

Oh, the Horror!

Why Fort Worth filmmakers are focused on vampires and zombies instead of neurotic urban singles.

By *KRISTIAN LIN*

The footage we see is in grainy black and white. A heavy-set man in a shirt and tie is getting a lapdance from a stripper when she's murdered in mid-gyration. In a panic, he runs out into a dark alley, only to find his exit blocked by a chain-link fence. Behind him, we hear the sound of a gun cocking, followed closely by that same gun firing. The man slumps against the fence, shot through the chest, dead.



That scene could be from a great many movies, but this one takes place in a location that shoppers from west Fort Worth might recognize as the alley behind the Stripling & Cox building on Camp Bowie Boulevard. It's from Erik Clapp's 2005 film *Seventy-8*. That's not the only piece of Fort Worth scenery that's turned up in low-budget horror flicks recently, either. In Steve Franke's mad-scientist picture

Serum, the hospital sequences were shot in Fort Worth's UNT Health Science Center, while Richard Perrin's industrial-cannibalism thriller *The Dead Don't Scream* was largely filmed in a North Richland Hills hospital laundry.

Those are just a few of many low-budget horror flicks made in the Metroplex each year. They come in all shapes and subgenres: slasher movies, vampire movies, zombie movies, ghost movies, cannibalism movies. (Interestingly enough, no one here seems to have attempted a werewolf film.) They're made on the fly and on the cheap by the entrepreneurial-minded, looking to turn a quick-and-dirty profit, and by hard-core fans, trying their own hand at a film genre whose devotees often regard it as an all-consuming obsession. The result sometimes winds up on video-store shelves near you. The movies have become a part of the city's cultural scene that's frequently overlooked — though perhaps it won't be for



Abram (and a still from his movie After Sundown): "I'd love to make a kids' movie one day."



long, if a few people can catch a few breaks.

Why horror? Because it sells. Christopher Abram, the 37-year-old River Oaks resident and writer-director of two locally made straight-to-video horror flicks, gave a thoroughly considered version of the seemingly universal answer. "I never went to film school," he said. "So when I first started filmmaking [in 1999], I did research, and every distributor told me to go into horror, because it's easiest to get distribution [of]."

Abram had spent six years as a member of the Dallas comedy troupe Actors Without a Stage (now Section 8 Comedy) and had several scripts for comedy films in a drawer. However, the advice put him on a new path, one that led to *The Fanglys*, his first feature. He incorporated into the story some of his own experiences growing up in Arkansas, where there are many Civil War battlegrounds and cemeteries. Abram shot the self-financed film on weekends over 18



Jon Keeyes (center, with actor Michael Madsen): "Distributors are paying less for horror right now." Above is a still from his new film, Living and Dying.



The organizer of Texas Frightmare, Lloyd Cryer, has a message for us about zombies.

months, with a budget of less than \$3,000, and finally inked a deal in 2004 with Asylum Home Entertainment to put the film out on DVD. He followed that up with a vampire Western called *After Sundown* that was released by the direct-to-video arm of Lions Gate Entertainment (the same company that puts out the *Saw* films in the theaters). And Abram just wrapped shooting on a serial-killer flick called *By the Devil's Hands*, which he's now editing.

Distributors like horror because it's easy to sell. Filmmakers like it because it can be done well on the cheap. Eric Whitney is a 40-year-old Benbrook native who lives in Dallas but gained his first exposure to the technical side of theater at what was then Tarrant County Junior College. He has worked for many local filmmakers in various genres — including Clapp on *Seventy-8* and Franke on *Serum* — as a production designer. (“I’m basically responsible for everything you see on the screen that doesn’t move.”) He broke down



Richard Perrin demonstrates what they used to use to shoot movies.



Eric Whitney, in the torture chamber he designed for Jon Keeyes'

the economics of movie *Suburban Nightmare.*

genres this way: If you're a local filmmaker who

wants to make an action-adventure picture, you'll need sometimes-expensive permits from the city hall and fire department for scenes that involve gunfire. You'll also need a weapons master who will ensure that the firearms are handled safely and who will charge as much as \$600 a day. Consider that such films also frequently involve car chases, stunt doubles, explosions, and the like, and you'll get an idea of how expenses can pile up. Horror films, on the other hand, are famously averse to guns in favor of edged weapons, and fake blood is cheap to make at about \$15 to \$20 per gallon. (Whitney's recipe for the stuff: corn syrup, red food coloring and powdered chocolate for color, and a bit of clear liquid soap, or else "it stains the hell out of everything it touches.")

Comedies and romances can be made with even fewer expenses than horror, but they don't have the same drawing power. "A comedy has to be really good to get noticed. Horror sells even when it's bad," Whitney noted. "Kids' movies are a big draw, and they're not expensive to make. I'm not sure why there aren't more of those being made. But horror is definitely the way to go for a first-time director."

