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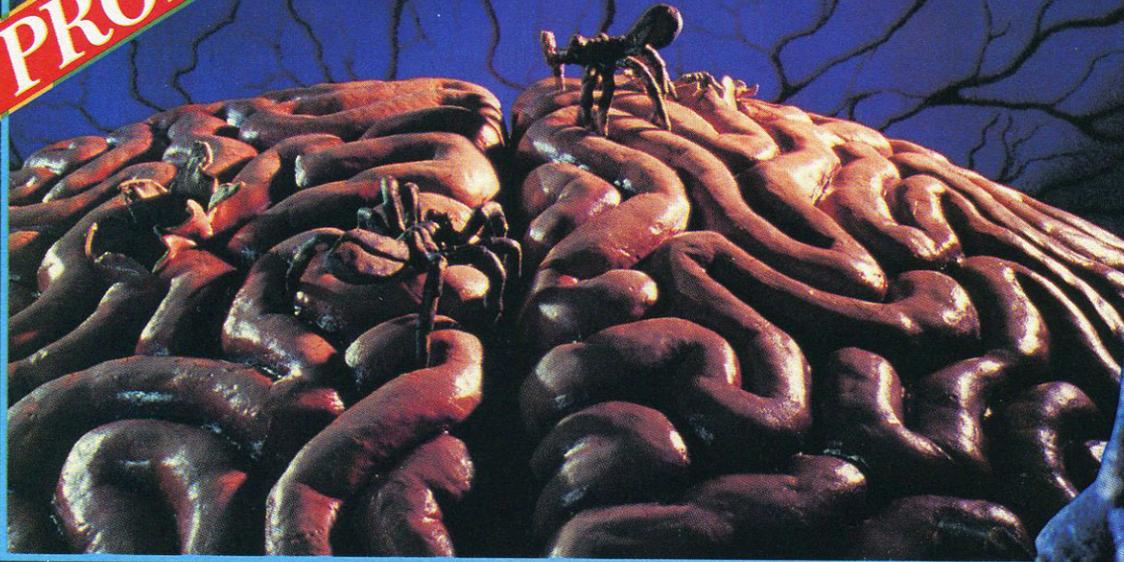


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PROFILE

Lunatics features
a young man
with spiders on
the brain.



