

Oren Peli talks “CHERNOBYL DIARIES”

Written by Michael Gingold
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It’s a big week for horror mogul Oren Peli. Not only is *PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 4*, the latest in the hit franchise he launched and continues to oversee, just arriving in theaters (see review [here](#)), but *CHERNOBYL DIARIES*, which he co-produced and co-wrote, hit DVD and Blu-ray on Tuesday. Fango chatted with Peli about the production of his first fear feature removed from American soil.

“That was a really fun project to make,” Peli tells Fango. “It was as opposite as can be from *PARANORMAL ACTIVITY* in the sense that that film shows what happens when you’re in your own home, a familiar place where you’re supposed to be safe, and [with *CHERNOBYL*], here we are in the most alien environment, in a foreign country, in an abandoned town that’s plagued by radiation, wild animals and other things. So it explored fear from a totally different angle. We ended up shooting in Eastern Europe, which was a wild experience on its own, although it ended up working out very well because of the terrific crew.”



To guide the film’s “extreme tourists” through the abandoned ruins where unseen menaces threaten their lives, Peli and co. chose first-time feature director Brad Parker. “We met with quite a few potential directors,” Peli recalls, “and at first, we were a bit hesitant because Brad hadn’t directed a movie before, though he had been a 2nd unit director and visual effects supervisor [on *LET ME IN*, among others], and he’s been directing commercials for five years. He definitely had experience, but we weren’t sure and had to meet with him a few times. The more we met with him, the more we liked him and got the sense that he really understood the style we wanted, the story and how to work with actors, so after a short while, we started feeling very, very confident about him. Of course, once we saw how he worked on set and how the first dailies were turning out, we were very happy and knew we had made a great choice.”

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Parker’s CGI background came in handy as far as recreating the film’s central location. Although the notorious Ukraine disaster site has gone before movie cameras in the past (for RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD 4: NECROPOLIS), the CHERNOBYL team wound up shooting elsewhere. “We had to use a combination of many different areas in Serbia and Hungary,” Peli explains, “and because Brad has a background in visual effects, he could figure out, ‘You know, we could use this location, which is not perfect, but then use visual effects and CGI to do set extensions and add them to the current location, and it will look perfect.’ We trusted him, and it ended up looking great. We got compliments from people who have been on the real locations in Pripyat and Chernobyl and asked us if we shot at the real places or not.”

Although CHERNOBYL DIARIES adopts a documentary style, it’s not done with the found-footage approach of the PARANORMAL pictures. “We weren’t pretending it was filmed by one of the members of the group,” he notes. “But it was very hard for us to create a sense of authenticity, so we tried to be as true as we could to the real experience a tour group would go through if they actually went there—up until, of course, the point where things go bad, at which point we allowed ourselves to fabricate a little bit.”

Part of maintaining that sense of reality involved delving into plenty of advance research. “We read a lot on the Internet, we talked to people, we watched documentaries and studied videos and photos. We had to train ourselves to be experts on the subject matter. We did want to actually shoot the movie there—and whether or not that was a smart idea is debatable—but in June 2011, when we filmed, they had closed access to the site. They usually do allow tourists to go there, but for most of 2011, the whole area was shut down because they were doing maintenance on the reactors and didn’t want anyone around in case something went wrong. So that’s when we said, ‘OK, we have to have a Plan B and find locations to duplicate it.’ But if it had been up to us, we would have gone over and tried to work out if it was possible to film parts of the movie there.”