





H.P. Lovecraft's
RE-ANIMATOR[®]

CAST

JEFFREY COMBS as Herbert West
BRUCE ABBOTT as Dan Cain
BARBARA CRAMPTON as Megan Halsey
DAVID GALE as Dr. Carl Hill
ROBERT SAMPSON as Dean Halsey

CREW

Directed by **STUART GORDON**
Produced by **BRIAN YUZNA**
Screenplay by **STUART GORDON, WILLIAM J. NORRIS** and **DENNIS PAOLI**
(Based on H.P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West – Reanimator")
Cinematography by **MAC AHLBERG**
Edited by **LEE PERCY**
Music composed by **RICHARD BAND**



CONTENTS

3 Film Credits

7 Yucking It Up:
The Black (and Red) Humor of *Re-Animator*
by Michael Gingold

20 About the Transfer



YUCKING IT UP: THE BLACK (AND RED) HUMOR OF "RE-ANIMATOR"

by Michael Gingold

Terror and comedy are often said to be two sides of the same cinematic coin; both are all about buildup and release. Combining the two, however, has always been a tricky business; many have tried, yet the road to horror/humor hell is littered with the corpses of films that couldn't get the balance right, or elicit either emotion effectively. Yet while some genre fans malign the form, there have been numerous examples of films that got the blend right, and worked like ghost...sorry, gangbusters.

The Bill Murray-led 1984 hit is among the handful of outright comedies to deal with spooky subjects and truly hit the mark. *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) is considered one of the titular duo's greatest movies. In the midst of his many seriously intended scare pictures, Roger Corman successfully explored the lighter side in *A Bucket of Blood* (1959) and *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), and sent up his own Edgar Allan Poe cycle with *The Raven* (1963) and *The Comedy of Terrors* (1964). Similarly taking a laugh break from his macabre mood pieces, Roman Polanski put a satiric bite into *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967). And, of course, *Young Frankenstein* (1974) is one of Mël Brooks' most enduring spoofs.

When it comes to horror films that scare as much as they amuse, the first director to perfect the formula was James Whale, who laced wicked humor through *The Invisible Man* (1933) and added mirth to the monster scenario of *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). After that, it was arguably three decades before another filmmaker leavened shocks with laughs and made it work: George A. Romero, who slipped occasional humorous respites into 1968's *Night of the Living Dead* ("They're dead, they're all messed up"). The comic-relief cops may be the weakest part of Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972), while around the same time, Vincent Price vehicles like Robert Fuest's *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971) and *Dr. Phibes Rises Again* (1972) and Douglas Hickox's *Theatre of Blood* (1973) successfully mixed gore and giggles.

Later in the '70s, Joe Dante and screenwriter John Sayles nailed the synthesis with *Piranha* (1978) and did it again in *The Howling* (1981); separately, Sayles helped imbue Lewis Teague's *Alligator* (1980) with similar wit, while Dante's *Gremlins* (1984) became the first horror/comedy blockbuster. Elsewhere in lycanthrope-land, the trailers for John Landis' *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) made it look like a chucklefest, and certain viewers



(like my parents when they took me to see it) were horrified to find it was a heavy-duty shock show with as much blood as levity. The same went for Romero's return to the undead apocalypse with *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which took almost as many jabs at consumerist society as it had scenes of zombies consuming people. The director and Stephen King then packed the five "jolting tales of horror" and framing segments of their anthology collaboration *Creepshow* (1982) with plenty of macabre amusement. And Kevin Connor's *Motel Hell* (1980) mixed its backwoods carnage with chuckles and was advertised with the tagline "You might just die...laughing!"

