BITE MARKS, the new darkly comedic vampire film from writer/director Mark Bessenger, combines two fantasy scenarios - vampirism, and the hot trucker who seems straight but just might be a little gay around the edges. But don't worry, straight guys, there is a nice set of vampiric boobs on display for quite a bit of the film as well.

Bessenger took some time off from post-production on BITE MARKS to answer some probing and insightful questions, but was peppered with my usual inanity instead. In this first of two parts, we talk about what makes a horror fan; nature or nurture?

SEAN ABLEY: We've been friends for a while, but I know almost nothing about your background. You could be a serial killer! Who are you and where do you come from?

MARK BESSENGER: I come from a small town in Indiana called North Vernon and attended college at Indiana University where I got my Bachelor's degree in creative writing. Next, I went to Columbia College Chicago for my masters. While there, I directed a couple of independent films before heading out to Los Angeles. We grew up in a rural area, so I used to go exploring in the woods and walking along the Six Mile Creek, which ran next to our house. It could be a very creepy location at times, and when I started directing my own little Super 8mm films, I often used the woods as locations. I was a typical Monster Kid, making my own movies, buying all the Aurora monster model kits (twice - the regular AND the glow-in-the-dark versions), going to the drive-in every Saturday night and watching our local horror host, Sammy Terry, on weekends.

I dropped out of college briefly in 1980 to open a home video store called Galaxy Video. I ran it for a year, then realized I'd rather be making movies than renting them out to others, so I sold the store, went back to school, and dove head-first into my love of cinema. After filming my second feature, I moved to Los Angeles where I unsuccessfully tried to find completion funds. Then I started my own production company where we shoot industrial and educational videos.

ABLEY: You watch more movies that any two people I know! Every day your Facebook status update is "Just watched BLOODSUCKING FREAKS and ISLA, SHE-WOLF OF THE SS." How do you find the time?

BESSENGER: It helps that I work at home. If I didn't, I'd never be able to keep watching movies. I get up at 5:30 every morning, see my husband off to work, then pop in a film while I eat breakfast. I spend my mornings writing a new script or in pre-production on the latest project. If I'm not shooting, I might watch a movie with lunch, then continue working in the afternoon. I usually pop in another flick at bedtime and watch while my husband happily snores away next to me. There seems to be a connection between eating and watching horror, which works out well, as I view most of the flicks I watch as cinematic junk food!

ABLEY: I admire your laser beam focus on the exploitation genres, any all-time favorites?

BESSENGER: My all-time favorite movie is THE ABOMINABLE DR. PHIBES. I just love everything about it: Vincent Price, the costumes, the sets, the music, the theme of revenge, the black comedy. I told my husband that when we have our wedding ceremony, we won't be walking down the aisle to the Wedding March, but to "War March of the Priests" instead! And of course, I love classics like HALLOWEEN, FRIDAY THE 13TH and THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE, but I have spaces on the shelf in my happy place for HUMONGOUS, THE BOOGENS, MONSTER ON THE CAMPUS, THE LEGEND OF BOGGY CREEK and TWO ON A GUILLOTINE, among many others. It all goes back to the "horror movie as junk food" thing. I see movies like THE EXORCIST as a classy three-course meal, and things like TOWER OF EVIL as a Wendy's double with fries! Sometimes you want to eat junk!

ABLEY: My parents were great in that they initiated me into horror and sci-fi very early on - I remember trips to the drive in to see stuff like DEATHRACE 2000 and EMPIRE OF THE ANTS when I was 10. What were your parents like?

BESSENGER: My dad is a Baptist minister, an ex-elementary schoolteacher and principal and a real estate developer. My mother ran the house, but she was a big horror movie fan. She would tell me a story about how she and her best gal pal went to see I WAS A TEENAGE FRANKENSTEIN at the theater and when the corpse sat up into the camera, her girlfriend screamed and was hysterical! My father was the kind of guy who didn't understand the pleasure of films and never saw the same movie twice, believing that if you saw it once, you didn't need to see it again. My mom was the one who instilled a love of horror into me. She was pregnant with me and her water broke in the lobby of the theater showing PSYCHO!

