



HOW I SPAWNED A MONSTER

Article by Ted A. Bohus

The Deadly Spawn was a very special film for me. It was the first film produced by my own production company, Filmline Communications. But let's go back to the beginning, circa 1979. Things were not working out with my partner Don Dohler and the weekly trip to Baltimore was killing me. I was employed by New Jersey Bell Telephone (now Verizon), and every Friday I'd pack the car, drive to New Brunswick, pick up John Dods (special effects), and head out to Maryland.

We'd shoot the film, then late Sunday night I'd drive back, get home at 3 or 4 in the morning, and have to be ready for work by 7 a.m. This went on for months. Then, a problem with financing arose and the project was put on hold. (It wasn't until years later that Don was able to complete the film, *Nightbeast*.)

So, a year later I called John Dods and said, "Hey, why don't we make a monster movie right here in Jersey?" He thought it was a good idea and offered his services as special effects supervisor. I got an idea for a story after reading, in *National Geographic* magazine, about scientists finding prehistoric seedpods encased in Arctic ice. They thawed the ice and these seeds were still alive, or something crazy like that.

I figured, let's put a seed-like, dormant creature inside a meteor and have it crash on earth, unleashing a horde of mutant horrors to terrorize the neighborhood. Good idea! It was only later that I realized it was *The Blob!* I came up with a title I thought sounded cool at the time, *The Deadly Spawn*.

At first, I wanted to produce, write, and direct the film, but as the reality of the job sank in, I realized I couldn't do everything, especially with a full-time job. John said he had a friend, Doug McKeown, who worked in a theater group and had experience directing actors and writing. Fine. We got together, had a great meeting, and Doug said he would take the story, come up with the screenplay, and direct. We'd all work together like one big happy family.

While working with Doug on screenplay ideas, I was trying to come up with an interesting creature design to give to John. I finally came up with something I thought was different. It was basically a man in a suit, but with two additional heads that were operated from behind like hand puppets. Besides the arms, which ended in huge claws similar to the mutant in *This Island Earth*, tentacles would also be operated from behind.

I thought this was a very unusual and innovative monster. When I showed the designs to John, the first thing he said was, "Oh no, not another man in a rubber suit monster!" He thought it would be better to just have this snake-like mass under the toothy heads. I said, "Fine, as long as it stays with the basic design of three heads with plenty of teeth, pincer arms coming from behind, and tentacles." After going back and forth with it for a few days, John came up with a drawing that we both liked. It had a globular body, one main head, filled with razor sharp teeth, flanked by two smaller heads. Two tentacle-like, clawed arms spouted out from either side. John also designed the creatures in various stages of development, from small tadpole versions to the full seven-foot Mother Spawn.

Everything was going along fine. Doug was writing, John was making monsters, now I had to come up with money, locations, actors, equipment, money, film, and money. I figured I'd start with . . . money!