But it was 1985 that would prove to be a banner year for horror/comedy—and that's not counting the trio of underachieving laffers incorporating genre standards: Howard Storm's *Once Bitten*, Rudy De Luca's *Transylvania 6-5000* and Rod Daniel's excruciating *Teen Wolf*. Larry Cohen and actor Michael Moriarty, who had previously collaborated on the highly effective hybrid *Q* (1982), reteamed on *The Stuff*. Tom Holland revived the vampire genre and added a streak of affectionate humor in *Fright Night*. With Romero's *Day of the Dead* taking a bleakly straight-faced tack, it fell to Dan O'Bannon's *The Return of the Living Dead* to provide ghouls that were jocular as they went for the jugular. And the goriest and lowest-budgeted of them all came out of nowhere to win the strongest reviews and become an instant cult favorite: Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator*.

By October 1985, when *Re-Animator* began its regional release, Charles Band's Empire Pictures had enjoyed a modest box-office success earlier in the year with *Ghoulies*, and also opened cult-favorite-to-be *Trancers* under the title *Future Cop*. Unlike those in-house productions, *Re-Animator* was an Empire acquisition, spawned in the mind of stage-turned-film director Gordon. He initially fleshed out H.P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West—Reanimator" stories into episodic TV scripts and then reconceived the project as a feature, first with writer William J. Norris and then longtime friend Dennis Paoli.

Comedy has run through Gordon and Paoli's veins since their high-school years, when they formed a humor troupe, modeled on The Second City and the satirical TV show *That Was the Week That Was* (1963-65), that played the Chicago coffeeshop circuit. "Stuart is phenomenally funny," Paoli says. "Not only is he the funniest person I know, he's the person who likes to laugh the most of anyone I know. Stuart cannot tell a joke without laughing at it himself."

The duo continued their collaboration as college students in Madison, Wisconsin. "Stuart started a group called, cleverly enough, Screw Theater, and we had a great time. We did the single most radical production of Shakespeare anyone will ever see." Appropriately enough given their future film work, it was The Bard's most famously violent play: "We did

Titus Andronicus as a postapocalyptic dumbshow. We took out all the dialogue—and it's Shakespeare!—except the last line, and it told the story perfectly. We staged it in the rubble of a building that had been knocked down, and everybody got maimed or hurt. But we were students; we didn't care, we just went ahead and did it.

"We also put on a radical version of *Peter Pan*—but it was not all-nude, though that's the way the story has come down. Peter Pan and the Lost Boys were hippies, the Darling children were bourgeois suburban kids, the pirates were the cops and flying was tripping. There was a nude dance scene, which was the flight to Neverland, and we got busted. How much fun is that? So Stuart and I have a history of doing serious work that also has a fun side to it."

On the surface, Lovecraft's *oeuvre* would not seem to be a natural vehicle for humor. But Paoli, a longtime writing instructor at New York City's Hunter College who teaches a course in Gothic fiction, believes otherwise. "People don't see Lovecraft as funny," he says, "but most of the comedy in *Re-Animator* doesn't come from punchlines. There are a few, but not many. It's funny because it goes over the line so much, because it is surprising and shocking in this sort of delightful way. And that's all there in Lovecraft, that going over the line. If you just look at what happens in his stories, a lot of it is absurd, and absurd is funny. It's shocking, and one of the things about humor is that it shocks. A punchline is a shock; you're set up by a straight line, and the punchline has to be something different from what you expected. And Lovecraft is as different from what we expect as anybody who ever wrote. So we actually mined the 'Reanimator' stories for humor."

As *Re-Animator* was one of the first films to spend a significant amount of time in a morgue—long before that became a commonplace setting in TV shows like *CSI*—Paoli points out that levity is necessary in such a morbid setting. Indeed, it was already a convention (in movies like *The Howling* and others) for screen morgue workers to take an irreverent attitude toward their jobs. "It's the grimmest possible place we could be," Paoli says. "Very few of us are doctors or pathologists; we're not going to be that wisecracking guy in the morgue, we're going to be that body on the slab. And laughter is the way we defeat that. We have to laugh at that, because if we didn't, we'd despair. The only way we live with our mortality is to be able to laugh at it. So it's built into the genre, because it's built into our response to the genre."

One of the first laughs in *Re-Animator*, in fact, accompanies one of the first significant gore moments—a bit of gallows humor delivered by Dr. Hill (David Gale) as he removes the complete scalp from a cadaver's skull in preparation for extracting the brain. "Very much like peeling a large orange," he quips with one of the only smiles he flashes in the entire film.

