

Brett Rickaby: Crazy for “BEREAVEMENT”

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 18 March 2011 11:14



There are many reasons to feel BEREAVEMENT while watching Stevan Mena’s new horror film (opening in more theaters today; go [here](#) for the lineup), and most of them stem from the actions of its villain, Graham Sutter. Played by Brett Rickaby, Sutter not only kidnaps young women and murders them in his abandoned-slaughterhouse home, but forces his abducted preteen “protégé, Martin Bristol (Spencer List), to witness these hideous acts. It’s the first lead and the most attention-grabbing part yet for Rickaby, a veteran of numerous screen and stage roles previously most recognizable to horror fans as the jailed, raving Bill Farnum in THE CRAZIES.

FANGORIA: How did you get involved with BEREAVEMENT—was it something Mena sought you out for, or did you just come in to audition?

BRETT RICKABY: This actually came as an offer, and it was kind of an interesting surprise. I was in New York—it was my first time back there in like nine, 10 years—doing this new Sam Sheperd piece at the Public Theater. I’ve always been a tremendous Sheperd fan, and I got to play a quintessential Sam Sheperd male, which was just thrilling for me. We had just finished that, and I got on a flight home and literally, as we landed on the tarmac, I turned my phone back on, and there was a message. I called my manager, who said, “There’s an offer for you for this movie.” “Uh...what?!” [*Laughs*] It’s not something I’ve been accustomed to. So I read the script, I called up Stevan and we started a dialogue. I know I’m not the first one it was offered to, but I think if you were to ask Stevan, he was glad it ended up the way it did. And I am, that’s for sure!



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FANG: Did being on the incredibly creepy locations Mena found for the film help with your performance?

RICKABY: Oh yeah, that atmosphere definitely made it easy. But also, Stevan had written one of the most emotionally dynamic characters I’d ever read, and other than giving me the opportunity to do it, which I’ll always be grateful to Stevan for—as an actor, it was a tremendous playground. It was huge. I had been practicing emotional range in my work, and resiliency, and when I read this role, I knew I was going to need that. I had been asking for something like that to come along, and was grateful for the opportunity to jump into it.

FANG: How was it working with Spencer List as young Martin?

RICKABY: Oh, man, he was totally professional. He knew it was just acting, but that didn’t keep him from totally engaging. One of the first scenes we did together was the one in the kitchen, where I run the knife through his hand. From an acting standpoint, that’s one of my favorite moments. Prior to that, we didn’t have a lot of communication, because we wanted it to be vital and alive, and fully realized in the moment. So we got a lot out of that, and from then on, we were able to fully commit and engage while we were working, and when the camera was off and we were away, to just hang out and have fun. He loved the whole thing, the whole process, and when he knew a death was coming up, he would find a thrill in it. When you’d tell him something like that was gonna happen, he’d be like, “Awesome!” [*Laughs*] He’d be so into it, and I really got a kick out of that. And it’s just tremendous work on his part too.

FANG: Was there any sensitivity about him being so young and being exposed to the violent moments, or even the intensity of your performance?

RICKABY: Well, Spencer seemed to have an ability to build resilience; he was able to put himself in those situations, fully go through them, and then sort of wipe them away, like, “Well, that was just a dream.” There was a detachment from it that he was able to handle. The one I was concerned about was Chase [Pechacek], who played the younger Martin. We didn’t have him do as much of that stuff, except the scene where I drag a knife across his cheek. And you know, there was a delicate balance there—between being sensitive to what this could do to a child’s psyche, even though you’re letting him know that we’re just playing, that we’re just doing this for the sake of telling the story—but at the same time, it can’t be so safe that there’s no

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drama involved. So it was a really delicate balance. Sometimes you can go too far to make something real, and then you have to make it OK, and then sometimes it's too OK, so there's nothing at stake.

