

The Arts

The New York Times

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2000

Bodyless Heads In Unfinished Building

On 42nd Street, Push Is On To Get New Wax Museum Ready for Opening Day

By GLENN COLLINS

But where were they?

It was 12:11 p.m. last Monday, and already the refrigerator truck bearing \$5 million worth of climate-controlled wax heads was two hours late. Worry was rising, as the welcoming committee, a five-member design team imported from Madame Tussaud's in London, had nothing to welcome. "I have no fingernails left," said Gill Griffith, who in her capacity as chief coiffeuse is known to all as head of hair.

It wasn't just that the team had spent months



making 175 wax likenesses of celebrities ranging from Maya Angelou to Diana, Princess of Wales. The problem was that each moment of delay could sabotage an intricate construction schedule. It wasn't until 3 p.m. that they knew: the truck had turned back, stymied by Manhattan streets frozen in Millennium Summit leader-lock. The heads finally arrived at 7:50 a.m. on Tuesday. And separate crates of bodies didn't begin turning up till Thursday.

Still, after six months of construction and seven years of planning, wax figures were finally arriving in the house of wax. No, not the legendary London attraction, but the nearly finished five-story wax palace in the New Times Square.



The new wax museum in Times Square will include a dome painted with historic characters. The wax heads of Whoopi Goldberg, Richard M. Nixon and Woody Allen, and Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI have arrived

This Madame Tussaud's isn't quite ready for its close-up yet. The official unveiling of the \$50 million showcase is scheduled for mid-November, although the public will begin to be admitted in a "soft opening" starting in mid-October.

So these days the F. J. Sciamé Construction Company (the New Victory Theater, Bridgemarket) is hurling

100 carpenters and electricians into a nasty, brutish and short assault on the unfinished structure. They are working from dawn to dusk six days a week to bring this British institution's fixation with fame to an 85,000-square-foot shell on 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. The known world has been invited to the

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Amid Bodyless Heads, Workers Push to Complete Wax Museum

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construction site today to observe Gov. George E. Pataki unveiling his wax statue (Tussaud's calls them portraits), which cost \$50,000 and took six months to build. Also among the bewaxed in the new exhibition will be Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, Woody Allen, Josephine Baker, Katie Couric, Joe DiMaggio, Bill Gates, Hugh Grant, Ernest Hemingway, Yoko Ono, Mickey Mantle, Joe Namath, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Gen. Colin L. Powell, Christopher Reeve, Sitting Bull and Andy Warhol.

All those heads and bodies must be assembled, clothed and placed just so. There is also the matter of the crystal chandelier in the Guillotine Room, which must be more richly crystallized. Then there's the guillotine itself, which must be programmed to decapitate the wax aristocracy every three minutes.

In the balance is an assumption putting millions of dollars and a legendary brand name at risk: that East Coast Yanks and the tourists who visit them will go for Tussaud's. It is by no means a slam dunk, this notion that London's most popular tourist attraction (2.7 million visitors a year) can capture a profitable lifeline of American visitors. The Tussaud's aesthetic is an amalgam of creepy glitz, high-oxygen portraiture and a bizarre but jolly fascination with gruesome spectacle.

And so when Andrew Tansley, the director of the privately held Tussaud's Group Ltd., arrived from England to inspect the construction shell last spring, a visitor joined him, beginning a five-month exposure to the art of Tussaudification. Herewith, a few moments from the transplantation of an eccentric London institution to a city that thought it was inured to the weird.

APRIL 11 Striding confidently through his bare-bones new space, Mr. Tansley announced that Tussaud's had signed a 49-year lease and a 50-year extension, close to a century of commitment. "We'd like to think that this is the place Madame Tussaud would have created had she settled in New York rather than in London," he said. Mr. Tansley, 48, referred, of course, to the company's founding diva, Marie Tussaud, a teacher of art to royal French offspring who was spared the guillotine so that she could use her skills to create the death masks of aristocrats who included Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI.

So creepy is the quasi-historical verismo of Tussaud's that the original mold of the death mask of Marie Antoinette (taken by Madame) contains some of the queen's eyelashes, still entombed in the plaster. After fleeing the Napoleonic Wars and landing in England in 1802, Madame toured her portrait museum on wagons throughout Britain before establishing her first London museum in 1835.

Mr. Tansley said the greatest challenge for his team was to rekindle in New York the spirit of the London original. Despite its Chamber of Horrors (a gallery of assassination, torture and heads on pikes), Tussaud's



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Nick Gallo installs the floor in the Mirror Maze at the new Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum in Times Square. The attraction is scheduled to open next month.

thanks to its relationship with the rich and famous. The celebrities who pose for portraits include the royals. (Every reigning British monarch back to George III has sat for Tussaud sculptors.) "There has always been a slightly macabre side to a wax portrait, and these portraits can seem pretty creepy," Mr. Tansley said. But, he insisted, "we are not glorifying blood or violence."

APRIL 18 The building lobby, destined to vaunt lush blue carpeting picked out in gold stars, is now a realm of scaffolding and yellow caution tape; chain hoists are clanking. Anyone navigating the construction rubble would wonder how Tussaud's could ever expect that 1.8 million people a year (1,200 an hour at peak times) would troop through that lobby, paying \$12.75 to \$19.95 for their two-hour visits.

