Most folks know that the first PARANORMAL ACTIVITY was made under unconventional conditions by Oren Peli, shot for $15,000 in the filmmaker’s home, with the actors encouraged to improvise. Although the budgets on the Paramount-produced PARANORMAL sequels (including the third movie, just out on Blu-ray/DVD from Paramount Home Video) have risen into the several-million-dollar range, the filmmaking has become even more freewheeling in some ways. Witness the experience of actress Bonita Friedericy.

Friedericy is know to lovers of TV spy comedy for her five seasons as General Beckman on NBC’s CHUCK, but she’s no stranger to horror, having been in ALIEN RAIDERS, THE STEPDAUGHTER, FEAR ITSELF (an uncredited turn in the COMMUNITY episode) and story arcs on both BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER and ANGEL. Friedericy has done plenty of other work in film, television and stage, but PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3 held a lot of firsts for the actress, starting with her initially being told she was auditioning to play a marriage counselor in a comedy called SPORTS CAMP, instead of a horror project.

“It was all improvised,” Friedericy recalls of her first interview. “Somewhere in the process, somebody who was auditioning leaned over and said, ‘I hear it’s PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3.’ So that’s when I really wasn’t sure what I was doing. I think it was just one callback where I met the two directors [Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman], and that was when I was informed that it

would be the role of a grandmother/art therapist.”

Friedericy says she understands the reasoning behind the skullduggery surrounding the audition; audition script pages, or “sides,” being leaked on the Internet is becoming an all-too-common phenomenon. “They keep a lot of films and TV shows under extraordinary wraps these days,” she says, “because with the advent of all the blogging and Internet conversations and chats, they don’t want anything spoiled. I think a lot of the appeal, the attraction of the PARANORMAL movies is, you simply don’t know what they’re going to do. Which is why they keep changing the trailers up, too.”

As for the way PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3 was shot, Friedericy realls, “It was a very interesting process. Basically, when you’re interviewing for these projects, [casting depends on] just look, feel and camaraderie. Then—and they’ve talked about it in the trade papers—this is such an incredible journey for the people making the film, the directors and producers and the actors as well, because they are constantly shooting footage, and whatever they have as their ‘bible’ [in terms of the script] changes daily. They just keep shooting and reshooting, testing and retesting, to try to get the best film they can that will satisfy the fans, the way the fans like to see it.

“There’s a very particular way these things are shot,” she continues, “and it’s really difficult [for the filmmakers]. It has to look like found footage, so they need to have either a handheld or locked-down camera, and in this case, it was taking place in 1988, so it had to have the feel and the look of 1988 video. They got the actual studio cameras from the period, so that when you see anyone carrying or locking down a video camera, it is authentic-looking. The prop people did an amazing job. Any sequence, if you look at it—there are games from the 1980s, I was wearing pleather, big hairdos—they gave a lot of attention to detail.”

This included the filmmakers’ method of working with the actors, Friedericy adds. “It is so much a collaborative effort that they would have a daily outline available of the scenes that were being shot. Some actors chose to read it or not, depending on if you felt comfortable riffing off of that. I did one sequence, which is obviously not in the film, where it looked like it was a quarter of a page. It ended up being a five-minute sequence, and I must have done it 10 or 12 times, and I would get notes each time.”

The scene consisted of Friedericy’s character having a surprise encounter with an entity that is unseen, but emphatically makes its existence felt. “This particular version of the grandmother

[played at the time by Friedericy] is cleaning up dishes in the kitchen after she’s had dinner with the granddaughters and the daughter,” the actress explains. “And as she’s cleaning, she notices things, and it’s that whole PARANORMAL thing of something being over my shoulder. I put something away and something else happens and then you see her notice some sort of presence and she walks toward the camera, and then she is suddenly blasted by a huge blast of wind and drops a bowl and screams. We did that quite a bit just to find out what was scary. It was very interesting, because a faraway shot walking into a camera—is it scarier to turn your head slower when you hear something, or is it scarier to turn your head and not see it? It was really all about, how do you get it more intense?”

A wind machine stood in for the supernatural entity. “There was a grip who sat behind the camera, and it started out being a little tiny circular pipe that was going to shoot air at me, and then it grew to be about a four-foot pipe that he would hold between his legs to shoot air at me,” Friedericy relates with a laugh. “I said, ‘You do have to get a picture of this.’ It ended up being an 8-foot-long, foot-and-a-half-diameter pipe, which this guy had to hold up to blast air into my face. It was very funny.”

Despite all the work, it was decided that the grandmother should be a different sort of person. Hallie Foote has the role in the final film; Friedericy now plays Beth Johnson in the completed PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3. “I think [that role consists of] footage they kept from a birthday party sequence,” Friedericy explains. “They very, very politely kept it and apparently in the credits, my last name is the name of the [daughter’s] boyfriend, so apparently I am his mother.”

Despite this odd outcome, the PARANORMAL producers immediately contacted Friedericy about another gig: Rob Zombie’s LORDS OF SALEM, which is currently in production. “I don’t know if it happened that they actually said, ‘Bonnie, would you come do this?’ ” she says, “but Jason Blum is an amazing producer, and Oren Peli—the whole team of the people who work on these, they move together. So I got a call to audition for the new Rob Zombie movie, and I loved working with them and I guess they were fine working with me, because I’m playing a Salem witch.”

After meeting Zombie, Friedericy reports, “He’s wonderful. What a sweet, good-natured man—the brain on him is huge, and the creativity. I loved him.” She has similarly kind words for Sheri Moon Zombie, a co-star in LORDS. “She’s going to be terrific in her part. She’s very smart, very beautiful.”