

Theories of EVILUTION

By MARC SHAPIRO

More zombies assault another dwindling group of trapped humans—but there are some twists in this tale.

There are some places in Los Angeles you just don't go at night. And the heart of East Los Angeles is one of them. Badly lit streets. Gang graffiti by the yard on every conceivable canvas. And people just hanging out on the streets, stoops and doorways. Most mean you no harm—but some are definitely up to no good.

Case in point: the small army of the undead being assembled on the set of the fright opus *Evilution*.

Ground zero for what screenwriter/producer (and Fango scribe) Brian O'Toole promises will be "a kick-ass night of zombie action" is the former Queen of Angels Hospital. Long a pillar of the LA community, Queen of Angels shuttered its doors years ago, only to re-emerge as the Dream Theater, a thriving movie-making space that has seen more than its share of scares and screams.

Extras are ushered into a makeup shop where bulging veins, deathly pallor and gobs of blood and gore are slathered on. Then it's a quick trip to wardrobe, where zombie garb flies off the rack and onto bodies. From there, it's off to the catering bus, where the last nonhuman meal of the night is served.

At this point, you're probably thinking: *Flesheating ghouls doing the zombie shuffle and eating the brains of plucky survivors trapped in an isolated somewhere...again.* And it's true that if you're an undead-flick freak, you won't have any trouble spotting the influences. But *Evilution*, an

18-day wonder and the first production from the fledgling Black Gate Entertainment (debuting from BrinkDVD September 22) has more than its share of original and unusual twists and turns.

Evilution marks Chris Conlee's first directing gig after a dozen years in the editing bay, on films including *Abominable*, *Simon Says* and *The Devil's Tomb*. Eric Peter-Kaiser, who's producing with O'Toole, is also the film's lead actor—and one of the unique touches is that the vilest of the vile, a character known only as

Junkie, is played by rock star Billy Morrison (The Cult, Circus Diablo, Camp Freddy). And then there's the source of the undead plague: an alien microbe from outer space.

"From the beginning, Brian said that he didn't want this to be just another zombie movie," Conlee says. "He was big on this film being about alien-possessed life-forms. Well, you didn't hear it from me, but yeah, this *is* a kind of zombie movie. But with some definite differences."

Peter-Kaiser, who is participating in his first straight horror film after a career previously spent acting outside the fright scene in movies such as Disney's *Miracle*, echoes the "*vive le difference*" attitude that hangs over the *Evilution* shoot like a well-fitted shroud. "What we're doing is taking

undead-infested apartment building, "The Necropolitan," trying to warn others that the ghouls are on the march. It's up a couple of flights of stairs in the reconfigured hospital-cum-studio to a landing that spills out into a maze of cables, cameras and crew, where Conlee, amid the clutter and chaos, is moving easily between his camerapeople and his star.

At the director's signal, Peter-Kaiser runs down the hall, stops in front of a particular door, bangs frantically and exchanges some equally excitable dialogue. As he calls for a series of takes, Conlee appears to have the chops, and is showing no discernable jitters.

"We're only on day four, and so far so good," he laughs later in the evening. "I've got about 60 people constantly watching me, and I've got to pretend I know what I'm doing. We've made our days and we're pretty much getting everything we want. If I've screwed up, nobody's told me so."

Evilution's story begins with the dedicated Darren diligently experimenting on the recently discovered, microscopic alien species. When he realizes that his military bosses are working covertly to turn it into a weapon, he takes matters into his own hands, spirits it away and hides it in the Necropolitan. Everything is fine until the junkie, looking for his next fix, finds the container, mistakes it for illegal hard drugs and shoots it into his veins. You can do the math from there: One possessed cannibal bites another, which

bites another—and before you know it, there are more brain-eaters than you can shake a stick at roaming the building, dining on humans and increasing their ranks. As if things couldn't get worse, here comes the military—hot on the trail of the pilfered alien gunk and readying a massive cover-up as the zombies race for the exits to spread out into the streets of LA.

