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Horror movies &stuff Interviews "Evilution" Director Chris Conlee



Horror Movies &stuff recently got a chance to chat with Editor turned Filmmaker Chris Conlee. Conlee has worked on such films as "BOO", "The Devil's Tomb", and "Abominable", "Simon Says", and others. "Evilution", his directorial debut, hits DVD on the 17th of November, this fall. The film, which stars Jonathan Breck, and Nathan Bexton, follows a hostile alien intelligence, with the ability to possess a dead human body and resurrect it. When it is stolen by a young scientist, Captain Darren Hall, he hopes that he can find a way to learn from it while keeping it safe from a military that wants to program it as a bio-weapon.

MR. H:You Directed "Evilution", and Brian Patrick O'Toole wrote the screenplay. Tell us how you two came together on the project, and also about how the project came together overall.

Chris:Some years ago I edited a horror feature called, "Boo," which Brian Patrick O'Toole co-produced and Anthony C. Ferrante directed. During that time, Brian was part of the creative team that helped to finish the film. In the years that followed, we'd occasionally touch base with one another, with each of us basically looking for work all the time. LOL! Anyway, I got a gig working as the assistant editor on, "Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles" pilot. It was during that time that Brian called me up, completely unexpectedly, and told me he'd gotten some money together and was going to do a film called, "Evilution." He wanted to know if I'd be interested in directing!

I nearly drove off the road right then and there. He explained that he'd had good luck in the past with first-time directors and he thought my editorial background would serve the story well. He set up a meeting with the other producer and the investors and I got the opportunity. It was that simple and that unexpected.

MR. H:For everyone out there who doesn't know, what's the basic premise of "Evilution"?

Chris:The U.S. government is trying to weaponize an alien lifeform they've come into possession of. The experiment, being carried out in a foreign land of unknown origin, goes horribly awry and they incinerate the entire base from the air. One of the junior scientists who was working on the project narrowly escapes, the only survivor, with a **living** specimen and hides himself in the basement of a creepy building in the **states** to continue his experiments. As should be expected, things don't go well and soon he and a group of his neighbors are fighting for their very existence -- and the existence of mankind, because if the infectious agent spreads outside their building, who knows how far it'll go?

MR. H:When it came to the horror genre in general, what did you set out to accomplish with "Evilution"?

Chris:I've been a horror fan from the time I was a little kid. My parents were never fans, but on Saturday nights they'd let me stay up and watch a local program in Portland, Oregon, called, "Sinister Cinema." It aired at midnight and nine times out of ten I'd fall asleep anyway before the show. But when I did make it I'd see things like the classic **Universal** horror flicks, "The Wolfman," "Frankenstein," etc. They'd also air the cool old sci-fi flicks like, "The Day the Earth Stood Still," and more esoteric one's like, "The Day of the Triffids."

It was all terribly entertaining stuff, but completely harmless for my young mind. Then one night I happened to make the midnight hour unaware that I was about to be changed forever. On the bill: "Night of the Living Dead." Holy shit!

Zombies chomping on intestines, little girls waking from the dead, people getting shot through the head. I'd never seen anything like it and frankly it pretty much freaked me the hell out. I had to sleep, with one eye open, at the foot of my parents' bed that night. I didn't sleep well for weeks, I'm sure, because that film just wouldn't leave my mind alone.

As I got older that scar healed a bit, I guess. I got into the movie-making business primarily as a feature film editor. Some of the movies I've cut are obviously better than others, but nobody sets out to make a bad movie. They're too friggin' **hard** to make to do a bad one. So I really wanted Evilution to be entertaining, above all else. And competently put together. Honestly, I just didn't want people to be bored by it. I didn't have any grand illusion that I was re-inventing the genre; I just wanted to take parts that I knew I liked and throw in a bit of humor, some action, some sci-fi, and just make a fun movie. Nothing more, nothing less. I think Brian's script did that wonderfully, and I just didn't want to screw it up in the execution.

MR. H:Would you describe "Evilution" as a horror/scifi hybrid, a straight up horror film, or a zombie movie?