JOSH BECKER SHALT DIRECT ...EXCESS

By **DAVID KUEHLS**

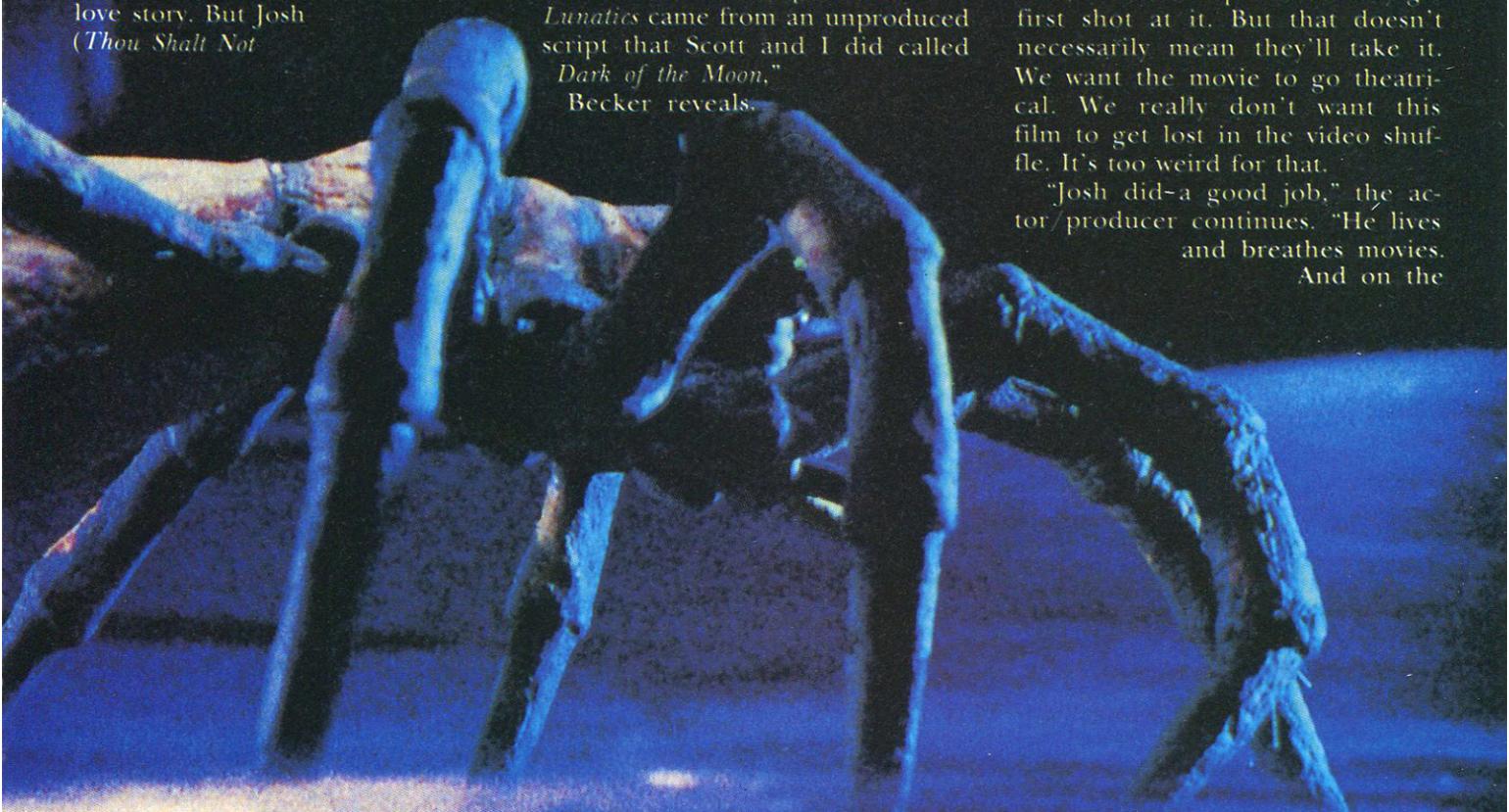
“If you poke someone in the eye and you have a sound effect, that’s comedy. But if you poke someone in the eye and blood spurts out, that’s horror.”

Only a writer/director who is totally deranged (or from Detroit) would follow up a bloody mercenary flick with a tender love story. But Josh
(*Thou Shalt Not*)

tral idea for *Lunatics* several years ago while working on a project with Scott (*Evil Dead II*) Spiegel. "A lot of the concepts I used for *Lunatics* came from an unproduced script that Scott and I did called *Dark of the Moon*," Becker reveals.

presstime, was shopping for a distributor. "RCA/Columbia Pictures gave us money to finish the picture," states Campbell, "so they get first shot at it. But that doesn't necessarily mean they'll take it. We want the movie to go theatrical. We really don't want this film to get lost in the video shuffle. It's too weird for that.

"Josh did a good job," the actor/producer continues. "He lives and breathes movies. And on the



“Ted’s attacked by a 15-foot spider that chases him around Los Angeles...it’s not all hugs and kisses.”

Kill...Except) Becker has done just that with *Lunatics: A Love Story*.

Shot in Pontiac Hills, Michigan in fall 1989, *Lunatics* stars Ted (*Darkman*) Raimi and Deborah (*Waxwork*) Foreman as two crazy people who fall for each other. "It is a love story," cautions Becker, "but Ted's character hallucinates constantly, and within his hallucinations one of his main fears—spiders—comes out in the film. For instance, at the beginning we do an extreme camera move that tracks up the hallway of his apartment building, through the keyhole, around his apartment, picks him up underneath his bed, goes through his eye and into his brain where spiders erupt. Later, Ted's attacked by a 15-foot spider that chases him around Los Angeles. So you can see, it's not all hugs and kisses."

Becker came up with the cen-

"In that story, a girl feels that there is a huge conspiracy against her, and it turns out that she is right. Which I thought was a scary idea. We took that old saying, 'Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that they're not out to get you,' and put it to work. In *Lunatics*, the girl thinks she's cursed and everything is against her. The guy is convinced that doctors are shooting X-rays at him, so he's got his whole apartment covered in tin foil. He's also afraid to go out. He has arachnophobia, but also agoraphobia [fear of open spaces] and he hasn't been outside in six months."

