

THE DEEP RED



HORROR HANDBOOK

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This ex-low budget filmmaker unleashed *THE EVIL DEAD* upon the world, showing a penchant for humor and a dazzling cinematic eye, which has become more refined with each subsequent feature. He is also a very soft-spoken, gentle type of guy which is a bit surprising after witnessing the incredible level of energy alive in his work. He loved to accompany his brother Ted (who played the gross, fat, old undead hag in *EVIL DEAD II*) to Saturday horror matinees in Detroit when he was a kid. But he really jumped into the genre when he, producer Scott Spiegel and star Bruce Campbell [from the *EVIL DEADs*] made a series of Super-8mm films while in college in Michigan. "We were making *IT'S MURDER* and we had a moment which was a scare," Raimi says, "and the college audience

was used as a tool to raise money to make the first *DEAD* picture which was seen, praised and publicized by no less than Stephen King. "I think the inspiration for that film came from George Romero's *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*, which my sister snuck me into; that really terrified me beyond words. [And now] if Romero's the Master of Terror, Hitchcock the Master of Suspense and King the Master of the Written Word, I've coined a title for myself—if I might be so bold—as the Apprentice of Suspense," he says jokingly. "I figure I'll start small; I still got a lot of years ahead of me," he smiles.

Raimi's style and camera grew to be wonderfully wild and fluid (yet always in total control) with *EVIL DEAD II*...like Spielberg on acid. "I love Spielberg. I really look forward to his movies."

"I try and figure out the intent of a scene, then try to break it up into pieces," he says, "in a logical progression which will flow and cut together on the screen—that's the basics of what any director does—and then I address each piece to make [its intent] as clear as possible for the audience. And then, once I've decided it's doing that, I ask, 'How can I punch it up and give it a little more juice, to make it more exciting for the audience?' Sometimes the most clear [idea] is the most exciting."

And yes, boys and girls, there is a Part III in the works, which begins

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jumped and screamed so I thought, 'Hey, this is great! I gotta make a whole picture which'll have this effect.' " So he followed up with the Super-8mm *SIX MONTHS TO LIVE*, *THE HAPPY VALLEY KID*, the story of a student driven mad ["that was a big hit on campus"] and *WITHIN THE WOODS*, which

in the medieval setting seen at the end of the last film, before the action returns to the cabin. The writer/director will try for an R rating this time (as opposed to the previous unrated) since, "as I grow older, I'm 29 now, I'm less interested in the gore than I was before. I wanna lean a little more toward the fantastic and amazing; though I'll definitely try to not let the EVIL DEADs' faithful followers down," he assures. "I'll try to still make it fun for them and exciting and as thrilling as possible."

Between those films was CRIME WAVE, a comedy which was taken out of his more-than-capable hands and recut and rescored by the studio. "I look at it [today] as a D picture, meaning poor. If I'd made my cut of it, without the script being changed, and did the music and sound job I wanted, I could've made it into a C+ picture. It'd never have been an A

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picture, quality wise, but it would've been a hell of a lot better. It would have been comprehensible. In the beginning [of the final cut now] I can't understand what the hell's happening; it's all kablooey."

One script he co-wrote with the great Coen brothers (BLOOD SIMPLE, RAISING ARIZONA), entitled THE HUDSUCKER PROXY, is still unproduced due to its proposed cost (the brothers want to shoot the '50's, big-business comedy in black-and-white). Meanwhile, Raimi cameos as "The Snickering Man" in

the Coens' latest film, MILLER'S CROSSING, in which he takes a machine gun hit in the chest. Sam also had a blast playing the crazed, Manson-like psychopath in THOU SHALT NOT KILL...EXCEPT. (They shot his entire part in two days.)

His next film is Universal's THE DARK MAN (budgeted at over \$8 million), a modern-day BEAUTY AND THE BEAST revenge tale based on his own story. "I'm gonna try and thrill the audience," Sam Raimi says, "but also try and uplift them and make them feel great as they leave the theatre."

