

Decedents Sitting Up and Other Tales

By Ryan Helfenbein

When it comes to Halloween, my family has always been the go-to source for unique costumes. Perhaps it's due to our line of work, or simply the fact that this industry breeds creative thinkers. Whatever the reason, we often end up creating the neighborhood kids' costumes. It is also common during this time of year for people to ask questions about my family's profession.

Hollywood has certainly done its part to raise unusual questions, and the tales we tell around the camp fire simply exacerbate these visions. "Do you believe in ghosts?" is a common one, and I can assure you that if I did, I wouldn't be an undertaker.

"Are you scared of the dark?"

Well, my wife says that I am.

"Do decedents frighten you?"

As my father has always said,

"It's the living you need to

worry about." Finally, the

priceless, "Can individuals sit

up after they pass away?" I've

heard that one more times than

I care to count.

Whether it is a graveyard as the source of Frankenstein's brain or a coffin for Dracula to

rest in, the undertaker has always had some sort of role to play when it comes to scary movies. Hollywood loves the ever-so-popular act of a "man rising out of casket." As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon for people outside of Hollywood to have reported this occurring. Just recently, during a presentation, a woman told a story of seeing this with her own eyes. In addition, a fraternity brother of mine told a similar story of the same thing happening when he was a child. With this said, in the over 100-plus combined years my family has spent in this industry; we have yet to see such levitation. Nor have any of my family members come in contact with an undertaker who has seen it in "real life."

How has this myth become so ingrained in movies and folklore, or better yet, why do so many people state they've seen this occur? Maybe it's a tall tale that dates back to the days before modern preparation (embalming) or even modern medicine? This could be true as there were many mechanisms created for the prevention of a premature burial. Maybe it is a case of mind over matter, as the repeated images in scary movies create suggestions in our minds. Or, as some people say, "Perhaps it is due to air build-up or even rigor mortis." Maybe that's it. Rigor mortis takes place in the body after death and can cause the muscles to tighten, perhaps even contract, making the individual sit up. But wait a minute here, according to the book *Forensic Taphonomy: the*

Postmortem Fate of Human Remains by William D. Haglund, " ... rigor mortis does not cause muscular contraction and, Hollywood movies to the contrary, dead bodies do not sit up, grasp objects, or walk about due to rigor."

Looks like that the question is finally answered. Or is it? It was reported a few years ago that just prior to a funeral, a decedent in Brazil allegedly sat up, turned to the assembled mourners, asked for a drink of water, then laid back down. According to the *Christian Post News*, the decedent in question was rushed to the hospital where he was pronounced dead -- for a second time.

It may well be that the individual was not deceased the first time. In addition, the family must have had a difficult time doing the services for a second time, because that funeral director most likely turned in his license, headed out of town and is now far removed from this line of work.

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So a body cannot sit up after death. Then what about hair and fingernails? Don't they keep growing after death? Believe it or not, this is another question I've often heard. But again, this is another popular misconception. What gives the impression of hair and nails growing is the fact that the skin shrinks a bit after the embalming process is completed. This is due to dehydration that occurs shortly after the procedure is finished. So, another myth exposed.

As the costumed trick or treaters arrive on your doorstep this year, perhaps you'll find yourself thinking of other questions concerning the art of undertaking. But let's hope that rather than conjuring up eerie thoughts of what may or may not occur after death, you're thinking, "Wow! I wonder if the undertaker made that costume too?"

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