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Having worked in all areas of filmmaking—from acting to production design on up— Tammi Sutton's been called the busiest woman in B horror. Now, she's further making a name for herself as a writer and director with well received festival film, ISLE OF DOGS. FANGORIA spoke with Sutton to see what advice this renowned female horror filmmaker could give to hopefuls everywhere.

**FANGORIA:** What was your earliest horror movie experience?

**TAMMI SUTTON:** My earliest theater horror film experience is, hands down, JAWS. I grew up at the beach in Florida, and after seeing the film, have never once swam in the ocean without the fear or anxiety of being eaten by a shark. For all the fantastic film experiences Spielberg has given me since, I still want to punch him in the face when I meet him.

However, most of my earliest horror movie experiences in general, were most definitely from television. Growing up in the seventies, American television was fruitful with TV movies that were terrifying and very dark subject matter for young eyes to absorb. DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK, SALEM'S LOT, BAD RONALD, THE POSSESSED, SOMEONE'S WATCHING ME, TRILOGY OF TERROR, THE STRANGER WITHIN, THE HOUSE THAT WOULD NOT DIE, to name a few, have stuck with me throughout the years. I sometimes revisit these films to see if they are as scary as I remember them to be. For the most part they are, on some level. Universal and Hammer Horror were a staple in my household growing up, as well. It was obvious to me even as a young child, that these films were not scary, but I loved them and could not get enough. My life-long crush on actor Basil Rathbone started very early. The Monster in FRANKENSTEIN will always be my favorite. Years later, getting to film at Universal Studios on the backlot and explore the sets of some of my favorite horror films has certainly been a dream come true.

**FANG:** Have you always been drawn to horror?

**SUTTON:** Yes. It started very early for me with television, and then transitioned later on into the big screen offerings. THE TWILIGHT ZONE was very exciting and addictive for me. It was just the beginning. The drive-in movies I saw were pretty hardcore, but I loved them just the same. Exploitation films were a young staple for me. 70s television, as mentioned earlier, had everything to offer. I am sure 70s television was the gateway for the flood of 80s horror films that were just around the corner. Yes, I was one of the thousands of kids who bought movie tickets to PG films and snuck in to watch the R-rated horror films. Halloween has always been an exciting time of year for me. That falls near my birthday, so I grew up getting lots of Halloween themed gifts, and felt connected to the horror theme in general, all my life.

I was also heavy into westerns and western-themed TV shows. If I wasn't in school, at the beach, roller-skating, listening to records, or at the barn riding horses, I was in front of the TV set or at the movie theater. Cowboys and Monsters were always my thing. They still are. I've got to mention westerns, because in the 70s they started getting tougher, grittier, and much more violent. They were on par, giving me the same experience as horror films. I've always been drawn and fascinated by the imperfections of the anti-heroes both these genres have offered up. Villains have always held a special place in my heart. My biggest draw to genre films is that they allow you to experience truly terrifying events without actually having to live through them. It can be very therapeutic.

The 80s horror movie theater experience was explosive. That's when I realized the floodgates had been opened. We were kids hungry for blood and guts, and horror was ours. The video store was an all-access pass to whatever horror films we wanted to see again or couldn't get into. Sneaking friends into my bedroom window at night to watch copies of TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE and the like, was common. I remember discovering my first horror magazine at a local video store. It must have been akin to a young boy discovering his first porn. "Holy Shit," I thought to myself, "What is this magazine called FANGORIA?" I had to steal my first issue because they wouldn't sell it to me. I read it cover to cover, and couldn't get that poster out of it and on my wall fast enough. Not only did it have articles on current horror films, but it also had articles on classic films going as far back to the 1950s. Fango helped me discover old gems and kept me up to date on what new horror was coming out. It was often frustrating because I would read about films I couldn't get my hands on. People today can go to the internet and find just about everything they want in a few clicks, and certainly can just read about films and everything there is to know about them. I had to work hard and savvy back in the day to get my hands on stuff; bootleg copies took a lot of work to track down, but it was always worth it.

**FANG:** How did you begin working in horror films?

**SUTTON:** In the mid-90's, I had to drive across the highways and byways of Florida to move to Los Angeles to find my true love. To this day, the events that followed seem like a distant dream. But the dream was real, and it was to change my life forever. I knew I wanted to work in film somehow, and I knew I wanted to meet the people that made the films I loved. And I have. It's been a torrid love affair ever since. When I first moved to LA, I worked in the art department by day and worked as a bartender at night in Hollywood. A young director hung out at my bar because his actor friend was working there. That young director was Dave Parker, who asked me to interview at FULL MOON for his upcoming feature THE DEAD HATE THE LIVING. I got the job production designing his new film and that was my “in” to features and out of bartending at night.

**FANG:** What was it like working for Full Moon and Charles Band?

**SUTTON:** I was super-excited to get a job at Full Moon, I'd loved all the Full Moon movies, as they were a huge part of my 80s & 90s video explosion. VideoZone was their behind-the-scenes video magazine which I loved. It was a big deal for me to get to work there. I loved walking into that office every time I could. There was an old, faded, Bruce Lee mural in the building's alley that always made me smile as I moved through the doors. I also worked with director Jeff Burr which was a great experience, but it was truly, director/producer JR Bookwalter who cemented my ground at Full Moon. He asked me to start producing and that's when my career moved beyond the art department. It's also when Charlie finally noticed me.