FILMOGRAPHY

THE EVIL DEAD (1983)

CRIMEWAVE/THE XYZ

MURDERS (1986)

EVIL DEAD II: DEAD BY DAWN
(1987)

THOU SHALT NOT KILL...EXCEPT
(as actor, 1988)

THE DARK MAN (1989)



Oftentimes, films are summarily dismissed or unnecessarily exalted for a plethora of reasons that have little to do with the actual merit of the work itself. Many deserving films have been unfairly delivered into oblivion for such prosaic reasons as a poor title, an unimaginative (or nonexistent) ad campaign, spotty distribution or for the simple fact that the film was non-formulaic and unclassifiable (as to sub-genre) and, therefore, unable to locate its potential audience. Other crimes committed against the film-going public also appear to be low budgets, no gargantuan FX scenes, and films shot in foreign lands. Still others are caught in the backlash when loyal fans are not given exactly what they wanted from their favorite director. Even though David Cronenberg delivered what was arguably his most controlled, intense work with *DEAD RINGERS* (1988), fans deserted his camp in droves, complaining that the film was "boring," "too depressing," or worse yet, it had no major FX scenes! Even the much-revered George Romero suffered a similar fate when *MONKEY SHINES* failed to include even one zombie in its scenario. Can you imagine?

Dozens of films, perched on the edge of re-discovery by a new generation of video fans, have simply disappeared because their distributors went bankrupt after mounting an expensive theatrical campaign that failed to find any audience.

Many more films fall victim to simple "poor timing" when it comes to their theatrical or video release. Director Joseph Ruben has been stung by the curse twice with two films that were apparently "lost in the shuffle" between other "high-profile," major studio releases. Both films are far more ambitious than both their titles and their audience reception would indicate. *DREAMSCAPE* was a challenging, provocative surreal nightmare that featured solid doses of fear, fantasy and nuclear paranoia in carefully measured amounts. His second effort, *THE STEPFATHER*, emerged as one of the most suspenseful, harrowing slasher films since the original *HALLOWEEN*. *THE STEPFATHER* was all but ignored during its theatrical release, in spite of a desperate campaign by its distributors to appeal to a wider, non-genre audience. The poster art for the film was radically altered during its release, but neither campaign tried to go after the hard-core horror crowd; and, as a result, the genre connection was "soft-pedaled" to an indifferent mainstream audience who was never quite sure just what the distributor was attempting to sell.

On the other hand, the production company behind THE EVIL DEAD films knew exactly what they had and who they wanted to sell it to. Billing their film "as the most gruelling experience in ultimate terror" and prominently featuring Stephen King's breathless, hyperbolic review in the poster art helped the DEAD crew catapult themselves into the Splatter Spotlight. A very aggressive campaign, coupled with adoring coverage in the genre's press, helped convince even the most cynical that THE EVIL DEAD was, indeed, a very, very important footnote in horror history. Many overlooked its shoddy, micro-budgeted mise-en-scènes and its wealth of recycled genre conventions and instead focused on the exhilarating camera work, the frenetic pace and the over-the-top FX mayhem. Director Sam Raimi became the "critics' darling" and could do no wrong. That is until CRIMEWAVE (XYZ MURDERS) fell flat on its smug little ass then it was back to the trenches for the "second most gruelling experience..."

