

Get the Point of “NEEDLE”

Written by Michael Helms

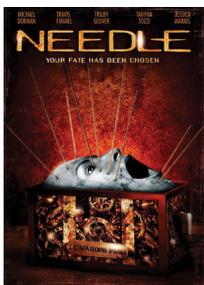
Tuesday, 06 December 2011 18:23



Released last week on DVD by Lionsgate Home Entertainment, the Australian horror film **NEEDLE** was one of the country's best internationally selling features of 2011. The movie focuses on Le Vaudou Mort, the most dangerous and deadly device this side of Clive Barker's Lament Configuration, and what happens when it gets into the hands of a group of college students. Fango spoke to director/co-writer John V. Soto and mechanical FX supervisor Jeremy Shaw about the film.

Director/co-writer John V. Soto

FANGORIA: How did you get to make **NEEDLE**?



JOHN V. SOTO: I've got about five or six script/film concepts that I've been working on for the last decade. The first one that came to fruition was **PREY**, which I wrote in 2005. Subsequently, it was picked up by Top Cat Films, and the director who took over directing the film completely made a mess of it.

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FANG: Any semblance of your script still in there?

SOTO: There are some elements left, but many of the supernatural elements are gone because the director wanted to move more toward an EVIL DEAD-type schlocky horror film with comedy elements, and it just didn't work.

FANG: Did you visit the PREY set?

SOTO: Yes, I did. I kept watching George [ATTACK OF THE SABRETOOTH] Miller directing a scene, he kept avoiding me, looking around nervously, and I knew something was up. Then, when I saw some guy come out in a loincloth, talking about “katchatah” or something, I realized my script had been greatly changed [*laughs*]. It was not a good feeling, a little bit of a shock. The movie's an OK watch, but it could have been so much more. It could have been a classic.

FANG: You then co-directed another film...

SOTO: I had a concept for a FATAL ATTRACTION-type story with a twist, and that was CRUSH. I'd directed and shot film before, done a lot of shorts, read 1,000 scripts and watched thousands of movies and studied them, but I just didn't feel comfortable directing that myself. I had no formal training, having only done screenwriting courses, one at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. So, being largely self-taught, CRUSH went really well. I wrote CRUSH in 2007, and it went through a development period of about a year and a half. It was only after I finished PREY and it was sold that the next thing I wanted to do was a project about obsessive love. It was a very low-budget film, about \$1.6 million—an independent production with no government financing—and has done really well; it sold in 14 territories, including the U.S. and Canada.

As co-director, I directed the actors. I had the script polished up by a guy called Anthony Egan, who has become a friend. We basically got on like a house on fire, as we both have similar tastes in the horror-thriller genres. I hooked up with Tony because he put his name forward to direct PREY when they were looking around for a director. A whole lot of people sent in their show reels, and clearly Anthony was very talented and had some great ideas, but wasn't suitable for PREY.

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FANG: You and Tony also collaborated on the NEEDLE script.

SOTO: Yeah. Over the last three years, I've always wanted to do a whodunit/murder mystery-type movie, and it goes back to the days of Agatha Christie in the 1920s and 1930s. She was light years ahead of most people. A lot of her work has been turned into films, and she was the master of “Who is the killer?” A bunch of friends, a bunch of businessmen, a bunch of people, one of them is the killer and one by one people are knocked off. I just love the puzzle element. So we talked about that, and at the same time, we also wanted to have a supernatural element. We pitched ideas to each other continuously for months until we arrived at the same idea, a machine that has supernatural powers to kill people from afar. I'd call CRUSH a gentle thriller, while in NEEDLE, the gloves are off and it's full-on horror.



FANG: What powers the machine? A demon?

SOTO: I don't want to give away too much, but when you understand the concept you'll be going, “Yes!” The inventor is basically a combination of engineer, scientist and a practitioner of the dark arts. The story is about this university student, Ben [DAYBREAKERS' Michael Dorman], whose father has died in a car accident a couple of years previous. The lawyers are still winding up the estate, and find one final piece in storage. “This is yours. Don't know what it is.” It's the machine that they've found. Ben doesn't really want it, rejects it, but they say, “No, may be of some value.” He goes to his professor, who's in archaeology, and he does research and finds the machine has amazing supernatural powers—bad powers. It's a machine for revenge.

Ben is urged by his friends to do a feature story on it for the university newspaper. He goes

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back to his room where he's hidden it away, and it's gone. One night at a party, he had shown it to about seven of his friends, and the next day, one of them is murdered. The police can't solve it and the coroner is puzzled, as it seems that his body somehow heated up on the inside. There is no entry wound, but there are exit wounds, so it's all really quite confusing.

FANG: What can you tell us about the cast and crew?

SOTO: Stephen F. Windon was the DP, and he shot ANACONDAS. He has done some amazing films, but visually, this is the perfect film. That's how good he is; he's an expert. We also had a guy called Jean Vandermeiren, who is a lighting expert and has worked on big European films. We have a great cast, quite amazing. We had Ben Mendelsohn playing a detective who, along with Malcolm Kennard, is trying to solve the deaths. We had Travis Fimmel, who did the TV series THE BEAST with Patrick Swayze, as Ben's brother Marcus. Michael Dorman is unbelievable in the film, and there's lots of conflict between them that you need in a film. We also had Tahyna Tozzi from WOLVERINE and BEAUTIFUL, a great actress. Trilby Glover was in RIGHTEOUS KILL with Al Pacino and Robert De Niro. We had [WOLF CREEK's] John Jarratt, who is a very strong suspect; he's actually the coroner attached to the police, which is quite a nice twist.

