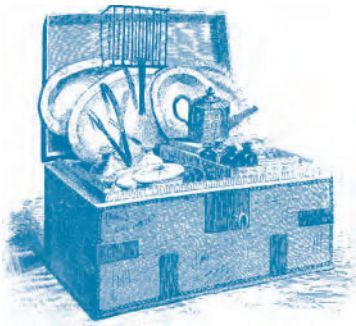


UP FRONT



CURATOR'S CORNER

By Lauren Uhl, Curator

Chiller Theater and the Girl with the Terminal Stare

In the 1950s, the film industry encountered stiff competition from the new home entertainment phenomenon of television, and Hollywood studios tried to figure out how to make money from their vaults full of old films. In 1957 Screen Gems released to television a package of 52 horror films from Universal Studios, the producer of such classics as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *The Wolf Man*. They called the package "Shock Theater." Eagerly acquired by television stations around the country, the offering soon gave birth to a new TV personality—the horror host. Pittsburgh had two. Bob Drews, originally a morning drive time DJ, became Sir Roger "residing in a gloomy English manor house." George Eisenhauer, who began his television career in 1949 as WDTV's first announcer, grew a goatee and became "Igor." In a few short years, however, local stations ran out of films to show and the programs were dropped. But fans of horror and science fiction missed the shows and agitated for their return.

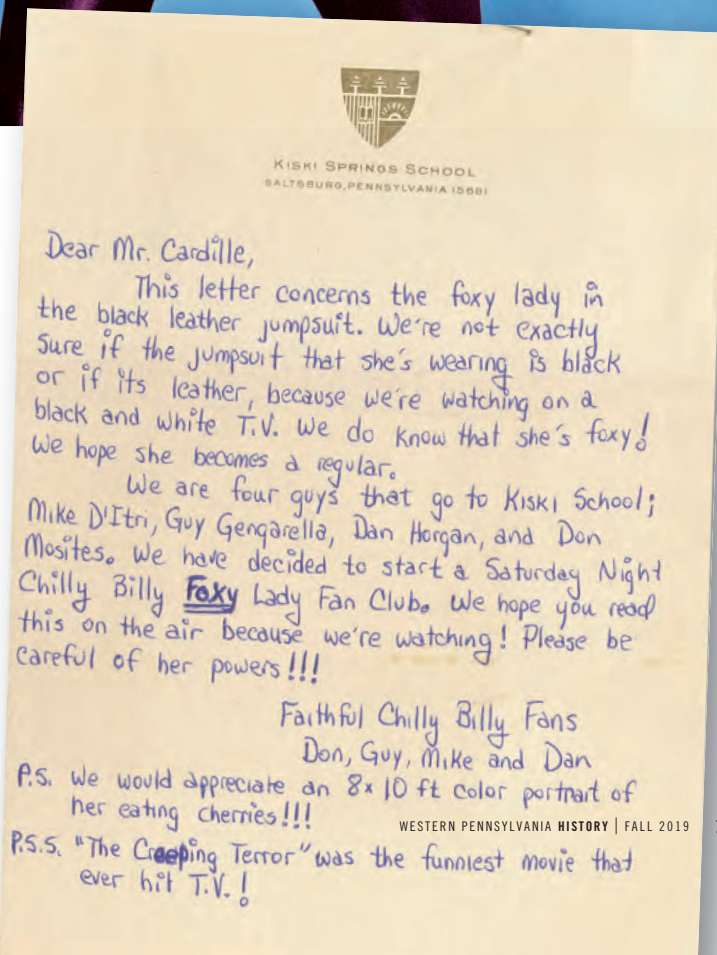
In 1963 Channel 11 debuted *Chiller Theater* with off-camera announcing by poplar personality Bill Cardille. At first Cardille simply read the copy given to him. But soon he began

Donna Rae poses in the purple pantsuit.

All photos courtesy of HHC Detre L&A, Donna Rae Papers and Photographs, 2019.0014.



