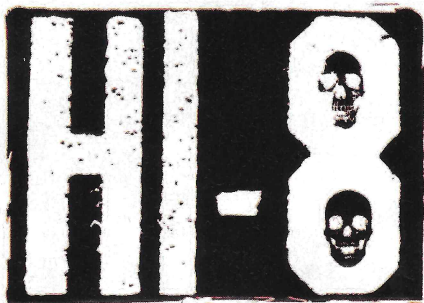


NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND



By BRAD SYKES

8 SIMPLE RULES OF



"The Scout" leads to a dangerous location in Brad Sykes' segment.

Hi-8. This early-'90s video format was the weapon of choice for many of today's top indie horror filmmakers in their early days, shooting backyard epics with a few friends, some fake blood and big ideas. It's also the title of Nightfall Pictures and Twisted Illusions' new anthology: *Hi-8* (short for "Horror Independent 8") aims to recapture the creativity of those analog days filtered through years of professional experience.

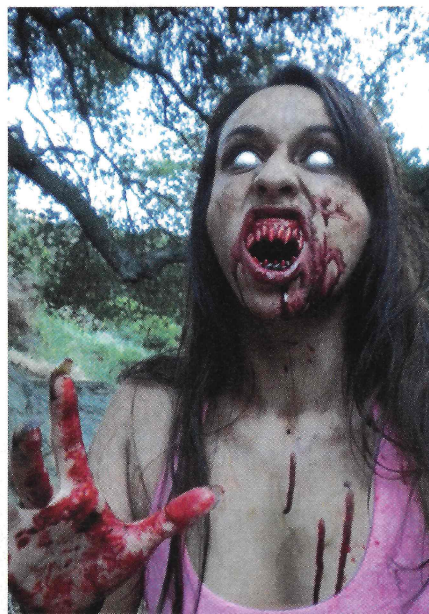
An "all-star" lineup of SOVeterans including myself (*Camp Blood*), Tim (*Truth or Dare?*) Ritter, Donald (*Savage Vengeance*) Farmer, Todd (*Zombie Bloodbath*) Sheets, Marcus (*100 Tears*) Koch, Ron (*The Vicious Sweet*) Bonk, Chris (*Filthy McNasty*) Seaver and newcomer Tony Masiello contributed segments from all over the U.S. All eight filmmakers were

granted complete artistic freedom, but exec producers Ritter, Josephina Sykes and I decided to impose some technical limitations so that all the segments would reflect a "back-to-basics" approach, in keeping with the tone of the entire project. With that in mind, we created "The 8 Simple Rules of *Hi-8*":

1. SCRIPT: Make a film in the style of movies you were inspired by.

One of our first concerns was that several directors might cover the same territory. Thankfully, instead of getting multiple zombie or slasher stories, everyone branched off in very different directions.

Sheets' "The Request" is a straight-up EC Comics-style vignette about a haunted radio DJ, where he "basically treated each



Things are just as scary in *Hi-8*'s wraparound scenes as in the shorts they encompass.

Hi-8 segments like Ron Bonk's "Gang Them Style" are a call to arms against the zombielike conformity of mainstream moviemaking.



frame of the film as a panel in the old comics." Koch's "A Very Bad Situation" was inspired as much by '80s creature flicks as it was by his own need to do something different from the gory special FX showcases he is known for. Seaver's "Genre Bending" satirizes the entire slasher genre with irreverent humor and an inversion of "final girl" stereotypes. And Farmer's "Thicker Than Water" was inspired not by movies, but rather by true stories of

"friends who had relationships with obsessively jealous people."

2. RUNNING TIME: Each short can be no longer than 10 minutes but no shorter than eight.

Some of the segments were so conceptually ambitious at the scripting stage that they had to be trimmed before production or during post. Bonk's zombie/action tale "Gang Them Style" "was inspired by just about any early film from George Romero or John Carpenter" and had to be whittled down from a much longer draft to one basic situation that would "make it a fast-moving but complete 10-minute story."

