I wanted, they’ve screamed at the right moment, and then they realized that they’d been led into it, and they laughed in an almost appreciative way at what I’d done and what their reaction to it was. And I thought there’s really a connection there between horror and humor.

And then I read a book called *Beyond Laughter* by a psychiatrist, I think his name was Dr. Grotjahn, in Beverly Hills, in which he talked about the relationship between horror and humor. And I went to see him as a matter of fact, paid him $100 for one hour to talk with him, and he told me some of his theories. And I decided to do a film that would be a comedy horror film, and that was *A Bucket of Blood*, which I shot in five days starring Dick Miller, written by Chuck Griffith. And the film was rather successful and very funny — it did just what I wanted it to do. It got the screams at the right points, and it got a lot of laughter in between.

I was very pleased with it, so I tried another one which was *Little Shop of Horrors*, which was more slanted toward the humor and less toward the horror. The horror was there, but it was almost comic horror. And that picture had a rather strange history. It was very wild, rather original, and I shot it in only two days and a night. And I expected that I should either have a great success with something like this or a complete failure, it was so audacious a thing to do. To my somewhat disappointment, I had a moderate success. But what happened was over a period of time, the picture became well known and it kept playing. Every year I would get additional rental and royalty checks. It would play at midnight screenings on college campuses, things like that. So over a period of years, it did become a rather big success.

*Roger Corman*

In an interview with Terry Gross on NPR’s “Fresh Air,” August 2, 1990
Charles Griffith
SCREENWRITER OF THE ORIGINAL FILM

Screenwriter and filmmaker Charles B. Griffith was born in Chicago in 1930, the scion of vaudeville and radio performers on his mother’s side. He credited his radio background for his ability to write screenplays very quickly. Over his career, he would prove adept in several genres, including horror, Westerns, sci-fi and biker films.

Actor Jonathan Haze introduced Griffith to director-producer Roger Corman, with whom Griffith would have a long collaboration. (Haze would later appear as Seymour in The Little Shop of Horrors in 1960.) Griffith’s first script was produced in 1956 when Corman directed It Conquered the World. He then began to write scripts specifically for Corman, including Attack of the Crab Monsters, The Undead, A Bucket of Blood and The Little Shop of Horrors. For some of these movies, he also acted in small roles, provided voices or directed secondary scenes. He provided the voice of Audry Jr. in Little Shop.

In 1966, Griffith co-wrote The Wild Angels with Peter Bogdanovich, about a motorcycle gang, with a cast that included Peter Fonda, Nancy Sinatra and Bruce Dern. He followed that up with Devil’s Angels, another biker movie. In 1975, he wrote Death Race 2000, a dystopian sci-fi movie about a cross-country automobile race starring David Carradine and Sylvester Stallone. (In 2008, Paul Anderson directed Death Race, a movie based on Griffith’s screenplay, starring Jason Statham and Joan Allen. That movie also inspired several video games.) In 1976, Griffith wrote and directed Eat My Dust, starring Ron Howard as a stock car racer.

Griffith had no copyright on the screenplay for The Little Shop of Horrors and sued for authorial recognition when his story was turned into a stage musical and feature film. He eventually received a very small percentage. Griffith retired in the late 1980s and died in 2007 at age 77.

Roger and I went bar-hopping again on the Strip and started brainstorming. ... In our more lucid moments, I came up with gluttony: the salad chef in a restaurant feeding, stuffing people. Then cannibalism. But the censors wouldn’t have allowed it. So I came up with a man-eating plant. And that was it. I followed the structure of Bucket almost exactly, but where Bucket was more a satire, this would be a flat-out farce with no social commentary.

Charles Griffith
The Faust Story

Audrey II promises Seymour he will “get everything [his] secret, greasy heart desires” if Seymour agrees to feed the plant. Downtrodden Seymour, with a crush on Audrey and wanting a win, enters into a Faustian bargain and plays into the plant’s world-domination plans. From its namesake story, the Faustian bargain has become a common trope in literature.

