

Horror: Still the Best Bet for Your Indie Budget

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INDEPENDENT HORROR MOVIEMAKERS are a unique breed, like vampires in the daylight. Maybe they have to be. Few other moviemakers have to face the challenges that an independent horror director must face, whether it's working with horrific scripts, elaborate make-up or dealing with monsters, real and imagined. But like hardened grunt soldiers, indie horror makers can take anything that comes their way because, unlike auteurs in other genres, they usually don't have as difficult a time finding an audience.

SCARE TACTICS

Notes on the Underworld of Independent Horror Movie-making by David Grove

IN THE PAST 40 YEARS, HORROR HAS ARGUABLY been the most important genre in independent film, particularly from a commercial perspective. The trend began around the time of Francis Ford Coppola's *Dementia 13* and William Castle's *Straight-Jacket* in the early '60s, and continued with such startling entries as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and John Carpenter's *Halloween*. What does it say about the genre to note that many of today's most bankable directors, including Coppola, James Cameron, Peter Jackson, Sam Raimi, Oliver Stone and Steven Spielberg all got their starts here? What is it about the genre that seems so ideally suited to the harsh limitations of low-budget, indie moviemaking?

Horror films are atmospheric, claustrophobic and tense, parameters which fit well within the constricts of low-budget moviemaking. Unlike other genres, budget limitations can actually benefit those working in horror.

"Horror, by definition, thrives from a rough-around-the-edges quality," says Jeremy Kasten, director of *The Attic Expeditions*. Creating that quality requires an innovative use of the camera.

"With my film, we did a lot of handheld work to get that edgy look," says Steve Cuden, producer-director of *Lucky*. "We also 'dutched' (tilted) almost every angle to keep the viewer off-balance."

It's these same limitations that helped films like *The Evil Dead*, *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* become landmark achievements in cinema. "The limitations of budget and equipment have lent a hand in making some of the most successful indie horror movies in history, because it gave them that grainy, documentary, 'news at eleven' type of footage that sells the whole ball of wax," says Tim Ritter, writer-director of *Creep*.

"The stories are easy to tell," adds Cuden. "A character or characters gets into trouble and then spends the whole movie being chased by a monster. They're mind games, mostly. And mind games are usually inexpensive to shoot."

Jacqueline Garry, writer-director of *The Curse*, believes that audiences are more forgiving of a horror film's flaws, as long as the overall product delivers the goods.

"The horror crowd is willing to go with a film even if it doesn't

make a lot of sense," says Garry. "People don't need explanations for everything in a horror film, as long as they're surprised, entertained, scared or amused."

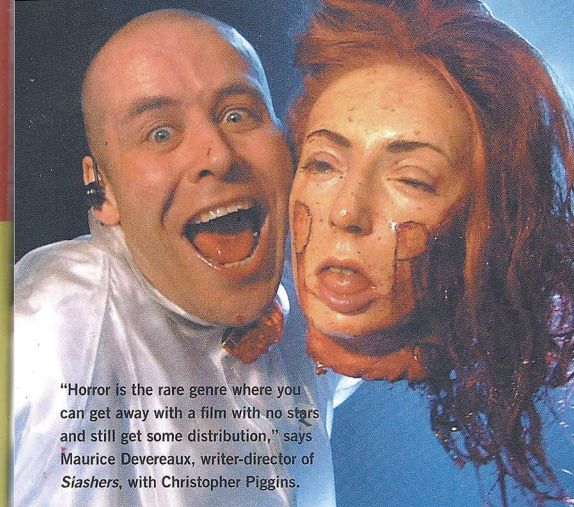
As the massive success of *The Blair Witch Project* proved, a horror film still doesn't need money or elaborate effects to be successful. In fact, scaring audiences with what they *can't* see is a key technique in the genre. "The monster just off the edge of the screen has proven, in recent years, to be scarier to the audience than anything that's dead center in focus," says J.T. Petty, writer-director of *Soft for Digging*. "This all meshes beautifully with the very concept of low-budget moviemaking. You can make a scarier film on account of the monster you can't even afford to show."

Sarah Ingerson stars as Claire, in J.T. Petty's *Soft for Digging*.