Other segments encountered running-time challenges later, in the editing room. Ritter's "Switchblade Insane" crams an almost feature's worth of plot twists (and blood-soaked nastiness!) into a whirlwind 10 minutes (see GOREZONE #28 for details). And my own segment "The Scout," a psychological thriller set in the Mojave Desert, ran only 12 pages, but we somehow ended up with a 22-minute first cut! Unsurprisingly, several *Hi-8* directors are already planning follow-up features expanding on their segments, which we can't wait to see.

3. SHOOTING FORMAT: Choose your weapon, be it VHS, Hi-8 or MiniDV. No HD or DSLRs.

Most of the directors shot their segments on MiniDV, but a few went so far as

"The cops showed up [and] I was like, 'Yeah, we are breaking in and just wanted to document the whole thing on video.'"
—Todd Sheets

to use actual Hi-8. One of them was Koch, who found it "fun to jump back into the old format, and love it for all its 4:3 glory" and "important to keep the authenticity of those early years." Ritter lensed his "on a mixture of genuine Hi-8 video with a Sony camera from the '90s, with portions shot on analog MiniDV with a Canon, all standard definition." Masiello's "The Tape," about one man's obsessive quest for a long-lost SOV movie, also embraced a mixture of the two formats, filming most of his segment on MiniDV and reserving Hi-8 for the "movie within the movie" scenes.

4. LIGHTING: Use no more lights than you'd find in a standard three-point lighting kit. Don't be afraid to use the best and cheapest light source—the sun!

While "The Scout," "Genre Bending" and "Switchblade Insane" were mostly shot outdoors, others went for more detailed and dramatic interior lighting schemes. The "Tape" crew, Masiello explains, spent hours creating "a saturated-color *Creeper* look—a dreamlike

For psycho-killer fans, Tim Ritter cuts in with "Switchblade Insane."



quality where viewers are not sure if what they are seeing is real." Bonk also aimed for a specific style, making sure his segment looked "like a '90s shot-on-video flick paying homage to '80s horror films."

Some of the eeriest lighting of any of the segments appears during a nighttime body dump in "The Request," which was apparently a little too real for some Kansas City residents, who promptly called the police. "So the cops showed up, guns drawn," Sheets recalls. "I was like, 'Yeah, we are breaking in and just wanted to document the whole thing on video.' It was obvious that we were out there filming, or doing *anything* but committing a crime. We had huge movie lights, several crewpeople and actors and cameras all around. [Actor] Brad Westmar was dragging a fake dead body wrapped in plastic when they arrived. He dropped it like it was electric!"

5. CAMERAWORK: Handheld or tripod only. No dollies, jib arms, Steadicam rigs, etc.

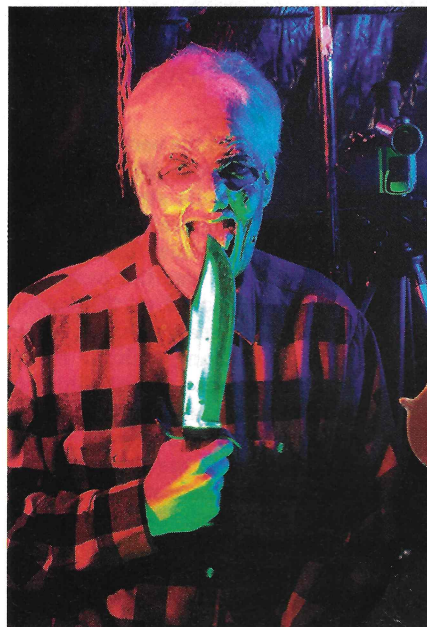
In the true spirit of the project, many of the filmmakers shot their segments themselves, with a few also doing it entirely handheld, as I did with "The Scout." Having worked with different DPs for more than 15 years, it was refreshing and exciting to go back to such a stripped-down, no-nonsense working style. Koch, who shot his own segment, as he has many of his other films, feels the same way: "I trust my eye for framing, and when I'm going for such a run-and-gun style with no budget, it's just easier to shoot it myself."

Ritter did the same, even transforming himself into a "human boom" during one suspenseful sequence where the switchblade killer is stalking a victim. "I had a tripod standing by, but never did use it. I was able to keep the camera steady when I needed to, and there's even one shot where I was on this cement platform and

pivoted up with my knees. Amazingly, that shot turned out to be quite professional-looking. I'd have a hard time guessing it was basically someone standing up while holding the camera unless I was there!"

