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Zombie movie filmmaker's 'dying passion'



Thomas Newman's film, Bong of the Dead, was filmed for just \$2,000.

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By Alex Browne - Peace Arch News
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How do you make a \$2 million feature film for only \$5,000?

Talk to Thomas Newman, producer and driving force behind Bong Of The Dead.

If he doesn't know how to do it, no one does.

Newman, 38, a North Delta resident whose day gig is at South Surrey electronics retailer Best Buy, has spent the last three years creating his debut feature – which he describes, with disarming candor, as a “stoner-buddy-zombie movie.”

If that conjures up images of a blurry, hand-held, sloppily edited, underacted mess – guess again.

Bong Of The Dead (a title take-off on low budget zombie classic Dawn Of The Dead and the parodistic Shaun of the Dead) may just be the Citizen Kane of stoner-buddy-zombie movies – a sharply photographed, well-lit picture, rock-steady even in its frequent tracking shots, full of dynamic compositions and ingenious special-effects work.

Shot on video it may be, but the visuals equal or exceed the standard of many shot-on-film projects.

The only apparent limitation is that it's intended for a specific market niche – if slow-witted potheads, oozing zombie make-up and gallons of fake blood is your idea of cool, Bong Of The Dead is definitely the movie for you.

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If that's not your scene, the upbeat Newman doesn't mind.

"It's a genre picture, and this is a pretty popular genre for a lot of people," he said.

Indeed the online buzz – one might go as far to say cult – created by YouTube postings of early footage for the film has helped fuel and energize the whole project, interesting backers and potential distributors – as well as draw participants who virtually volunteered their services for the shoot.

"People were saying 'This sounds like a cult classic' - everybody is a fan of Cheech and Chong, Harold and Kumar and Shaun Of The Dead."

The movie – for which he says he is currently close to negotiating a distribution deal – is a testament to Newman's irrepressible spirit, and the 15 years he spent learning how to become a one-man band (at last count he was writer, director, cameraman, editor and visual-effects supervisor for the film).

Of course, it doesn't hurt that he spent most of that time in the television and movie industry, starting as a sculptor for special props and make-up prosthetics for X-Files and graduating to the director of on-set interviews and special features for DVD releases of Vancouver-shot movies.

It also doesn't hurt that this allowed him to network with others who lent acting and special skills to his film for screen and resume credits and the kick of being involved in a project driven by passion rather than commerce. (If everyone involved – including Newman – had charged Bong Of The Dead what their skills are actually worth, it likely would be a multi-million dollar picture).

Among those eagerly involved are co-producer, and makeup effects wizard Mike Fields, and professional actors Mark Wynn, Simone Bailly, Jy Harris and Barry Nerling (well-known local performer [Michael Roberds](#), of Addams Family fame, is also one of the zombies in the movie, contributing a truly revolting cameo).

Set in a post-apocalyptic world in which meteorites have turned most of the population into zombies, Bong Of The Dead follows the misadventures of survivors Tommy (Harris) and Edwin (Wynn), whose principal occupation is growing (and smoking) as much pot as they can.

The discovery that zombie brains have a magic fertilizing effect – allowing them to grow a highly potent species of weed – sends the two stoners on a road trip into the "danger zone," an area where the zombie population is concentrated.

It also sends them into the clutches of a Nazi-like gay zombie (Nerling) who plots to mobilize the other zombies into an "army of the undead."

But along the way they meet another survivor, Leah (Bailly) – the kind of tough chick beloved of all action movies. She also happens to be an inventor who has built an array of zombie-fighting weapons on her farm – all of which the trio get to try out in a blood-splattered finale.

Technological advances have helped give Newman's indie production a glossier look, Newman adds, miniaturizing what would, until recently, have been a truckful of high-definition equipment.

"I used a Sony video camera – the tiniest high-end consumer camera, with a wide-angle lens and a mini tripod," he said. "People were arriving at the set thinking that was what I was using to document the shoot – it was, like, where's the real camera?"

"The guys I got to document the shoot were using a camera that was about three times the size."

Shot in the Langley area, the actual filming was a relatively brief process, Newman said.

"It was a 15-day shoot, but they were 12- to 18-hour days – and myself and my wife, Jodi, were cooking all the food for the cast and crew."

But most of the time on the film was spent in pre-production – Newman meticulously storyboarded every shot so that it didn't have a random pieced-together look – and in a grueling year of editing in which he personally made 350 cuts, composited scenes, layered in digital effects and post-synched sound.

As recently as last November, Newman faced the classic 'all is lost' moment beloved of formula movie scenario writers – his main editing computer crashed, taking his final cut, or so he thought, with it.

"I'd backed everything up – I could have put it together again, but it wouldn't have been the same," he said.

Fortunately, some kind of movie gods seem to be smiling all the way on Newman's project – right from having his "dream location" supplied through the generosity of Langley's Bridden family, to having an industry contact come through at the last minute when he ran out of movie "blood" during filming of the climactic battle with the zombies.

They manifested themselves again in Newman's darkest hour when he discovered a friend's father is in the data retrieval business.

"He was able to save all the files for a fraction of what it would have cost me," he said.

The Iranian-born, Thailand- and Canadian-raised Newman (the original family name is Haddad) is convinced it's all some kind of test – one he has survived and which finally seems to be paying off for him.

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"Movies are my dying passion," he said, adding that he has a follow-up project, Unnatural – with test footage already posted to YouTube – just waiting for development funding.

"And I'd really like to connect with (cult filmmaker) [Robert Rodriguez](#)," he said. "I'm who he was, 10 years ago."

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