

**BASKET
CASE**



BASKET CASE

CAST

Kevin VanHentenryck as Duane Bradley
Terri Susan Smith as Sharon
Beverly Bonner as Casey
Robert Vogel as Hotel Manager
Diana Browne as Dr. Kutter
Lloyd Pace as Dr. Needleman
Bill Freeman as Dr. Lifflander
Joe Clarke as O'Donovan

CREW

Written & Directed by **Frank Henenlotter**
Produced by **Edgar Evans**
Director of Photography **Bruce Torbet**
Edited by **Frank Henenlotter**
Music by **Gus Russo**
Special Makeup Effects by **Kevin Haney** and **John Caglione Jr.**

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“CASE” HISTORY

by Michael Gingold

At the dawn of the 1980s, slasher films had overrun the independent horror scene. You couldn't walk into a hardtop theater or pull into a drive-in without being accosted by one of the spiritual children of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). These films typically concerned themselves with a gaggle of suburban teens or collegians, often in an isolated area, being menaced and slain by a masked or unseen, mysterious attacker.

There was one pocket of low-budget fear filmmaking at the time where things were different, however: the New York City exploitation milieu. Here, ambitious, downmarket auteurs created studies of multiple murder tied specifically to their environment, in which we get to know the killers better than their victims. Abel Ferrara sicced an artist driven bonkers by punk music on various street vagrants in *The Driller Killer* (1979), and sent a twice-raped young woman on a vengeance quest against the Big Apple's male scum in *Ms. 45* (1981). With *Maniac* (1980), William Lustig created a portrait of an urban creep bumping off a series of random human targets – preying on the Manhattanite fear, exacerbated by the then-recent Son of Sam slayings, that anyone could become a victim at any time on the city's mean streets.

Around the same time, a young horror devotee and 42nd Street habitué named Frank Henenlotter was scraping together a \$35,000 feature that would prove to be the most unusual of the bunch. Although it features the bloody dispatching of a series of victims, *Basket Case* has concerns that set it far apart from the slasher field, and make it unique among all its shocker brethren of the time. Chief among them is the fact that its revenge-seeking “antagonist,” Duane Bradley (Kevin VanHentenryck), is the guy whose side we're encouraged to take as he seeks out the doctors who separated him from his Siamese twin-brother. Even the misshapen Belial, who does their dirty work, has moments of sympathy, harking back to the great Universal creatures of the past.

Duane and Belial's sibling devotion – even when it becomes fractured by jealousy – gives *Basket Case* its dramatic spine, and for Henenlotter, it was the key to making this bizarre scenario work. He had conceived the notion of what he describes as “a malignant jack-in-the-box,” but spent a while trying to figure out the motivation for a man to carry a little monster around in a basket. “Then one night, I was in Times Square where the ABC studios are now, which used to be a giant, two-floor Nathan's,” he recalls. “I was eating hot dogs



there, and it occurred to me: 'What if they're brothers?' And the moment I had that idea, I was like, 'Oh my God, that's great!' I always carry a pen on me, and I wrote, basically, the dialogue that Duane tells Casey the hooker in the bar right there on Nathan's napkins. When I came home, I transcribed all these mustard-stained napkins, and it's almost verbatim in the movie."

Another quality that sets *Basket Case* apart from its early-'80s brethren is its sense of black humor, derived from both the eccentric supporting characters and dialogue and the over-the-top bloodletting. Henenlotter had honed that tone in a series of short films, including *Son of Psycho*, *Lurid Women* and *The Slash of the Knife* – the latter of which was intended at one point to play a NYC midnight show with John Waters' notorious *Pink Flamingos* (1972), but lost the gig because it was considered too offensive! More appreciative of *Slash*'s spirit was Edgar levins, who would become *Basket Case*'s producer.

