Written by Sean Abley
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In Part One of my interview with BITE MARKS writer/director Mark Bessenger, we talked about our earliest mental scars caused by horror cinema. In this second part, Bessenger gives me the lowdown on shooting a vampire (with a side of gay indie) comedy in the middle of Indiana.

SEAN ABLEY: You shot the film both in Los Angeles and Indiana. Why Indiana? Was it all about cost? Or were locations part of the decision? Neither? Both?

MARK BESSENGER: It was mainly about cost. I hired my cousin to be the unit production manager on the film, and she said her husband's family owned a big scrapyard where we could shoot for free! Well, I judged the cost of renting a junkyard location here in California where the actors could return home every night vs. the price of free locations and putting the actors up in a motel, and it was easy to see that Indiana was the place to be! Not only did we get *all* of our locations Indiana free, but we also got the semi-truck for free! It was win-win all the way around. The biggest expenses were putting the cast and crew up at a motel, but the manager gave us a 33% break on the room rates. That, and the meals. Everyone couldn't have been nicer and more accommodating to us, and the locations were great!

ABLEY: Did you do any local casting in Indiana? Or did you bring everyone out with you?

BESSENGER: I brought the three leads, two supporting players, the two-person makeup team, the production photographer and the associate producer with me. Everyone else (with the exception of the vampire girl, who was from Wisconsin), was found locally in Indiana.

ABLEY: Although I already know what it is because we've talked about it, tell the faithful Gay of the Dead readers about the biggest headache during your Indiana shoot.

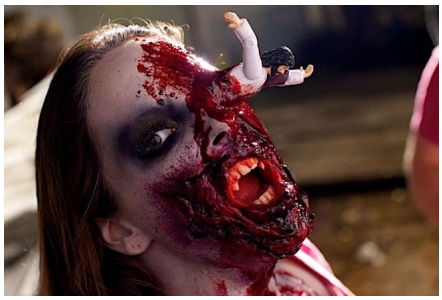
BESSENGER: There were many headaches (don't let a cast member bring his boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife or whatever along... *ever*), but without a doubt, it was the weather. With only a couple days' exception, the 17-day production was all night shoots.

Call time would be 7 p.m. with a pitch-black sky at ten o'clock. We would take a one-hour dinner break at midnight and then wrap around 4:30-5:00am because the birds would start chirping and ruin our sound.

Now, I had budgeted our time too tightly, thinking that there would be no problems, and left no room for contingency days. The shooting schedule was moderate, I thought, and we should have no problems getting all our shots each night. But I had not taken into account that in June, thunderstorms would be a problem. And they were. All the locations were exteriors, and the rain forced us to stop shooting again and again. Probably a third of our nights were interrupted by a sudden downpour, causing everyone to scramble, moving the lights under cover or breaking them down and stowing them away. It was a nightmare. Each night, I shot with one eye on the monitor and the other on my iPhone, constantly checking my Weather Channel app radar. We ended up falling so far behind, that we had to schedule a return trip to shoot for five more nights, which drove us over budget.

ABLEY: At some point you decided "BITE MARKS is going to be my first horror film with my new production company..." I think every filmmaker has a different reason for choosing their first film, so tell me how and why BITE MARKS percolated into Blakk Flamingo's horror debut.

BESSENGER: When a friend of mine and I decided to partner up and form a new production company, Blakk Flamingo Pictures, we knew we wanted our first film to be a horror film, as that was my main interest. I pitched the money man two ideas, and he liked them both, but he wanted gay characters in our first film, and while I could do that for BITE MARKS, I couldn't do it for the other idea. So, it was decided BITE MARKS would be our first movie!



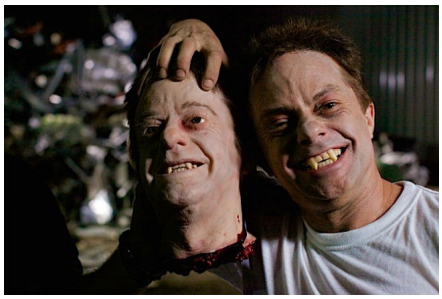
ABLEY: You cast Stephen Geoffreys in BITE MARKS. I've been a fan for a long time, and know he's had a tough time over the years, or at least that's my perception. Can you tell me about casting Stephen and how he was to work with?

