The filmmaking duo the Vicious Brothers (Colin Minihan and Stuart Ortiz) had a found-footage hit last year with GRAVE ENCOUNTERS, and now they’re back with GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2. And as they discuss below, they didn’t just repeat themselves, but adopted a new approach to mock-documentary horror filmmaking.

GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2 (now on VOD and opening in select theaters today from Tribeca Film), written by the Vicious duo and directed by John Poliquin (the trio also edited), centers on arrogant film student Alex Wright (Richard Harmon), an aspiring horror auteur who becomes obsessed with uncovering the secrets behind the first GRAVE ENCOUNTERS. After a mysterious someone sends him evidence that its events were real and not staged, he begins an investigation that ultimately leads him and his friends back to the haunted asylum where the first movie was shot. There, they find out that the horrors documented in the original ENCOUNTERS have been waiting for fresh victims…

FANGORIA: At what point did you decide to do a follow-up to GRAVE ENCOUNTERS?

STUART ORTIZ: Honestly, it had been such a long, hard road getting the first one made and

trying to get distribution—from coming up with the idea to actually having it released was like a year and a half, two years—and by the time we were out of that, the last thing we were thinking about was GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2. We were working on other projects, but after the movie came out and was successful, we started talking to Tribeca about the sequel idea. The main thing holding us back was that we didn’t want to do it unless we could do something we really believed in and thought was cool. We didn’t want to do a sequel just to do a sequel. It would have been very easy just to rehash the first movie and do something derivative. Sequels, especially horror sequels, are notorious for just being horrible most of the time. But it was nice working with Tribeca because they basically gave us carte blanche to do whatever we wanted to, and said, “We trust you guys. Whatever you want to do, we’re into it.” That was freeing, so we said, “Let’s just do something really weird and outside the box.”

FANG: It looks like you had a much bigger budget on this one. You have more special FX and more locations.

COLIN MINIHAN: Yeah, we had 10 times the budget. We didn’t really *have* a budget on the first one.

FANG: GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2 is kind of a meta-commentary, in some senses almost a satire, of found-footage horror films. How did you approach that side of the story, and setting the right tone?

MINIHAN: When we came up with the idea for a sequel we could get the most excited about, it fell into that meta nature. We’ve heard THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE II does something meta, and people are comparing [the films], but I’ll bet it doesn’t go anywhere near the direction our movie does. We were trying to strike a balance of familiarity and completely new territory, while expanding on the storyline and further fleshing out the character of the building, and I believe we achieved that. I think fans of the first film who didn’t get enough answers will get them in the sequel, and be satisfied with the results.

FANG: You also satirize horror filmmaking and aspiring moviemakers in your lead character, Alex.

ORTIZ: We knew from the beginning that we wanted to make this more of a young, hip film,

with younger characters. We figured we’d have them be kids in college, and that led to, “Well, if the kid’s going to know about [GRAVE ENCOUNTERS], let’s have him be into film.” And I said, “Let’s have him be a film student, that’d be even better.” And the character just sort of wrote himself. It really came down to the decision early on, when we were coming up with the concept, that it would be fun to open the movie with actual YouTube reviews of the first movie, which accomplishes two things: If you haven’t seen the first movie, it literally tells you what that’s about, and it’s also a fun commentary on that film. Then the decision was: Do we make Alex like the movie or not like it? Once we said that he doesn’t like the movie, that defined the role. I think he’s a fun character. He’s who we were at one point, probably—just kind of a pretentious, know-it-all filmmaker kid.

MINIHAN: He embodied the 18-year-old versions of Stuart and I.

ORTIZ: For sure. And it just seemed fun. It was a good opportunity to have this kid who has his own ideas about movies, and wants to make a horror film, but hasn’t found his voice yet. And through the process of the movie, he finally does find his voice and is able to make the film he wanted to make.

FANG: You also poke a little fun at other horror trends; Alex’s student films satirize post-SCREAM slasher movies and torture porn.

ORTIZ: Oh, completely.

MINIHAN: We wanted to have scenes that weren’t completely reliant on found footage, so showing pieces of his films is a fun lead-in to the real horror that the audience gets in the

second and third acts.

FANG: And of course, you poke fun at yourselves in one scene.

MINIHAN: Yes, that was funny. I got to be an actor for a day. I don’t know how they do it.

FANG: Was it any easier going back to the same asylum location the second time, or more difficult staging the bigger and more elaborate FX scenes?

MINIHAN: Well, you’d think with 10 times the budget it would be simpler, but… I mean, 10 times the budget sounds huge, but at the end of the day, this is still a very small, independent film. We pushed the schedule as far as we could, but all the gags we had written were not easy to execute, and took a lot of time. We had worked with our director, John Poliquin, before in the music-video and commercial world, and knew he had a great technical understanding and could pull off the script on budget and under the time constraints. It was a testament to him that he finished every day pretty close to on time, and just keep battling. But more money doesn’t make things easier. There are more problems that come up, and GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2 was not an easy film to make by any means.

FANG: Why did you decide not to direct the sequel yourselves?

ORTIZ: The main reason was that at the time the film was fully greenlighted and about to go into production, Colin and I were working on this “proof of concept” trailer for a film we’ve written, and are hoping to close the financing on before the end of the year, and that in itself was a pretty elaborate production. We were shooting for three days, and then we were in postproduction for a long time; it has 3D in it and stuff like that. So right at the time we were going into production [on GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2], we were also trying to finish this thing, and we didn’t want to compromise having to juggle these two things. We knew John is a great director, he’s a fan of the first movie and he’s just a friend. So it was like, “We don’t have to direct it, but we can still be involved.” And we were. We were there for most of the shoot, and co-edited the movie; we actually had editing suites on location in the hospital, so around day two we were cutting scenes. It wasn’t like we said, “Here! Go do it!” and had no involvement.