Later in the scene, he's deadly serious as he delivers the punchiest of the film's few dialogue punchlines, after Herbert West (Jeffrey Combs) has disapprovingly snapped a couple of pencils: "Mr. West, I suggest you get yourself a *pen!*"

The movie's black-comic side truly explodes after West has re-animated Rufus the cat, only for the animal to come back as a shrieking banshee that must be violently dealt with. As the popularity of Simon Bond's best-selling 1981 cartoon book *101 Uses For A Dead Cat* and its pair of sequels had recently demonstrated, feline abuse is a surefire mode of sick humor, and the fact that the furry stuffed toy clinging to Combs' back and thrown against a wall is the movie's least convincing special effect helps take some of the curse off any bad feelings about bashing the former beloved pet. There's a great kicker to this setpiece too, as Dan Cain (Bruce Abbott) expresses doubt that Rufus was truly dead before, and West says, "Do you agree that he's dead now?", picks up the kitty corpse and drops it with a *thump* back onto the table.

This sequence introduces *Re-Animator's* penchant for gruesome slapstick, which soon continues into the actions and treatment of its reanimated humans (just as inevitably as Bond's books were followed by Philip Lief's *Cat's Revenge: More Than 101 Uses for Dead People* and its own sequel). The combination of violence and humor is the very definition of slapstick, dating back to the 16th-century *Commedia dell'arte*, as Paoli explains. "A slapstick was a theatrical tool, a paddle that had another board connected to it on a hinge, so that when you swung it, the hinged board opened up a little bit, and when you stopped the paddle, the other board would hit it. In the *Commedia dell'arte*, there was always a bourgeois figure—like *Il Dottore*, the doctor—and there would be money on the floor, and this character, being greedy, would lean over to pick it up. And when he did, the clown character would whack him on the butt. But he wouldn't really hit him; he would use this slapstick, so it sounded like he hit him, but he didn't hurt him, and everyone could laugh.

"So slapstick is predicated on violence—doing violence to an authority figure and getting away with it—but on the other hand, we're not really hurting somebody. It's the kind of thing they got away with in Warner Bros. cartoons; Elmer Fudd shoots Daffy Duck's bill off in half a dozen different shorts. That's awful—that's as bad as anything we do in *Re-Animator!*—but it's funny, because Daffy Duck can pick up his bill and put it back on. Road Runner cartoons are nonstop violence, and Wile E. Coyote can run into that painted tunnel on the side of the mountain, and get up and go on to the next misadventure. We pushed that about as far as you can push it in *Re-Animator*. When you have that reanimation serum, you can survive any violence. You can re-survive that violence. How many times do we kill Rufus?"





The apotheosis of this idea, of course, is the resurrection of Dr. Hill following his decapitation. The humor resulting from this ghastly development begins as broad physical antics, when the headless body blunders around an office under the psychic command of Hill's frustrated severed head. It then continues into *Re-Animator's* most notorious scene, in which Hill's detached noggin attempts to have his way with the naked and bound Meg (Barbara Crampton). It's an outrageous moment, the kind of I-can't-believe-what-I'm-watching gag that many horror/comedies have strived for, and that no other has arguably pulled off as well. And it works because Gordon has so successfully modulated the balance of horror and humor up to this point, and because this development proceeds logically from the narrative and characterization that have preceded it.

Paoli remembers how it came about: "We thought, 'OK, we've killed Hill—what do we do now? How can we push this further?' In Lovecraft's story, the Hill character, a doctor during WWI, is decapitated and comes back to life, so we pulled that out. Lovecraft had his own very disturbing ideas about where he goes from there, but we felt we could play with that. OK, what would happen if he was decapitated? What would he want to do? Well, who's his character? He wants power, he's egomaniacal. It would free his ego in the most absurd ways. I didn't think in these intellectual terms at the time, but once you start thinking about how that would free him, where it got interesting was, his ego could be totally subsumed with his libido. Pauline Kael pointed out in her review that when Hill is decapitated, it seems to free his sexuality, his sexual obsession.