Chris:Evilution is definitely a horror/sci-fi hybrid with action thrown in for good measure. We never referred to it as a zombie picture, because as purists ourselves we favor George Romero's lumbering undead to the acrobatic zombies of late. But these aren't zombies in our movie. They're alien possessed, which gave us a little bit of freedom to play around with the speedy parkour athleticism of our creatures.

MR. H:You guys assembled a pretty talented cast for an indie picture. James Duvall, Jonathan Breck, Noel Gugliemi, Nathan Bexton, and Marie Antoinette.

How did you guys go about gathering up such a talented group, and what overall did you see in this particular group of actors, which led you to believe they'd work well in this particular picture?

Chris:Well I'd love to say we had some great plan when we cast the film, but we didn't. Honestly it all sort of happened organically. I had worked with Jonathan Breck a few years earlier on a small project that I was editing, and we'd stayed in touch a bit so we called him very early, and he agreed to come aboard. Our star and producer, Eric Peter Kaiser, had just worked on a film with James Duvall and Nathan Bexton, so he called them and they agreed to come aboard. James knew Guillermo Diaz, so he came aboard. And Guillermo knew Noel G. so he came on. That pretty much left us the roles of Maddy and Sgt Collins to fill. I'd cut Sandra Ramirez in a film called, "Razor," and thought she'd be perfect. she didn't really know me, but I got in touch with her through the director of the other project and she said yes right away.

Sgt. Collins was a little more complicated. I knew an actor named Jamison Jones who's a fantastic actor and I felt he'd be perfect for the role. He played a similar role in the television series, "24." We called him in and he wanted to do it; we all agreed he'd be great. But we'd also called in an actor named Tim Colceri who I'd cut in a film called, "The Gun" a couple of years earlier. Tim also blew us away and he wanted to do it. So now we had a very hard decision to make. Ultimately we made a unanimous decision that it was right for the film to make Sgt. Collins an older character and Tim won out. But it was a squeaker, because these are two excellent actors and the movie would have been great with either of them, just different. I still keep hoping for a chance to work with Jamison some day.

Regarding Nathan Bexton, I have to say I wasn't sold based on his headshots, but the producers and Eric Peter Kaiser swore he was the right person for the part. Somehow I envisioned the apartment manager being an older fellow. But when Nathan did his thing, he was perfect. Many reviewers single him out as their favorite character in the movie. He was a casting coup, for sure.

MR. H:I assume you've seen the final cut of the film, on a scale of 1 through 10, how would rate the blood and gore levels of "Evilution"?

Chris:Gee, that's pretty subjective...I guess I'd put us somewhere between 7 and 8. But the gore we have is pretty entertaining, I'd say. A couple really good moments.

MR. H:"Evilution" was your feature film debut as far as directing goes. How excited were you to finally helm a feature length film?

Chris:More excited than you can imagine! I'd come out to Los Angeles in 1991 with the idea that I was going to direct movies. Over the years I'd managed to create a career in editing, but the directing seemed like a million miles away. I wasn't sure how to parlay editing into directing, although it's a common progression in this business. Anyway, once the opportunity did present itself I just didn't want to screw it up. I knew that if I got a 'good one' under my belt, the next one would be easier. Hopefully I succeeded. Now I have something that I can show people as I hunt for the next directing gig.

MR. H:You've done a ton of editorial work on many past horror features such as "Simon Says", "BOO", and "The Devil's Tomb". What was the transition like moving into directing a feature length for the first time?

Chris:My editorial experience was invaluable for a number of reasons. First, when you're cutting a movie you spend an inordinate amount of time trying to decipher, hone, and polish the STORY. You find and fix character flaws. You discover the movie's proper pace. It's truly the last re-write of the script. Knowing this in advance, I was able to look at Brian's script with a keen eye and we discovered a few things together that we changed prior to shooting: nothing big, his script was strong, but little polish things.

Also, invariably, when you're doing a low budget movie with limited time and resources, the time will come when you have to make compromises on the set. When those times came, usually at the end of each shooting day, I'd take a five or ten minute break with Mathew Rudinberg, our Director of Photogaphry, and Paul Silver, our Assistant Director, and we'd decide what we really NEEDED to have in order to tell the story. Wild camera moves and visual flourishes go out the window and the emphasis becomes, "We gotta have this, this, and this, in order for the scene to make sense." I think my editorial background was very helpful for that clarity. It also helped us from overshooting our transitions. By that I mean that I didn't necessarily need to have my characters entering and exciting every scene, because as an editor I knew we'd be picking them up mid-action somewhere and we'd be leaving them in mid-action. No sense shooting a bunch of footage that we wouldn't be using.