BESSENGER: I was talking with Sam Parks of Monsterverse about whether or not today's films really needed the "name" factor that they did in the '80s and '90s. You know, where a film had to have some celebrity in it, regardless of their star power. That's why you had all of those straight-to-video films with Arte Johnson or Jamie Farr in them. Sam thought a name couldn't hurt, so we began talking about who would be good to approach. Tony Todd and Clu Gulager were mentioned, but then I thought that Stephen Geoffreys would be perfect. He was a horror film fan favorite, he'd done FRIGHT NIGHT, a classic vampire film, he was gay, and he was attempting a comeback. I contacted him on MySpace, sent him the script, and he loved it. Soon, he was part of the cast.

I flew him to Indiana from San Francisco, and he fell right in with everyone. He was a joy to work with, did his lines perfectly and endured a whole head casting for one of the film's makeup effects highlights. He also did a fight scene, rolling around in the mud! Because of the rain, he had to stay for two extra days with nothing to do, and he didn't complain once. Stephen was great!

ABLEY: Remember FRIGHT NIGHT, when Chris Sarandon holds his hand out to Stephen, offering him eternal life? I remember sitting in the theater watching that scene and thinking " *Yes! Do It!!* " and having a semi-bone. It must have been cool to be able to cast someone who is such a part of horror history.

BESSENGER: It was. Stephen was excited about playing a vampire again, too. And of course, there's a FRIGHT NIGHT reference in BITE MARKS that he was really tickled with. There was a scene in which his character climbs into the back of the trailer on the semi-truck. He walks into the back and disappears into the darkness. Suddenly, you hear Stephen scream and a fight happening. Stephen asked me if I wanted the trailer to rock during the fight. I said sure, and when he started screaming, he would *slam* himself against one wall, then the other. He really gave me a great performance.



ABLEY: Speaking of the cast, how about you speak of the cast? Tell me about some of the

folks you brought together for this film.

BESSENGER: Well, the first person cast was David Alanson, a mutual friend who actually inspired the role of Vogel, the mischievous boyfriend. David constantly has a big grin and a twinkle in his eye, and I thought he would be perfect for the part he helped me imagine. But he had to audition, and he did and I cast him immediately.

Another person I cast right away was Windham Beacham, the star of LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP and BACK SOON. He called me to see if the picture was union...it wasn't, and as he was SAG, he asked me to reconsider that by applying for the Screen Actors Guild's Low-Budget Film status. I was hesitant, but I told him to come in and audition anyway. Windham was the last person to read for the role of Cary, the cynical yet romantic, practical boyfriend. He commented on my FROGS t-shirt when he entered, mentioning that he was also a horror film fan. Well, his reading was spot on, and not only did he nail the character, he also got David to react to him, something that hadn't happened all day. So I had him read a few more scenes and offered him the part there on the spot.

Another actor who auditioned bailed on the part of Brewster, the sexually-confused trucker, so we had another round of auditions (some guys wouldn't come in because they didn't want to play a gay role), and that's when I met Benjamin Lutz. Tall, handsome and with a sexy Bruce Campbell quality, Benjamin really captured the trucker's innocence and befuddlement. I can't imagine anyone else playing those roles, now. A lot of the smaller parts were filled out by the others who tried out, including John Werskey, who auditioned for Cary but got cast as the mechanic who becomes a vampire.

ABLEY: On my brief visit to the set, I remember seeing poor Windham standing in a corner, mouth full of fake teeth so he couldn't talk, holding his pants in an attempt to keep them up but down far enough so that the makeup covering his lower back tattoo didn't rub off. Were your actors tortured for their art with the vampire makeup and effects?

BESSENGER: Well, "tortured" is such a negative term. Let's say they had lots of chances to push the boundaries of their acting experience. Actually, the actress playing the vampire girl probably got the worst of it. She underwent several long hours of pale body makeup, splattered with blood, fangs, foam latex appliances around her mouth and one boob, over one eye, her hair greased up and running around the entire movie bare-breasted in an open shirt and panties! The five men playing vampires also got body-painted, foam latex-ed, fanged and

bloodied, but not to the extent Krystal Main was.

Now, each of the three leads plus Stephen Geoffreys had a fight scene. David fought John on top of the trailer. Benjamin fought Stephen in a muddy section of the scrapyard, and Windham fought his enemy in a rocky spot and got a bucket of gooey maggots vomited onto him! But they all loved it and had a great time! Windham was especially happy getting dirty, bloodied and maggot-splattered!