FX for *Lunatics* were handled by Detroit locals Dave Hettmer and Gary (*Moontrap*) Jones. Sam Raimi and Rob Tapert served as executive producers. Bruce Campbell plays a supporting role and produced the \$700,000 production which, at

set when you're going 12 hours a day, six days a week, that pays off. I've seen other directors—who shall remain nameless—who, two weeks into the shoot, couldn't care less what they're doing. They're thinking about their next picture, or they're upset because this is material they've done before, or they're not making enough money or whatever. And if the director is bored and distracted, so is the crew. But it wasn't like that with Josh. It was refreshing to have a guy who was in on all the details and wanted to get it right. He wrote the script too, and that helps." Campbell pauses, then states the bottom line: "Of course, it's Josh's film. He's got to live and die by it."

Becker grew up in suburban Detroit, literally a stone's throw from the Raimi homestead. "From my parents' house I could throw a rock and hit the Raimi house," jokes Becker. "I was good friends with Ivan Raimi [who co-wrote *Darkman*] when I was in grade school. The first time I met

Becker (with Deborah Foreman and Ted Raimi) wanted to make a low-budget film that would allow its actors to act.

Sam was at the school bus stop in fourth grade. Sam was a nut from an early age. He always came to the bus stop and did magic tricks for us. At that point in his life Sam wanted to be a magician. He did lots of tricks, but his favorite was a gun that would fire and then a little flag would pop out and say "POW!" Sam was a character even then."

As a teenager, Becker made "tons of movies" with a crowd that included the Raimis (Sam, Ted and Ivan), Tapert and Campbell. Becker's first foray into film was a Super-8 version of *Oedipus Rex*, for a school project in eighth grade. Campbell, who played King Creon, remembers: "Josh did it with all the period costumes and in a staged fashion. It looked like a filmed stage play. It was silent and when someone spoke, Josh cut to a blackboard with the lines written on it."

But Becker soon tired of the classics, and most of his high school films were slapstick comedy. "There's just a slight difference between slapstick comedy and horror," Becker explains. "The Three Stooges, for instance, are slapstick and their comedy is based on pain. So if you poke someone in the eye and you have a sound effect—DOINK!—that's funny; that's comedy. But if you poke someone in the eye and blood spurts out, that's horror. It's a small difference, but an important one. It's the same basic concept. They're both gags, and they both have payoffs."



Lumatics Pix: Copyright 1991 Renaissance Pictures

After high school, the group split up—Raimi and Tapert went to Michigan State, Campbell to Western Michigan. Becker, after a few semesters at Michigan and East Michigan, decided to give Hollywood a try. There he met screenwriter Sheldon Lettich, and

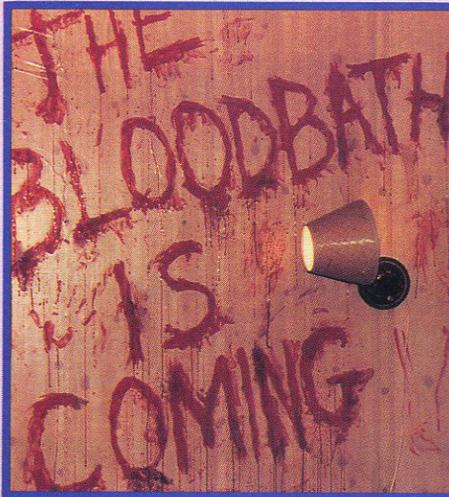
Becker, so he came back home to work behind the scenes on *Evil Dead*.

In that low-budget classic, Becker was in charge of the lighting, but he also doubled for the monster (Ellen Sandweiss) in the cellar and Sandweiss again in the getaway car. "That was me in the car with a yellow towel over my head, trying to make it look like her blonde hair," Becker confesses. "Of course, I had a big beard at the time, so I slumped way down in the seat. And since I was in charge of the lighting, I put myself in the dark."

The role was the inauspicious beginning of an inauspicious second career for Becker: "Shemping" in Raimi movies. (For the uninitiated, to "Shemp," in Detroit-speak, means to play a background role in a scene, often in heavy makeup. The label refers to a few Three Stooges shorts where a stand-in played Shemp Howard.)

