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NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND



POST MORTEM

By GLEN BAISLEY

I'm sitting at a desk surrounded by mountains of paperwork, tapes and boxes. I lean back in my chair, rubbing sleep from my eyes. A glance at my watch says that it's 5:10 a.m. I have been working for about 19 hours straight. The computer screen glows with an intensity that makes my eyes ache. I have just finished editing a 13-minute sequence for my new movie, *The Tenement*. I play back the last scene, the crucifixion of Troma/Seduction Cinema star Suzi Leigh, a.k.a. Kelli Summers.

Bleeding, bruised and adorned with a barbed-wire crown, Leigh is being branded with a black rose tattoo by DecayNY FX artist Gene Mazza's glorious creation Rellik (Rich Lamb)—a hulking, Jason-esque, leather-robed killer. A pair of lesbian Goth girls sporting metallic vampirelike headgear, a band of black-hooded cultists and a high priest with a chalice filled with blood watch as Rellik plunges a dagger into her throbbing bare chest. I'm pleased with the scene. This is the money shot—and it's just the opening.

The Tenement packs more thrills than my first movie *Fear of the Dark*. It's a four-part anthology spanning 20 years and based around a seedy apartment building in the fictitious town of Fairview Falls, unfolding much in the style of movies such as *Creepshow* and *Tales from the Darkside*. The first story introduces Ethan Fernier (Joe Lauria), a sociopath and obsessed horror fan who lives with his crippled alcoholic mother



Glen Baisley (right, with Ed Shelinsky and kneeling Joe Lauria) digs up a little guerrilla filmmaking for *The Tenement*.

(Doreen Valdati). This is the origin of the Black Rose Killer who appears in *Fear of the Dark* (available now) and my next movie, *Sins of the Father* (slated for release in early 2004). The second tale, which was inspired by a Helen Reddy song called "Angie Baby," has a mute girl (C.J. DiMarsico, another Seduction Cinema vet) being terrorized by her neighbor (John Sudol), leading to supernatural results.

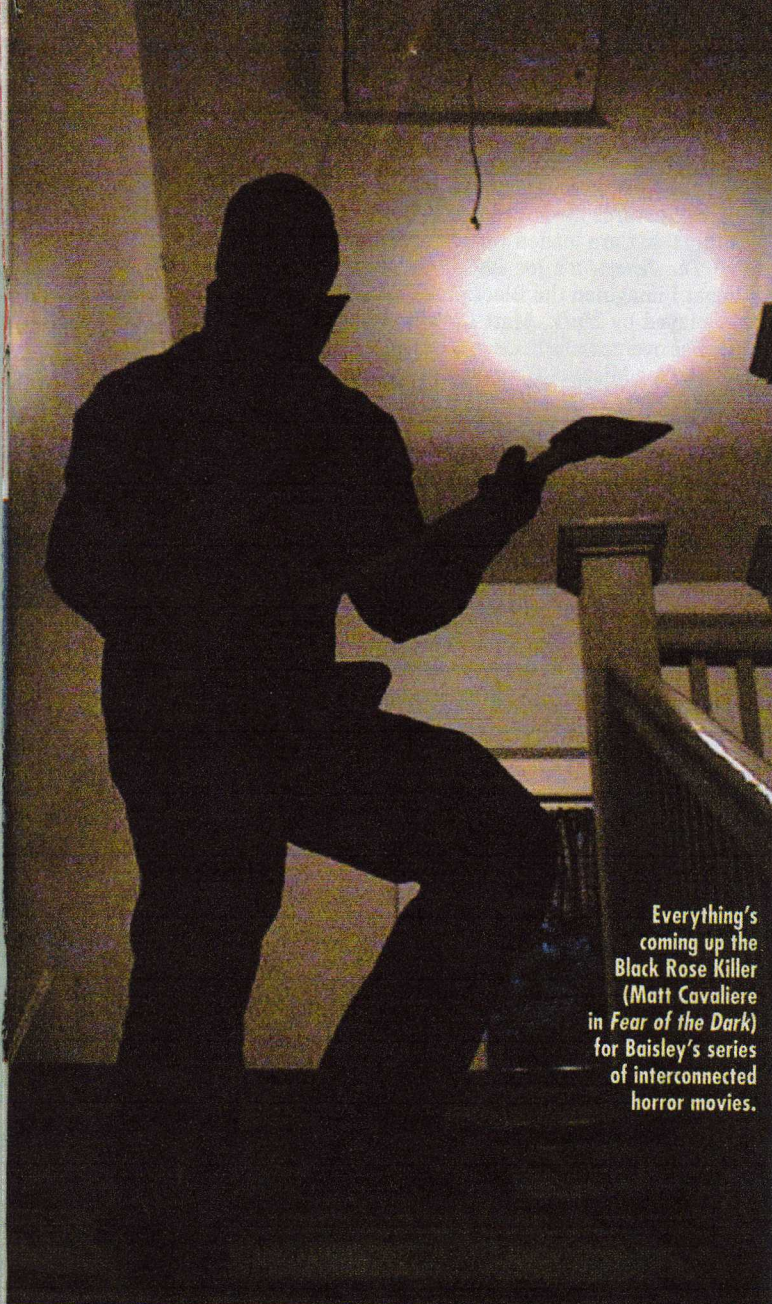
The third segment (in the tradition of *Martin and Vampire's Kiss*) has actor Mike Lane portraying a neurotic man who might be turning into a werewolf after being bitten by a wild animal. The final tale stars Ed Shelinsky (who also does most of the scores for my Light & Dark Productions) as a serial killer/taxi driver who picks up a fare played by Danielle Russo and gets more than he bargained for.