"The guy was absolutely nuts!" levins says of his initial reaction to Henenlotter's work. "He was having fun with the medium as it stood at the time. He was making people squirm, then making 'em laugh. In *Slash of the Knife*, every time you expected a joke to happen, he'd throw something in that would freak you out. And when you expected to be freaked out, he'd throw in a gag, so you didn't know what to expect. What a joy!"

Once they determined that they would work together on a feature-length project, Henenlotter and levins tried to get backing for a script called *Ooze*, a biological thriller that included a role intended for *Flamingos*' Divine to play out of drag. When they couldn't get the funding together, they decided to shoot *Basket Case* with their own money. "I thought, 'Let's make it just to make it!'" Henenlotter remembers. "If it stinks, no problem. We can undoubtedly sell it to some rock-bottom distributor, get it shown on 42nd Street for one week and it'll disappear.' And that kind of empowered me to make the film, because I was thinking, 'Nobody's ever going to see this!'"

That guerrilla-filmmaking spirit is another part of *Basket Case*'s appeal; this salute to 42nd-Street sleaze feels truly authentic in its grubby atmosphere and settings. Which is something of an achievement, as the majority of the scenes in the Hotel Broslin, where Duane and Belial hole up, were filmed on sets built in the loft of artist Ugis Nigals, Henenlotter's co-worker at a graphic design firm. Not that they didn't try to shoot the real thing: "We were actually gonna film it in a New York hotel," Henenlotter reveals, "and we had spoken to the people about it. But when we got there, it was nothing but junkies and hookers, and as we pulled up, somebody yelled, 'Hey! Hollywood's here!' Right away, they started asking for money to watch the equipment. So we went, 'OK, we can't film here,' and just faked it."

There were nonetheless a number of actual locations employed for *Basket Case*, which cemented the dark-side-of-Manhattan veneer. In addition to "the Deuce," and the nighttime TriBeCa street where Duane goes on his naked run, these included the Mayfair Theater in Queens, where Duane enjoys a showing of the Sonny Chiba flick *The Bodyguard* (1976), and a thief (Tom Robinson) makes the ill-fated decision to swipe his basket. (The Mayfair was actually a gay porn house at the time, and was closed by the New York City Health Department during the AIDS crisis in 1995; it's now the Bombay Theater, specializing in Bollywood fare.) Henenlotter and co. shot scenes with Duane and Casey (Beverly Bonner) at a pair of establishments that had just been used by William Friedkin for his controversial Al Pacino-starrer *Cruising* (1980): the Christopher Street leather bar Badlands and the infamous Hellfire Club, a BDSM establishment.

"We shot with the props left over from *Cruising* still in that place," Henenlotter says of the Hellfire Club. "There were giant handcuffs we had to shoot around and rather graphic drawings on the wall. There was a sling set up for fist-fucking or something, and everybody on the crew kept taking their pictures in it. I brought in all these props to make it look more like a basement, but it was really to hide the glory holes."

Key members of the *Basket Case* team included cinematographer Bruce Torbet, who had lensed Brian De Palma's debut feature *Murder à la Mod* (1968); Ilze Balodis, who had previously been married to Nigals and helped secure most of the cast through her position at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts; and makeup effects creator Kevin Haney, assisted by John Caglione, Jr. (with an uncredited Nigals handling the scalpels-in-the-face death of Diana Browne's Dr. Kutter). Both protégés of the legendary Dick Smith, Haney and Caglione would quickly move up to gigs on *Saturday Night Live* and studio features, and they won Best Makeup Academy Awards within a year of each other: Haney for *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) and Caglione for *Dick Tracy* (1990).

Working off a face cast of VanHentenryck himself, Haney created a Belial that possesses a remarkable amount of character for a lump of articulated latex. Henenlotter's filmmaking skill and VanHentenryck's committed performance opposite Belial convince us that he's a living, thinking being – and seen today, there's something charming about the crude stop-motion that animates him in a few scenes, one of the last gasps of that classic hands-on technique before computers began taking over. (For his part, Henenlotter has quipped that this work should have been credited as "ordinary effects"!)