Indeed, the likes of David Cronenberg, Peter Jackson, and Sam Raimi started out in low-budget horror and went on to make their mark on world cinema. Their background is evident even in their non-horror films that some would consider more respectable: Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures* shares the same sense of the grotesque as his two horror flicks that preceded it (*Dead Alive* and *Meet the Feebles*), while the already-famous knife-fight scene in Cronenberg's recent Russian mafia drama *Eastern Promises* wouldn't have looked out of place in a low-budget scarefest, though the latter would have certainly featured a naked, hot young woman instead of a naked Viggo Mortensen. Hollywood studio chiefs and hard-core cinephiles alike know how the genre can showcase up-and-coming directing talent.

This is particularly apparent to filmmakers in Fort Worth, where Jon Keeyes has established a model of success. Since Fort Worth Weekly profiled him two years ago ("A Nightmare Dream Come True," July 27, 2005), his *American Nightmare* and *Suburban Nightmare* both received video distribution through various retailers, including Blockbuster Video. This year his non-horror suspense flick *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know*, now retitled simply *Mad Bad*, has been picked up for video release in the spring. He's hoping to line up a limited theatrical release for his serial-killer film *Fall Down Dead* in 2008 as well.

Now 38, Keeyes talked by phone from his second home in Colorado, which his filmmaking career helped pay for. He was preparing to travel to L.A. to line up financing with production companies, meet with talent agencies, and hire a rep who'd get him entry to the Hollywood studios. His early successes with horror have allowed him to graduate from the genre.

That is, if he wants to. There's no indication of that, though. Of the four movies he has in development, three are horror flicks. "There are other stories I want to tell," he said. "But my greatest passion is horror, and I'd be happy spending the rest of my life doing that." For the moment, though, he's preparing for the DVD release of his Texas-set hostage thriller *Living and Dying*. Two years ago, he was pondering whether to film it in Texas or Romania, a country that has a thriving local movie industry and an infrastructure that even Hollywood filmmakers use when they want to film on the cheap. He wound up splitting the difference — the movie retained its Texas location, but his financiers at New Films International insisted on a number of Eastern European actors to make the film appeal to the international market. Thus, in addition to recognizable Hollywood faces such as Edward Furlong and Michael Madsen, the cast is populated with Turkey's Tamer Karadagli and Deniz Akkaya, Poland's Malgorzata Kozuchowska, and Romania's Monica Dean (who acts in her homeland under her birth name, Monica Barladeanu). "It forced me to change a few of the characters," Keeyes admitted. "But I think they got stronger." The inclusion of the Euro actors has paid off, too, as the film has played in theaters in Turkey, Romania, and Italy. As of Dec. 26, it'll be at a video outlet near you.

No one has any hard statistics on exactly how big a part horror plays in the local filmmaking scene. The Dallas Film Commission doesn't track film projects by genre, and even if it did, it'd still have an incomplete picture, said director Janis Burklund. "A lot of these low-budget horror productions know how to do things on their own," she said. "They only come to us if they don't know what they're doing."

Horror's status as an easy entry point is the reason it has been so strongly affected by the advances in technology that have made filmmaking easier to learn for amateurs, who can buy adequate equipment at their local Best Buy or Home Depot.

A relatively old hand at age 49, Richard Perrin left the filmmaking business in the 1980s to found his actors studio/casting agency in Euless, but he was recently inspired to return to the field with his industrial-cannibalism thriller *The Dead Don't Scream*. He marveled at the advantages filmmakers possess today. "Props are delivered overnight now," he said. "Sound is half your movie. Back in the 1990s we fired real blank charges, and they sounded like cap guns [on the soundtrack]. Now we record the sound in camera and on MP3s, and gunshots sound good and loud." His film features human corpses in various states of carving and being ground up into sausage, and he hailed the work of his special-effects firm in creating realistic bodies for the camera.

Keeyes sees another effect of the horror boom. When asked what had changed most in the horror industry since he got into it, he didn't hesitate. "Now that everybody can make a horror movie," he said, "the horror market got inundated with bad movies. Distributors are now choosier. They're looking for quality, story, and characters. You submit your horror film to a buyer, and he's got 500 more of them on his desk."

That view was echoed by many others in the industry. “This segment of the market has been very good for us, and it’s still strong,” said a spokeswoman for Blockbuster Video. “But the appetite for it has waned a bit now that these movies are a dime a dozen. Our customers have become very savvy, and they’ve let us know that they won’t rent just anything.” She cited a tapering off in rental figures for horror, though she wouldn’t quote specific numbers.

“The problem I see with horror movies these days is the in-your-face violence,” Keeyes said. “Audiences want to see heads lopped off.” Of course he sees nothing wrong with that, but filmmakers have been so eager to give that to the moviegoers, he said, that they forget to pay attention to story, character, and “the sense of dread and paranoia” that characterized his favorite old-school horror flicks, John Carpenter’s *Halloween* and William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist*.

(Those same films were cited repeatedly as influences by local horror directors, an overwhelming majority of whom are white guys in their 30s. Asked about that piece of demographic info, Keeyes pointed out that the successful horror franchises of the 1980s were all pitched at white teens who have now come of age.)