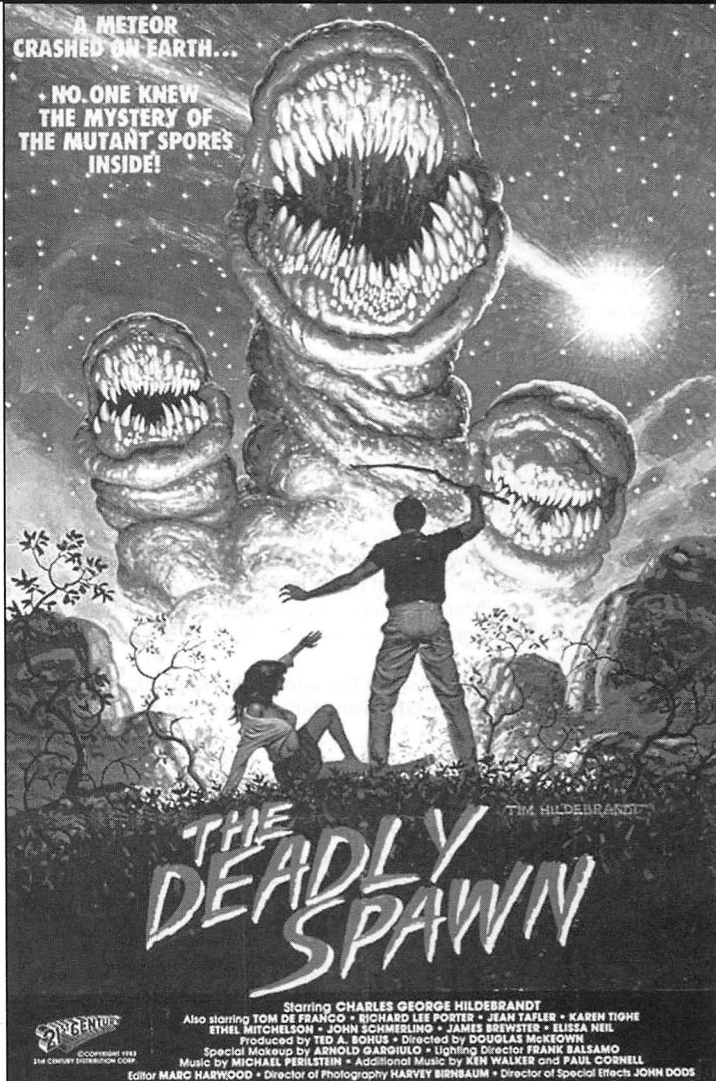
How do you get funding for an independent feature film? The independent backer. If you hobnob with enough people, you will probably, eventually, find someone willing to talk to you about investing in film production. You explain to them that a lot of small films went on to make millions of dollars. *Halloween*, *The Evil Dead*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Blair Witch Project*, etc., etc. Of course you don't tell them that it is usually the distributor that makes those millions.

This is what happened with *The Deadly Spawn*. A friend of mine introduced me to his brother Ron Giannotto. Ron is a collector and film enthusiast. At the time he was in medical school. He and a student friend put up the first monies for *The Deadly Spawn*. We were now a legitimate film production company.

Continuing my streak of good luck, I asked my friend, fantasy artist Tim Hildebrandt, who painted the *Star Wars* poster, Tolkien Calendars, etc., if he would lend his name to the production. He immediately wanted to do anything he could to help. His first love was filmmaking—even over painting.

At this point, I was still amazed at how easy all this was. Everyone in the business I'd spoken to told me what I was trying to put together was impossible. Make a special effects laden film for under eighteen thousand dollars . . . impossible! Get equipment, locations, actors, editing, materials, and crew for nothing . . . impossible! Get the negative cut, pay the lab, do a final mix, keep all these people together for over a year . . . impossible! If this was all so impossible, then why were we going to start shooting next week?

Then, of course, I began to learn why it was impossible. I cursed myself for ever thinking things were too easy. Less than a week before shooting, the guy with the equipment called and said he got offered a paying job out of state and was going to take it. "What?!" I yelled. "We start shooting in four days!" "Sorry." CLICK. I sat back in my chair totally devastated. How can this happen? How could I tell everyone after all their work?



I frantically called equipment rental companies. Not only was a camera, sound, and lighting package totally out of my budget range, they wanted a half-million dollar insurance policy and a ten thousand dollar check that they would hold until the equipment was returned in good condition.

That word, impossible, kept ringing in my head all night. The next morning everyone called to confirm our schedule for Saturday. While I was on the phone, a strange feeling came over me, a feeling that everything was going to be all right. Either that, or I'd gone completely mad. By midday I figured I better call John and give him the bad news first. Those smug bastards that told me I couldn't do it were right! As I reached for the phone, it rang. It was Harvey Birnbaum, the second guy who called with an equipment package. He dropped out early on, but was now available. I asked, almost too horrified to hear the answer, "How about this Saturday?" . . . (Long pause) . . . "OK." We set up a meeting immediately. I hung up the phone and literally started dancing around the room. You bastards haven't beaten me yet!!

The day before shooting I asked my friend at a distribution company if he had any old contracts for crew or actors. He gave me a few, but for the most part I had to make up a legal sounding document. When I called a lawyer and found out how much he wanted to make up these contracts, I asked him if he wanted to invest! The contracts were kept simple. The investors got their entire investment paid back in full out of first monies in. Then the deferments were paid, and finally the percentages.

