

Brazilian Kiss Nightclub Disaster

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The recent deadly fire that broke out during a college party at Kiss, a nightclub in Santa Maria, a college town of 260,000 people in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state, has resulted in real tragedy. While the 615 square-meter club's capacity is under 700 people, it was packed with an estimated 1,200 to 1,300 people. 236 youngsters were killed and more than 169 hospitalized for smoke inhalation and burns, with dozens of them in critical condition. Most of the dead were college students 18 to 21 years old. Reports indicate that the toll would make this disaster one of the deadliest nightclub fires in more than a decade.

The fire started at around 2:30 am when a band performing at the club let off as part of its show cheap fireworks meant for outdoor use instead of the more expensive indoor fireworks. The band that was onstage pointed the flares upward. The club's ceiling ignited and, because of a malfunctioning fire extinguisher, the blaze spread throughout the packed club at lightning speed, emitting thick, toxic smoke. Those inside panicked as they tried to get out and smoke made them lose their sense of direction. About 50 of the victims were found in the club's two bathrooms apparently confusing their doors with the exit door. At least 90 per cent of the victims died of smoke inhalation rather than burns. The club had combustible insulating foam material in the ceiling, and faulty fire safety equipment. It had neither an alarm nor a sprinkler system and had only one exit. Moreover, metal barriers, used to keep people in line on their way in, ended up blocking people from getting out. Firefighters had to open a hole in the outer wall to allow more people to escape.

Brazil is far away. However, its tragedy hits close to home and stirs painful memories everywhere. One cannot help but notice the similarities between this tragedy and others happening several years earlier. In 1903, the Iroquois Theater fire disaster in Chicago, Illinois, USA, cost the lives of at least 605 individuals. In 1908, the Rhoades Opera house fire in Boyertown, Pennsylvania, USA, resulted in 170 deaths. In 1940, the Rhythm Night Club fire in Natchez, Mississippi, USA led to 209 deaths. In 1942 the infamous Cocoanut Grove fire, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, in which 492 people died became a milestone in burn care. In 1961, a fire swept through a circus killing 503 people in Niteroi, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 2000, a welding accident reportedly set off a fire at a club in Luoyang, China, killing 309 people. In 2003 a blaze at the Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, USA, killed 100 people and injured 200. A flare ignited the ceiling foam at an overcrowded nightclub in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 194 people in 2004. Indoor fireworks were blamed for a fire at a club in Bangkok on New Year's Eve 2008 in which 66 partygoers were killed. Another indoor fireworks display at a nightclub in Perm, Russia, ignited a plastic ceiling decorated with branches, killing 152 people in December 2009.

Though more than 100 years separate the oldest from the most recent disaster, common mostly preventable threads run through all of these nightclub and theater fires: overcrowding, locked exits, and flammable decorative and construction materials. The use of fireworks inside the buildings, usually as part of live stage acts or bands, has been the cause of many of these fire disasters, mostly recently. It is striking how the circumstances of the Station nightclub fire are similar to those of the Rhoades Opera house fire that occurred 100 years earlier.

Certainly, each disaster contributed in some countries to better building codes and safety measures, as well as to improved management of burn victims. The Rhythm Night Club fire foretold future nightclub fire disasters by pointing to flammable materials. The infamous Cocoanut Grove fire came at a unique time in the history of burn care and resulted in a number of important advances in burn treatment, including the first comprehensive descriptions of inhalation injury, improvements in





topical treatment of burn wounds, resuscitation of shock, use of antibiotics, and understanding of the metabolic response to injury. It also stimulated the organization of burn care facilities, public safety legislation, and burn prevention. Following the Rhode Island disaster, specific rules and regulations forced many venues in the USA and Europe to install sprinkler systems and make other expensive renovations including the use of fireproof material and the installation of new doors and stairways as well as appropriate lighting and indications of exit locations. Nightclubs were also required to have emergency plans and have trained crowd management personnel on scene during each show.

Unfortunately, lessons learned from previous disasters are quickly forgotten. Even though safety regulations in some countries are strict, at least on paper, there is no guarantee that they have always been followed. Lives were wasted in Santa Maria, because, as reported by the media, precautions that should have been taken were just neglected. Even though every disaster stirs greater awareness about fire safety among the general public, implementation of necessary prevention measures is universally confronted rapidly with economic realities and weak political will. The tragedy in Santa Maria should force serious reflection over the widespread culture of leniency, contempt and corruption endemic across the globe.

Only when the penny-pinching business-driven mind for maximum gain at minimal cost is set aside and when human life becomes more valuable than any necessary costs incurred to provide a safer environment can our youth enjoy life and party till daybreak without embracing the kiss of death. Till that day, similar disasters will happen again and unfortunately numerous lives will still be lost.

It may be worthwhile at this stage to recall the investigation results of the Iroquois Theater fire disaster in 1903. A Chicago Fire Department captain toured the theater days before the opening. He noted that there were no extinguishers, sprinklers, alarms, telephones, or water connections. He pointed out the deficiencies to the theatre's fire warden but was told that nothing could be done, as the fire warden would simply be dismissed if he brought the matter up with the syndicate of owners. When the captain reported the matter to his commanding officer, he was again told that nothing could be done, as the theatre already had a fire warden. Subsequently, the investigation discovered that two vents of the building's roof, which had not been completed in time for the theater's opening, were nailed shut to keep out rain and snow. Another finding showed that the supposedly "fireproof" asbestos curtain was really made from cotton and other combustible materials. In addition to not having any fire alarms in the building, the owners had decided that sprinklers were too unsightly and too costly and had never had them installed. To make matters worse, the management also established a policy to keep non-paying customers from slipping into the theater during a performance. They bolted nine pairs of iron panels over the rear doors and installed padlocked, accordion-style gates at the top of the interior second and third floor stairway landings. Many of the exit routes were confusing, and to keep the audience from being distracted during a show, all exit lights were turned off. The doors of the outside exits, which were supposed to make it possible for the theater to empty in five minutes, opened to the inside, not to the outside. The investigation also led to a cover-up by officials from the city and the fire department who denied all knowledge of fire code violations. It was alleged also that fire inspectors had been bribed with free tickets to overlook code violations. A grand jury indicted a number of individuals, including the theater owners, fire officials and even the mayor. No one was ever charged with a criminal act though. Families of the dead filed nearly 275 civil lawsuits against the theater but no money was ever collected.¹

It seems that sometimes, somewhere, time stopped in 1903.

¹ **Weird and Haunted Chicago. THE SHOW DID NOT GO ON** *History & Hauntings of the Iroquois Theater Fire*

<http://www.weirdchicago.com/iroquois.html>

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