THE EVIL DEAD series is a good case in point for illustrating the various elements at work that help determine whether a film will become a "cult hit" or just another forgotten blood bomb with a snappy title. Despite the fact that THE EVIL DEAD may be neither "the ultimate experience" nor "the most ferociously original horror film of the year" has had little to do with its actual impact on the horror world. THE EVIL DEAD, when it premiered on the West Coast at the prestigious Los Angeles International Film Exposition in 1983, had already accumulated a groundswell of popular support and the advance word of mouth was sensational. Genre magazines and publications further fanned the flames with an uninterrupted barrage of in-depth interviews, behind-the-scenes FX reports and glowing testimonials from fans and critics alike that threatened to make THE EVIL DEAD appear as Splatterdom's answer to CITIZEN KANE. To be a critic of this film became analogous to trashing Karloff's interpretation of Frankenstein's monster or faulting George Romero for shooting NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD in black-and-white. No one, it appeared, wanted to upset the horror cognoscenti by offering an unpopular opinion on a film that had yet to prove its lasting worth. Genre fans are a notoriously loyal bunch and the howling welcome the original received insured the continuation of the series and also afforded Raimi the luxury of working with multi-million dollar budgets and employing some of the best FX talents around for future efforts. The rabid allegiance of a film's core audience cannot be over-emphasized in assessing the longevity of a particular style of filmmaking. Because, oddly enough, many genre film sequels go against the grain of established movie marketing logic by earning many times over what the original grossed in its initial theatrical or video release.

Once an established audience has been targeted, it's much easier to "embellish" the future product somewhat in hopes of attracting an even bigger share of the general movie-going populace without having to risk alienating its devoted, hard-core followers. This "mainstreaming" effect has been extremely beneficial to the box office take of numerous horror sequels, most notably the NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET and FRIDAY THE 13TH series.

In many instances, certain elements found in the original films have been "tampered" with in order to insure broader audience appeal. In return for these allowances, the filmmakers are offered more money, better distribution and healthy advertising campaigns that only major studio financing can provide. Nowhere is this point made clearer than with the Freddy Krueger character in the NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET films. Wes Craven's original film introduced a cackling, sadistic child molester/killer in a title role that was anything but "heroic" in nature. Krueger was a truly frightening visage, evoking memories of the archetypal boogeyman that has haunted horror films and literature since the turn of the century.

The original NIGHTMARE was critically well received and grossed slightly more than \$9 million in domestic rentals. As Wes Craven became less and less involved with the series (returning only to co-script NIGHTMARE PART 3: THE DREAM WARRIORS) crucial changes were made to both the Krueger character and to the direction the films would take in the future. Krueger was gradually transformed from a despicable, loathsome pedophilic psycho-killer into a wise-cracking gameshow host from hell who was as adept with the one-liners as he was with his famous finger knives. Krueger's horrific burn makeup, designed and applied by David Miller in the original, became more stylized and less frightening in each subsequent entry. More emphasis began being placed on the "entertainment" and "fantasy" elements as the grisly horrors of Craven's original became supplanted by spectacular, state-of-the-art FX displays.

Craven later complained in genre publications that the producers were turning the series into the cinematic equivalent of a "fast food cheeseburger." He was especially critical of PART 2: FREDDY'S REVENGE, where Krueger was brought out of the dreams and allowed to terrify the teens at their pool party. Craven felt such actions "diminished" the character and made Krueger appear "silly" rather than scary.

Nonetheless, FREDDY'S REVENGE made \$12 million at the box office and millions more as a best-selling video hit. Just as fans of the original began to cry "foul" with the way Robert Shaye and New Line Cinema were handling the series, PART 3: THE DREAM WARRIORS was released and it nearly doubled its predecessors' box office. Well, that cinched things for the folks at New Line. They knew their "cheeseburger" had real staying power.

Soon, Freddy was everywhere: posters, records, board games, models, Halloween costumes, hats, gloves, masks, trading cards and talk shows. Krueger was, undeniably, a monster cult hit, worshipped by millions of kids who appeared blissfully ignorant of his perverted origins. What Craven had originally envisioned as "the savage side of male adulthood...the ultimate bad father" became a cool, wise-assed hipster who's new record album, "Freddy's Greatest Hits" featured cheerful paeans to child abuse like "Down in the Boiler Room." Krueger became the most highly celebrated serial killer since Jack the Ripper. And, the most loved.

In NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 4: THE DREAM MASTER, legions of the hottest FX artists in town provided a backdrop blitzkrieg against Robert Englund's by now highly polished stand-up comedy routine and the

results were nothing short of spectacular. THE DREAM MASTER grossed \$50 million at the box office and proved to fans and skeptics alike that it was, indeed, "The Little Cheeseburger That Could."