DOCTOR FAUSTUS
This character from Western European legend and folklore has appeared in literature many times. Faustbach, published by an anonymous author in 1587, inspired English playwright Christopher Marlowe’s The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus in 1604. The typical Faust story depicts the learned man’s pursuit of knowledge taken to an extreme, so that he sells his soul to Mephistopheles for knowledge and power, though later versions have been more or less sympathetic to Faust’s pursuit. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s play from the early 19th century redeems Faust. Other versions have been created by Hector Berlioz, Charles Gounod, Heinrich Heine, Thomas Mann and Gertrude Stein.

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY
This 1891 novel by Oscar Wilde depicts the bargain made by Dorian Gray, who says he’d give his soul to remain young and handsome if his painted portrait instead showed signs of aging. Gray falls under the influence of a man who encourages him to indulge himself, and Gray begins to see signs of his vanity, age, cruelty and capriciousness in his painted image while he himself remains youthful.

ROBERT JOHNSON
Legend says that blues musician Robert Johnson met the devil at a crossroads and sold his soul in exchange for his guitar skills. The crossroads and meeting a man of magic were retained from African religion, and, according to Jon Michael Spencer, eventually the mixture of those religious beliefs and Christianity evolved that man of magic or trickster figure into a devil. Keith Glover wrote a version of this Robert Johnson-Faust story in his play Thunder Knocking on the Door.

DAMN YANKEES
The 1955 musical by George Abbott, Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, based on Douglass Wallop’s novel The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant, is about middle-aged Washington Senators fan Joe Boyd, who makes a deal with a Mr. Applegate to become the young ballplayer the Senators need to beat the Yankees. He has to leave his life and his wife behind, however.

BEDAZZLED
The 1967 film starring Dudley Moore and the 2000 remake with Brendan Fraser tell the story of a hapless loser who sells his soul to the devil for seven wishes.

“THE DEVIL WENT DOWN TO GEORGIA”
This 1979 song by The Charlie Daniels Band relates the story of the devil challenging a young fiddle player named Johnny to a contest: The young man wins a fiddle of gold if he wins; the devil gets Johnny’s soul if he loses.

THE LITTLE MERMAID
From the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale to the animated Disney movie, the story follows a mermaid who sells her voice to a sea witch in order to become human, win the heart of a human prince and gain a human soul. Some versions end more happily than others.
Short Stories

Although Roger Corman and Charles Griffith’s idea for the original *The Little Shop of Horrors* movie hasn’t been linked to any specific source story, Griffith may have known about and been influenced by short stories by H.G. Wells, John Collier and Arthur C. Clarke. Read excerpts from their tales below.

“The Flowering of the Strange Orchid” (1894)

by H.G. Wells

The buying of orchids always has in it a certain speculative flavour. You have before you the brown shrivelled lump of tissue, and for the rest you must trust your judgment, or the auctioneer, or your good luck, as your taste may incline. The plant may be moribund or dead, or it may be just a respectable purchase, fair value for your money, or perhaps — for the thing has happened again and again — there slowly unfolds before the delighted eyes of the happy purchaser, day after day, some new variety, some novel richness, a strange twist of the labellum, or some subtler coloration or unexpected mimicry.

Pride, beauty, and profit blossom together on one delicate green spike and, it may be, even immortality. For the new miracle of Nature may stand in need of a new specific name, and what so convenient as that of its discoverer? ...

It was perhaps the hope of some such happy discovery that made Winter-Wedderburn such a frequent attendant at these sales — that hope, and also, maybe, the fact that he had nothing else of the slightest interest to do in the world. He was a shy, lonely, rather ineffectual man, provided with just enough income to keep off the spur of necessity, and not enough nervous energy to make him seek any exacting employments. He might have collected stamps or coins, or translated Horace, or bound books or invented new species of diatoms. But, as it happened, he grew orchids, and had one ambitious little hothouse. ...