Farmer, whose segment also features a movie within the movie, split the photography between himself (for the main scenes) and a DP (for those moments set on a beach). "I wanted the beach scenes to have a different look," he says, "to emphasize that this is a movie the characters are watching on TV and not an extension of their own narrative."

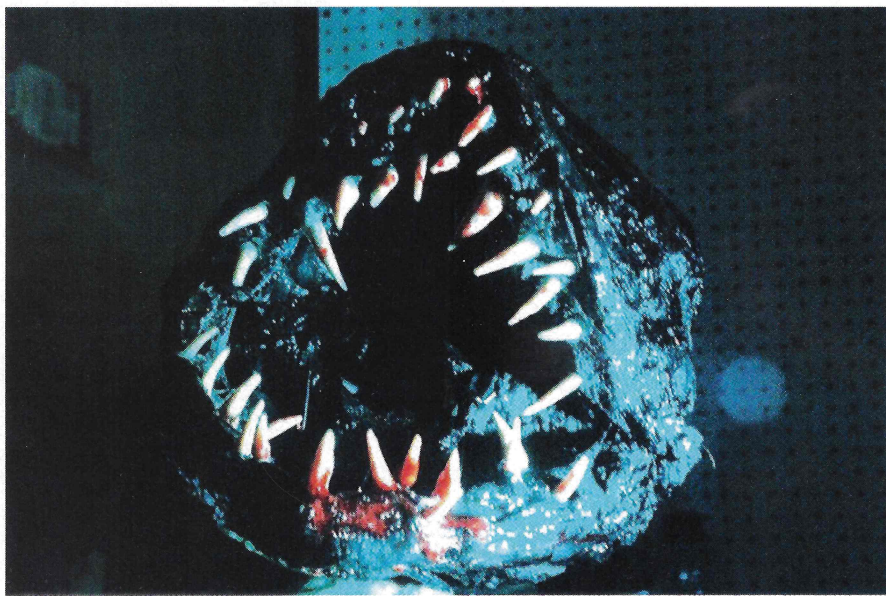
6. SOUND: Outboard mics are accepted, but using the onboard mic is also acceptable, as long as all dialogue is clearly audible. For exteriors, wind noise is OK



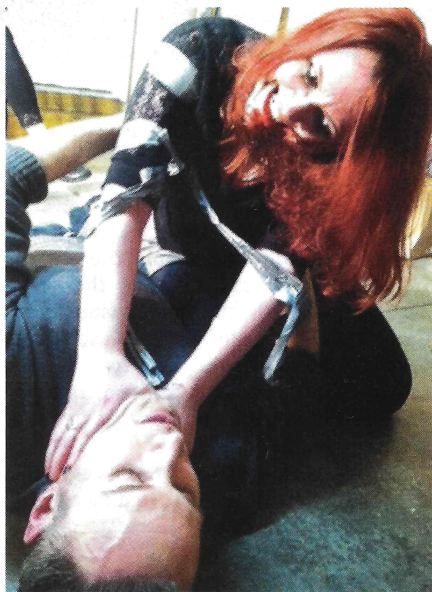
SOV enthusiast Tony Masiello had the chance to contribute to the pantheon as creator of "The Tape."

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What can make "A Very Bad Situation" worse? A low-tech monster created by filmmaker/FX artist Marcus Koch.



Blood is "Thicker Than Water," and sicker too in Donald Farmer's segment.

and encouraged.

"The Request" had the perfect location for obtaining good audio: Most of it was shot in a working radio station! On the other end of the spectrum, one of our biggest challenges while filming "The Scout" in the desert was the persistent strong winds that kicked up throughout the 12-hour shoot, wreaking havoc on the sound and forcing multiple takes, and sometimes almost blowing down the actors and crew!

Bonk was forced to work around sound issues at the Syracuse, NY parking garage where much of "Gang Them Style" was filmed: "Each night, during which we were shooting from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m., it was *very* loud until about 3 a.m., especially at closing time. One night, everyone was out in the streets celebrating Cinco De Mayo, and it was just crazy. We had to stop shooting; we could barely even hear each other talk."