Filmed almost entirely at the transformed Queen of Angels, *Evilution* also stars Tim Colceri, Sandra Ramirez, Noel (Hood of Horror) Gugliemi, Guillermo Diaz, James (Donnie Darko) Duval, Jonathan



The Manager (Nathan Bexton) of the Necropolitan doesn't recall anything in the lease about this.

familiar horror elements and putting a spin on them," he says. "We're all big fans of the fast-moving infected in *28 Days Later*. We've adopted that 'running' element and added something else to it. Because we're dealing with alien life-forms, we've decided to give them true life. Putting it bluntly, they can run and jump and do all kinds of cool things."

But for the first scene of the night, the only one in on the action will be Peter-Kaiser himself, playing military scientist Darren Hall. He's set to do a mad frantic dash down the darkened hallways of an



As the addict who starts all the trouble, Morrison is a darkly spot-on bit of typecasting, as the musician-turned-fledgling-actor admits that he spent 14 years as “a real-life drug abuser. So for better or worse, this is a part that I can play in my sleep. I can tell you that when you’re using drugs, the horror is very real and very gnarly.”

Morrison came to *Evilution* after a small but well-received role in the film *Tripping Forward*—in which, yes, he also played a junkie. When he was offered this film, he was not taken aback by the continued stereotyping. “I was asked to play a drug addict...what a surprise,” Morrison says. “But he’s a likable drug addict who is basically responsible for everything that happens in the movie. I steal this substance from the basement of this building, and of course, I do what any self-respecting junkie would do—I shoot it up. Then I be-

Breck from the *Jeepers Creepers* films and Peter (*The Lair*) Stickles. Nathan Bexton plays the Necropolitan’s Manager, a character who recurs in Black Gate’s subsequent feature *Basement Jack* and will have a larger role in the planned third feature in the trilogy, *Necropolitan*. Alex Noble is in charge of the special makeup team, and the movie’s score is courtesy of genre veteran/frequent John Carpenter collaborator Alan Howarth.

The odyssey of *Evilution* began in 2006, when Peter-Kaiser, already heading up the non-genre outfit Island Gateway Films, hooked up with O’Toole. The latter was casting about for something new after a stint at Kismet Entertainment, where he co-produced such films as *Dog Soldiers* and *Boo* and scripted the creature feature *Cemetery Gates*. “Brian and I got to talking,” Peter-Kaiser recalls, “and we decided to start Black Gate Entertainment as a horror division of Island Gateway. It was a good match. We both knew different people, but Brian knew the horror genre and the indie scene, and that’s what I needed to lean on. Shortly after that, he started writing *Evilution*.”

Colceri is a big supporter of the *Evilution* script—even if his motives are a bit on the selfish side. The actor, who has balanced out a career of A-offerings like *Full Metal Jacket* with such genre quickies as *Leprechaun 4: In Space* and the recent giant-killer-eel movie *Razortooth*, is checking out the sports page after an earlier bout of zombie-fighting while offering *Evilution* observations.