We had a young guy, Luke Carroll, an outstanding actor who plays the journalist and meets a nasty end. Nothing against journalists! There was also Nathaniel Buzolic, the great Jane Badler from V, a guy called Khan Chittenden and Olivia Ledger, Heath Ledger's sister. All the cast delivered more than what was on the page. We didn't want dodgy actors. The way I look at it, we've got the crème de la crème of Australian actors. Jessica Marais is from a very popular TV series, PACKED TO THE RAFTERS. She plays Kandi, a lesbian who's in a relationship with Trilby Glover's Isabel. These two are helpless lesbians [*laughs*]. I did want that in the film!



Get the Point of “NEEDLE”

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Tuesday, 06 December 2011 18:23

FANG: How did you attract such a strong cast?

SOTO: They just responded to the script; they loved it. It has elements of *CRY_WOLF*, which, if you've seen it, is a fantastic film. That was the benchmark for us, to make a film better than *CRY_WOLF*. It's also influenced by *FINAL DESTINATION*; we have deaths that are quite spectacular in that way. There's not much the characters can do about it once they've been chosen.

FANG: Where does the title come from?

SOTO: It's because the machine uses needles inside, and this is connected to the way you die. And I don't mean little syringes; I mean great thick knitting needles. It's like a nickname for the machine, and it has a couple of other meanings, as in “to needle someone [*laughs*].”

FANG: Have you planned a sequel?

SOTO: We've got an idea for *NEEDLE 2*, because the machine is indestructible. I've got a very strong concept. Unfortunately, none of the cast will be coming back because they're all killed off [*laughs*], so we'll have to find a new batch of actors.

FANG: Can you see yourself continuing to work in horror?

SOTO: Yeah, definitely. I love it. It's a thrill. The way I look at it, you get more bang for your buck. If I want to do an action film, I need at least a \$10-15-million budget. If I want to do a big sci-fi film, I need probably \$20-30 million for lots of CGI and stuff like that. Scary films give you best value for the money, because you get a visceral reaction from the audience. Slap actors across the face, and it doesn't cost much. However, the budget on *NEEDLE* was much bigger than on *CRUSH*; it was \$3.5 million, which is double *CRUSH*, and that's why we could have more locations and actors and it's a bigger story. It was independently financed, which is an achievement in itself in Australia. Screen West did provide about 10 percent of the budget—we love Screen West, which is very supportive—but that's all; no other support from anywhere else.

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Mechanical FX supervisor Jeremy Shaw

FANGORIA: What was the role of you and your team on NEEDLE?

SHAW: We were basically required to wrangle and build the more elaborate props, such as the supernatural machine which features in the film. It was quite elaborate, having to build multiples and breakaways and allowing it to do certain things. There was a bit of French design that went into building the initial box; that design process took about two or three weeks, just sitting down with the director and production designer and a few other people, just to rough out what was required from this piece. It went through many different phases and concepts including lids opening up, sometimes more elaborate, sometimes less elaborate. In the end, we nailed down the initial design and paint scheme based on a list of requests for the box's actions. Will it go in water? People would be running with it and facing it, so they couldn't get hurt. We built stunt boxes, standby boxes, hero boxes and mechanical boxes, which was quite an interesting feat.



All up, we took about two months in prep and construction, and did it in such a way that allowed us to make more pieces and recreate the boxes. You couldn't tell which was which on set; one had a bit more action to it, but other than that, you'd never pick them. The paint schemes were perfect. The overall building of this machine was fantastic, and a lot of fun.

Also, between the Spank FX company and myself, we made all the stunt knives and shovels that hit people's heads; they were made of a urethane plastic. And breakaway light globes for exploding lights. And we were on all these different locations wrangling abstract effects like smoke and wind and even pyrotechnics. It was a rollercoaster—23 or 24 days of nonstop fun—over a period of four weeks or so. It was an absolute riot.

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FANG: How do you feel about the type of film NEEDLE is?

SHAW: In Australia we produce very nice dramas, but I reckon that for people holding out for a good thriller, NEEDLE is going to be the one. It's got shocks and horror and all the fun stuff that everyone enjoys, and it's going to look fantastic. Steve, the DP, did a wonderful job in every single shot. It looks awesome. The crew we had was topnotch; everyone pulled together to create a great working environment. And it went so smoothly. I mean, to rock up each day, do a wonderful job, work with wonderful people, go home and relax and then do it all over again was a strange lifestyle, I must admit. We slept less and worked more, but in the end, it's all about the quality of the picture.

NEEDLE is going to be a film that people are going to want to watch often. Hang out for a cult classic here; it's going to be a film that people can watch over and over and still get that tingling feeling at the back of their neck, and be yelling, “Oh my God!”