Contracts were made up, actors rehearsed, equipment was made ready. I kept checking everything over and over. After that last humbling experience, I would never think anything was too easy again. The day finally came. I could hardly sleep that night, thinking something might happen to one of the actors, or the equipment truck coming all the way from Long Island might be late or get in an accident, or was I forgetting something? I finally drifted off to sleep . . .

Some early press notices about the new film indicate it is a "Gothic comedy." Burton says that's not his intent, but snippets of information certainly do seem to suggest that some levity will be experienced with an 18th century gentleman awakening into an era of female liberation and technology. Barnabas may wax poetic in 1972 (the year the film is largely set), which may come across as comical but Depp, here in a nod to the original Barnabas, is being sincere. Depp said in 2010, "For me, even the conversations I've had with Tim, what Jonathan Frid did with that character and that classic look he created, I find it very difficult to stray very far from that . . . with maybe just a couple of different touches here and there . . . But Jonathan Frid's Barnabas was so special."

Director Burton sees *DS* as the story of a "hermetically sealed" family, where the supernatural will be placed in reality. Interestingly, Frid in an interview from the mid-1980s noted that his portrayal centered on a man trying to not embarrass his very upper crust family and aiming toward living an existence of honor rather than horror.

As *Dark Shadows* sails back into the movie theaters, longtime fans hope the 21st century will welcome and embrace its unique nature while attracting a whole new legion of fans to the fold. Will new fans visit the old show (the complete series is now available on a DVD box set from MPI Home Video) and embrace its oddball sense and passion? And perhaps note a few familiar faces—Kate Jackson in her first professional role as a ghost/governess or Harvey Keitel with a belly to the bar at the Blue Whale. There has been a recent run of popular franchise reboots, namely *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica* but more than a few fell apart, i.e., *Charlie's Angels*, *V*, and *Bewitched*. Selby recalled in his book *My Shadowed Past* that *Dark Shadows* fit into an era when children were seeking an escape from the stresses their parents faced—political turmoil, Vietnam, college campus protests and changing roles for women. But now, in an era with vampires and werewolves everywhere you look, will *DS* resonate with a culture that now, perhaps, too often focuses on escapist entertainment? Longtime fans have a wait and see attitude given that the new production is in the hands of two admired artists and avowed fans of the original series.

From 1966-1971, Collinsport, Maine, was a spot people wanted to visit everyday, but will today's youth feel the same, and how will their parents who likely remember this kooky outpost of television history feel? Will it be comfortingly familiar and fun or awkwardly sentimental?

R.J. Jamison is the co-author, with the late Craig Hamrick, of Barnabas and Company, 2nd edition, and is the biographer of the Oscar-nominated, Dark Shadows leading lady—Grayson Hall: A Hard Act to Follow. Both are available from Amazon.com. See www.barnabasandcompany.com and www.graysonhall.net.

For information on Dark Shadows Festivals, visit www.darkshadowsfestival.com. The Festival will host a summer event in Tarrytown, NY, in July.

Editor's note: Screem would like to thank Jim Pierson and Allegra Haddigan for their help in making this article possible. Dark Shadows opens in theaters on May 11th, 2012.



Left to right: David Selby, Lara Parker, Johnny Depp, Jonathan Frid, director Tim Burton, and Kathryn Leigh Scott on the set of Warner Bros. Pictures' and Village Roadshow Pictures' *Dark Shadows*. Photo by Leah Gallo.

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Day one. Made all the last minute calls, and got ready to go. The Hildebrandts' house was in Bernardsville, New Jersey, about an hour away. A few of the crew met at my house, so we had this little caravan. We got there and started setting up. The equipment van arrived and was unpacked. The actors all got there and started rehearsing. So far so good.

Where was Frank Balsamo, our lighting director, with the film stock? Finally, he pulled up and I ran over, "Frank, get the film to Harvey right away." "What?!" he continued, "I thought you said you were bringing the film." "No . . . look, it doesn't matter, please go back and get the film." Oh well, a two-hour delay. Now, where's the monster? I called the studio in New Brunswick, hoping no one would answer the phone. Of course, they did. It seemed that when they were building the big Mother Spawn, no one actually thought about bringing it out of the basement workshop. It was too wide for any doorway. They finally had to cut one of the heads off and reattach it later. What a great start. Little did I know this was just a little precursor of things to come.