Sins of the Father will close the trilogy by reintroducing an older Ethan Fernier (Pete Barker) as a cancer-riddled man on his deathbed who wants to confess his sins to B-movie actor/writer Peter Jacobs (Richard Redmond) and make the world understand why he did the things he did. This movie co-stars Montreal actress Isabelle Stephen as a woman who forces Ethan to make a decision that leads to disastrous results and one of the best kill scenes I ever shot—death by camera tripod.

Three years ago I decided to get my life



For mute Sarah (C.J. DiMarsico), people can be dangerous, but this ghoul is a perfect Gentleman (Lauria).



Everything's coming up the Black Rose Killer (Matt Cavaliere in *Fear of the Dark*) for Baisley's series of interconnected horror movies.

back on track, having started writing again after an almost 10-year break. A career in retail hell can dishearten the best of us. My first script in a long time was called *The Crier* (no relation to the 1995 film also released as *Demoness*), inspired by a Spanish ghost called "La Llorona." I had read at the time that Full Moon was starting a new company called Alchemy Entertainment to cater to urban horror fans. The timing seemed right.

It was at a Chiller Theatre show that I met *Subspecies* series star Denice Duff. She gave me the phone number for Full Moon and a contact name—a number which I thought was just for general information. I was amazed when I discovered that it was a direct dial to the company's vice president. Outside work wasn't normally accepted, but Denice's referral opened the door. Though they liked it, internal issues prevented them from taking on any additional projects. But this was enough encouragement for me to decide to write a new screenplay that I could direct and distribute myself. That movie was *Fear of the Dark*.

Fear, which chronologically takes place after *The Tenement*, was released in 2001 and is about a woman named Alice (Rosemary Gore—Al Gore's distant cousin, who landed widely

A real knife was used...and Mark agreed that the scene would look better if he took the punches and kicks for real.

seen Paxil print/TV ads with a little help from her *Fear* footage) whose family was murdered by the Black Rose Killer when she was a child. Twenty years later, the murders begin again, and she believes he is coming back for her.

I wrote *Fear's* screenplay in about three months and immediately put casting notices in every conceivable form of media. Soon I found myself with a great ensemble made up of amateurs and professional actors, friends and family, but virtually no money to make the movie. I had over 10 years of production experience, but I had never done anything on this scale before. My friends told me I was crazy and to do a short first. I responded, "I don't have a short in me. I have a feature."

My lack of funding began to discourage me until one day I flipped on the TV and saw an interview with director Mark Borchardt, plugging the documentary *American Movie*. This film opens up with a scene of Mark sifting through bills and wondering how he will make it through to the next month—a scene which struck a chord with me immediately. His struggle to overcome the odds inspired me. I could only afford one mini-DV camera and very little equipment. Friends insisted that it wouldn't work. Then I shut them up by showing them Robert Rodriguez's "Ten Minute Film School" from the *El Mariachi* DVD, which proved how a movie could be done on a small budget with a single camera.

