

The Price is “FRIGHT,” Part Two

Written by Tony Timpone
Thursday, 04 October 2012 15:08



Today we continue our interview with acclaimed Canadian director Ted Kotcheff (see part one [here](#)), whose once-feared-lost 1971 Australian film WAKE IN FRIGHT is being given an ambitious rerelease across the U.S., courtesy of Draffhouse Films.

WAKE IN FRIGHT follows the tragic downfall of an uppity British schoolteacher (played by Gary Bond), whose unplanned weekend with the drunken locals of the Outback ultimately destroys his soul. To see when it will be coming to your city, go [here](#).

FANGORIA: WAKE IN FRIGHT features one of Donald Pleasence’s best performances. What was it like working with him?



TED KOTCHEFF: Oh, he was a charmer. I was very lucky he was a friend of mine, but he was always charming anyway; we got along so well together. He was a great actor, and it was always a pleasure to work with him. He’s gone now, of course. He had a wonderful, wicked sense of humor, and you could see it in his eyes all the time. And you never knew whether he

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was being serious or not with some of the things he was saying, which gave tremendous interest and depth to the character.

FANG: What about the shooting of the implied rape scene between him and Gary Bond? How did that go?

KOTCHEFF: In 1971, at the Cannes Film Festival screening, I was sitting in and the film started and the jury was watching, and a voice behind me kept saying, “Wow! Wow! What a scene! Phew! I love this so much! Great! It’s great!” And then when it came up, this homosexual rape scene, he said, “Oh my God! This director’s gonna go all the way! He’s gone all the way! Oh my God, it’s so great! What a climax!” Afterward, I looked back and I saw this 25-year-old American kid. But he must’ve been in the film business, because only people who were in the business could sit in that area. So I later asked our PR guy who it was, and he said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, the young American director. He only did one film, it’s a flop.” I said, “Can you give me his name, though?” “You wouldn’t know him, what’s the point in giving it to you?” “Just give me his name, please.” He said, “Ummmm...Martin Scorsese.” So I said, “You’re right, I’ve never heard of him.”

When the film was lost and we found it, the word got around that a new print was coming, and Martin asked for one. He was in charge of the classics department in Cannes. And he remembered my film after 38 years. We gave him a print, and he declared it a Cannes Classic. Only two films have ever been screened twice at Cannes: Michelangelo Antonioni’s L’AVVENTURA and Kotcheff’s WAKE IN FRIGHT.

FANG: Wow, what an honor.

KOTCHEFF: And he’s still giving these amazing quotes about the film, which we are using in the publicity. He loves the film. I’ll always remember him saying about the homosexual rape, “Oh my God, he’s gone all the way, wooow!” I guess a lot of directors have not gone all the way on that one.

FANG: Was the film a success financially anywhere in the world when it came out?

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KOTCHEFF: Only in France. You know, the French loved it, being under existential stress and all that stuff. And it played in Paris for nine months. And then it disappeared. And then, of course, when it came back with this new print, it was a huge success in Australia. And everywhere now that it has played, it's done extremely well.

FANG: So United Artists had initially picked up the film, or co-financed it?

KOTCHEFF: It was a company called Group W Films, the Westinghouse Company. They used to own a chain of cinemas and television stations up in the northeast United States. And they had this idea to make films for their television stations, and they did two or three, and they had a distribution deal with United Artists. So that's how United Artists had its hands on it.

FANG: So how did UA first react when they screened WAKE IN FRIGHT?

KOTCHEFF: They thought it was too hard to bear. They thought the worst part of all was, of course, the slaughtering of the kangaroos. They felt audiences would reject the film because of that. They thought the film was just too tough. In New York, film critic Rex Reed and others gave it tremendous reviews. In fact, Rex chose it as one of the 10 best films the year it came out in America. And a lot of other critics gave it very good reviews, but UA didn't spend 25 cents advertising it. Films need to be publicized and advertised, and it opened in a fog of unknown. And it didn't help that it was released [in New York] during a blizzard.