As the weeks went by, we started to get some good footage in the can. The occasional calamity, of course, would always rear its ugly head. One of the biggest nightmares was the creature's drool. Don't forget, this is 1981, and we all just started in the business and weren't familiar with the tricks of the trade. The substance we thought most resembled the consistency of monster drool was rubber cement! One day, I was complaining to another effects artist about the mess, when he said, "Rubber cement?! Are you crazy? Just mix baking soda, water, and add a little starch to it. It cleans up in a second." He was right.

Every weekend we'd get more done. Every day was a learning experience. A guy from Philadelphia, Mike Perilstein, called and said he'd like to work on the music score. By the time the film was finished, three people contributed to the music—Ken Walker, Mike Perilstein and Paul Cornell. Paul did most of the sound effects along with John Dods.

I was introduced to Marc Harwood who had made a few short films. He was interested in editing *Spawn*. He seemed like he knew what he was doing, and besides, he had his own equipment. He was in! (I still work with Marc to this day, and he created visual effects for my film, *Hell On Earth*.)

Then, one weekend a different problem arose that took me totally by surprise. Evidently, John wanted to direct some of the scenes dealing with special effects. Doug McKeown, the director, did not like this idea. I had to make a decision and stuck by my partner, John. The bottom line was that Doug left the production. How could a film turn two people against each other so that they cannot be in the same room together?

At a certain point, everybody wanted to put their two cents into the film. When you're not paying people, if you're not really careful, a film can turn into a free-for-all. I finally said, "Look, as the producer, I make all the decisions, if you don't like it, I'll get somebody else to do that job, you can walk!"

With all the crazy stuff happening, I wanted to try and get the film done faster. A guy I knew in New York also had his own equipment, but he wanted to get paid. I figured I would schedule a week straight to shoot. Gee, just like a regular movie! I asked everyone to take a week off work. I convinced the investors that putting in this little extra money and shooting seven days straight would save us months work. Aside from some of the film being out of focus, the plan worked.

The actors were a real pleasure to work with. That is until they were offered paying acting jobs. When Jean Tafler had to leave (she played the love interest who was to survive with her boyfriend), I had to figure a way to kill her off. Something not too bad . . . so, I had her head ripped off by the Mother Spawn and her headless, lifeless body thrown through a third-story window. Anybody else wanna leave early?!

When we did have a couple actors leave for awhile, we had to shut down. When one, Richard Lee Porter, returned, his hair was much shorter. It was all action at the end, so we just sprayed down his head with water. I figured people would think the sweating made his hair shrink up. I guess it worked. Nobody ever mentioned anything about his hair.

Tom DeFranco gave a noteworthy performance, and one day got so much into the role he actually smashed his head diving out a third-story window. That take was left in the film and to this day it's painful to watch.

Charles Hildebrandt did an outstanding job considering he never acted before. With all the laws about child actors (and I think we broke them all), it was handy having him live right there. Karen Tighe, the "cute blond," not only did a great job, but put on film what I consider to be one of the genre's great screams.

Ethel Michelson and John Schmerling as the Aunt and Uncle were fine, accomplished actors. Great work. The ladies' luncheon scene with Judith Mayes was hysterical. As they were chowing down on the remains of one of the baby spawns that got caught in the blender, her outlandish take after eating the goo was priceless.

One night, I was sitting on the Hildebrandt porch, looking kind of depressed. Tim came over and asked what was the matter. I had been thinking about the end of the film. I was not happy with the ending and wanted to change it. The trick ending I really wanted would be far too expensive, so I was trying to come up with something else. I said, "How about at the end, when all the creatures have been destroyed, the battered and bruised teenagers look up at the night sky and see hundreds of meteors coming down? Of course insinuating that there were creatures in all of them."

Tim looked at me. "What's the ending you really want?"



