

Cloris Leachman Takes "THE FIELDS"

Written by Michael Gingold
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Oscar-winning actress Cloris Leachman's long career has taken her through a wide variety of parts, even within the horror/supernatural genre, from the sublime (YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN) to the ridiculous (LAKE PLACID 2). Her latest venture is THE FIELDS (out on DVD and Blu-ray this week from Breaking Glass Productions), a combination of coming-of-age drama and paranormal thriller; the actress spoke to Fango about all three of the above-mentioned films.

In THE FIELDS, Leachman plays Gladys, who along with her husband Hiney (Bev Appleton) takes their grandson Steven (Joshua Ormond) into their Pennsylvania farmhouse to get him away from his feuding parents. In the surrounding cornfields, however, Steven discovers that something far worse may be lurking: a malevolent presence that threatens him and his family harm. Nothing, however, perturbs the unflappable, and often foul-mouthed, Gladys...



FANGORIA: What was it about this particular role that attracted you?

CLORIS LEACHMAN: Well, I thought the character of the grandmother was interesting and fun and not the typical thing. She was much more colorful and individualistic, and very different from a "nice" grandmother. She was terribly real, and...full of beans [*lau*
ghs

]. I love the relationship she has with her grandson and her husband and everybody. And I loved doing the movie in the house they chose. We were there for a long period of time, so I just lived it, I lived in the house, practically. It felt so... [*makes spooky noises*
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FANG: Screenwriter Harrison Smith says your role is very specifically modeled on his real

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grandmother. How closely did you work with him and model your role on the real person?

LEACHMAN: I just took from the script. But he kept telling me that his family was shocked at how [my performance] was their grandmother. I didn't know, because I didn't have any living person to follow and help me. It's like, you put somebody's clothes on, their shoes, in that house.

FANG: How was it working with Bev Appleton and Joshua Ormond, who played your husband and grandson?

LEACHMAN: Everybody was outstanding. I was just thrilled, and they were all surprises to me. All brand new. I enjoyed the relationship with my husband [*laughs*].

FANG: A fun side to Gladys is that although she's obviously very loving, she's also very profane. She doesn't hold back in terms of her language.

LEACHMAN: You don't even know how much they cut out. Not a lot, actually, but five or six times, I think. It was surprising [when I read] the script; she's not the grandmother you'd expect! I really laughed. She's spirited, you know? People [like her] who use those words are not trying to be profane, they're using them because it has a function of leaning on something for effect—like, “I mean it and I'm so f**kin' mad, I just...!” [*Laughs*] It's just part of their language.

FANG: Are you a fan of supernatural movies yourself?

LEACHMAN: I don't categorize things like that. This is not a monster movie or a scary movie in that sense, but it's pretty edgy. I just enjoy things I can get involved in and believe, and be affected by. You don't have to give a name to it, like supernatural or scary or funny, or anything. It just depends on if it's good. I loved making the movie. Every day was interesting and fun and surprising. The other actors were so terrific.

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FANG: Were there any days or scenes in particular in the shoot that stood out for you?

LEACHMAN: Well, of course the one where he brings me the birdcage [*laughs*]. And did you like scene with my sister?

FANG: Yeah, that's definitely an odd one (in which the sister speaks to her in gibberish). How was it shooting that?

LEACHMAN: It was difficult. I wanted to be very sympathetic toward her and loving, and understanding of what she was saying when other people didn't, because I knew her so well.

FANG: Speaking of women who don't watch their language, you appeared in LAKE PLACID 2 several years back, playing the sister of Betty White's character from the first one. What was that experience like?

LEACHMAN: I got to go to Bulgaria, where they shot it. It had been a communist country, and everything *looked* like it had been in a communist country [*laughs*]. All of the buildings were cracked. It was an old and deeply built city. It couldn't have been a democracy. You just felt it in every street. But I had a good time.

FANG: Did you take any cues from White's performance?

LEACHMAN: I never thought or heard about [the first film] until they hired me, and I didn't even see it. I have no idea what she did in it. I did it because Betty doesn't like to fly, apparently, so I said, "I'll only do it if you make a little altar to Betty in the living room." [*Laughs*] We were working and working, and finally we got up to that scene in the house where I come in the front door to my living room, and I said, "Where's the altar?" They said, "What?" "I said I wouldn't do the movie if they didn't make an altar for Betty!" There was no time for anything, so they got this fancy bookcase and put some pictures of Betty on it, and some flowers, beads and shells, and some ivy and candles, and that was the altar to Betty [*laughs*]. I think you just barely see it. They didn't focus on it much. Isn't that silly?

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FANG: And of course, we have to talk about your classic part as Frau Blücher in YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN.

LEACHMAN: A few years ago, Mel Brooks told me that “blucher” in Yiddish means glue, so the horses [that whinny at the sound of her name] are afraid that they’re going to be sent to the glue factory! I didn’t know that before.

FANG: How much fun of a shoot was that?

LEACHMAN: Well, you just couldn’t wish for anything better. That giant castle room, you know, where they first enter, and the dining room over at one end, and down the stairs to the laboratory—they cut a scene out where I say, “It’s not ‘lab-ratory,’ it’s ‘lab-OR-atory!’ ” I was just thinking last night, there were three scenes Mel cut out that were so funny. I had another scene with Gene Wilder where we’re in his quarters for the first time, and I have a big round ring with 50 big keys on it. I’m trying to tell him some things about the castle and I say [

in Frau Blücher accent

], “On this ring are the keys to all the rooms in my...

your

castle.” I start to say “my castle” at first, but I change it to “your castle.” I’ve lived there for so long by myself, I think it’s mine!

And when I did the other one with Mel, HIGH ANXIETY, there’s a scene that’s heartbreaking he cut out of that, just heartbreaking! I have on my hooded robe, and I take it off and hang it up in the closet, and I go to my bed and I’m wearing [laughs] these snakes twisted around my body, painted gold with jewelry in their eyes, and I have on very high heels. So I totter over to the bed and throw myself on it, spread-eagled, facing up. And the camera’s on the ground facing the bed, and it starts slowly moving up, starting with the legs of the bed, going up past the mattress, past my body, past the wall, and finally it’s pointing at the ceiling and there’s Harvey

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Korman dangling over me in chains, being lowered slowly! And he makes some comment about it. And Mel cut that out—first of all, the movie was too long. When he shoots, you wind up with about 40 hours, so you have to cut [

laughs

], just a lot of funny things. And also, Grace Kelly was coming to 20th [Century Fox] one night, and he wanted to show her that film, but he thought that scene was too risqué.

FANG: How much did Brooks allow you to improvise, and how much did he want you to stick with the script?

LEACHMAN: We stuck with the words [*laughs*]. What else would we do?