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COMMENTARY

Which ghouls rule on Halloween? In Austin, that's a no-brainer

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Zombies are the monster of the moment, at least in Central Texas. While the '80s and '90s had sexy bloodsuckers inspired by Anne Rice's "Vampire Chronicles," zombies are now the most fashionable undead.

Sure, tonight, you'll see giant furry bats clomping around in size 14 Chuck Taylor high tops, witch costumes that make you wonder exactly what supernatural powers are keeping the crepe-paper miniskirt attached, and frighteningly last-second ghosts, who really ought to have washed those floral sheets before cutting eyeholes. Personally, I have the hardest time deciding on a Halloween costume.

Yet the monsters that really matter are zombies.

They are usually described as stumbling, rotting savages with a yen for human flesh, particularly brains.

Although flesh-eating ghouls have been part of folklore forever, they entered the modern consciousness with George A. Romero's black-and-white classic "Night of the Living Dead." The 1968 film — featuring people trapped in an isolated setting surrounded by ravenous cannibals — set the pattern for countless zombie romps.

Nowadays, many zombie-centric entertainments are originating in Central Texas.

OK, maybe I'm zombie-fixated because the summer before last I helped on the yet-to-be-released, zombie/human love story "Deadbacks." The poster: "He Loves Her. She Loves Him. Her Friends Love Human Flesh. It's Not Going To End Well." After a scorching summer shoot on a Lockhart ranch, the dehydrated and grimy crew looked more undead than the actors.

Thus, I was aware of zombies before September's zombie rights march on Austin's City Hall. Undead protesters carried signs like "Zombies was people, too!"

With Austin being filmland's third coast, it's not surprising that there are several Austin zombie films.

The Robert Rodriguez half of his "Grindhouse" double feature with Quentin Tarantino is the zombie-themed "Planet Terror." This past spring, Austinite Emily Hagins, at 13, premiered her solidly creepy zombie film "Pathogen."

"Z: A Zombie Musical" is the low-budget local comedy that has come back from the

dead. The critically crashed hard drive that contained the only finished copy of the "All Singing! All Dancing! All Zombies!" musical was recently resurrected by DriveSavers in California.

On stage, there's "Bitten! A Zombie Rock Odyssey." After September and October performances at the Dougherty Arts Center, the show revives this week at Arts on Real.

Tongue-in-rotting-cheek video game Stubbs the Zombie in "Rebel Without A Pulse" was released in 2005 by Austin publisher Aspyr Media. You play as undead anti-hero Stubbs.

A 4 a.m. Sunday zombie dance party was one treat for weary programmers at October's League of Technical Voters codeathon. Programmers had volunteered to be locked together for 48 hours to develop software for nonprofits and governmental agencies.

I think Austin cares about zombies because they're a relief from the many choices Austinites have to make.

A stereotypical zombie's overwhelming desire for brains clears the clutter that circulates in our collective craniums. Zombies are freed from the pesky details of daily living, such as contemplating the consequences of absent-mindedly consuming gallons of gummy rats.

"When you are a zombie, you don't get sick, you don't have debts, you don't get broken up with. You don't have to deal with the same mundane crap as you used to. You're just free, man." Or so the character Dallas (Marc Carboni) observed in "Bitten!"

Zombieness is freedom from tedious daily choices. Which toothpaste to use? Flip-flops or cowboy boots? Here or to go? As Barry Schwartz points out in "The Paradox of Choice Why More Is Less," though Americans value their freedom to make choices, picking from multiple options is difficult.

Austinites have a problem picking from the perpetual plethora of pleasures. What band to hear? Which film festival to see?

Sometimes, being a zombie becomes its own entertainment choice. On Saturday, ballroom dancing instructor Richard Fowler, 37, organized nearly a dozen elaborately made-up zombies. Their goal: the Austin Ballroom Dancers Halloween shindig.

Soon after the zombies stumbled into the Austin Recreation Center, the greeny-brown and oozy-looking Fowler was leading his zombie wife, Julie, 46, along the gymnasium floor with more grace than anyone so badly decomposed ought to have. The velvety Nash Hernandez Orchestra crooned, "I love you, just the way you look tonight," as zombies and devils glided across the floor.

Halloween may have more entertainment options than any other evening. You might need functional fairy wings or a working wizard wand to get everywhere you'd like to go.

Zombies aren't troubled by this cornucopia of choices. They're just looking for brains.