

The Newborn Dead: Sharpe Objects

Written by Marla Newborn

Wednesday, 14 December 2011 09:58



Michael Sharpe is a busy guy. He's an actor and a director. Nothing too unusual about that; there are many actors who step behind the camera. However, this is the horror indie-cinema world, and it isn't quite so easy to be successful at both. Yet Sharpe is making strides, and rather quickly.

But let me start at the beginning. Sharpe is from Charlotte, North Carolina, where there is a very tight-knit film community. According to Sharpe, "Everyone knows everyone else, and it's a great networking model." He is correct, and even I have also met some great people from that area at conventions and through social networking. In fact, I met Sharpe through a friend of a friend of a friend on where else? Facebook, of course. The difference was that by the time I friended Sharpe, I was also aware of a feature called DEVIL'S CROSSING (see article [here](#)) and all the hype that was building around this zombie Western in which Sharpe has the leading role. As I waited with anticipation to see his performance in DEVIL'S CROSSING, Sharpe sent me two short films to give me an idea of his acting range.



The first was a farcical comedy entitled BACK IN THE SADDLE, about which Sharpe says, "Doing comedy was a whole new thing for me. I usually play more intense roles, but of course, when asked to do comedy, I jumped at the chance." The other was a powerful drama called KNOWING. "This was a story of a father dying of cancer," Sharpe says, "and I felt very much more at home doing this role. I started out doing theater, so I was familiar with intense dramatic themes. I had no idea how KNOWING would turn out, and I ended up winning a Best Actor award for that role. I would love to act in another drama at some point. Real-life characters speak to me on a deep level."

Finally, we got around to discussing Sharpe's acting in horror films. He says that while playing the lead role of Shadrach in DEVIL'S CROSSING (pictured right) was fun, "it was also very

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intense and demanding on me, both physically and mentally. Everything seemed on edge in that character.” And his heroic, edgy turn is on screen in just about every scene in the film. *DEVIL’S CROSSING* was Sharpe’s first feature-length horror gig, and fulfilled some youthful dreams. “Horror films have always been the essence of my childhood,” he explains. “I grew up watching what I consider to be my golden age of horror—the ’70s and ’80s had some of the best genre films.”

“My very first dream of what I wanted to be when I grew up was a special effects makeup artist,” he continues. “Today, it is that nostalgia I seek when I watch both new and old horror movies. Horror is like rock ’n’ roll. There are no limitations. You can pretty much do whatever you want, and the audience will either deal with it or walk away. Just getting any kind of a reaction is truly a great feeling.”

And just as Sharpe’s career as an actor was starting to heat up, he decided he wanted to direct. Sounds clichéd, but Sharpe has a way of making things happen. “I have always wanted to make movies since I was a kid,” he says. “Guess it is better late than never. I was not sure how to go about it. Luckily, I soaked up a lot of knowledge about both acting and directing from some of the great filmmakers I was lucky enough to work with.”



Back in summer 2009, Sharpe played the leading role in Johnny Priest’s critically acclaimed thriller *SPLIT* (pictured left). It was on that set where he met cinematographer Mac Allen. “Mac told me that if I got a script together, he’d be happy to shoot it,” Sharpe remembers. “That was the genesis of my directorial debut with the short *MONOMANIACAL*. As Mac and I discussed making a horror project, I asked him what he would like to shoot, and Mac said he always wanted to film a chase scene in the woods. So that was where the script started. I wrote the whole film around that starting point.”

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Taking the helm meant directing other performers through some pretty difficult situations. “I put my lead actress, Katie Bearden, through hell,” he admits. “I warned her early on that it would be a tough shoot for her. As most actors who have worked with me eventually find out, I push them as artists to places that they may not yet have gone in their acting. The other lead in MONOMANIACAL, Catherine Trail, plays a demented, bipolar woman. All in all, it was an intense first film for me as a director.”

MONOMANIACAL received lukewarm critical response, but Sharpe (pictured below on the set) was OK with that. “MONOMANIACAL is a great little film; it’s just not everyone’s cup of tea. I thought it was pretty ambitious for my first time out as a director.”



DEVILING, Sharpe’s next jaunt as a filmmaker, is currently garnering more favorable reviews on the festival circuit, mostly due to star Robert Haulbrook, whose performance is so scary that his smile alone sends chills down this writer’s back. Sharpe reveals a bit about this latest scary short: “DEVILING deals with one of my greatest personal fears, and I can’t say exactly what that is because I would give away a key element of the film. Basically, the story is about a mortician named Ronald [Haulbrook] and how he loses his mind when his relationship with his girlfriend [Jodi Essex] fails.”

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It is this unraveling that makes Haulbrook so frightening; think Jack Nicholson in *THE SHINING*. Sharpe is enthused about his star's performance: "The guy is topnotch. I actually wrote the script with him in mind for the lead role. I remember thinking, 'If he says no, then there is no way I can make this film.' No one could have pulled off this part but Robert. Recently, he won Best Actor at the Carrboro Film Festival in North Carolina for his portrayal of Ronald in *DEVILING*." The film also picked up an award for Best Narrative Fiction at the same festival.

Casting aside, Sharpe made some very smart choices in both art direction and music with *DEVILING*. At first the effect is subtle, but then one begins to notice the difference in hue between many of the scenes. "It is the color of the embalming room where we filmed that seems so lifeless," Sharpe explains. "I also brought down the saturation in post to take the life out of the environment, since nothing lives in that room. It's Ronald's place. I wanted to show a distinct contrast between Ronald's world and his ex-girlfriend's world. It turned out exactly as I saw it in my head."



DEVILING's music, by Alex Maudlin, builds to dissonant crescendos at all the right moments. Sharpe reveals that theirs was a long-distance collaboration: "I was in Los Angeles and Alex was in Charlotte. We had a lot of Skype sessions. Most of the time, we wanted to pull our hair out getting it right, because we are so particular when it comes to music, especially in film. Alex is one of the most talented musicians in the Southeast."

My guess would have been that Sharpe would become one of those Clint Eastwood types—you know, where he will eventually act and direct himself at the same time. Sharpe, however, says, "That's something I have always been against from the start. However, I have

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always wanted to do a scene with Robert Haulbrook, so if a director doesn't come along soon to put Robert and me in front of the camera, I may have to break one of my own rules."

Sharpe is currently writing a feature script that he hopes to shoot in 2012. He says this one, like DEVILING, will deal with psychological terror and irresponsibility that plays on people's minds. "If I can get this vision out of my head and onto the screen, I think it will be mind-blowing. And did I mention Robert Haulbrook is going to play one of the lead characters? Stay tuned!"