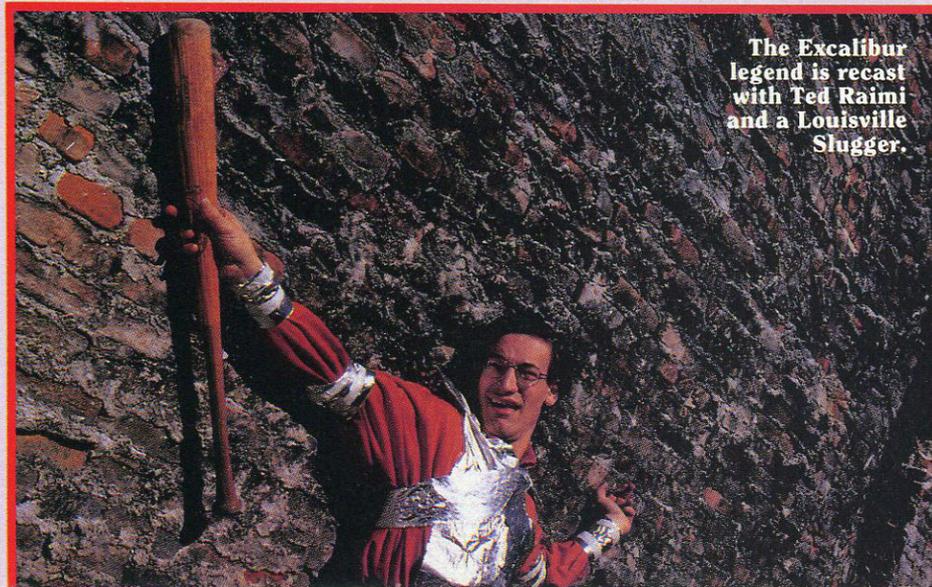
Becker "Shemped" in *Evil Dead II* as one of the medieval dead. "When Bruce Campbell drops out of the sky in 1300 A.D., the first thing that happens is that he hits the ground and then his car hits the ground. And then you cut to five faces in armor looking down on him. I'm one of those faces. Then, in the very last shot of the movie as you're pulling back and Bruce is screaming "No!!!" there are hands coming up to salute him, and I'm the last hand. That may mean little in the scheme of things, but it amuses me."

But in *Darkman*, Becker pulled off his *piece de resistance*, a Double-Shemp (Editor's note: Don't try this at home): "Sam did this long tracking shot of Liam Neeson and Frances McDormand walking



Just a friendly note left behind by some cultists in Becker's debut film.

the two wrote *Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except*. Lettich would go on to co-script *Rambo III* and direct *Lionheart*, but the doors in Hollywood remained closed to



The Excalibur legend is recast with Ted Raimi and a Louisville Slugger.

down the street,” Becker explains. “First, I go through the foreground wearing sunglasses and a hat and coat. Then, as the shot nears the end, I go through the background no longer wearing glasses or the coat. I’m two different extras in the same scene!”

In between those Raimi films, Becker directed one of his own: the long-delayed *Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except*. Sam Raimi stars as a Charles Manson-like killer battling Vietnam vets. *Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except* garnered good reviews in FANGORIA and *Deep Red*, but that’s about all the upturned thumbs Becker saw. “*Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except* is the world’s lowest-budget movie,” confesses Becker, “but I’m not ashamed of it.”

Becker is, in fact, a little bitter about the whole deal. “It’s a good story. But I think I missed the market for that one. I came up with the idea for it in 1979, and did a Super-8 version in 1980, which was 50 minutes long. If I had shot the feature version in 1980 I would’ve had something, because the idea was fresh then. It was before all the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* films came out, before all the Vietnam exploitation films. But by the time I got enough money together to make the film and by the time I got a distribution deal, there’d already been two *Rambo* films, three *Missing in Action* flicks, and it seemed like all I was doing was a big ripoff on those pictures. And in reality I had my idea way before all that started.

“Looking back,” Becker continues, “I see that I put more work

Thou Photos: Courtesy Scott Spiegel

into the story than the production. But it was one of those things where everyone said it couldn’t be done, and I went ahead and did it anyway. I got to a point where I couldn’t raise any more money, so I just went out and shot it. And

“Everyone said [*Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except*] couldn’t be done, and I went ahead and did it anyway.”

since I couldn’t hire a director of photography, I was the DP. And [producer] Scott Spiegel was also the art director. But the bottom line is: We got that movie done. We put it in the can for \$18,000.”

