

## Brian Yuzna: High on "SOCIETY"

Written by Brian Kirst

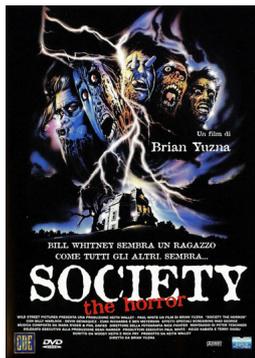
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Well-known for his association with Stuart Gordon on *RE-ANIMATOR*, *FROM BEYOND* and *DAGON*, eclectic filmmaker Brian Yuzna began his directing career with 1989's mindbending social allegory *SOCIETY*. Beloved for its orgiastic, flesh-bending "shunting" sequence (highlighted by Screaming Mad George's incredible FX), *SOCIETY* will be presented at Chicago's Terror in the Aisles 13 (see full details below) this Friday, November 30. In preparation for his guest appearance at the event, Yuzna talked to FANGORIA about *SOCIETY*'s evolution.

**FANGORIA:** After becoming known as a producer on *RE-ANIMATOR* with Stuart Gordon, you directed two cult favorites, *SOCIETY* and *BRIDE OF RE-ANIMATOR*, in 1989. Talk about a home run!



**BRIAN YUZNA:** I thought [when I started] directing that I may not be any good at it, and that will be that. They say most people make two movies: their first and their last. You don't have any more chances if it's not a home run. So I wanted to make sure I got a couple of chances. I made a deal with the guys for two movies: I told them one would be the *RE-ANIMATOR* sequel, but I wanted that to be the second one. If my first movie was no good, at least I wanted to get a second shot. So I looked for a project, and this guy, Rick Fry, gave me a script called *SOCIETY* that he had written with Woody Keith. When I read it, I really liked its paranoid atmosphere. That's what attracted me.

**FANG:** How did the script evolve once you became involved?

**YUZNA:** I'm into fantastic stuff. I like weird stuff. And this wasn't weird enough. I said I wanted to do some effects and things I'd never seen before. So I imagined what kind of effects I would

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like to see on screen. I thought of flesh molding together—that’s what I’d like to see! So it began with that image, and I developed the script with Woody and Rick. I’m the kind of guy who starts with inspiration. It doesn’t necessarily have to be mine; if somebody has an idea and there’s an image or situation I like, I’ll try to find the logic to it within the story. With SOCIETY, there was a lot in there that I was able to pull out and make sense of, in kind of a story-logic way.

Some stuff never did make sense. Like, for example, the whole hair-eating thing. I still don’t know what that’s all about. But I tried to make some sense out of it. I attempted to bring out the political aspect and came up with a whole mythology. I tried to bring out the incest stuff, play it out a little clearer. And then I wanted to make the shunting scene this incredible phantasmagoria. That’s kind of a surrealist approach to things. In surrealism, you trust your subconscious. There’s an ascetic connective quality to things—a poetry that, if you pull it out far enough, you can put into a narrative level that makes sense.

For instance, I am very much into mythology. I just invented a whole mythology for the blue bloods—how they’re a different race, a different species. That was never in the original script, which was a paranoid story about this kid whose parents have a secret life that involves him being sacrificed, but the basis stayed the same. It was an interpretation in a different genre, to me. The core is just the alienation that we feel from our families, sometimes. Or at least, I did when I was that age. I think today, people don’t seem so alienated from their families, from their parents.

**FANG:** How did Screaming Mad George play into this vision?

**YUZNA:** Well, George was the main collaborator for the movie. Of course, it began with Woody and Rick and the script. The company that was producing SOCIETY was Wild Street; the two producers were Keith Walley and Paul White. They were Brits, but Paul lived in Japan; back then in the late ’80s, Japan was just full of money, and Paul got the money there to finance Wild Street. Screaming Mad George is Japanese, and they said, “If you could work with this guy, it would be great. It would be like giving something back to the financiers.” I met him and he was really into surrealism. He had all this surrealist art! We got along instantly, and just jumped in and started evolving the whole shunting thing from a visual perspective. George was really into the poetry of the images in SOCIETY, and sculpting the stuff. We would come up with ideas, and boom—he’d make them! I was always trying to make the images somehow fit the narrative, but you can see during the shunting and other scenes that some of his stuff gets pretty far out there! Like the psychiatrist with the hand face!

**FANG:** Your lead, Billy Warlock, came from mainstream television; he had been a regular on HAPPY DAYS and soap operas. How did he react to the atmosphere you created?

**YUZNA:** Billy was great. It was a good thing we got him. I didn't have any credibility; the producer didn't have much experience. It wasn't a big company, it wasn't known. We were doing a low-budget film and nobody involved had any track record. So it was hard for us looking for a cast, especially for a script as weird as that. The fact that we got Billy Warlock, as experienced as he was—we were really lucky to get someone of his caliber. He was very good. He saw it as a lead and completely committed to it. I never got one iota of feeling from him that wasn't complete, positive commitment. It was a good part for him, really.

**FANG:** True. The late horror writer Chas. Balun, who is well-known to FANGORIA readers, was also involved in the film.

**YUZNA:** Chas. I knew because he was a super horror guy and had a magazine called *Deep Red*. He was a writer and movie critic/journalist who was just crazy for hardcore horror! I met him after RE-ANIMATOR, because he did some articles on that. He did set visits to write articles on SOCIETY, and ended up being in the shunting scene. But then, everybody was in the shunting that we could pull in! It was the crew and their friends. When I look at that sequence, there are paid extras there, but at least half of the people are friends, family and crew. We didn't really have a lot of money to hire people, and when you do a big scene like that, you just try to get anyone you can to show up.

**FANG:** Is the shunting sequence what you remember the most from that project?

**YUZNA:** As I was filming it, I thought, “I can't believe I'm getting to do this. I can't believe no one is saying, ‘Excuse me. Could you please defend this?’ ” Nobody ever asked what the point of it was. Nobody ever challenged it. The shunting is one of the great highlights for me of all the times I've been on movies. We did it over a period of three or four days. I remember putting a sign up, over the set, of that famous quote “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!” I felt like I was really living the dream. It was so far out-there. It was very stressful, of course. It wasn't easy, but I knew that there were a lot of moviemakers out there who were going to wonder how I got to do that! I was just amazed—I came up with an idea and did it, and nobody stopped me!

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**FANG:** That thought could probably sum up many of your very imaginative films!

**YUZNA:** I guess a lot of times, the financing I got wasn't from typical companies. I didn't have to deal with checks and balances and all that. It was kind of a “just us chickens” vibe [ *aughs* ]. We just got to do whatever we felt like doing!

Terror in the Aisles 13 will be held this Friday, Nov. 30 at the Portage Theater, 4050 N. Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago. Yuzna will appear for free autographs and photos. Doors open at 7 p.m.; feature presentations, in addition to SOCIETY, include Don Coscarelli's PHANTASM, Dario Argento's THE BIRD WITH CRYSTAL PLUMAGE and Ryan Oliver's AIR CONDITIONS. There will be a live charity auction for [Vital Bridges](#). Tickets are \$12 for pre-sale, available on-line [here](#).