Fan letter, 1977.





Donna Rae as "Terminal Stare" wearing the black asymmetrical evening gown with Bill Cardille, Joyce Sterling, and Steve Luncinski on the castle set of *Chiller Theater*.

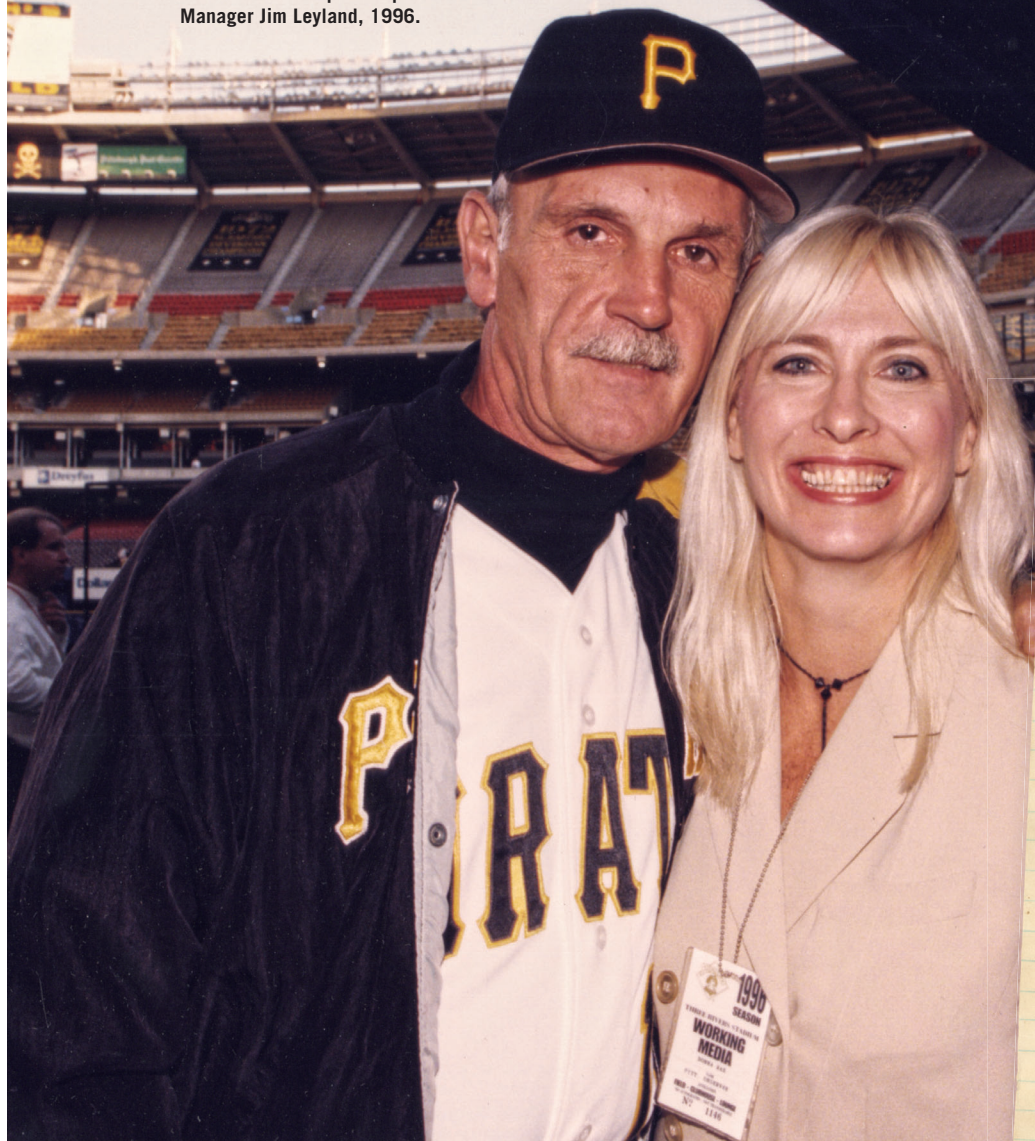
having fun with it, adlibbing and writing small comic introductions assuming that no one was listening. It turned out that there not only was an audience listening, but they liked Bill as well as the movies. Soon Cardille was hosting in front of the camera from a cartoon-like set of a crazy laboratory. In 1976 *Chiller Theater* opened its 13th season with a more elaborate studio set, a Transylvanian castle, and a cast of characters.