I worked overtime at my retail job. Combined with whatever savings I had and my trusty MasterCard and Visa, I purchased the bare essentials. I created makeshift lights from some stuff I

The *Tenement's* Suzi Leigh should at least be grateful that Richard Redmond, Andrea Mahnke and Bernadette McComish crucified her indoors, out of the cold.





Ever get so drunk you feel like you should shave your tongue? That's not what *The Tenement's* Danielle Russo is up to.

bought at Home Depot.

I plugged away with renewed determination. My spirits and career aspirations were high, but then my home life began to suffer. Toiling long hours away from home was hard on my wife Diana and our then 4-year-old daughter, so I began involving them in my occupation and bringing them on set. Today my daughter can pretty much tell you the ingredients of a "blood mix" and how most of the FX work. Like me, my kid has grown up with a "healthy" dose of horror. On Tuesday nights we would sit together and watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a memory I hold dear as it reminds me of when I sat on my father's lap as a child and watched the old Hammer Dracula movies and the *Chiller Theater* show. My wife and I are surviving the turbulence generated by the financial stress and time away from home incurred by the movies. I try to appease her with what I call the *I Love Lucy* approach, giving her a role or two in my productions. She helps out with catering for the cast and crew as well.

Fear of the Dark was lensed on a budget of about \$10,000 and an approximately two-week schedule, with several weeks of additional scenes shot over the following year (considerably less time and money than *The Tenement* and *Sins of the Father*). I realized soon after its completion that moviemaking keeps me sane. Everything before it seems like a blur now. *Fear* was covered in *The New York Times* and won an award for Best Storytelling at a local festival—one which originally was going to ban the movie. Its disembowelment scene was deemed "too graphic and shockingly realistic." A friendship was forged the day festival chairwoman Maryann Arrien (who has since consulted on my movies) threatened to pull the plug on the fest if it was not shown. *Fear* (which also caused a stir in the family church) later played at a packed midnight screening.

Controversy has arisen over the years regarding a scene of Alice smashing a mouse. An animal rights activist was horrified to hear Mark Yonick, *Fear's* Black Rose Killer, quip at a convention, "It took four or five of those things before the head stayed on...and they cost a buck apiece." Of course, no animals were hurt, unless you count the poor shaved cat toy that we stuffed a blood-filled latex condom into.

I always knew that *Fear of the Dark* would be the beginning of something big—a franchise perhaps. I'm constantly

chided by colleagues for having made the Black Rose Killer the center of the movies' universe in a "six degrees of Kevin Bacon" way. I find it appealing how we get to see all of these characters who are somehow affected by him (however distantly) grow throughout the movies—all of which are stand-alone features structured so that it's not necessary to see the others, but are loaded with "Easter eggs" for those who have.

The Tenement's Joe Lauria has best captured my vision of what I imagined the Black Rose Killer to be (he was previously played by Mark, Matt Cavaliere and Anthony Eikner). Joe was so overzealous in a scene in which he attacks Fango managing editor Michael Gingold with a shovel (made of fiberglass) that he left Mike with several bruises despite his wearing a padded jacket. If it wasn't for FX wizards Brian Spears and Pete Gerner of G&S Effects stepping in, Mike's onscreen broken nose and splintered teeth might have been all too real.

No part is ever too small in my movies, and actor Mike Valenzano would know this best. His character of Oscar Valentine—whose psychosis stems from his father having been eaten by clowns—was created by him on the spot, and the role (which caused me to alter the Black Rose Killer mythology to fit him in) went from an extra bit in *The Tenement* to a central character in my next movie *Fairview Falls* (which will go into production this fall). Singer/songwriter Sal Sirchia is also going from a cameo in *Tenement* to a big part in *Fairview*.

Low-budget moviemaking is really an art, and sometimes you do anything for a shot or a setting. One time when scouting locations for *Fear*, we ended up stranded on a mountaintop

Fear won an award for Best Storytelling at a local festival—one which originally was going to ban the movie.

at night when our guide (who dodged every camera shot as if we were taping *America's Most Wanted*) decided to leave us there. Before disappearing, he joked about how easy it would be to hide a body up there. We made it back down using the infra-red "Night Shot" function on my video camera. Upon returning to his house at the base of the mountain, we saw something we failed to notice before—his shed was adorned top to bottom with animal skulls.