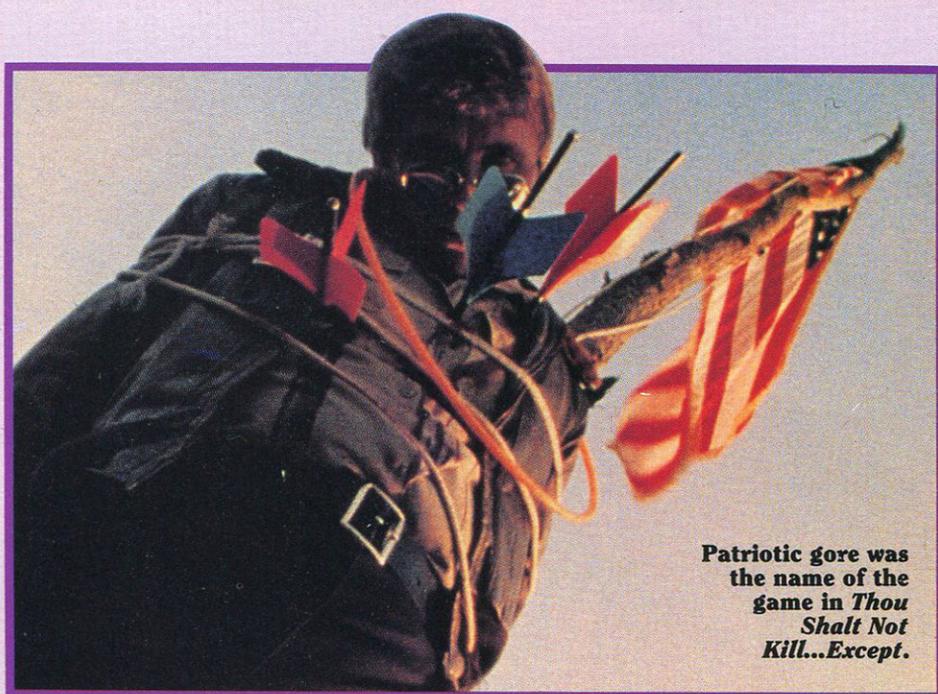
Becker admits that he bit off more than his budget could chew on *Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except*. For instance, he now labels the opening 20-minute sequence which

takes place in Vietnam (actually Michigan) as “too ambitious.” But he’s learned from his mistakes. “In *Lunatics*,” Becker reveals, “because of the limited budget, some of the scenes had to be reworked, or simply left out. I

wanted the whole first part of the movie to be Ted leaving the mental institution and driving cross-country to LA. For our money, though, we couldn’t do that. So now, the movie begins with him already in the apartment in LA. We also axed some effects—which I can’t recall specifically—because of the budget.”

But in *Lunatics*, Becker did get to try something that’s quite risky. “One scene has just Ted and Deborah in a room talking to each other...for 20 minutes,” states Becker. “I think that’s almost unheard of. No one will even try it. The scene involved complicated blocking and complicated performances. It’s a tough one because Ted and Deborah have just met at the beginning of the scene, and by the end of the scene, they’ve fallen in love. In the course of one scene, I had to take them emotionally through a whole spectrum of things. It worked, but it’s almost unheard of—particularly in low-budget movies where, for the most

(continued on page 65)



Patriotic gore was the name of the game in *Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except*.



After a long day working on *Lunatics*’ FX, animator Rick Ruby couldn’t wait for the caterer.

FX Photos: Courtesy Gary Jones/Acme

MANIAC COP

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was opening for the likes of Jefferson Airplane, The Who and The Electric Prunes, Z'Dar did a short stint as a jingle writer for the Leo Burnett and J. Walter Thompson ad agencies before moving to LA. "Once in Hollywood, I ended up producing a couple of records for the production company of a famous surf band. The results were less than positive and I was very discouraged." It was then that Z'Dar made a rather intriguing career decision. "This may come back to haunt me, but yes, it's true, I was a Chippendale's dancer."

It seems the out-of-work actor was just recovering from a debilitating breakup when he stopped in to see a friend who was bartending at the strip club. "My buddy thought it would be a great way to make some money and get over the relationship. So I took three weeks of disastrous dance lessons, downed a shot of Jack Daniels and went on stage as an airline captain...captain of the Mile High Club. When I saw all those wild women waving \$5, \$10 and \$20 bills, I figured, 'This can't be all bad.'" He then proceeded onto the Chippendale's dance circuit under the guise of a CHiP (California Highway Patrolman) and as Bronco Bob the Long Tall Texan. But ol' Bronco Bob now claims to have hung up his holster and G-string for good. "A lot of guys get trapped in that lifestyle and see it as the be-all and end-all. For me it was temporary. I had to get out. I had to keep reminding myself that no matter how many diversions and sidetracks and setbacks I had, I could never, ever lose sight of my real goals."