It is unfortunate that so many other deserving films have been eclipsed by the ominous, towering shadow cast by the NIGHTMARE films and many fear that studios will use similar strategies to help "mainstream" their horror product in hopes of finding greater audience acceptability.

David Cronenberg has been one of many genre filmmakers who've suffered in the past because his efforts have been so stubbornly original and difficult to classify. Though he has achieved his greatest commercial successes with lesser works like THE DEAD ZONE and THE FLY, it is with misunderstood and underappreciated films like VIDEO DROME and THE BROOD that Cronenberg shows us the brilliant innerworkings of his unique personal universe. He was subsequently blasted in some circles for going "mainstream" again with DEAD RINGERS, although close examination yields convincing evidence that it may yet prove to be the weirdest of the lot.

Horror audiences have proven themselves to be just as fickle and unpredictable as their mainstream counterparts. Many, many films achieve an unwarranted status as either a bomb or a blockbuster for the most transient of reasons. But, few films can withstand the continual scrutiny of a decade or more without revealing something essential about both the film and its audience. A slight historical perspective allows us a unique vantage point from which to assess the relative merits of certain films which were either over-exposed, underrated, over-hyped or just plain ignored by their contemporaries. This passage of time allows us the luxury of reflection and comparison; though, it would still be wise to heed Jean Cocteau's warning that "history is facts which become lies in the end; legends are lies which become history in the end."

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jection), he starts to get worried that he might have killed them unwittingly. Enter the obligatory hardboiled cop with an open mind (a very open mind) to try and solve the mystery. And from there on in things get a little hard to follow...to say the least. Several minor characters and subplots drop in and out without doing anything other than confusing the picture. The film has too many confusing plotheoles and implausibilities to be truly engaging and it has the usual let's-set-up-for-a-sequel-that-never-appears ending. Watch a rerun of "The Love Boat" instead. (GR)

THE EVIL DEAD

★★★★

1983 85 m/d: Sam Raimi
 Outrageously graphic roller coaster ride through horror heaven has just about every effect you'd ever want to see. Clever, scary, and in some sequences, simply exhilarating. Definitely the standout horror effort of recent years.

EVIL DEAD 2



EVIL DEAD 2

★★★★

1987/85 m/d: Sam Raimi
 Incredibly exciting, demon thriller that's not so much a sequel, but a carefully measured, studied remake of the original. Still, the dazzlingly inventive camera work, breakneck pacing and major league FX work can't hide the fact that some pretty

stupid stuff is going down. Okay, so it's a small beef; but, c'mon, the characters all acted as if the first movie was never even made.

EVILS OF THE NIGHT

★

1984/85 m/d: Mardi Rustam
 Let's see now, aliens in blue work shirts and ski masks with laser firing rings seek out over-sexed teenagers for experiments in increased life expectancy. Julie Newmar still looks great in a mini skirt; though Neville Brand looks to have suffered some kind of debilitating head injury since EATEN ALIVE. From the producer of same. Should've thrown 'em all to the crocs before they had a chance to produce this piss-headed mess. Shot entirely in someone's garage for less than \$500.

EVIL SPAWN

★★

1987/90 m/d: Ken J. Hall
 A bunch of Fred Olen Ray's buddies got together (including Ray alumnus John Carradine) on weekends, presumably, and shot this cheapjack, backyard beast-n'-breasts fest that once again features the towering twin talents of Bobbee (MAUSOLEUM) Bresee. BB is an aging movie queen seeking to re-energize herself with injections of an experimental drug, only to turn into another cheezy FX spectacle at night when the juice wears off. A few lively gore effects momentarily distract you from the tedium and the creature; it's an awkwardly lumbering, seven-foot rubber insect with eighteen-inch talons that's not t-o-o scary. For completists who need to see everything with "Evil" in the title.

EVILSPEAK

★★★

1981/92 m/d: Eric Weston
 Military school nerd makes connec-