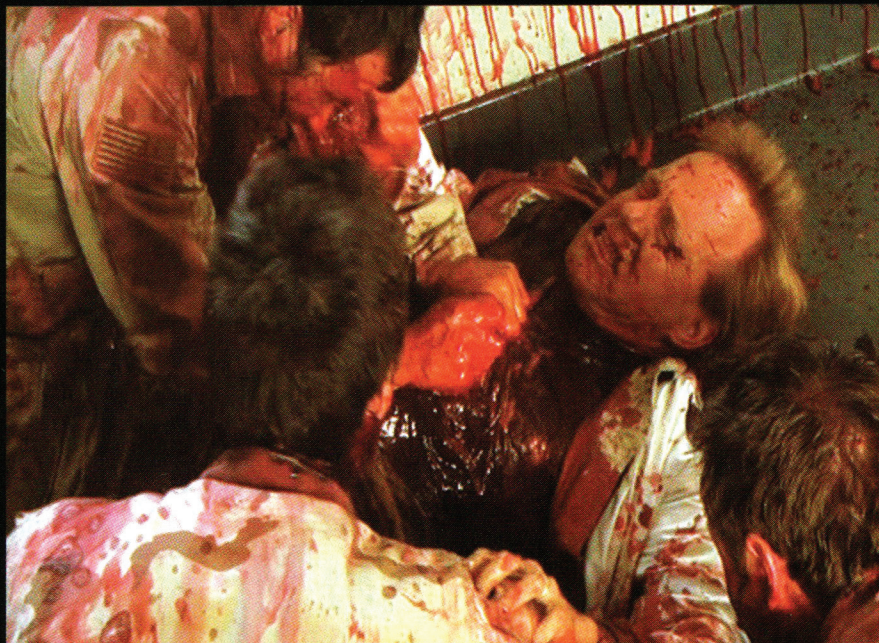
“I normally just get killed or shoot somebody,” Colceri chuckles. “Here, I’m the military man who is sent to find the

guy who took the serum. We end up killing a lot of zombies. I go through the entire film doing that, and then...well, if I tell you what happens, I guess I’d have to kill you.”

The actor gives high marks to the film’s “black blood and flesheating,” and says that Conlee’s first-timer status has not been a problem. “Chris is from the editing world, which is a good background to have when you’re directing. The communication is good and he’s comfortable to be around. You have to have somebody like that when you’re doing a movie on this level.”

come one of the infected and run around infecting other tenants. This being horror, I don’t make it to the end of the film. But I do die a fantastic death.”

Later in the evening, it’s shaping up as major zombie time. Although it’s early in the shoot, the *Evilution* company has chosen this night for a climactic zombie slaughter sequence. Conlee, cinematographer Mathew Rudenberg and a host of ghoul wranglers have brought an army of the undead into the building and up the stairs to a long, darkened hallway that leads into a well-lighted alcove. Extras are positioned according to height, look,



Funny...whenever we get sick, it always makes us feel less hungry.



Producer/star Eric Peter-Kaiser (in helmet) had the luxury of helping hire his own infected attackers.

etc. There are last-minute makeup adjustments and a couple of run-throughs of the zombies racing down the corridor and into the alcove.

Rudenberg is enthusiastic as he huddles with Conlee and the lighting team, pushing for a bit more than the expected visual style that this type of film typically offers. During a break in filming, the DP joins the chorus of those who say they're pushing *Evilution's* seemingly limited *mise en scène* in different directions.

"We knew going in that we would be restricted by location, schedule and budget," he notes. "But we felt we had to keep a high production value, so we looked for a style that would bring out the elements the story conveys. We wanted to do something that would capture the influence of the great zombie movies and translate them into something fresh."

Explaining the progressive bag of tricks he and his team are pulling from to breathe new visual life into traditional gut-munching, Rudenberg says, "We're giving volume to space, using camera movement and lighting to create separations between the background and foreground and giving substance and dimension to confined areas. Visually, we're giving life to the building that mimics what's going on with the zombies."

With his presence not needed for a while, Peter-Kaiser holes up in an empty office space to temporarily unwind. "You know, the one thing people are asking me

is, 'Are you out of your mind producing and starring in a movie?' And I tell them yes I am."

But Peter-Kaiser claims that once the cameras began rolling on *Evilution*, it was mostly about the performance. "A lot of what I did for this movie as a producer involved the preparation: putting the right people in place and making sure the team was together," he says. "When I'm in a scene, my actor face is on. Chris knows the genre and understands what he needs. All we require as actors from that point on is 'Higher, lower, right, left...'"

Still, Peter-Kaiser's actor side is finding a lot to play around with in the role of Darren. "He's kind of a young Dr. Frankenstein with a bit of the scientist from *Re-Animator* thrown in," he says. "He's more of a humanitarian who sees the positive side of what the alien lifeform can do. He feels like a god when he does what he does, and for an actor, that's heady stuff."