One day, when I was six, I came home from school to find her in the living room watching THE REVENGE OF THE CREATURE on the 3:00 afternoon movie on TV. I entered the room just as the Gill-Man was escaping from the Ocean Harbor Seaquarium, and I was hooked. That film is still one of my favorites to this day. Plus, we also went to the drive-in practically every weekend. We saw the typical family fare, like Disney movies and Jerry Lewis comedies, but they would also take me to the scary ones, too. That's where I saw a lot of Hammer and AIP titles. We'd usually go on Fridays, then our grandparents (who lived across the street) would often take all the grandkids to see the same movie the next night! I saw the 1966 BATMAN and all the PLANET OF THE APES movies that way. I soon became a horror freak, which I think embarrassed them a little. I'm sure my extended family thought I was weird, but every Halloween they'd be calling me on the phone asking me to help them with their parties!

ABLEY: I remember as a kid falling asleep on the couch one night, and waking up to a TV commercial for ASYLUM, the Peter Cushing film. In my half-awake state, the body parts wrapped in paper moving by themselves terrified me! I still remember that to this day. Do you have any early, mentally-scarring horror movie memories?

BESSENGER: Ha ha! I just watched ASYLUM again two days ago! Love that story segment! But you bet I've been mentally scarred! Mostly by Disney movies! I remember being devastated when Bambi's mother was killed! I hadn't seen the film for decades when I bought it on laserdisc years ago. I was watching the film, and as it got closer and closer to "the moment", I had to actually pause the disc because I was hyperventilating!

The witch rolling boulders in SNOW WHITE was horrific, as was the banshee in DARBOY O'GILL AND THE LITTLE PEOPLE. But the film that probably affected me the most was, oddly enough, SHRIEK OF THE MUTILATED! There's a scene where a woman in a house looks out her window and sees a white sasquatch running by. The monster stops in its tracks when it sees her, then immediately begins running toward her. It gets closer and closer to the camera, and then climbs into her window. It's a cheap, cheesy movie, but that image terrified my young

mind. I still get nervous when watching Bigfoot-related things.

ABLEY: I know people are surprised when I tell them PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE is my all time favorite movie, because they think it's going to be I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE (original flavor) or something like that. What movies would surprise us when they pop up on your favorites list?

BESSENGER: WILLY WONKA AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY would probably be a big surprise. I just love that film. Gene Wilder and all the other actors are great. The film is so dangerous and full of surprises, and you can't help but cheer for Charlie when he finds that golden ticket. Other eyebrow-raisers would be HEAD with the Monkees (huge fan), MARY POPPINS and XANADU (love musicals), PAJAMA PARTY and the Basil Rathbone Sherlock Holmes films. I'm also a huge fan of Abbott and Costello!

ABLEY: You have two "lost" films at the moment - low budget films you shot, but still haven't really seen the light of day. Tell me about these children that have been locked up in the basement.

BESSENGER: Back in 1990, my friend Don Rasmussen and I jumped on the Super 8 feature film craze and bought an entire package of film equipment. Our first flick was a horror-action-martial arts film called NINJA ZOMBIE. We shot it in the small town of Antioch, Illinois for about $25,000 completely with unknowns. It had real martial arts fight scenes, makeup and gore F/X, female nudity, an evil cult, stunts, a 3-wheeler motorcycle and a love story. It was reviewed in the very first issue of Film Threat Magazine, who gave it a mostly positive review. We signed a deal with a New York distributor who was never able to sell it. Too violent, mean-spirited and bloody, we were told.

My second feature was a gay romantic drama called RHAPSODY, filmed in Chicago with local talent. That was the film I came to L.A. with, making the rounds at all the indie branches of the studios. Everyone liked it, but no one wanted to give me the money to finish it. It remains unfinished to this day, but there may be new life for it, yet.

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