Oddly enough, I didn't meet Charlie until after I had produced a few movies at Full Moon. I remember him walking past my office door one day, barely stuck his head in, and said "Oh, you're the girl that does everything." He smiled, and walked away. I was thrilled. Full Moon was a machine. Well-oiled? Maybe not, but there was a formula, and it was working. I learned all the in's and out's about filmmaking, from development to distribution, and it was an experience of a lifetime. Charlie didn't question my work because I got the job done by hook or by crook. We didn't have the internet and cell phones back then to find stuff. It was beepers and phone books, and you had to scrounge and recycle everything you had. The money was shit, but I loved my job and I often joke, "I might be the only one Charlie doesn't owe money to, because I worked for peanuts."

One day, a film came up that nobody else at Full Moon wanted to direct, and Charlie and JR both knew I wanted to get behind the camera. So, they threw me into the fire, gave me two

weeks to write a script and another few days to prep and eight days to shoot. Trent Haaga and I had already been working together and took the bait. Did I ever dream my first directing gig would be a killer clown movie? No, of course not, but it was. KILLJOY 2 will always have a special place in my heart and so will Charlie Band and all the fantastic people I worked with at Full Moon that let me stumble and fall and figure out how to make movies.

**FANG:** In the many years you have been in the horror industry, what changes and shifts have your seen?

**SUTTON:** I've been working in the horror industry since the late 90s. The biggest changes I've seen and been part of is the film-to-video media shift and post production revolution. At Full Moon in particular, I went from shooting THE DEAD HATE THE LIVING on film to a slew of films shot-on-video. You have to remember, nobody thought this video thing was going to stick or develop farther. Charlie knew, and I went with it. Sony F900 was the bomb when it came out, and people were shooting on recycled Beta-Cam news cameras. It was happening and I was there. You couldn't just run out and grab a camera and start shooting like kids can today. It was hard, even on video, but we were making it happen. That massive change in access to cameras and affordability gave up-coming filmmakers new access to the closed doors of Hollywood.

Let it be said, without the horror fan base, most of these video movies would have never been made, watched, or sold. I've shot my last three features on the RED camera and edited with Final Cut, which I loved. However, I just recently produced a film we shot on 35mm, and it was a nice reminder of the old days that aren't gone yet. One thing I have not seen change over the years is that horror filmmakers are always fans of the genre, and that I like.

**FANG:** What advice would you give to up and coming filmmakers who are just starting out?

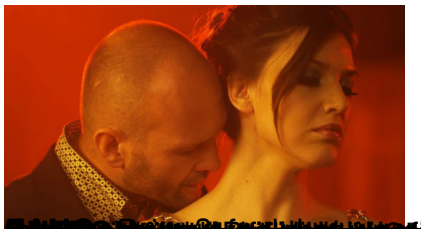
**SUTTON:** My advice to filmmakers who are just starting out is get your hands on a camera, write a good script and start shooting. If you're in it for the glory or the money, stay home. It's a long, hard ride and can often times be a lonely, long journey. If you want to be famous, go get on a reality show, if you want to make films, go out and get on set, and start filming. This business is about stamina. If you fail, try again. Watch every film you can, it's the best film school there is. I have a degree in International Finance which helped me along the way in business, but being on set is really where you learn how it's done and what you have to know to get films made. Remember, you can learn a lot, even from bad examples.

**FANG:** ISLE OF DOGS is not necessarily horror, but is certainly violent. Could you talk a little about why you were drawn to this project and your experiences screening it for audiences?

**SUTTON:** I was in Berlin talking to another producer friend, Travis Stevens, and told him I'd been wanting to make a nasty, violent film that I was interested in. I'm a big Peckinpah fan, and I wanted to make a film that dealt with the violent, inherent, realism that brews in the dark side of men, the very thing that draws me to what mostly becomes horror films. Travis introduced me to British writer Sean Hogan in Berlin and we moved on to make the film shortly after in England. I was not trying to make a film for a particular audience. I was after making a film I wanted to see. Like myself, I feel that audiences find the movies that appeal to them one way or another. With that said, I brought a rough cut to Fright Fest in London, and thought I'd show it to maybe fifty people on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Instead, it ended up in their biggest theater, on the biggest night, to the largest crowd following an entire day of Tobe Hooper films and Q&A.

Then I got hit with some really poor reviews that certainly did not resonate with the experience I had with the crowd I met. Some people loved it, some hated it. The haters were people who admitted they were drunk and some only saw the first five minutes. Fair? No. Hurtful, yes. I licked my wounds, and went home and reviewed the film. It kicked my ass into going back and completely taking to heart what people didn't like, even if I wanted to rip their heads off. I came back to the US, recut the film, re-scored it and then brought it back out to a new audience.

Was I ready to be disheartened again? Yes, I was, and that's something every single artist, especially filmmakers, have got to understand is part of their job or existence. If you put something out there, it's going to be reviewed, scrutinized, picked apart, and not just by journalists or film critics anymore. The new cut of ISLE OF DOGS went to Shriekfest International Film Fest in Hollywood. Let me say, I was there two years before and lost. I wasn't there to win an award, I was there to screen my film to a new audience. I was certainly sweating it. Now, I was putting up my baby to peers and friends, and I was going to have to take it, one way or the other. It turns out it's an audience film after all. They loved it, and it won “Best Thriller Horror Feature”. Was I pleased? Hell yes. Was it worth all the previous pain? Yes, every minute of it. The film is currently in Berlin (where it all started) debuting for an international audience film market and will soon be released.



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