"Now, that's absurd. When you decapitate someone, what kind of image is that, in psychological and particularly in Freudian terms? That's castration! But in this case, castration frees his libido. So we turned that on its head—so to speak. And from that point on, it was absolutely clear to me what had to happen."

At a roundtable interview this writer attended in 1986, Gordon described the first time he heard about the scene: "Dennis called me in the middle of the night, and he was laughing uncontrollably. He said, 'I think I've just created the world's first visual pun,' but he wouldn't elaborate on that over the phone. But he sent it to me, and I shared his laughter; I thought it was a great idea."

Also key to *Re-Animator's* success is the performances; all the actors respond to the increasingly insane goings-on with total belief and conviction. They never treat anything as a joke—which leaves the audience free to find the laughs themselves. At the center of it all is Combs, committing himself to West's obsessions and self-possession, to frequently hilarious effect. (It's not hard to draw a line between West and Jim Parsons' similarly singleminded Sheldon on the hit sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*.) He delivers lines like

“What would a note say, Dan? ‘Cat dead, details later?’” as if West doesn’t realize they’re funny—which only makes them funnier to us—and his simple reaction to Dan’s incredulous “You haven’t done this on people?” is comic perfection.

“Jeffrey can find everything in a line,” Paoli says. “He has the ridiculous talent to be able to find every interpretation of his dialogue, and include it in his readings. Jeffrey got all the themes we were exploring, which is why the couple of ad-libs he did are so good, like when he’s looking at the toe tags while they’re trying to choose a subject to reanimate.” That off-the-cuff line—“Malpractice!”—is delivered with just the right tone of disapproval, succinctly suggesting West’s sense of superiority while also making us crack up.

The final touch was Richard Band’s music, which perfectly complements the mix of tones without forcing the humor. However, its centerpiece theme, played during the opening credits and elsewhere, stirred up a bit of controversy, as it puts a heightened but unacknowledged spin on one of the all-time classic film compositions. As critic Roger Fristoe of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* put it, Band’s work “sounds like what might have resulted had Bernard Herrmann written his *Psycho* score for Mel Brooks instead of Alfred Hitchcock.” Many of Herrmann’s devotees were not as charitable, though.

“We must never lose sight of the fact that [*Re-Animator*] is a funny horror film, and my use of Bernard Herrmann’s *Psycho* theme was done for humor’s sake,” Band told this writer during a 1995 interview. “A lot of people got the joke, but a lot of people took offense to it—the purists, the head of the Bernard Herrmann Society and all that—they would have loved to have strung me up. I had specifically put a line in for the end credits that said something like, ‘With humble apologies to Bernard Herrmann,’ making light of the fact, so that there was no doubt in anyone’s mind where it stemmed from. But it never got in.”

Those naysayers did nothing to impede *Re-Animator*’s march into the horror pantheon, where it remains one of the leading lights of what has come to be called “splatstick.” Any number of highly entertaining examples followed, from Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead II* (1987) to Peter Jackson’s *Braindead/Dead Alive* (1992) to more recent examples like Jason Lei Howden’s *Deathgasm* (2015). Producer Brian Yuzna took the helm of two official sequels starring Combs, *Bride of Re-Animator* (1989) and *Beyond Re-Animator* (2003), while the whole gang reteamed for another Lovecraft shocker, *From Beyond* (1986), and Gordon and the two leads went on to *Castle Freak* (1995), said to be a loose and uncredited adaptation of the author’s short story “The Outsider.” There have been micro-budgeted takeoffs—the shot-on-video *Re-Animator Academy* (1992) and the porn flick *Re-Penetrator* (2004)—and in 2016, a pair of new adaptations of the Lovecraft tales were announced: Serge Levin’s *Re-Animator: Evolution* and Ivan Zuccon’s *Herbert West: Re-Animator*.