MR. H:How arduous or easy was the process of finding distribution for "Evilution"?

Chris:Well this is a tricky one. If you have a quality movie, it's not hard finding distribution. Meaning it's not hard to find someone who'll put your movie on store shelves. But what is VERY hard is finding somebody who will do that without totally screwing you in the process. It has become extremely difficult the past 8 or 10 years to make a profit with an independent film. The market has changed so much, with kids downloading films for free, with video on demand services offering abysmal licensing fees, etc, that virtually nobody wants to put money up front when acquiring a little-known movie. It just doesn't happen.

Evilution could have been on store shelves shortly after we made it, but the producers were looking for a better deal. Honestly I wasn't too involved in that aspect of it, given that I was sort of a director for hire and had no producer duties. Ultimately they signed with a lesser known label, BrinkDVD, but found the business relationship more to their liking. Time will tell how that works out. Hopefully well for everybody, because I'd like Black Gate Entertainment (the folks behind Evilution) to make more movies so that I can direct again for them.

MR. H:Have you received any compliments on the film from any big time genre actors, directors, or otherwise?

Chris:Not really. The movie hasn't been seen by too many people. I have cut several films for director William Dear, who directed, "Harry and the Hendersons," and he's seen it and liked it tremendously. He was sort of my mentor while I was preparing to direct. If I had questions, I'd throw them at him and he'd give me advice. One day while we were in pre-production I called him and said, "Damn, man, the questions never stop. Everybody has a question." He told me that's what a director does, is answer questions. And you wouldn't know if you got any of them right until the movie was done. Now that we're getting released, I'm going to make a bigger effort to get more directing gigs, so I'll be showing it to more of my contacts. I hope they like it.

MR. H:Not many people know this, but you directed a short comedic satire film called "The Lost Michelle Obama Tapes: Tape Number One - The Sermon on the Mount According to Michelle Obama". Where did the inspiration for that project come from?

Chris:Oh, boy... It would probably be MUCH better for my career in Hollywood if NOBODY knew about that film. LOL!

I had a friend who was a very active Hillary Clinton supporter during the campaign and she wrote the script and asked me if I'd direct it. I agreed to do it, largely because the satire was so heavy-handed I felt it could be interpreted in more than one way: Liberals could point to it and say, "See how evil the right is for these gross exaggerations!" and the Conservatives could point at it and say, "See how these Socialists want to ruin our country!" Because of the fact it could be taken two ways, I'm not sure how effectively it presented the writer/producer's intent, but as a filmmaker it was practice and it was fun.

MR. H:Are there any plans for a sequel to "Evilution", or are you hanging back until you see how well the DVD does?

Chris:Black Gate Entertainment planned a trilogy, with all the films revolving around the apartment complex in the movie, The Necropolitan, with Nathan Bexton in all three films. The first two have been shot and are being released at the same time on November 17th, 2009. The first film is, "Evilution," and the second film is, "Basement Jack," directed by a friend of mine named Michael Shelton. The third film hasn't been shot yet, for financial reasons, but hopefully it will. After that, there's definitely been talk of a sequel, but who knows... No script exists yet, and I haven't even heard what the premise would be. Still, it'd be fun and I'd definitely want to do it if they asked me.

MR. H:What other horror projects do you currently have in the oven?

Chris:Well, my editing slate is starting to fill up. I just cut two episodes of, "Eastwick," for ABC, and I'm supposed to cut a feature called, "Burden" for director James Lay later in the year. My writing partner, Daniel Bilodeau, and I are working on a horror script idea that I've had floating around in my head for a while. I'd love to do it. It's sort of a throw-back to '80s horror with a twist. Did you ever see, "Basket Case?" Well it's really not like that, but another editor friend of mine said a lot of the themes are the same. I'll leave it at that.

End.

([Talk "Evilution" in the Forums!](#))

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