The artists also contributed a great deal of splatter, as part of the director's homage to pioneering "Godfather of Gore" Herschell Gordon Lewis – to whom *Basket Case* is dedicated, and whose films Henenlotter devoted himself to reviving in the ensuing years.



Shot on weekends with whatever money the team could scrounge up, *Basket Case* was a catch-as-catch-can production that stretched for nearly a year, but was fueled throughout by enthusiasm and Henenlotter's ability to think on his feet. "That was one of Frank's biggest strengths," levins says. "When we ran into a wall, when we had something planned and it clearly wasn't gonna happen, he could quickly pick up the pieces, turn around, make a decision and go in another direction. That's what enabled us to get the movie done, because we were constantly faced with situations that were other than what we had hoped for."

The movie was completed on 16mm in 1981, and had an early screening in the East Village that was enthusiastically received by the audience, which included Divine. "We had to put on that show in order to raise money for a blow-up, to get it to 35mm," levins explains. Also on hand was the editorial staff of *Fangoria*, who had been alerted to the show by Michael Weldon, editor of the trailblazing fanzine *Psychotronic*. *Fangoria* first reported on the screening in its August 1981 issue, noting that *Basket Case* "very well could become this year's cult gore classic." Two issues later, the movie was on *Fango's* cover, with Henenlotter admitting to editor/interviewer Bob Martin, "When I saw the words *Basket Case* in *Fangoria*, my first reaction was 'Oh no...someone's grabbed our title!'"

The following issue, however, had less heartening news to report. *Basket Case* was picked up for US distribution by Analysis Film Releasing Corporation, and despite the company having released *Maniac* and the equally graphic *Caligula* (1980) uncut with adults-only designations, and the fact that a midnight as opposed to a general release was planned, they decided to cut *Basket Case's* bloodier moments – not out of ratings concerns, but in order to make it more of a comedy. Naturally, this didn't sit well with Henenlotter, or with levins, who explains, "When you let Frank finish the sentence [i.e., complete a scene], yeah, there's a splat of gore, but there's usually a gag very close by. And if that is taken out, then you have to make up the ending in your own mind, and that creates a lot more discomfort for the viewer. Because then, everyone imagined the scenes ending in the way that was scariest to them, and the film became unpleasant, and the funny parts weren't funny."

The truncated cut wound up opening at New York City's Waverly Theater in April 1982, and business was negligible – until drive-in movie critic Joe Bob Briggs, who was hosting the Texas premiere, insisted on showing an uncut print. Its positive reception convinced Analysis to send the unexpurgated *Basket Case* to the Waverly, where it played Friday and Saturday midnight shows for many months. (On its one-year anniversary there, the first 100 attendees received free McDonald's hamburgers.) The movie received much wider exposure when it was issued on VHS by Media Home Entertainment in 1983 – and two years later, fans got another chance to see it on the big screen. After Analysis folded,

Basket Case's theatrical rights were picked up by Rugged Films, a small New Jersey-based distributor run by former music-documentary producer Roger Grod.

"Roger was one of the angels of *Basket Case*," levins says. "He was out of the Wild West, and he had these great ideas. It was Roger who came up with handing out surgical masks to keep the blood off your face. He was this streetwise kid who just had a ball with us. Roger, if you're reading this, God bless you!" Another of Grod's gimmicks: providing vomit bags to patrons attending Rugged's 1985 reissue of the US edit of Andrzej Zulawski's *Possession*, under the new title *The Night the Screaming Stopped!*

Basket Case was also a video success in Britain, where it was released by horror specialist Palace Pictures – and attracted the attention of the Rolling Stones and director Julien Temple, who featured a clip from the movie in their "Too Much Blood" video. Duane/VanHentenryck and his basket made cameos in Henenlotter's subsequent *Brain Damage* (1988) and, of course, returned in *Basket Case 2* (1990) and *Basket Case 3: The Progeny* (1991). The sequels were done on significantly higher budgets than their predecessor, with a slicker look and more extravagant makeup effects...and yet the original's rough-hewn appeal still endures. In its combination of outlandish gore and outrageous humor grounded in a gritty *mise en scène*, *Basket Case* remains one of horror's most distinctive achievements nearly 40 years after its creation.