Yet *Re-Animator* will always stand apart as a distinctive horror/comedy, one that derives its frights and humor as much from a scalpel-sharp sense of character as from its exaggerated bloodshed. From first scene to last, it’s a clear product of filmmakers who know how to maintain control of their material even as they’re pushing boundaries.

“Stuart and I work right on the line of what you can get away with,” Paoli says. “The line between horror and humor, the line between morality and...not immorality, but total amorality. Anything goes. And to go there, you have to go past it. You can only know how far you can go if you take one step beyond.”

Michael Gingold is an editor and/or writer for Rue Morgue, Birth.Movies.Death, Scream, Delirium, IndieWire.com and Blumhouse.com, and spent 28 years with Fangoria magazine and its website. Since he first saw Re-Animator, it has had an unlikely but very positive effect on his love life.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

ON RESTORING *RE-ANIMATOR*:

Brian Yuzna's *Re-Animator* was a textbook example of a work in progress. In total no less than three different versions of the film were initially released, with a fourth version released years later.

THE UNRATED VERSION:

Brian Yuzna and director Stuart Gordon preferred their original cut of *Re-Animator* (1985) - what they eventually termed the Unrated Version - which ironically has the shortest running time. This version contains all scenes of gore and nudity intact and uncensored.

Practically at the same time, but without the involvement or consent of Yuzna and Gordon, an R-Rated Version was created on 35mm, which differed substantially from the Unrated Version. This version runs quite a bit longer (9½ minutes) and in order to achieve an R-rating, many of the gore sequences were trimmed. The increased running time was made up mainly of dialogue scenes that were not used in the Unrated Version.

In addition, a more extensively censored TV Version was also created. The gore scenes were cut severely and replaced with additional alternative scenes rejected earlier by Yuzna and Gordon.

THE INTEGRAL VERSION:

Both the R-Rated and TV version had cut the film's gore sequences by various degrees and had extended the original cut's running time using alternative dialogue scenes.

It was years later that a new version appeared in Europe that contained nearly all of the gore scenes of the Unrated Version as well as the dialogue scenes unique to both the R-Rated and TV versions. More controversially however, this version had substantially reconstructed the story by placing these scenes in different parts of the film as well as using replacement dialogue in order to avoid duplication in the narrative. This version came to be known as the Integral Version.

Many were critical and dismissive of this new version. Neither Yuzna nor Gordon had given their consent to this new version and were not involved in its creation.

However, the passage of time has shown the Integral Version to become an accepted and valid version of *Re-Animator*, due to the new elements it contributes to the narrative and subtext of the film. Indeed, many have come to prefer this version of the film over the original Unrated Version. The gore elements from Yuzna and Gordon's original cut are intact, but certain plot lines and character studies are explored more fully, allowing for an arguably richer narrative experience. By contrast the original Unrated Version is very fast-paced and focuses squarely on the horror aspects of the story.

RESTORATION:

Both the Unrated and Integral versions of *Re-Animator* were fully restored at TLEFilms FRPS, sourced from the original film and audio elements. The original 35mm camera negative and Interpositive elements were scanned in 5K sensor/4K resolution on the IMAGICA Imager XE Advanced Plus film scanner. The colour grading was completed on the Baselight using a 6-meter screen via 2K-native Christie DCI projector, a 10-bit OLED TV and CRT studio reference monitors.

Extensive digital restoration work was performed using Furnace, Combustion and PF Clean to repair issues such as dirt, scratches, torn or missing frames, and photochemical lab damage. This work was performed carefully to ensure no digital artefacts would be created.

The soundtracks to both versions were restored from the original 3-track master magnetic reels and alternative backup elements where necessary. Audio mixing and remastering was completed at TLEFilms FRPS. The multi-channel 5.1 mix was created by Tonmeister Jochen Dorn.

Enjoy!

Torsten Kaiser
Technical Director / Head of Operations
TLEFilms FRPS - Film Restoration & Preservation Services



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PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Blu-ray/DVD Mastering **David Mackenzie**
Artist **Justin Erickson**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

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