The *Spawn* crew: (top, left to right) Greg Ramoundas, Frank Balsamo, Jack Piccuro, Richard Valley, and T. Davis. (bottom, left to right) John Matthews, Kevin Shinnick, and John Payne.

"I want everyone to think it's all over, and don't forget, throughout the film we sort of indicate that these things just keep growing. We pan back away from the house and see the countryside and mountains. Slowly the ground begins to shake and then turns into a huge earthquake. All of a sudden, a half-mile-wide spawn head lifts out from under the mountain and bellows into the night." Tim just looked at me, thought for a minute, and said, "I can build that set for a few hundred dollars." Ya-hooooooo!

After Doug left, John shot some of the monster stuff over like he wanted. And to be fair, most of the footage was better.

Well, this was it! The film was in the can! It's still amazing to me that the Hildebrandts could have an entire film crew in their home almost every weekend for over a year. They were, indeed, very special people. (Tim passed away in 2006, rest in peace, my friend.)

Now for the fun part . . . postproduction. Because of our long production period, Marc, the editor, had plenty of time to edit as we went along. John, of course, wanted to edit the special effects sequences. We only locked horns a few times, mostly over the take length.

One day he called me and said the entire sequence where Jean Tafler gets her head bit off was unusable. I immediately went down there to check this out. He showed me the raw footage. Fine, it was just as I remembered. We only needed very quick shots and it finally worked out.

Now we had a cut film, with music and sound effects on the way, and it seemed like most of the problems were behind us. That's when we ran out of money. I figured I'd take the film around and maybe cut a deal before it was finished. I asked Tim if he could possibly do a *Deadly Spawn* painting. Having a Hildebrandt poster I felt would be a major selling tool.

I took the film around to four or five different distribution companies. They all said the same thing, "It looks great, bring it back when it's done." Doing a final mix and making a print was very expensive. Even with the investors putting up extra money, it still was not enough.

The last company I took the film to was mostly interested in foreign rights. I trekked into New York with my film cans under one arm and a sloppy dialog track for interlock under the other. I set up the projector in a small conference room, where Alexander Beck, (AB Enterprises), two of his employees, and I sat and watched the whole thing.

The entire time a friend's voice of advice echoed inside my head, "Don't show the film to anyone until it is completely finished." The film was over, they turned on the lights. Alex immediately took me into his office and offered to pay for the final mix and print if he could have foreign rights. I had a deal. *The Deadly Spawn* would get finished!

Well, here it was, the moment we'd all been waiting for. The world premiere of *The Deadly Spawn*. We would have it at my friend's nightclub, The Limelight, in Hackensack, New Jersey, on Saturday, November 27th, 1982 at 6:30 p.m. We had everybody there—family, friends, all the people I worked with at the phone company, cast, crew, strangers I'd pull in off the street. We put the 16mm projector on the bar and projected it onto a 15-foot screen. As the end credits came up, a roar of applause erupted. People were laughing, some crying. This made it all worthwhile.

After that party and now with a finished film, I was ready to hit the distribution circuit again. I never had any illusions that this little film would do anything other than possibly get a limited video release. You can't begin to understand the sheer amazement I was going through when three of the five distributors that screened the film wanted to blow it up to 35mm and give it a theatrical release.

RKR, Troma, and 21st Century were all offering a bid for the film. The main two I concentrated on were Troma And 21st. Troma was small but they put a lot of aggressive publicity campaigns together, and seemed to really stand behind their films no matter how silly they were. But 21st Century, on the other hand, was a publicly held company. You know, stockholders and everything. At the time I thought this meant something.

After hearing all these offers, I got a really crazy idea. If these smaller companies all wanted the film, why not submit it to a major? What have I got to lose? Well, my only 16mm print for one thing. A few of the majors were willing to look at it, but I wouldn't risk sending the print to the West Coast. At that time, I couldn't afford to print another one. Then, the call came that I was waiting for.

Paramount Pictures still had its main offices in New York, and they agreed to screen the film and return it within a week. I had been told it was a rare occurrence when Paramount would even look at a 16mm print. I hand delivered the film cans and went home.