It is even harder to envision customers being whooshed to the top of the building in two exterior glass-sheathed elevators that will disgorge them into a fantasy "Opening Night Party" featuring wax celebrities hobnobbing at a mythical Broadway show.

"We're in the stage where you look around and say, 'It's not going to happen,'" said Janine Scarpello, the feisty, hard-hat-wearing general manager. "But it always does."

MAY 11 "Already we're getting mail, mostly bills," said Rod Hickey, 37, the production manager, shouting over the whine of a circular saw. "The post office says we exist," he continued, reading the address of a letter sent to "234 West 43rd Street, Madame Tussaud's." (In England, the surname can be pronounced tuh-SAWDZ, but Francophiles pronounce the final syllable as sows.)

Mr. Hickey is an indomitably fireproof construction boss who has seen it all, then fixed it. He orchestrated the creation of Cirque du Soleil's aquatic "O" fantasia in Las Vegas, where he also managed to get the pirate ship to sink on cue at the Treasure Island Casino. "If you think there's a degree of difficulty with

explaining to Steve Wynn why the ship won't come back up."

JUNE 5 "Even a small miscalculation can affect the likeness," said Judy Craig, 58, the head of the Tussaud portrait studio in London, which has a staff of 80 artists and technicians. "You want the smile on the lips to match the smile in the eyes."

The creative teams take 250 intricate measurements of celebrities' body proportions and hundreds of color photographs in creating likenesses of the face (sculptured in clay and cast in wax), the hands (cast in clay, then wax) and body (fiberglass, with an armature of steel and chicken wire, covered with clothes often donated by the celebrity subjects). The eyes are acrylic. The hair? Real. Inserted strand by strand.

Later, on the phone, the singer Tony Bennett recalled what it was like to be modeled. "In a real sense they are super-realist artists," said Mr. Bennett, whose own oil paintings have had many gallery shows.

When Mr. Bennett sat for a "very tedious" Tussaud's modeling session, he remembered, "they got everything right, down to the crack in my tooth." He added: "Then they conned me out of one of my Brioni suits, dark blue. So they could dress me up in the museum."

JULY 21 There are showers of acetylene sparks down in the lobby as 10 workmen weld together 20-foot pieces of A36 structural steel, the spine of the 15,000-pound staircase that millions of tourists are expected to ascend to the summit of American waxdom. Upstairs in the Guillotine Room the walls are being lined with murals of mobs battling during the French Revolution; the canvas has been aged and given a patina of craquelure.

While New Yorkers will be spared such gruesome London spectacles as Marat being knifed in his bath, there will be no dearth of historic gore. An exhibition called "Madame Tussaud's Story" will feature the functioning

In the Graveyard Room, Brett Klisch, 27, head scenic artist for the installation, pointed out an open grave bearing a decapitated nobleman, listed in the scenery roster as "Generic Headless Body." "This will be the family room," Mr. Klisch said proudly. "Soon we'll put in the bodies and the tombs to theme it out."

AUG. 2 No one has been seriously injured on the construction site, but there have been petty disasters: the roof leak in the Portrait Gallery, the mural that didn't fit. Then there was the tragic Babe Ruth incident. In mid-July Tussaud's transported the portraits of Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle to Yankee Stadium for a publicity event. Only Joltin' Joe and the Mick came back in one piece. The Sultan of Swat statue fell forward, shattering the hollow wax head.

"We managed to save the eyeballs," said Steve Futcher, a portrait molder, describing the rush to complete a new head by opening night.

AUG. 10 Admittedly all the lighting isn't in, and the tree limbs aren't quite done, but the Mirror Maze is up. A construction team using suction cups manhandled the giant, custom-made mirrors into place. What's the hardest thing about doing that? "Not breaking the mirrors between now and the opening," said Tony Bianco, a carpenter.

AUG. 24 The guillotine has arrived, but Gavin Sadler is concerned about the missing bolt. "It's a metric M6," said Mr. Sadler, 30, the technical director, who has arrived with the guillotine to get it up and chopping.

"We'll get a metric — where?" asked Mr. Hickey.

"I know," said Steve Van Varick, a carpenter perched on a scissor's lift. "We'll take it out of the Ikea furniture at Rod's house."

The guillotine is, of course, a reproduction of a French original; it was built in Haverhill, Suffolk. The 18-foot-high, 661-pound contraption has a rough, dirty job to do, and it accomplishes it with a yard-wide, 22-pound fake blade that crashes convincingly, horrifying new batches of customers who enter the room. It resets as the crowd is distracted by a cannon shot.

"You have to make it three times stronger than it needs to be," said Mr. Sadler, a veteran London set designer. He said proudly, "It's my first guillotine."

SEPT. 7 Bodies are arriving, four or five per crate, and the London design team is toiling to join them to heads. Lisa Partridge, the Tussaud artist who creates acrylic eyes, has learned that Film Forum in Manhattan will soon be screening a new 3-D print of "House of Wax," the 1953 horror film starring Vincent Price as the mad sculptor who repopulates his Victorian chamber of horrors by coating victims with wax.

"There are a few colleagues for which that might be an option," Ms. Partridge said, raising a laugh from the wax gang.

Weeks of desperate labor remain until the first faux-celebrity-starved visitors troop up the grand staircase. And then? "When it's all finished," said Mr. Hickey, unflappable to the last, "I get to leave."