FANG: Was the problem that they just didn't know how to sell it?

KOTCHEFF: Yeah, they didn't know how to sell it. They didn't believe in the film, they didn't believe it had any financial chance to succeed, so they didn't spend any money on the publicity. It was one of those self-fulfilling prophecies.

FANG: Did you ever think you'd ever see the day when WAKE IN FRIGHT would be rediscovered at film festivals like Montreal's Fantasia, celebrated worldwide all over again and now, getting the theatrical release in the U.S. it deserved in the first place?

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KOTCHEFF: Well, it’s certainly the most extraordinary film in the history of cinema [*laughs*]. I just can’t get over it. It just goes on and on—at film festivals, people think it’s a great film, it’s getting rereleased now all over America—a film I made 40 years ago. And it’s being celebrated again! It’s an extraordinary experience for me, and one of the most extraordinary things that’s ever happened in the world of film.



FANG: What do you hope today’s audiences will take away from seeing WAKE IN FRIGHT in this century?

KOTCHEFF: Well, the film’s central character starts out with a big sense of superiority. And what happens is that he doesn’t know himself, and I was always attracted to characters like Duddy Kravitz too; you don’t know what’s dragging them on, and this guy doesn’t know himself either, he just knows what he’s capable of. You put him in circumstances or situations where suddenly light is shone on the dark side of his character, and he’s very disturbed about it. And he loses his sense of superiority, and realizes we’re all in the same existential boat—all of us, together, and he’s humanized, and he comes out a better person at the end than he was at the beginning.

FANG: You mentioned before that WAKE IN FRIGHT is probably your second favorite film of yours after THE APPRENTICESHIP OF DUDDY KRAVITZ—did it take the rediscovery to put it back near the top of your list, or did you always consider it one of your best?

KOTCHEFF: I’ve always thought WAKE IN FRIGHT was one of my best movies. It’s hard to compare two films that are so different. The reason a lot of other critics and people I know say

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WAKE IN FRIGHT is one of my finest achievements is because, when you're working on a film, you set out with a vision of it, and the higher percentage of success you have in realizing that vision you have in your head, the better the film is. With WAKE IN FRIGHT, what I set out to do, I achieved tremendously. I was very proud because of the tremendous attention to detail in the film—the costume and design departments. I said, “I don't want any cool colors. No blues, no greens. I want hot colors! Orange, red, yellow, burnt sienna... And I want lots of dust.” What I did was bring barrels of earth that were the same color as the Outback and sprayed the dust in the air, which would hang there for a while and then create a film of dust over everything. I wasn't faking, that's what it actually was like, but these are things I would do in the studio, too, to maintain the same sort of atmosphere. You gotta feel the heat and the dust and the flies and the sweat and the whole uncomfortableness of it all, which can drive a man crazy.

The other thing I did was, we brought in sterilized houseflies from the University of Sydney. We had at least 200 of them before a take. If you look closely at some of the scenes, you'll see flies creeping over things. Sometimes the fly would get in the eye of an actor in a scene. It's 100 percent attention to detail when you make a film. So I'm very proud that I was able to capture the atmosphere; that's what the film is about, too—the inhospitable circumstances that make the men behave as they did.

FANG: So what's next for you?

KOTCHEFF: Well, I have about three or four films. It's so nice to have five, six films that you're dribbling—and you're faithful that one of them will come into reality and you will find the money and the star for it. Because you're always juggling. So I have a social comedy, I have some other films. Can't think of 'em right now. And I have an action film and a period film set in Indiana in 1835. Somebody will make it; it's really a terrific script.

FANG: So retirement is not an option?

KOTCHEFF: To me, that's the ugliest word in the English language! “Retirement” fills me with horror, gloom and despair. I like to keep working; that's very interesting, it keeps you hyper and the old brain cells working. Yes, I'd like to go on as long as people will let me.