Donna Rae, with a background in health and physical education, worked part time as a reporter on *Evening Magazine* when she met Bill Cardille while taping a health show. He asked her to join the new ensemble cast he was developing for the revamped *Chiller Theater*. At first, Donna didn't talk on the show because nothing was rehearsed. But soon the silent act worked to her advantage. As long as she didn't talk, she could keep her first job at a competing station. With her gorgeous good looks and wardrobe of sexy evening gowns, Donna quickly became a favorite on the show. Soon fan mail rolled in, including a letter to Bill Cardille with a suggestion on how to get "the Girl with the Terminal Stare" to talk. (Tickle her feet, of course.) Her character now had a name—Terminal Stare.

Donna played Terminal Stare on *Chiller Theater* for seven years, until the last show aired on December 31, 1983. During that time, she and the cast made countless public appearances. While fans mourned the demise of the show, they had ample opportunity to see Donna in other venues. Blessed with abundant energy and stage presence, Donna had kept up with her other interests while on the show.

A regular in local theater, she appeared in many productions around the region including "The Owl and the Pussycat," "Thriller of the Year," "Vanities," and "Come Blow Your Horn." To develop new playwrights, Donna organized and directed the "Pittsburgh New Works Festival" which selected 10 new plays each year

Donna Rae as a sports reporter with Pirates Manager Jim Leyland, 1996.



for production around the city. She continued to demonstrate and lecture on nutrition and exercise in department stores, writing a book on exercise called *Image Shaper*. As a sports reporter on radio, TV, and in print, Donna interviewed well known athletes including Yogi Berra, Larry Bird, Arnold Palmer, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Her love for beautiful clothes eventually led her to open several consignment stores. Today she operates a traveling marketplace that she takes to nursing homes and veterans' hospitals, bringing inexpensive items to people who cannot get out to shop and have limited means. Unlike her *Chiller Theater* counterpart, Donna loves to talk and engage with people. And though

she happily left the role behind more than 30 years ago, Donna is still recognized, and loved, as Terminal Stare. In 2018, Bill Cardille's daughter Lori introduced Donna Rae to History Center staff and Donna graciously donated two of her killer outfits—the iconic purple pantsuit and off-the-shoulder black evening gown to the collection along with photos of *Chiller Theater* and fan letters. 🌟

The fan letter from Scott Biss naming Donna Rae as the "Girl with the Terminal Stare," 1977.

April 25, 1977

Dear Bill Cardille,

I have found the best and perfect way how to get {the girl with the terminal stare} to talk. I was watching "Billions Island" on tv last Friday and this is what happened. A scientist and his friend came to the island saying that he could get everyone off the island if they came with him, and they did. The scientist took them to some castle and they were all put in a torture chamber and were all made to talk. All of talked except one and that was Mary Ann, the scientist put Mary Ann on the rock then he went and untill her shoes. He was going to give her the Chinese Tickle Torture and Mary Ann still wouldn't talk so he started tickling her feet and after about 2 minutes she went crazy and told everything she knew then they escaped off the island and went back to there own island.

This is my idea:

Since the "Girl with the terminal stare" over

is in such a daze, here's what you do, at the end of your show take "The Girl with the Terminal Stare" and lay her flat on a table, then remove her shoes and start tickling her feet until she says or does something.

I suggest that Norman brings her in and gets her to lie down since she never listens to you!! and I will bet you \$100 that she will talk or say something.

Yours Truly,
Scott Biss