Loyd Cryer frames the current situation in horror as part of a cyclical creative malaise. “There was an overkill of Friday the 13th clones in the 1980s,” he remembered. “Now everybody’s ripping off what they call ‘torture porn,’ like Eli Roth’s *Hostel*. Eventually, someone will come up with something new, and that’ll give horror new life.”

Cryer should know, since he’s the organizer of the Texas Frightmare Convention, an annual event that features screenings of horror movies, sales of memorabilia, and appearances by celebrities. (Next year’s scheduled guests include George A. Romero and Dawn of the Dead cast members, *A Clockwork Orange* star Malcolm McDowell, and legendary Italian filmmaker Dario Argento.) The first Frightmare, in 2006, was held in Grapevine Convention Center, with 2,000 fans in a 10,000 square-foot area for display. The second was at the Omni Hotel in Dallas (20,000 sq. ft. and 3,000 attendees). The third will take place in February at the Hilton DFW Lakes (47,000 sq. ft.). He started the event because he didn’t want to have to fly to New Jersey to meet other horror fans. “There was a real stigma attached to Texas for years,” he said. “The horror industry didn’t take us seriously. They thought we were a bunch of rednecks. Fangoria had a convention here in the early 1990s, and it failed miserably.”

The 36-year-old Ennis native vividly remembers watching horror flicks as a little boy at the local drive-in and how much the setting of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* looked like the town where he grew up. “My mom took me to a lot of stuff that she probably shouldn’t have taken me to,” he said with a laugh. He now sells auto parts and services and speaks with a noticeable Texas drawl and a professionally smooth manner.

The rest of Cryer's house in Justin looks much like any other middle-class home, but his bedroom wall is lined with DVDs and videos that he figures are 99 percent horror (though a few comedies were sprinkled in). They come from all eras, nations, and formats — his entertainment system includes even obsolete technologies like a laserdisc player and a BetaMax videotape player so that he can watch the rarities in his collection. While he sees a great deal of new films for the convention, he delights in re-viewing his old stuff, and he speaks enthusiastically and knowledgeably about Italian giallo films, Mexican slasher flicks from the 1980s, the early roots of Japanese horror, and a 1974 Swedish revenge film called *Thriller*, which includes scenes of hard-core pornography and has been cited as an influence on Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*.

What changed between the early 1990s and the last few years to make the Metroplex such a hospitable place for filmic slashers and demons? Cryer cites the number of transplants who have moved to North Texas from elsewhere and brought their filmmaking ambitions with them, as well as recent legislation such as the \$22 million incentive package passed last June that gives tax breaks to film projects shot in Texas. He also detected changes in the national mood. "In times of war, horror movies tend to go up. The world is giving us real-life terror to deal with. Horror movies give you a natural release," he said, charting the genre's history back to *Beowulf* (the 12th-century poem, not the Robert Zemeckis film) as part of a tradition of sitting around campfires and telling scary stories that offer moral lessons.

Unlike comedies, horror movies inspire large groups of fans to congregate in one place, and the diversity of those fans might startle you. *Frightmare* draws from the Goth-punk scene ("They're very into the music in the films, and they often hear about us through the music scene.") but also attracts cinephiles and autograph seekers who want to meet the celebrities attending these events. "I've had ticket orders come in from NASA e-mail addresses," Cryer said.

"I wouldn't say Texas *Frightmare* Weekend created a community of horror fans," he said. "But I've had so many people who've come up to me and thanked me for doing this show. Horror fans often feel like outsiders, and we're grateful to have an outlet for our passions. It's really gratifying to see other people have a good time."

There's some crossover between horror fans and fans of sci-fi or anime, but most fascinatingly, Cryer reported a great deal of overlap between his fan base and the fans of *Assassination City*, the flat-track roller derby league in Dallas. He had no idea why this might be, but he bought advertising space for the month of February on *Assassination City*'s 2008 calendar.

The same fanboy fire often grips people behind the camera as well. "Most filmmakers will tell you that horror sells," said Cryer. "But most of the ones I talk to, this is where their passion is."

That might not immediately seem to be the case with Abram, the River Oaks filmmaker and comedian who said his greatest ambition was to make a kids' movie. He also plans to make a Christian-themed thriller. "The Christian market is opening up," he said. "They know now that you don't always have to have a biblical subject."

He expressed discomfort with the compromises of working in horror, particularly the necessity of including female (always female) nudity. Still, he said his work has a cathartic personal dimension. "I watch my previous stuff, and I think how it related to what I was going through at the time. I don't consciously look to make my movies personal, but sometimes it comes out."

After a long pause, he talked a little about his health problems, including diabetes and recent heart surgery. "I think *By the Devil's Hands* involves my health issues. The main character often feels helpless, and I think some of the stuff I was feeling came through in how I wrote her. The people who work on my movies are my friends. If they didn't support me, I don't think I could do this.

"I think I make horror to conquer my fears."

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