“I knew something would happen today. And I have bought all these [plants]. Some of them — some of them — I feel sure, do you know, that some of them will be remarkable. I don’t know how it is, but I feel just as sure as if someone had told me that some of these will turn out remarkable.”

“That one” — he pointed to a shrivelled rhizome — “was not identified. It may be a Palaeonophis — or it may not. It may be a new species, or even a new genus. And it was the last that poor Batten ever collected.”

“I don’t like the look of it,” said his housekeeper. “It’s such an ugly shape.” ...

“They found poor Batten lying dead, or dying, in a mangrove swamp — I forget which,” he began again presently, “with one of these very orchids crushed up under his body. He had been unwell for some days with some kind of native fever, and I suppose he fainted. These mangrove swamps are very unwholesome. Every drop of blood, they say, was taken out of him by the jungle-leeches. It may be that very plant that cost him his life to obtain.” ...

The next few days he was indeed singularly busy in his steamy little hothouse, fussing about with charcoal, lumps of teak, moss, and all the other mysteries of the orchid cultivator. He considered he was having a wonderfully eventful time. ...
[P]resently the strange orchid began to show signs of life. He was delighted and took his housekeeper right away from jam-making to see it at once, directly he made the discovery.

“That is a bud,” he said, “and presently there will be a lot of leaves there, and those little things coming out here are aerial rootlets.”

“They look to me like little white fingers poking out of the brown,” said his housekeeper. “I don’t like them.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. They look like fingers trying to get at you. I can’t help my likes and dislikes.” …

The plant was placed on a low bench near the thermometer, and close by was a simple arrangement by which a tap dripped on the hot-water pipes and kept the air steamy. And he spent his afternoons now with some regularity meditating on the approaching flowering of this strange plant.

And at last the great thing happened. Directly he entered the little glass house, he knew that the spike had burst out. … There was a new odour in the air a rich, intensely sweet scent, that overpowered every other in that crowded, steaming little greenhouse.

Directly he noticed this, he hurried down to the strange orchid.

And, behold! the trailing green spikes bore now three great splashes of blossom, from which this overpowering sweetness proceeded. He stopped before them in an ecstasy of admiration.

The flowers were white, with streaks of golden orange upon the petals; the heavy labellum was coiled into an intricate projection, and a wonderful bluish purple mingled there with the gold. He could see at once that the genus was altogether a new one. And the insufferable scent! How hot the place was! … Suddenly everything appeared unsteady. The bricks on the floor were dancing up and down. Then the white blossoms, the green leaves behind them, the whole greenhouse, seemed to sweep sideways, and then in a curve upward. …

[His housekeeper] went straight to the hothouse, and, opening the door, called his name. There was no reply. She noticed that the air was very close, and loaded with an intense perfume. Then she saw something lying on the bricks between the hot-water pipes.

For a minute, perhaps, she stood motionless.

He was lying, face upward, at the foot of the strange orchid. The tentacle-like aerial rootlets no longer swayed freely in the air, but were crowded together; a tangle of grey ropes stretched tight with their ends closely applied to his chin and neck and hands.

She did not understand. Then she saw from one of the exultant tentacles upon his cheek there trickled a little thread of blood.

With an inarticulate cry she ran toward him, and tried to pull him away from the leech-like suckers. She snapped two of these tentacles, and their sap dripped red. …

She left him and hastily opened the nearest door, and, after she had panted for a moment in the fresh air, she had a brilliant inspiration. She caught up a flowerpot and smashed in the windows at the end of the greenhouse. Then she re-entered.

She tugged now with renewed strength at Wedderburn’s motionless body, and brought the strange orchid crashing to the floor. It still clung with the grimmest tenacity to its victim. In a frenzy, she lugged it and him into the open air. …

Wedderburn had lost a good deal of blood, but beyond that he had suffered no very great injury. They gave him brandy mixed with some pink extract of meat, and carried him upstairs to bed. His housekeeper told her incredible story in fragments to Dr. Haddon. “Come to the orchid-house and see,” she said.