I also have a new appreciation for stuntmen from shooting the final moments of *Fear*. For this sequence, Mark donned the Black Rose Killer outfit and went up against Rosemary's co-star Vanessa Edwards. A real knife was used in favor of a

There's plenty to grab you—and Henry (John Sudol)—among *The Tenement's* four stories.





Isabelle Stephen has a face-to-face encounter with the *Sins of the Father*.

prop, and Mark agreed that the scene would look better if he took the punches and kicks for real. After several blows to the head, including one that dropped him to his knees, the scene's first half was completed. The second half opens with a slice to the back that thankfully didn't cut through to him, an elbow to the face and a knee to the groin. This would be the first time Mark endured great pain for me; for a *Fear* opening sequence that was shot months after the rest of the production, Mark test-fell from a ladder onto the hard October ground. I looked up when I heard Mike Gingold exclaim, "Ouch, that had to hurt," and proceeded to examine the impression that Mark's body had left in the soil. Later, Mark spent his afternoon stretched out on a hardwood floor, barely able to move. He was luckier on *Sins of the Father*: He only sprained his hand and dislocated his shoulder on that one.

I've found that when you tell people you're making a movie, you suddenly gain a lot of friends—and when the work really starts to pile up, you learn just who your friends truly are. These movies would never have happened were it not for the support of the cast and crew who worked long, hard, *unpaid* hours simply because they believed in me and the projects. They not only dedicated time, but in some cases their homes. Many of the indoor scenes for all of the movies were shot at Ed and Mark's apartment, including one of *Fear*'s many infamous scenes—the castration, which left a bloody streak on Ed's bedroom wall. The latest tenants suspiciously asked what happened there, because no matter how many coats of paint they give it, the stain still bleeds through.

My favorite "Ed moment" was when we told a bunch of strangers that a popular tourist area was closed down for a big-budget shoot, in order to steal the location. A Japanese woman who apparently didn't speak English continued to get in our shots while videotaping our every movement, until Ed snapped. The last thing I remember is her worried look as she jumped into her car and raced away as Ed approached her while pointing at the Hudson River and screaming, "Run, run, here comes Godzilla!"

Tenement and Fear of the Dark star Mike Lane is one of my biggest supporters. He has been active in promoting the movies from the start, despite the fact that I forgot about him

and left him to suffocate in a real casket while shooting *Fear*—an incident that took place on the day *The New York Times* came to report on one of *Fear*'s biggest scenes, set in a funeral home. And how did we get to use this real location? It turned out that actor Sean Maher's father owned it. He was sympathetic to me being a struggling filmmaker and let me use the facility, casket and all.

We have been always lucky with locations—lucky enough not to get thrown out! One day on *The Tenement* found us raking demonic hands over the face of John Sudol as he yelled, "Daddy, stop touching me!" Meanwhile, right above us there was a funeral service going on—which I knew about beforehand.

The best locations, though, are often the ones you get by accident or "theft." After months of being told by a property owner that we could use a certain place for *The Tenement*, we found out that he didn't really own it. A "f**k-you shot" was decided upon, where we would stage a beheading with the location as a backdrop. Joe

"helped himself" into the abandoned building; six hours later, and with a bold second trip back the next day for another four-hour shoot, we had some really sweet footage (including Gene chasing my sister-in-law Judy with an ax) that is enough for a mini-set of movies for a future special-edition *Tenement* DVD.

Eight months of running from one location to another for *Tenement* and *Sins*, cramming in 12-hour-plus shoot days—it has been a rollercoaster ride that seems as if it will never end. A grin escapes me as I hit the Save button and turn off the monitor. The glow fades to nothingness. I unplug the camera for the night. There are 33 more hours of footage to go through for a movie that will probably be about two hours when completed. It's the middle of July, and the *Tenement* premiere is taking place October 4 in New Jersey, in advance of the video's debut at this month's Chiller Theatre convention; you can find out more at www.lightanddark.net. I'll lie down for an hour or two, and when I wake up I'll write my article for this magazine, one that I grew up reading, and that has inspired me on many occasions.

I sit a moment in silence, in the darkness. I have survived the controversy and hardships that have disrupted my family. Could I survive a life without moviemaking? No, the world would be dead to me.



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