While balancing a late lunch and conversation, Conlee is equal parts good-

natured and self-deprecating but happy all around to have scored the *Evilution* gig. He recalls that he was driving home one Sunday night around midnight, exhausted from an arduous editing session, when his cell phone rang: It was



With people dying left and right, what chance does a mere rat have?

O'Toole on the other end. "He told me he had this picture greenlighted and wanted to know if I was interested in directing it. I was so excited that I almost ran my car off the road."

"I find myself pinching myself all the time that this opportunity was presented to me, and that I didn't have to hunt for it," he continues. "Making this movie has

been so much fun to this point. I mean, it's got blood, gore, guts and all kinds of stunt performers running around doing these amazing things."

The novice helmer is nonetheless candid as he admits that in the first week of his maiden feature-directing voyage, he is still flying by the seat of his pants. "I mean, I basically don't have a clue as to what I'm doing," he laughs. "I do have a definite advantage in having edited so many other people's work, which has given

"This being horror, I don't make it to the end of the film. But I do die a fantastic death."

—Billy Morrison, actor

me plenty of experience with things like character and story arcs. Having Mathew on board has helped a lot, especially when it comes to the film's look. He has brought something to the process that has definitely taken us away from the Romero kind of zombie movie. With the stuntpeople, we can do a lot more things—even more than they did in *28 Days Later*. We're jumping back and forth between a strobe-light kind of effect and a studio look."

Still, Conlee remains good-naturedly cautious. "I hate to talk too soon; after all, we're only four days into this. Dealing with actors is a fairly alien concept to me. So far, everything seems to be working,

chamber, Conlee is soon knee-deep in hot lights, cramped spaces and made-up actors, both the background extras and the up-front players who will get the most screen time, being positioned and instructed on how to die on cue. Up against a wide door at one end of the room and on either side, cameras are positioned to capture the action. A hissing sound and the rising of a thin, spreading white cloud indicates a mixture of dry ice and ammonia has been released.

Conlee calls for a couple of run-throughs. The action picks up as the zombies charge down the hall and into the alcove. The extras at the front slam into the door, piling on each other and attempting to claw their way through. Conlee calls for additional rehearsals in which the fog mixture sprays out and rises up from the floor. The zombies are instructed to flail, stagger and fall down dead amidst the cloud.

There's plenty of enthusiasm on the part of the extras, resulting in outlandish turns, slips and falls that are encouraged by Conlee, who steps into their midst offering encouragement and a suggestion of a twist here and a turn there. Finally, the cameras roll. The extras pile into the alcove and make for the door as the white fog begins to rise. They stagger back. One of them careens back into a hardwood abutment, falls forward into the mist and thrusts up an arm that then slowly drops below the surface. Others thrash about in various death throes. Finally, Conlee calls "Cut," and everybody bursts out laughing—including the director.

"That was great," he yells. "Fantastic! Now let's do it again!"

Some time later, the zombie sequences have been completed to Conlee's satisfaction and the extras are dismissed. Some race to the makeup room to have their goop removed. But others, in the spirit of the evening, choose to wear their horrific faces home. As they disperse and march to their vehicles, Peter-Kaiser assesses the challenge of *Evolution's* low-cost, tightly scheduled nature. "It's not a question of whether 18 days is enough to make this movie," he says. "It has to be enough. That's the bottom line. This is what it is, a low-budget independent film. But we're doing the best we can with what we have."

While he speaks, cars with zombies in full gory visages stream out of the *Evolution* lot and turn onto the city streets. And just as in the film...the infected have escaped into the night.



Peter Stickles (right) might not want to make the "cold, dead hands" speech to Richard King.

but maybe everybody thinks I'm a jackass and they just won't say it to my face."

As the director gets up to leave, he responds to the question of whether he is dreading any of the upcoming scenes. "Yeah," he chuckles. "The one we're shooting right after lunch."

Sure enough, back in the zombie death

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