The cold outer air was blowing in through the open door, and the sickly perfume was almost dispelled. Most of the torn aerial rootlets lay already withered amidst a number of dark stains upon the bricks. The stem of the inflorescence was broken by the fall of the plant, and the flowers were growing limp and brown at the edges of the petals. The doctor stooped towards it, then saw that one of the aerial rootlets still stirred feebly, and hesitated.

The next morning the strange orchid still lay there, black now and putrescent. … But Wedderburn himself was bright and garrulous upstairs in the glory of his strange adventure.
[E]ven in its dry, brown, dormant root state, this orchid had a certain sinister quality. ...

[Mr. Mannering] at once planted it in what he called the “Observation Ward,” a hothouse built against the south wall of his dumpy red dwelling. Here he set always the most interesting additions to his collection, and especially weak and sickly plants. ...

After a long time sets of tiny buds appeared here and there among the extravagant foliage. Soon they opened into small flowers, miserable little things; they looked like flies’ heads. ...

Could it be to attract other flies for food or as fertilizers? But then, why like their heads?

It was a few days later that Cousin Jane’s cat disappeared. This was a great blow to Cousin Jane, but Mr. Mannering was not, in his heart of hearts, greatly sorry. He was not fond of the cat, for he could not open the smallest chink in a glass roof for ventilation but the creature would squeeze through somehow to enjoy the warmth, and in this way it had broken many a tender shoot. But before poor Cousin Jane had lamented two days something happened which so engrossed Mr. Mannering that he had no mind left at all with which to sympathize with her affliction, or to make at breakfast kind and hypocritical inquiries after the lost cat. A strange new bud appeared on the orchid. It was clearly evident that there would be two quite different sorts of bloom on this one plant, as sometimes happens in such fantastic corners of the vegetable world, and that the new flower would be very different in size and structure from the earlier ones. It grew bigger and bigger, till it was as big as one’s fist. ...

It had opened into a bloom. And as he looked at this bloom his astonishment grew to stupefaction, one might say to petrification, for it is a fact that Mr. Mannering remained rooted to the spot, with his eyes fixed on the flower, for fully fifteen minutes. The flower was an exact replica of the head of Cousin Jane’s lost cat. ...

The new lusty foliage had closed in unperceived; the too lightly dismissed tendrils were everywhere upon him; he gave a few weak cries and sank to the ground, and there, as the Mr. Mannering of ordinary life, he passes out of this story.
According to the dealer, the orchid came from “somewhere in the Amazon region” — a rather vague postal address. When Hercules first saw it, it was not a very prepossessing sight, even to anyone who loved orchids as much as he did. A shapeless root, about the size of a man’s fist — that was all. It was redolent of decay, and there was the faintest hint of a rank, carrion smell. Hercules was not even sure that it was viable, and told the dealer as much. Perhaps that enabled him to purchase it for a trifling sum, and he carried it home without much enthusiasm.

It showed no signs of life for the first month, but that did not worry Hercules. Then, one day, a tiny green shoot appeared and started to creep up to the light. After that, progress was rapid. ... Hercules was now quite excited: he was sure that some entirely new species had swum into his ken. ...

The tendrils were thickening, and they were not completely motionless. They had a slight but unmistakable tendency to vibrate, as if possessing a life of their own. Even Hercules, for all his interest and enthusiasm, found this more than a little disturbing.

A few days later, there was no doubt about it at all. When he approached the orchid, the tendrils swayed toward him in an unpleasantly suggestive fashion. The impression of hunger was so strong that Hercules began to feel very uncomfortable indeed.