And what of the future of the character that has brought him the most fame? "I think part three will get going sometime in the fall of '91," Z'Dar predicts. "That's just a hunch. I'm hoping the story will have a different tone to it. I'm looking for a Jekyll and Hyde type of thing. Perhaps something where my spirit inhabits a regular cop. Or maybe a split personality. I see it with a lot of horror and violence, but with more psychological overtones as well." ❀

LANCE

(continued from page 22)

hand, Henriksen showed a terrific sense for black humor. "Walter wrote 'Cutting Cards' for me, because he wanted to combine Rafe's mannerisms with my real speech patterns. So I went out and bought a fake moustache, which made him look non-physical, like he'd never been out in the sun. And after the first day's rehearsal, Walter insisted that I keep the moustache. But I knew better than to ask him for permission. There's something about working with Walter that lets me explode for the part."

Henriksen will go to pieces for Hill again in the fall release *Alien III* (which Hill is co-producing), reprising the parts of Bishop that remain after the queen's attack. The actor will also show up in body and spirit as the android's lookalike creator, who helps Ripley chase a new breed of monsters around a prison planet.

But perhaps none of Henriksen's roles can express his concerns about the state of the world with the maliciousness of Torquemada. "I'm very despondent about religion and politics," he sighs, "even though I lost my faith long before I did this film. I don't listen to things about God from the outside, because I pay attention to what's in me, and I get mad at anyone who tries to cross that line into my soul. If Torquemada makes people think about religious excesses, then I've succeeded for *The Pit and the Pendulum*. Movies about these themes have been done before, and we're just another log on the fire. *Pit* frees the audience to make their own moral choices."

Despite the anguish that Henriksen gave Gordon on the film, the actor hopes their next collaboration will be *Telluride*, a script he's written about an Indian curse destroying the present. It will be a welcome return to heroism for a performer whose inner fires equal Torquemada's. "I've turned down a lot of roles because they wouldn't give me adventure," Henriksen confirms. "I even refused *RoboCop* because I didn't want to play another android after Bishop. With Torquemada, I never wanted people to think there was a good guy trying to claw out of his madness. I've finally dared to be as ugly as humanly possible." ❀

LUNATICS

(continued from page 47)

part, you've got people saying one-syllable lines like, 'Look. It's him. Let's get the heck out of here.' "

Lunatics will most likely get a PG rating, but that's OK with Becker. It's harder to ban those kinds of films. "*Thou Shalt Not Kill...Except* [which went out unrated] was banned by all the Scandinavian countries and Australia," he frowns. "You can watch *Mad Max* in Australia but not my movie. Go figure."

Currently, Becker divides his time between Michigan and Los Angeles. "I've been out in LA longer than Renaissance Pictures," Becker explains. "But LA is lacking in reality. Therefore, I like to spend as much time in Detroit as I can. I feel like Detroit is reality."

Lunatics premiered in Detroit last November, with a wink at Hollywood. "It was a great show, a great time," relates Becker. "We went whole hog with it: limousines, spotlights. We all showed up. Sam, Rob, Bruce and I were in tuxedos. We had a red carpet leading up to the theater. Ted came in an ambulance and popped out attended by nurses and wearing a straitjacket. It was a lot of fun and the audience of 600 really liked the movie."

Most of Becker's projects are in the "non-genre" area, but there's a script he's developing with Rob Tapert called *Humans in Chains*. "It's a science fiction/horror story about aliens who have taken over the earth, and humanity has been enslaved," Becker describes. "It's about the new messiah, who comes down to free the humans to battle the aliens—who are giant termites and are ridding the world of all its wood."

Ultimately, though, Becker would like to make a special horror film. "The thing I don't see much of nowadays is really scary horror films," says Becker. "One of the movies that had the biggest impact on me was *Rosemary's Baby*. I saw that when I was 10 years old. I had nightmares about that film for two years after." Becker pauses for emphasis. "I'd love to do that to little kids." ❀