7. SPECIAL FX: Old-school makeup FX are encouraged, the gore the merrier. No CGI, visual FX or greenscreen allowed.

Here was an area everyone really embraced. Even though none of the directors were aware of the details of each other's segments, I often felt like they were trying to outdo each other in the blood-and-guts department. Bonk "kept the effects old-school—squishing heads, lots of blood-squirting and vintage zombie makeup—*Night of the Living Dead*-style stuff." As the only *Hi-8* director who is also a professional FX artist, Koch was especially excited to create "a slimy, vicious menace from outer space" like something he

**"Sure, [real guts] stink under a bunch of hot lights, but surprisingly, not as much as the fake ones made from latex."
—Tony Masiello**

would have done as a kid, "making things out of the simplest household items: couch foam, cotton and latex."

In one case, the previous work of one *Hi-8* director directly inspired another. Masiello wanted to emulate the "early gore films of Todd Sheets," and utilized Hispanic and Asian markets in San Diego that sell beef guts and lamb's hearts. "The people at the counter may look at you strangely," he says, "but there is no substitute for the real thing. Sure, they stink under a bunch of hot lights, but surprisingly, not as much as the fake ones made from latex, which we decided not to use. Our DP ended up with beef guts in his hair for two days, but it was worth it."

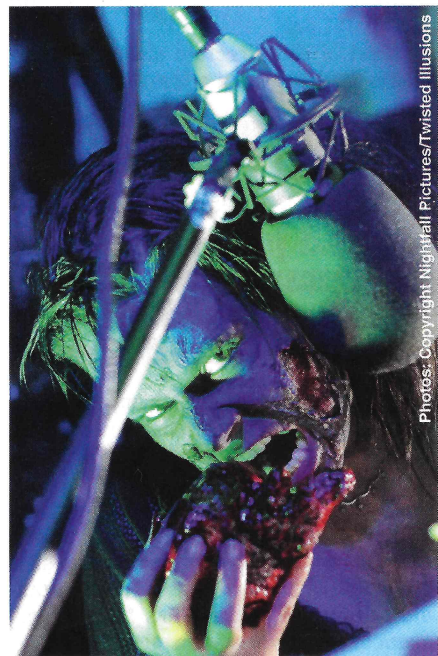
8. EDITING/POST: Edit on whatever program you want. Keep sound and picture editing basic and simple; imagine you are cutting on a non-linear system. No hi-

tech post effects (compositing, greenscreen, etc.) allowed. All shorts must be fullscreen, 4x3.

There are fewer horror stories here, as post flowed smoothly for all eight shorts, both creatively and—for the most part—technically. All the directors appreciated the creative freedom afforded them on this project. "It was so nice to be able to shoot it how I saw it in my head, and also to edit it as I saw it—without anyone standing over my shoulder questioning every edit or shot choice," Sheets says. "I could create exactly what I saw in the drive-in theater of my mind."

The wraparounds were among the last pieces of the puzzle. After debating a few different concepts, Josephina and I decided to eschew the "Crypt Keeper" approach in favor of something more dynamic—and personal—and feature a trio of kids making their own *Hi-8* horror movie who run afoul of something more evil than they could ever put in front of a camera.

Finishing post fell to Nightfall Pictures and supervising editor Chris Lorusso, and (appropriately enough) eight months after its conception, we had a finished movie, with all eight shorts completely different from one another in content, style and tone. I can truly say there is something for every genre fan in *Hi-8*, which is exactly how we wanted it.



Photos: Copyright Nightfall Pictures/Twisted Illusions

If you'd like to "Request" a return to no-frills gore, Todd Sheets and co. are happy to oblige.

When I first started e-mailing the other filmmakers about participating in this project, one comment stood out, from Koch: "Remember when this used to be fun?" Well, making *Hi-8* is the most fun I've had making a movie in a long time, and I hope that the fans enjoy watching it as much as we did putting it together. Following a limited VHS edition, Wild Eye Releasing will issue *Hi-8* on DVD and VOD December 16; you can follow all the updates at www.Hi8themovie.com. 