Hercules went into the house and came back a few minutes later with a broomstick, to the end of which he had attached a piece of raw meat. Feeling a considerable fool, he advanced toward the orchid as a lion tamer might approach one of his charges at mealtime.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then two of the tendrils developed an agitated twitch. They began to sway back and forth, as if the plant was making up its mind; Abruptly, they whipped out with such speed that they practically vanished from view. They wrapped themselves round the meat, and Hercules felt a powerful tug at the end of his broomstick. Then the meat was gone: the orchid was clutching it, if one may mix metaphors slightly, to its bosom. ...

By the next day, a network of what looked like short roots had covered the still visible chunk of meat. By nightfall, the meat was gone.
Selected Glossary of Terms

PEOPLE

Betty Crocker
A fictional creation of General Mills to be the name and then the face of its flour, box mixes and other food products. She made her debut in 1921 as just a name (that appeared on answers to customers’ baking and cooking questions) and took on a persona three years later when the company started a radio show called “Betty Crocker Cooking School.”

George Washington Carver
An American agriculture scientist (ca.1861–1943) whose experimentation and development led to a revived agricultural economy in the South post-Civil War. He taught and researched at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

James Dean
An actor (1931–1955) who came to represent a generation of American youth through three films: *East of Eden* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Giant* (1956). A motorcycle and car enthusiastic, Dean was killed in a car crash in 1955 on his way to a road race.

Hedy Lamarr
An Austrian-born actor (1914–2000) called “the most beautiful woman in Europe” by director Max Reinhardt. She fled her home country in 1937 and landed in Hollywood, where she worked steadily for MGM through the 1940s. She was also a skilled inventor who helped develop frequency hopping to guide torpedoes during World War II. The Navy rejected the patented invention, but decades later, it was used for submarine communication, early cell phones and the essence of Wi-Fi and Bluetooth.

Mrs. Luce
Clare Boothe Luce (1903–1987) was a playwright and editor who married Henry Luce (1898–1967), the publisher of *TIME* and *LIFE* magazines. Perhaps her most famous play is *The Women* (1936). During the first year of World War II, she wrote as a war correspondent for *LIFE*. She went on to serve in the House of Representatives from 1943 to 1947 and as an ambassador to Italy from 1953 to 1956.

Jack Paar
A comedian (1918–2004) who was a pioneer of the late-night TV talk show during the 1950s and 1960s. He served as host of “The Tonight Show” (1957–1962) and “The Jack Paar Program” (1962–1965).

Edgar Allan Poe
An American writer (1809–1849) known for his stories of mystery, horror and the macabre, like “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Raven.” Poe was a favorite of *The Little Shop of Horrors* filmmaker Roger Corman, who directed several films in the 1960s based on Poe’s work, including *House of Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Haunted Palace* and *The Masque of the Red Death*.

Donna Reed
An Oscar-winning actor (1921–1986) for her performance in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and star of the family sitcom “The Donna Reed Show,” on which she played a quintessential wife and mother from 1958 to 1966. Early in her career, she had been synonymous with the pure and innocent ingenue.

The Shangri-Las
An American 1960s girl group founded by two pairs of sisters from Queens. In 1964, they released their signature song, “Leader of the Pack,” about falling
in love with a bad boy. They became a trio shortly thereafter and disbanded by 1968.

**Wolfman**
Wolfman Jack (1938–1995), a radio DJ from 1963 to 1995 who was famous for his gravelly voice.

**PLACES**

**Howard Johnson’s**
A chain of American restaurants founded in 1925 in New England as an ice cream store. During the 1930s and then post-World War II, the business expanded into other states (Johnson essentially invented franchising) as full-blown restaurants and hotels. The restaurants were famous for ice cream and fried clams.

**Levittown**
A residential suburban community on Long Island planned and developed by Levitt & Sons in the 1940s as a mass-produced housing development with 17,000 houses, schools, pools, community centers and more. The name became synonymous with suburbia.

