

Mick Garris Rolls the “BAG OF BONES,” Part One

Written by Abbie Bernstein

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Here is how director Mick Garris, speaking by phone during a break from the editing room, describes A&E’s two-part, four-hour adaptation of Stephen King’s novel BAG OF BONES, starring Pierce Brosnan and debuting this Sunday, December 11 at 9 p.m./8 Central: “Basically, it’s the story of a writer who loses his wife suddenly, the love of his life, and he can’t write anymore. He goes to his lake house in Maine to try to inspire himself to write again, because she’s such an important part of his life, and starts to communicate with her after her death. But it turns out she’s not the only spirit in the lake house—and one is not nearly such a positive force.”

That last bit is likely an understatement, given the serious horror elements of Garris’ previous projects derived from King’s work, including the TV miniseries THE STAND and THE SHINING, the feature films SLEEPWALKERS and RIDING THE BULLET and the telemovie DESPERATION, plus the “Chatterly Teeth” segment of QUICKSILVER HIGHWAY. Fans of the prolific King and MASTERS OF HORROR creator Garris have been hearing about BAG OF BONES for a while now; asked exactly when he began trying to get BONES to the screen, Garris laughs, “Oh, about five years ago. But we finally started shooting at the beginning of August.



A&E (i.e. the Arts and Entertainment Network) has only gotten into producing scripted

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programming on a large scale relatively recently. And it hadn't really been in the horror business either, until BAG OF BONES found a home there. “Really, the one place that was originally going to do BONES for television, when we decided that we would give it a try for television, was ABC,” Garris recalls. This seems logical, as that network was the home of THE STAND, THE SHINING and DESPERATION. However, the director says, “It languished there for six months and we developed it into a four-hour screenplay for them, and nothing ever happened. We never heard a word from anybody. Nothing would progress. There were some casting ideas that weren't great, and it kind of collected dust there, and we were very frustrated.

“So my producing partner Mark Sennet went to A&E with it,” Garris continues, “and they seemed to be very interested, depending on what the casting would be. It's something very different from anything they've ever done before, and so we set it up there, contingent on the casting issues of who would play Mike Noonan [the author protagonist] and the secondary characters.

“We had a lot of trouble doing it as a feature,” he adds, “because it's not about or for teenagers. If something is supposed to be a scary movie, that's the audience, [the studios and distributors] think. Hopefully, people of all ages will embrace it, but when you're speaking in terms of commercial appeal, feature films have become the domain of the young, and here's a story about a mature writer—in the book he's in his 40s, and Pierce is a little bit older than that—so we had a lot of trouble setting it up as a feature. It's very passionate and romantic, as well as being a scary ghost story. Going to ABC seemed like a natural extension of having done the other King things there. But DESPERATION did not have a happy life at ABC, so we weren't too terribly disappointed to go to another network after their lack of enthusiasm.”



BAG OF BONES marks the first Garris/King project where neither of them actually wrote the script. Instead, the director relates, “Matt Venne wrote this; he's a writer I found on MASTERS OF HORROR. He did Dario Argento's [episode] PELTS. [Venne is] a terrific writer, and BAG OF BONES was his favorite book of all time. So it just seemed like the right configuration. I was not able to do the writing myself. King was involved in a lot of other things; I don't know if he saw PELTS or not, but he did trust me. He liked the idea of bringing in another writer, and

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Matt was somebody I believed in a lot, and we talked about him and King said, ‘He sounds good. Let’s see what happens.’ And he was very enthusiastic about the script.

“[King is] not a producer on this,” Garris notes. “He’s not officially involved, but because of our relationship, I would run all these things by him. He didn’t really give script notes, but I sent him first the feature screenplay and then the teleplay after that happened, and he obviously did have director approval and two or three of the leading actor approvals. Other than that, he wasn’t really involved, except as a friend.”

The script went through an uncommon condensation/re-expansion process, as the project went from being a feature to a TV miniseries. Winding up in a medium that allows for a longer running time was a welcome outcome, Garris says. “We were really glad to be able to add some length to it, because the two-hour feature screenplay left out some key information. There are still things that some of the big fans of the book might notice; it’s a little streamlined in terms of the mystery of what’s behind the hauntings, but it’s pretty faithful to the source material.”

Venne wrote his script with a good deal of input from Garris, who recalls, “We developed it very closely together. It’s definitely Matt’s work, and he did a fantastic job, but I was really involved with the guidance of it and where it was going, because I was genuinely producing this. Mark Sennet and I are producing partners, but this was something that had been developed over a long period of time, and we worked really closely. But it’s lots of fun, actually, not being the writer and letting somebody else take the reins for a while. I love writing and then directing, but Stephen King wrote the scripts for most of the things we’ve done together, and that was a blast, too.”



Contrary to some people’s recollections, leading man Brosnan has done horror before; in fact, one of his earliest screen roles was in the “Carpathian Eagle” episode of the 1980 HAMMER’S HOUSE OF HORROR TV series. While he subsequently became much better known for

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playing James Bond and Remington Steele, Brosnan also starred in *NOMADS* and *THE LAWNMOWER MAN*. When it came to casting Mike Noonan, Garris says, “We were going through every kind of name, just racking our brains, and actually Stephen King’s agent at CAA suggested a couple of actors, and one of them was Pierce. Pierce was somebody we had already talked about with Lynn Kressel, our casting director, who I’ve been working with since *THE STAND*. She had mentioned him and we thought he was a great idea. And then when CAA suggested him, we thought, ‘Oh, gee, this might be possible!’ The idea of such a really good actor who’s also a movie star and hasn’t done television in, like, 15 years—everybody was excited about that. Then we met, and it just was great. He’s really good in the part. He’d never really done a film like this before, certainly in a long time.”

Brosnan’s turn in *LAWN MOWER MAN*, very freely adapted from a King short story, is mentioned, and Garris laughs. “It isn’t really a horror movie and not really a Stephen King movie, since he sued to have his name taken off. It’s a genre film, but not really. [*BAG OF BONES*] is different, too.” Before *FANGORIA* readers take umbrage, Garris hastens to add, “I’m not going to say the old, ‘It’s not really a horror movie.’ It does have horror elements to it, but it’s also a very passionate ghost story. I hope it will be embraced by the *FANGORIA* crowd. It certainly has a lot of the elements, but I think it has the potential of having an audience even beyond that.”

Garris, who has had a relationship with *Fango* since its earliest days of publication, notes that the readership has changed over time. “The *FANGORIA* crowd has really matured in an interesting way—the direction of the magazine, embracing more of the history of the genre, I think is really great in the way it’s reaching out, and that’s kind of what we’re doing, reaching beyond just the tropes of horror and being very faithful to King. His whole appeal is that it’s not about the monster in the closet. It’s about those people [affected by the monster].”

Once Brosnan was cast, Garris says the script didn’t require much change to accommodate the actor. “He plays it with his own accent, as a guy who was educated abroad. What we did to adapt it to Pierce was, once he was on board, he and I sat together and went through the script with ideas and basically just brought the dialogue down [so there was less of it]. It was very expository at times, and we decided that less was more, and so it really was just tightening up what he had to say, as opposed to changing it for his personality so much. Although you think of how Pierce Brosnan speaks—you want the words to be as natural in any actor’s mouth as possible, and there were a lot of contractions and things that felt very slangy that were not really how Pierce Brosnan would speak. A lot of that happens on the set, but in this case, Matt Venne and myself made a lot of little twists and turns to adapt it to him; [it was more about] speech patterns than anything else.”

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