Michael Gingold is an editor and/or writer for Rue Morgue, Birth.Movies.Death, Scream, Delirium, Time Out New York and others, and spent 28 years with Fangoria magazine and its website. He is the author of The Frightfest Guide to Monster Movies (FAB Press), and would like to thank Frank Henenlotter again for writing the great introduction for it.



CHAM-PAIN IN THE PARK!



A **BASKET CASE** COMIC STRIP

STORY AND ARTWORK BY MARTIN TRAFFORD

CENTRAL PARK...

Dr. Kutter was
The last Belial..

..it's finished..right?..

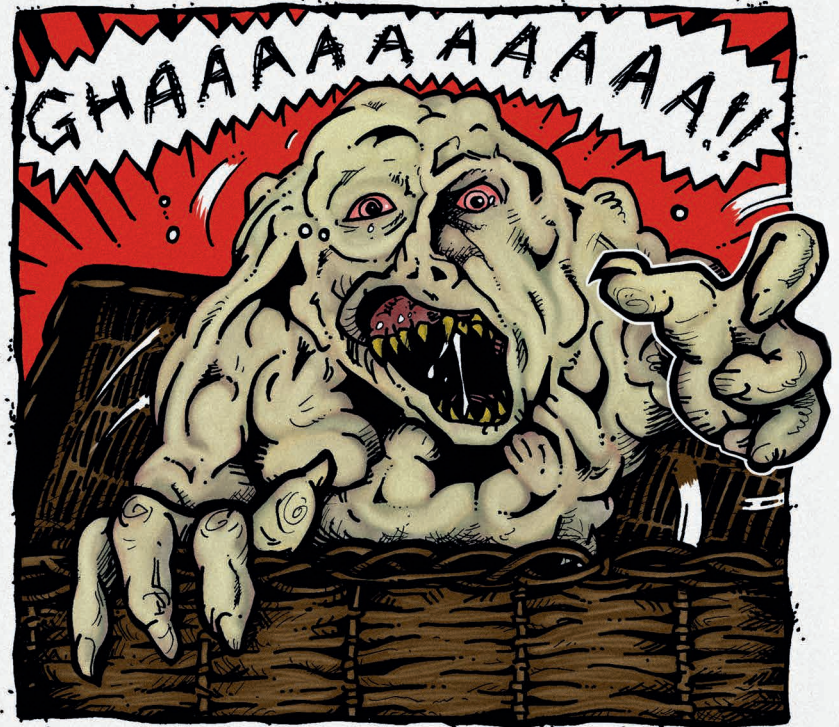
..we achieved what we
Set out to do..

..cos I was thinking, maybe we could
do our own thing a little?..
I know.. I know
but it's just been so intense..

..I'm EXHAUSTED really...

I just feel SO TIRED..
I just need some SPACE...

..you feel the same..right?..





Martin Trafford is a British freelance illustrator based in Australia. You can check out his work on his Facebook page Martin Trafford Trafford and follow his Instagram @martin_trafford_traffart.

END!

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Basket Case has been restored by the Museum of Modern Art in cooperation with director Frank Henenlotter.

The film was scanned, graded and restored at Cineric, New York. The original 16mm AB negative was scanned in 4K. A 35mm Interpositive element was also scanned for certain shots. The restoration work included full picture stabilisation and the removal of dirt, debris, scratches and other signs of wear. The mono soundtrack was restored from the original 35mm magnetic tracks by Audio Mechanics, Los Angeles.

All materials for this restoration were made available by Frank Henenlotter, who has approved this restoration.