How does that affect them from here on? I don't know. I can tell you that this whole experience has affected me, in a really good way. [*Laughs*] I met a few of my demons along the way, and that was OK. I just realized that they were phantoms, just false beliefs, figments of my own imagination. But that's why Sutter's tragic—he believes they're real. That's the tragedy of it. The real horror of BEREAVEMENT, I think, is that frequently the actions we take in pursuit of our own redemption—which is what Sutter's after; he wants to be redeemed—become horrors we perpetuate on our fellow man. That's the really scary thing about Sutter. He thinks he's doing the right thing in order for him to move on to a better place, but what he's doing creates horrors for other people.

FANG: Your role in THE CRAZIES is a different sort of character, who has no control over his actions and is kind of forced into doing evil, in a sense, by the biotoxin that overtakes him.

RICKABY: Yeah. The comparison for those roles is that they're both crazy [*laughs*], but they're very different. THE CRAZIES was actually one of the easiest parts I've ever played. The only difficult thing was putting my arms through the jail bars; I got pretty damn bruised up doing that, but that's how it goes. The rest of the film was so easy; then we got to that scene, and it was like, “You're gonna jump up against the bars and scream,” and thought, “Oh, pffft, this is gonna be so easy; this is what I do, commit to big emotional stuff, this is my home.” But we were doing it, and [director] Breck Eisner was like, “Hey, man, I don't know what to tell ya, but it's not working.” [*Laughs*]

] And meanwhile, I don't know if you've ever done it, but arms are not meant to go through bars! I was already getting beat up, and I said, “Look, dude, I'm committing.” And he was like, “I don't know what to tell you, but it's not reading.” And I thought, “Crap, man, I've gotta sell my body out here to make this work. I've got to forget about the pain, and just go with it.”



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One of the things Breck talked about was that there was a progression with the illness from drinking the water, that there were stages. And Bill is the one where we get to see the stages evolve. So it was really important that they be defined for me at different times. First, there was this sort of dizziness and low energy, and eventually, it evolved to a point where your worst thoughts become your predominant thoughts, and then that's it—you just act from that place, only from your worst impulses. So I had to tap into that.

It's funny, because we worked on BEREAVEMENT for three years, and I went to Pennsylvania four times over that period. And I loved the involvement. There were times at the end where I knew that the money was running low, and Stevan was calling me up, saying, “Hey, we need some stuff; can you come do it?” and I was like, “Dude, I'm in. You baby is my baby, and we both love it, and let's go love it some more until we get it.” We had finished principal photography, and Mena and his team were attending a convention out here for BRUTAL MASSACRE, and I met up with them. And that night, I started getting ill. I honestly was as sick as I've ever been. I had a case of Ramsey Hunt syndrome, which is basically shingles of the ear, and in the midst of that, there's an attack of the nervous system; it's a virus, just like in THE CRAZIES. When I tried to go to bed at night, I was literally visited by my worst thoughts; even my best thoughts were mocking me. It was horrible, beyond the physical pain of it, because it was connected to the nervous system, and it was doing something to my brain. So when Breck said, “Your worst thoughts become your predominant thoughts,” I was like, “Well, I know about that!” [*Laughs*] I had already gone through that, so it was relatively easy to do.

The difference with Sutter in terms of his insanity is, it's the other side of the coin that gives it its punch. It's the hope for redemption that's not realized that makes the despair so profound. The more he lives in his own redemption, the more he believes in how great things will turn out, the more significant the loss will be. So that's where the difference was in terms of navigating those particular thought processes, and what these men do emotionally along the way.

FANG: Do you have any horror projects coming up?

RICKABY: I've talked with a couple of people, and I'm attached to one project and in discussions for another one, but I'm not exactly sure where the funding has ended up. While I'd like to still consider myself as being attached to it, it's probably only a wish at this point. It would be a great role, and another totally different one, but I'm a little reticent to publicly say what it is at this point. I don't know if those projects have their money, so I can't say with any certainty if they'll happen at this point. I do pretty out-there kinds of characters, you know—usually

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emotionally volatile or crazy or kooky on some level. For me, that's a juicy playground; it's a great place for me to be.

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