

Gay of the Dead: A conversation with Documentarian Jeffrey Schwarz, Part Two

Written by Sean Abley
Thursday, 29 December 2011 10:24



In the [first part](#) of my conversation with documentarian Jeffrey Schwarz, we chatted about SPINE TINGLER! THE WILLIAM CASTLE STORY, as well as his FRIDAY THE 13TH and A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET documentaries. In this installment, we discuss the passing of New Line, the obstacles for indie filmmakers, and Divine!

FANG: On another subject, I think the destruction of New Line Cinema is the biggest blow to the horror genre of the last, oh, twenty years. The fact that New Line is gone is a tragedy to me.

SCHWARZ: I agree with you. I mean, it still exists, there's still a New Line. But no Bob Shaye.

FANG: Exactly. I mean, they're so tied. For good or for bad, he really was that company. I just feel like that's a real darn shame.

SCHWARZ: Well, it is a darn shame, they had a quite a rich legacy. The movies are still there, the movies are still up on the shelf. But the personality of the studio was Bob Shaye and all the people he surrounded himself with, and the history. That was a forty year history right there. And they're still making movies, but they don't have...there's like a staff of seven people there. I'm not even sure why it exists at this point. I'm glad it exists. The name is still out there, [but] it's basically Warner Brothers now.

FANG: I guess I could see it coming when it got super meta during NEW NIGHTMARE, when the film became about the studio. Which I loved, but to me it was sort of the signal that perhaps Icarus is flying a little too high.

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SCHWARZ: It's all about shareholders, it's all about stock prices, it's all about stuff we don't care so much about, but that have the impact on why things happen. I don't think it had anything to do with the quality of films, or the profitability of films. I mean, come on, as soon as New Line closed, they had one of their biggest hits with SEX AND THE CITY. It wasn't about their generating revenue; it was about these big studios reining in their independent arms. They virtually closed down all the independent arms of the studios.

We have a big problem among the independently-minded filmmakers. Who's going to put out your movie? Who's going to pay for your movie, and who's going to distribute your movie? So the genre is really hurting because we only have a few players left. Most great horror films, as you know, come from a bunch of kids who want to make a movie. All your favorites, I'm sure, and my favorites are home grown movies like TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE or REANIMATOR or NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD. Could that happen now? I don't know. I think the filmmakers would have to do all the leg work, and really have to do a roadshow with it. I can't think of any real classics from the last ten or fifteen years on the level of REANIMATOR.

FANG: How do I want to put this? There are the big hits that are homegrown, like BLAIR WITCH or PARANORMAL ACTIVITY, things like that that explode. But I can't think of one small movie that has, quote unquote, production value that got big.

SCHWARZ: Yeah, maybe like CABIN FEVER, maybe something like that. I don't know. It's just really, really difficult right now for anybody trying to make anything independent. I don't know how it's all going to shake out. Like, where's the next Kevin Smith going to come from? Even for somebody like him, it's really difficult for filmmakers to be nurtured, or to make a breakout movie. It does happen, but it's very, very rare.

FANG: Unfortunately it's "Oh, you made a movie for \$50,000? Here, make another movie for \$50,000."

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SCHWARZ: PARANORMAL was made for nothing – I mean, the sound mix cost more than the movie itself. What did the studio do? They created a division to make microbudget features. So the studios are in this game now. They know they can pick up a movie for nothing, but they have to market it. You can make a movie for \$100,000 and it can be brilliant, but you're gonna spend twenty times that on marketing, and no indie filmmaker can afford that. I thought the PARANORMAL campaign was kind of genius. The movie is what it is, but I loved the campaign. The thing was just sort of discovered lying around somewhere and you had to call the theater to tell them you wanted to see it – I thought that was good, old school (marketing). That's classic exploitation film. It can still be done. It's really hard to know what the upside—with DVDs, it would be a big DVD sale. But that doesn't exist anymore. So where's the economic incentive for somebody to make a low budget movie? I don't know how people do it.

FANG: Well, some of us don't any more. Changing gears a bit, let's talk about your Divine documentary.

SCHWARZ: Yes! I AM DIVINE is in production. The movie is authorized by Divine's mom (before she passed away, we did an interview with her) and by John Waters; we got the blessing of the Pope of Trash himself. I wouldn't have moved forward without his blessing. Divine has so many fans all around the world, and I've been really encouraged by all the feedback we've been getting from the fans. This is a movie made by fans for fans, and it's gonna be great. Hopefully, that will be out on the festival circuit sometime next year.

FANG: Did you find you had to do more of a song and dance to get people to talk to you due to Bernard Jay's book, NOT SIMPLY DIVINE, being so reviled by everyone?

SCHWARZ: I don't know Bernard Jay personally, but I do know that after Divine died the book came out, and Divine wasn't around to refute any of it. And I guess he won't be around to refute any of my (film), either. But the main thing in getting people to talk to you is trust, and I try to make movies that make these people into heroes. William Castle is a hero. Divine is a hero. Especially now – it's the ultimate "It Gets Better" video. Divine has the last laugh on all those people who picked on him in high school. I want to make a really entertaining, hilarious, touching, poignant, ridiculous, over-the-top documentary. I like to say I make documentaries for people who don't normally watch documentaries.

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Today there really isn't a big distinction now in the culture between a doc and a feature. People will pay money to go see a documentary in the theater. You just have to hook into a great story and a great character that people are going to respond to. There are the Divine fans that are already out there who worship and adore John Waters films and Divine, and there's this whole new generation who this might be new to them. That actually, is really exciting; to kind of bring the John Waters aesthetic and Divine's aesthetic and life into the 21st century.

FANG: If a documentary about Vogue (THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE) or Joan Rivers (JOAN RIVERS: A PIECE OF WORK) can open in theaters, why not a Divine documentary?

SCHWARZ: Yes, exactly. Divine ate shit, so we don't have to.

FANG: You just had a doc open to some really great reviews – VITO, about Vito Russo who wrote, among other things, THE CELLULOID CLOSET.

SCHWARZ: There's actually some appeal there for horror fans. We do talk in the film about Vito's take on how gay and lesbian characters in the 30's, 40's and 50's, when they appeared, there were a lot of horror movie conventions around their appearances. Aside from actually being vampires and murderers, they're usually a sinister presence in a lot of films.



FANG: So there are some scholarly genre references.

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SCHWARZ: Yes, scholarly genre reference.

FANG: [*Laughs*] I just made that up.

(For more of Jeffrey Schwarz's work, check out [Automat Pictures](#), the I AM DIVINE [page](#), the I AM DIVINE Fundraising

[page](#)

and the [SPINE TINGLER: THE WILLIAM CASTLE STORY](#)

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