

A “FEAST” for the Senses

Written by Michael Gingold

Wednesday, 05 January 2011 13:24



Sometimes the desire for revenge is so strong you can taste it, and that’s certainly the case in BITTER FEAST, the co-production of Larry Fessenden’s Glass Eye Pix and Dark Sky Films that hits DVD from the latter company this week. Drawing inspiration from a dismissive restaurant review in *The New York Times*, independent writer/director Joe Maggio took a step away from his usual relationship dramas to create a sharp suspense shocker of culinary payback. Fango sat down with Maggio to discuss the ingredients that went into the film.

BITTER FEAST (see review [here](#)) stars James LeGros as Peter Grey, an obsessive restaurant chef who loses both his kitchen and a TV-show gig after food blogger J.T. Franks (Joshua Leonard) tears him down on-line. Believing his life ruined, Peter abducts J.T. and puts him through a series of cooking-based trials, to impose upon him a gory lesson about what it takes to be a true gourmet...



FANGORIA: How did you first make the jump into the genre with this project?

JOE MAGGIO: I hadn’t really thought about it until Larry [pictured at right with Maggio on the film’s location] got in touch. It was one of those great, unusual situations, where he called me and said, “There’s money, do you have any horror scripts? Do you have anything that you’d like to do in the genre?” And I said, “Yes I do, but it needs a polish; can I have a week?” I hung up the phone and started racking my brain for what I could possibly come up with, and I remembered a couple of years prior reading that review in the *Times*—Frank Bruni [criticizing] Gordon Ramsey’s London Hotel, which was going to be his first restaurant in New York—and creating these characters and writing a dramatic story based on that.

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FANG: So BITTER FEAST wasn't influenced by any particular reviews you might have gotten on previous films?

MAGGIO: No, not at all. I think, though, that everything is personal when you're writing a story. I always look at my own life as sort of a litmus test if something rings true, if it's authentic—"Well, how would I feel?" I think most writers and filmmakers do that.

FANG: How was it working with the Glass Eye team?

MAGGIO: It was fantastic—and I say this all the time, Larry probably thinks I'm just brown-nosing him, but it really is true: They took my filmmaking to another level. Before BITTER FEAST, I had made three indie dramas that had done well at Sundance and on cable, in art-house theaters, won awards and stuff, but I was definitely a screenwriter who would go and direct his own movies. I learned the craft of filmmaking on this one, especially when it came to the stunts and FX. Everyone has to know exactly what they're doing, because the blood has to come out at just the right time and in the right spot. Or if someone's swinging a cast iron pan and you want to make it look like it's hitting someone in the face, you can't just have the actors wing it; you'll have to have worked it through and know where they're going to fall because the pads have to be there for them. And Larry was very supportive; I would consult with him, and he would sort of tell me how an effect might work better or if he saw me setting something up that wasn't going to really pan out. He's got very strong opinions on what should be done, but ultimately, he leaves it up to the filmmaker, and I had all the freedom in the world. He also made sure that an hour before we wrapped, there were two giant coolers packed with ice and beers for the crew. It was a great situation.



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FANG: How did you arrive at the actors you chose for the three leads?

MAGGIO: It’s funny—James LeGros had worked with Larry on *THE LAST WINTER*, and when we were thinking of who we might cast, I said, “Do you think James would do it?” And Larry said, “I’ll call him and see.” So he called, a couple of weeks passed and he told me, “I haven’t heard back from James, he must be busy or not interested or something.” So we started hunting around for different people and didn’t get far, and I asked, “Can you try James one more time?” So he did, and James answered and was like, “I’d love to do it!” Apparently, he had never gotten the first message, so it was a lesson learned: Always call at least twice, ’cause you never know.

With Peter in place, I knew I wanted J.T. to resemble him physically in some way, because one of the things I was playing with was that although these guys are enemies and have locked horns, they are very similar, and that’s part of what fuels their competition. I had just seen Joshua Leonard in *HUMPDAY*, and I thought he and James could almost be brothers. I felt that might be interesting, and he agreed to do it—and Josh knew Amy Seimetz, he had just worked with her, so he called her to play his wife, and she wanted to do it. Also, Larry had worked with Owen Campbell, who plays Peter’s older brother who tortures him in the flashback, so we got Owen, and then his younger brother Tobias is an actor as well and looks like he could be a young James LeGros, so it was absolutely perfect how that worked out.



FANG: And what about chef Mario Batali, who has a cameo—how did that happen?

MAGGIO: Larry’s kids go to the same school as Batali’s son, so he would see Batali around, and he just approached him and Batali said yes right away. I think he thought it was something that would never happen, but we just stayed after him and he remained true to his word. We

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had to wait a while to get him because of his schedule—we had the entire movie [shot] and there was this one hole, the Batali scene, and we got that several months after principal photography wrapped. That was one of my proudest accomplishments, just working with Mario Batali. I’m a big foodie; I love cooking, and I admire Batali in the way I admire Ingmar Bergman. The guy is a poet of the stomach, he’s absolutely a genius, so to be able to work with him was fantastic.

FANG: And what does he think of the film?

MAGGIO: He loves it. I think he appreciated that the stuff with the food seems real; he feels like that’s actually how it is in the restaurant world. He thought it was accurate, he thought it was scary, he thought his performance was great and I think it is too; he did a great job and has been very supportive of the movie.

FANG: Do you want to continue doing horror films?

MAGGIO: I would love to—though I would love to have a little more time on the next one. You know, I’m used to doing seven or eight takes, one right after the other, just keep going. The actors always loved that because they don’t like sitting around; they’d rather be on their feet working, doing scenes from morning till night, than sitting around for several hours while a shot is set up, and that scenario is unavoidable in a horror film. I’m sure there are cases where it isn’t, but on this kind of show where there are effects and blood gags and knives and things, it takes time to set those up, and it’s nerve-wracking because you only get a couple of takes.

But I would love to do it again. I’m totally with Larry on this: I believe the horror genre is a perfect forum for telling stories about the human condition, because unless you’re someone who has lived a charmed life and never suffered and never known pain or loss, life can be hard—it can be horrific. In the same way that we’ll always need stories as a society, intelligent horror is a fantastic means for telling stories about what it means to be a human being. I’ve got a few ideas moving around my brain; they’re psychological, like BITTER FEAST, rooted in everyday concerns and anxieties that are taken to an extreme.

{comments on}

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