FANG: Has that hospital location achieved any kind of notoriety since the first movie came out? Have people tried get inside?

MINIHAN: I’m sure people, regardless of the film, try to break into that place all the time. There are always broken windows, so I’m assuming this film is only going to further its mystique. We set the first movie in Maryland and created a fictitious hospital, but obviously, with the meta nature of the sequel, we wanted to present it as the real place. But the actual name is always bleeped out [of the dialogue], and that was a lot of fun in postproduction, trying to make it as believable as possible: bleeping out names, locations and certain things you could never do in a traditional film.

FANG: In GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2, you note that all the people who took part in the original are dead; for example, you talk about Merwin Mondesir leaving behind his wife and kids. How did those actors feel about being killed off in “real life,” so to speak?

MINIHAN: I don’t even think they know [*laughs*]. I guess they’ll find out and we’ll get some nasty e-mails.

ORTIZ: I think Ashleigh [Gryzko] knows.

MINIHAN: Yeah, Ashleigh knows. I might have mentioned something to Merwin, I’m not too sure. But I think it helps further the story. Maybe they’ll be back for the third one. You never know.

FANG: A couple of the BLAIR WITCH PROJECT actors have told stories about people thinking they were actually dead based on that film. I’m just wondering if those actors are worried that people might not try to cast them if they see GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2 and think they’re deceased…

ORTIZ: I hope those people think that. Not for that reason, but that would be really f**king hilarious.

MINIHAN: I think people are smarter than that by now! I mean, found footage was new when BLAIR WITCH came out, but it’s been around a while now, so if you’re thinking it’s real, you might want to take a film course or something.

FANG: How did you go about casting the new movie?

MINIHAN: We worked with the same casting director from the first film, a Vancouver local named Laura Brooke-Toplass. It was pretty easy. The whole cast is Canadian, because the movie was shot in Vancouver, even though some of it takes place in the U.S. We landed some very talented young actors. Richard Harmon is amazing, and his partners in crime, Leanne Lapp and Dylan Playfair… I wouldn’t call them undiscovered talent—they’ve done TV and movies and stuff—but with Vancouver actors, sometimes they’ll get bit roles in series but never really lead stuff, so it’s awesome to give them an opportunity that they’re worthy of.

FANG: It’s fun to see Sean Rogerson come back as a very different Lance Preston. Was that part of the sequel concept from the beginning?

ORTIZ: Definitely. Working with Sean on the first movie was a pleasure. He’s a real pro, a great actor and we had a lot of fun working with him. We’ve maintained a tight friendship with him since then, and we were always joking with Sean, even from the very beginning, “If we do the sequel, you’re definitely going to be in it.” He was like, “How is that even possible?” And I said, “We don’t know, but we’re going to make it happen.” Once we actually got to the stage of thinking about ideas, it was a no-brainer. It was a fun opportunity to show Sean’s range, because in the first movie, he’s kind of this douchey guy who starts to go a little crazy at the end, and this was an opportunity to take it further. And the great thing about working with Sean is that he’s fearless. He was just like, “Hell, yeah! Let’s do it, boys! If we’re gonna do crazy, let’s take it *real* far!” He was very committed. He was losing weight for like three months before we went into production, going on those crazy diets where you, like, eat nothing. He lost

30 pounds for the role.

FANG: What are your feelings about the found-footage horror trend in general? Is GRAVE ENCOUNTERS 2 kind of a last word on the subject, or do you think it still has further possibilities?

ORTIZ: I think there are definitely a ton of possibilities. I mean, just because there are a ton of found-footage movies out there, you got a lot of people asking the same thing: “Is found footage done? Are people tired of it?” I think it comes down to, it’s just a new subgenre of horror, and will probably become an approach to other genres as well. CHRONICLE took a science-fiction/superhero slant on it. It just comes down to whether the movie’s good, and people will enjoy it and want to see it. If people get burned out, it’s for the same reason they get burned out on horror movies in general: There’s not a lot of good ones. They’re easy to make, and there’s a ton of crap out there, and now that’s what’s happening with found footage. It’s getting more popular and well-known as a device, and more people are coming out of the woodwork with their mom’s camera and just shooting something. It just comes down to being good or not.

MINIHAN: A decent screenplay that can grab an audience is what it comes down to, regardless to the style of storytelling. It could be a found-footage film or a traditional narrative; as long as the story and the characters are good, people are going to enjoy the film.

FANG: What do you have coming up next?

MINIHAN: We actually had a call earlier today with a company in LA about our next project. We’re hoping to go into production early next year. It’s a sci-fi/horror film, and it’s not found footage, and we’re hoping to make it genuinely terrifying.

ORTIZ: We have to remain tight-lipped about it right now, but suffice to say it’s called THE VISITORS, and it may have something to do with alien abduction.

MINIHAN: We want to bring something fresh to the horror genre. Stu and I are giant horror

fans, and we’re dying for the opportunity to make another film that’s outside the GRAVE ENCOUNTERS world. It seems that we may get that opportunity, so we’re looking forward to jumping back on set, behind a camera and getting our hands dirty again.