Horror films also have the benefit of being ideally suited to 16mm and video. "If you do a drama or comedy and it's not in 35mm, you're going to have a hard time getting a distributor," says Kevin Kangas, writer-director of *Fear of Clowns*. "Horror lends itself to 16mm and video—*The Blair Witch Project* is a testament to this... With any other genre, a distributor probably won't even look at your movie."

The notion of simultaneously scaring, amusing and compelling an audience is key to why so many now-famous moviemakers were able



"Horror is the rare genre where you can get away with a film with no stars and still get some distribution," says Maurice Devereaux, writer-director of *Slashers*, with Christopher Piggins.

to hone their skills within the stringent confines of the horror genre.

"What more important skill can a moviemaker develop than learning how to manipulate an audience to keep them emotionally engaged for two hours?" asks Kasten. But manipulation isn't the only lesson learned on set. "The horror genre has all of the elements needed in making other films," says Cuden. "There's a certain amount of action, suspense, character development, unfolding emotion, humor, crazy angles and cool editing."

"I think a good horror film shows more about a director than the next boring, socially-conscious film coming out of Sundance," says Garry. "You get to make more stylized and creative films and I think that's why so many now-famous directors started out there. You get to take more chances in horror—learning how to build suspense, create dramatic situations, taking more chances with camera placement and movement and cinematography in general."

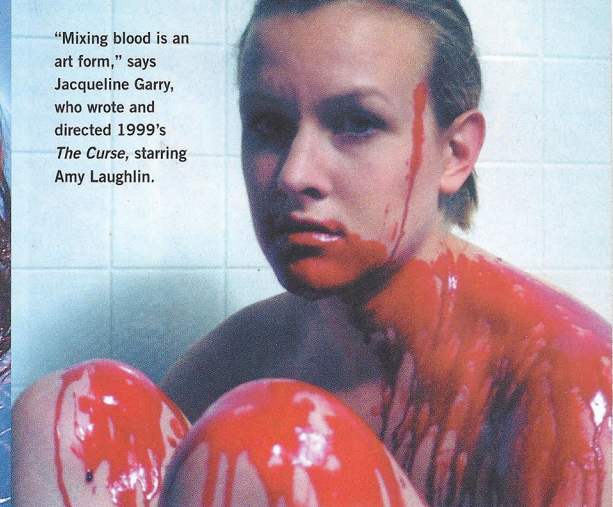
"YOU CAN LET YOUR IMAGINATION RUN WILD, but it's not like it was back in the early 1970s," says Dante Tomaselli, writer-director of *Satan's Playground*. "Today's horror movies don't get the same respect, but most of the greatest horror films have always been low-budget and independently made, like *Halloween* and *Night of the Living Dead*. I think this is because there is so much that has to be planned to make an independent horror film—so much stress—that it gives the films a raw and immediate quality. Passion and fear strike you in such a remarkable way and that can yield brilliance."

Larry Fessenden, the acclaimed writer-director of *Habit* and *Wendigo*, believes that many moviemakers start here because horror films are easier to finance. Fessenden did the opposite, spending the first 15 years of his career making experimental films with little attention or fanfare. It wasn't until the release of *No Telling* in 1991 that he suddenly gained unexpected attention and publicity.

"It's easier to finance a horror film than a personal, inter-relationship, coming-of-age film," says Fessenden. "Horror is also sloppy, angry and raw. And I suppose a young moviemaker with no money might find that the best way to express himself is through the visceral images of a horror film. The themes are life and death, which are the same ideas that preoccupy a kid who dreams of becoming a moviemaker."

But just because it's easier to sell, distribute and gain publicity for a horror film doesn't mean that it's the right genre for everyone. Eli Roth, writer-director of the recent very successful indie horror flick, *Cabin Fever*, believes that moviemakers can start out in any genre, as

"Mixing blood is an art form," says Jacqueline Garry, who wrote and directed 1999's *The Curse*, starring Amy Laughlin.



long as they care about what they're doing.

"Stanley Kubrick hadn't made a horror film before *The Shining*, and that was a great film," says Roth. "Hitchcock and Polanski also proved that you can take on the horror genre later in your career."

Maurice Devereaux, writer-director of *Slashers*, believes that many moviemakers approach horror simply as a way to get a movie distributed. "I think half of the moviemakers start out in horror because they have a passion for it and the other half because it was easier to finance the film," he says.

"The fact is that horror is the rare genre where you can get away

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