I only told a small group of people I submitted the film, I was so sure of being rejected. But still, I was scared to leave the house until I heard something. At the time I had no answering machine and certainly no secretary. A few days later the call came, you know the type, So and so is calling from Paramount Pictures, could you please hold? I was petrified.

I don't remember whom I spoke to, but I was told the film passed the initial screening and was being sent to the "final board" for approval. "What does that mean?" I asked. "If the final board approves, then we are authorized to make you an offer for distribution." I asked how long this would take and was told I'd know within a week. I don't have to tell you what I did when I hung up the phone.

I called a few people and told them the news. The only reason we could figure out as to why Paramount would even consider a film like *The Deadly Spawn* is that maybe they thought low-budget films would become trendy or something. Who knows? Who cares! I was negotiating with Para-##@*%!-mount!!

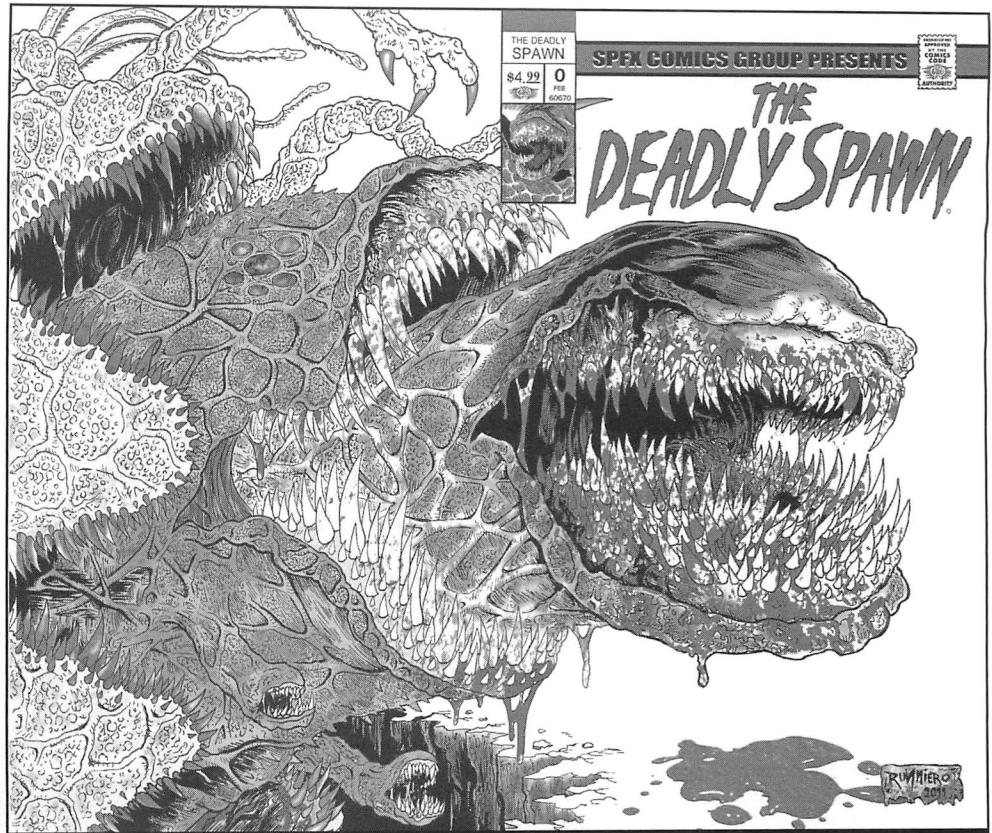
I wish this story had a happy ending. When this really nice guy, I wish I could remember his name, finally called, he sadly said, "I'm sorry Ted, the Executive Board just thought the film was a little rough for Paramount's standards. We were really pulling for it here in the office."

What a nice thing to say, but I still felt like shit. When you get caught up in this stuff, you begin to think it really has a chance of happening. Oh well, now that I fell off the Paramount mountain, it was back to the small-time.

By now 21st Century (Art Schweitzer, Tom Ward) had the best deal on the table. Troma really wanted the film but they didn't want to pay as much. When I was finally happy with a draft of the contract from 21st, Troma called and said they were still thinking about matching or bettering my deal. It was Tuesday and I told them I was going into New York to sign the contract with 21st on Thursday at 3 o'clock. If I didn't hear from them before that, it was gone. Wednesday came and went, no call. Thursday morning, no call.