**THINGS**

**C.O.D.**
Cash on delivery (or collect on delivery), where the customer pays for the goods at delivery.

**December bride**
A radio show and TV show of this name aired from 1952 to 1959. The comedy recounted the adventures of a widow who was looking for a husband, and the phrase “December bride” means a woman who marries late in life.

**“Father Knows Best”**
A family sitcom that aired on TV from 1954 to 1960, featuring Robert Young as wise father Jim Anderson and Jane Wyatt as his commonsense wife Margaret. (It also ran as a radio show from 1949 to 1954). The Andersons parented their three children through their 1950s Midwestern problems.

**“Howdy Doody”**
A U.S. kids TV program that premiered in 1947 and ran for 13 years. The show revolved around Buffalo Bob (Bob Smith) and his friends, who included both marionettes and people. It was the first children’s show to broadcast nationwide and to be shown in color. The character Howdy Doody was created by Smith first for radio and then visually realized by puppeteer Frank Paris.

**LIFE**
A general interest magazine published from 1883 to 2000, first as a weekly then as a monthly, and known for its photography and lifestyle stories. Henry Luce bought it in 1936.

**Nitrous oxide**
Also known as laughing gas, an odorless, colorless and nonflammable gas that can create a state of euphoria when breathed in and can be used as a sedative for dental and medical procedures. It doesn’t knock a person out entirely, but it can make a person relaxed, happy, giggly and lightheaded.

**Rose Bowl**
The first Tournament of Roses was held in 1890 with a Rose Parade beforehand to celebrate the abundance of flowers in Southern California in the middle of winter. The first football game was played as part of the Tournament in 1902, and it eventually became known as the Rose Bowl, held each January 1 in Pasadena.

**Rotary Club**
Founded in 1905 in Chicago, Rotary was the world’s first service club to promote members’ social and professional interests. The name is derived from the meetings rotating among members’ offices. As the club grew, the mission evolved from social interests to serving communities in need, with the club’s motto being “Service Above Self.”

**Sominex**
A brand name for diphenhydramine, an antihistamine used to treat cold and allergy symptoms, which can also be used to induce sleep and counteract motion sickness.

**Sturm and Drang**
A literary movement from the late 1700s in Germany that usually featured lots of action and emotional turmoil.

**Vitalis**
A hair tonic made by Bristol-Myers as a greaseless way to style men’s hair and keep it neat.

**William Morris Agency**
Formed in 1898 in New York City by its namesake to represent vaudeville talent, the William Morris Agency began representing film industry talent as well, notably signing Charlie Chaplin in 1910. Its many clients have included Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, The Beach Boys and the Rolling Stones.
For Further Reading and Understanding

THE MUSICAL


THE ORIGINAL ROGER CORMAN FILM


STORIES OF KILLER PLANTS


Tales From the White Hart by Arthur C. Clarke, including “The Reluctant Orchid.” Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970.


CAST RECORDINGS

Little Shop of Horrors Original Cast Album, Geffen Records, 1982. Featuring Lee Wilkof as Seymour, Ellen Greene as Audrey, Hy Anzell as Mr. Mushnik and Ron Taylor as Audrey II.


FILMS

The Little Shop of Horrors, screenplay by Charles Griffith, directed by Roger Corman. Featuring Jonathan Haze as Seymour, Jackie Joseph as Audrey, Mel Welles as Mr. Mushnik, Myrtle Vail as Winifred, Leola Wendorff as Mrs. Shiva, Wally Campo as Sgt. Joe Fink, Jack Warford as Det. Frank Stoolie and Jack Nicholson as Wilbur Force. 1960. 73 minutes.

Little Shop of Horrors, screenplay by Howard Ashman, directed by Frank Oz. Featuring Rick Moranis as Seymour, Ellen Greene as Audrey, Vincent Gardenia as Mr. Mushnik, Steve Martin as Orin, Tisha Campbell as Chiffon, Tichina Arnold as Crystal and Michelle Weeks as Ronnette. 1986. 94 minutes.