ABLEY: CG vs. practical effects—preference? And what did you use on BITE MARKS?

BESSENGER: CG for weather, backgrounds, locations and inanimate objects is fine. Practicals should always be used for makeup effects and for people and animals. With a few rare exceptions, it just doesn't look natural when used to depict living things. On BITE MARKS, we actually did both. For the vampires, we had latex appliances on their faces and used fake blood, maggoty vomit, a steel rod through the body and, er...urine, when necessary. In editing, we used CG effects to enhance scenes with fire, smoke, camera flashes and lightning.

ABLEY: It's funny—it can be such a small world out here in Low Budget Land. Two of your actors' very next film was one I was working on, another one of your actors was in the last one I produced, and your editor was our editor on PORNOGRAPHY: A THRILLER. At one point I sort of dreamed of having a rep company like Cassavetes or Soderbergh, using the same people over and over again. Are you "family" minded, or do you want a whole new crop for the next one?

BESSENGER: I do like working with some of the same people over and over, largely because you have already created bonds and friendships with them and you know what they can do, so that makes it easier on me as a director the next time out, because I know these people will do their jobs and don't have to be babysat as much. But I believe that new blood is important, so I do like to bring new talent into the mix to shake up the dynamic. I'd say I like it to be about half

and half. And I do like to cast returning actors in different kinds of roles so they can push their boundaries and play things they might not otherwise get a chance to play.

ABLEY: BITE MARKS is your first film that will be (presumably) distributed widely. Any thoughts on the distribution business these days? With DVDs on their way out, have you considered VOD and PPV, and possibly self distribution?

BESSENGER: We will be hitting the film festival circuit with the movie, and with its crossing of genres, we feel that we can get it into both horror and gay fests. Of course, we will also be examining the VOD and PPV markets and a DVD release is definitely in our future. I don't think we will have to self-distribute, but we are prepared if that's the route the film has to go.

ABLEY: I just saw a film by one of our horror royalty, and it was awful, incomprehensible. In fact, the latest output by several of our horror bigwigs has been really mediocre, if not downright crappy. Do you think it's possible for horror writer/directors to keep their edge for three-or-more decades? I'd be interested to know who you think still has it.

BESSENGER: It's possible, but I think it's difficult. What scares us as 20-year-olds probably isn't going to be the same as what scares us as 50-year-olds. I think some directors will be able to keep the horror fresh, as there are some universal fears that transcend generations. As for who still has "it", that's tough to say, as most of the directors I admired during their early works have gone on to other genres, so it's difficult to pick who has kept their edge. Perhaps it's a good thing, as it leaves the field open for new talent. I'm a big fan of Adam Green right now, although it's interesting that his horror style of filmmaking is often described as "old school."

ABLEY: THE WALKING DEAD just premiered (awesome!) And it makes me think back to the good ol' days, when the broadcast networks would routinely make horror Movies of the Week (SATAN'S SCHOOL FOR GIRLS), or miniseries (SALEM'S LOT), or full-on genre series like THRILLER. I know we've had quite a few genre series in the past couple decades, but nothing has kept me as entertained or scared as that original broadcast of SALEM'S LOT. Have any thoughts on TV horror?

BESSENGER: It's good to see that TV horror is still doing well. TRUE BLOOD is basically DARK SHADOWS with more blood and hot sex. DEXTER is a well-written show with gore. It's

interesting that the best horror shows are the ones that run on cable. I think the freedom from censorship boards allows writers to explore more horrific themes.

When you get a show on network TV, you have to limit yourself, stunt your own creativity, because if you don't, Standards and Practices will do it for you. It's interesting that all the horror shows on television now are all serials. There isn't a TWILIGHT ZONE, OUTER LIMITS or NIGHT GALLERY-type anthology show currently airing, is there? The last one we got, MASTERS OF HORROR, was so hit-and-miss that it became a chore to watch. And even though it originated on cable, one of the best episodes, Takashi Miike's IMPRINT, wasn't even allowed to air on Showtime! I'd love to see the return of a well-written anthology series to television.

ABLEY: And what are you up to next?

BESSENGER: I have two projects circling over the pre-production start line, just waiting for the green light. One is a gay romantic WWII drama and the other is a serious horror film set on a farm. Whichever one gets their money in the bank first is the one that I go with. (Laughs.) After all, you can't say "horror" without "whore!"

(For more on BITE MARKS, go here or visit the BITE MARKS Facebook page .

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