At 2 o'clock I went into the city, met Tim and Rita Hildebrandt, and we made our way to the 21st Century office. Papers were signed, and I received the first check, made out to Filmline Communications for twenty-five thousand dollars. When I supplied them with the delivery requirements, I got another twenty-five thousand dollar check.

Everyone got paid back, everyone made a profit. I thought things were good, but wait, it's not over yet!



Coming soon . . . *The Deadly Spawn* comic book!

For now, let's just talk about a dream come true—my first film getting a theatrical release. I thought, this is it! How can we lose? The film was made so cheaply, even if it totally flopped, we'd make a bloody fortune.

21st Century called me up and asked for my input on the television spots. Television?! I didn't even think about that. Newspaper ads, news shows, magazine articles, *The Deadly Spawn* on the marquee above Broadway! Those couple of months in the beginning of 1983 were some of the best times of my life.

I spoke to Sam Raimi again at Studio 16. He had gotten a deal for his film as well. By now he changed the title to *The Evil Dead*. (Sam once told me he was thinking of changing the title from *Book of the Dead* to *The Evil Dead* and what did I think. I told him I liked *Book of the Dead* better . . . go figure!) Sam's film got to the theaters first and caused a sensation.

We finally opened right across the street, right on Broadway as I had envisioned. Go head to head with Sam. No problem. Another film opened that week as well. I figured it wouldn't do well because it was about dancing or something. The film was *Flashdance*. Between *The Evil Dead* and *Flashdance*, we were buried. We opened and closed in two weeks. In some areas we lasted much longer. 21st had struck around 60 prints and most of them were playing at the end of April 1983. By May 4th, *Variety* had *The Deadly Spawn* 11th on its top grossing list, just beneath *Local Hero* and *The Evil Dead*.

The big headline read: *The Deadly Spawn* opens in fifty theatres, does \$320,000 its first week. That's it! We were rich! I could start the next film immediately. Well, guess what? I wasn't rich, and I didn't start the next film anywhere near immediately.

Around this time I began getting my first real lesson in Creative Distribution Practices. Lesson 1: Never rely on a handshake deal. If it's not spelled out in the contract, forget it. For example: I told 21st about my friend that owned a lab. My guy would strike the 35mm prints for about \$500 each. They said that was great, if they couldn't get it done cheaper they would give me a call.

Let's skip ahead now to my first Producer's Report. I'm still thinking, low-budget film, \$320,000 first week alone, there must be a big check with this report. Oh well, no check in the report, I guess they mail it separately. My eyes scan down the paper. The last figure I see says \$60,000 dollars!

OK, that's not too bad, but I thought it would be more. When I place a call to 21st Century to find out if they mailed my check, I am informed the \$60,000 is what I owed them! Enough about this . . . it's a book in itself!

But, hey, how many low-budget filmmakers can say they got the chance to see their efforts on the big screen, all over the world? We had a rare chance at the brass ring. We actually got to see what it feels like to be in *The Big Show!*

The Deadly Spawn was eventually released on VHS through Continental Video. It was a good seller despite the ridiculous name change to *Return of the Alien's Deadly Spawn*. Around this time there was a rumor about an *Alien* sequel. They felt, somehow, people would confuse the two. Yeah, right! I think about a year later Continental went out of business. Later, the film was released on DVD by Synapse. We went back to the original 16mm negative so the DVD had great quality. It also had the few cuts back in that were removed during the 35mm blow up.

Now *The Deadly Spawn* is released on Blu-ray by Elite Entertainment. A lot of the film was shot on outdated stock and was pretty grainy . . . BUT, when it was shot with good stock, and in focus, the Blu-ray looks fantastic! I dug up all sorts of things for the Special Features . . . interviews from 1982, TV shows, casting bloopers, new photos, and an opening video of me with the infamous *Deadly Spawn* hand puppet! This is about as good as the film will ever look . . . unless I get a call from George Lucas and he wants to shoot a 50 million dollar remake!