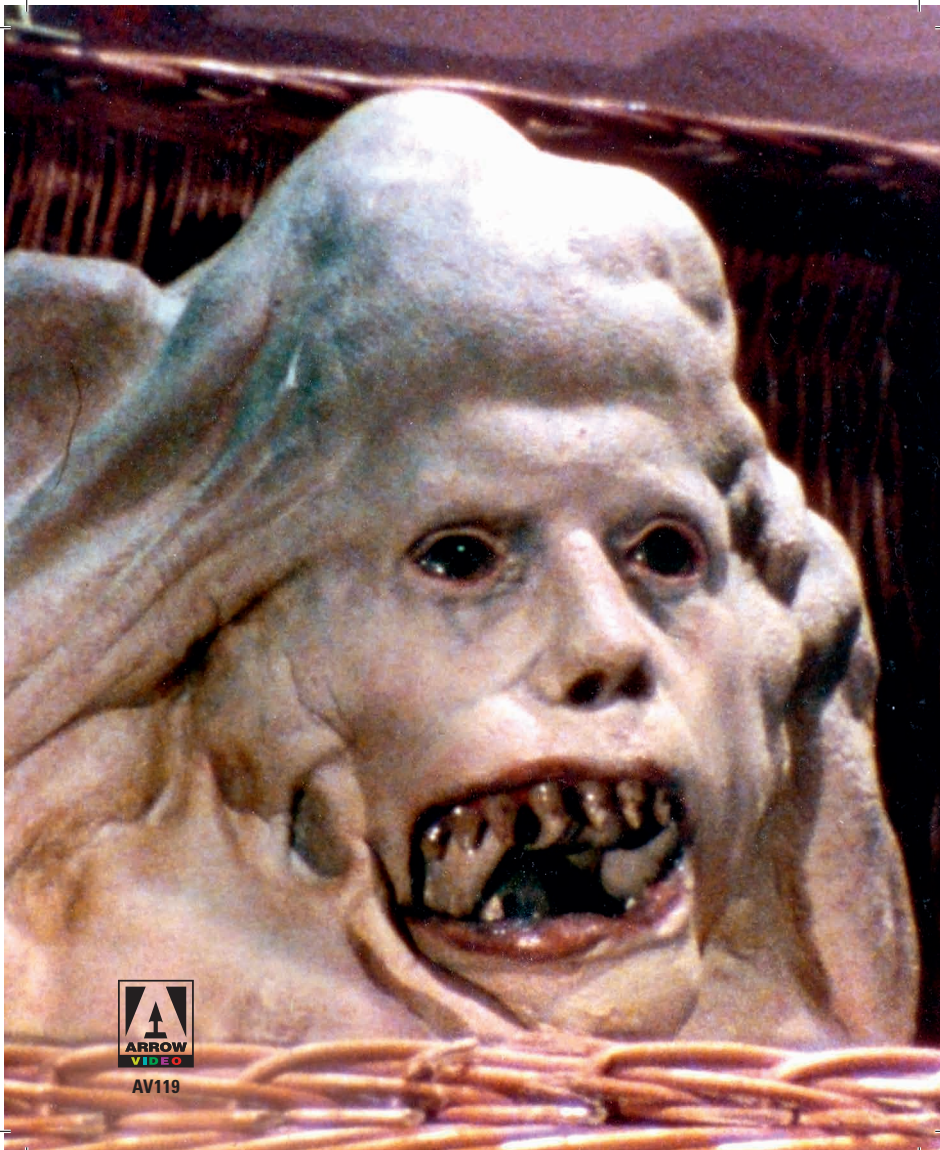
PRODUCTION CREDITS

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

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Mike Bencivenga, Ilze Balodis, Beverly Bonner,
Joe Bob Briggs, Carl Daft, Brian Darwas, Michael Gingold,
Edgar levins, Michael Mackenzie, Robert Morgan,
Kika Nigals, Ugis Nigals, Florence Schultz,
Maryellen Schultz, Martin Trafford
and Kevin VanHentenryck.

*Very, very special thanks to Frank Henenlotter,
whose assistance in putting together this release
has been invaluable.*



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