

MANIAC LIVES AGAIN

An interview with director William Lustig by Andrew J. Rausch

After having helmed a couple of successful adult films in the late 1970s, director William Lustig set his sights on making a horror film. He then teamed up with actor Joe Spinell, whose previous acting credits included *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Taxi Driver*. The two collaborated on a script for the film, which they titled *Maniac*. The film, which depicted a serial killer slashing his way through the streets of New York City, was intended to be a sort of "Jaws on land."

The resulting blood-soaked psychological horror film is disturbingly brutal in a way that American audiences were not accustomed to at the time. Aside from its brutality and gore, the gritty film was notably different from other American slasher films because the serial killer's day-to-day misdeeds are depicted in an almost documentary-like matter-of-fact fashion. Although Lustig refuses to take credit for having influenced or inspired fellow filmmaker John McNaughton, it cannot be disputed that this is essentially the same approach McNaughton later used to great effect in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*.

At the time this low-budget splatterfest was released in 1981, it was primarily viewed as an exploitation film (although it has since become recognized as something more significant). The film's brutality and perceived misogyny outraged some at the time, including *Sneak Previews* co-host Gene Siskel, who famously walked out of the theater during his screening. All this outrage was much ado about nothing, but managed to score the film a tremendous amount of publicity, propelling the \$350,000 film to earn more than \$6 million in the United States.

As one Internet Movie Database reviewer ("Deadmilkboy") observes, "*Maniac* is neither the best horror film of all time nor the most enjoyable, but damn it is intense." The gritty little gem, which was later remade in 2012 by writer/producer Alexandre Aja, is recognized today as a touchstone horror film and has gained popularity and respect in the decades since its release.

On November 27th, *Maniac* will be re-released in a remastered 4K format as a three-disc Blu-ray/DVD/CD set from Blue Underground. The highly anticipated set will also include new bonus features. As this impressive re-release approaches, *Scream* sat down with William Lustig to discuss both *Maniac*'s new 4K incarnation and the history and legacy of the film.

SCREAM: Joe Spinell was an interesting man. How did you first meet Joe, and what was he like off screen?

WILLIAM LUSTIG: Joe lived life out loud. Here's how I met Joe. He was a thug in a movie called *The Seven-Ups* on which I worked as a production assistant. We started talking about horror movies one day and I realized we had a mutual love of horror films. When you meet somebody who loves horror films, there's an instant bond there. We began hanging out, frequently going to see movies in New York. Joe was a guy who lived life in excess. He ate to excess, he drank to excess, he did drugs to excess, but he was also a very sweet, charming guy who, at times, you wanted to kill. That's who he was. He was made up of a lot of contradictions. But all his friends loved him dearly, and we all miss him very much. He died way too young. But he really died at his own hands. He drank and drugged himself to death. It's a shame. He had a gift.

He certainly was a talented actor. What was he like to direct?

Like most great actors, he took command of his role. He really knew what he was doing in each scene, how it all fit together. He really, really did his homework, while at the same time, he managed to be spontaneous. He really was a director's dream. He did work with multiple directors multiple times because of that—his being a director's dream. You hire Joe for a role, and you just get out of his way and let him do his thing.

And he was always working, sometimes on multiple films at the same time. I read once that he had to cut his hair and shave his mustache for a role in a different film while you were still filming *Maniac*. Did that cause problems? What was your reaction to that?

That story is definitely true. My reaction was that he needed the work, and I didn't want to get in the way of that. He was doing our movie, *Maniac*, for no money. We weren't paying him. He was part of the team and he owned a portion of the film. He got a role in *Nighthawks* playing Stallone's boss, his captain. And as such, he had to look like a cop. It was very funny. We were actually done shooting the movie and we needed pick-up shots. There were some close-ups of him driving a car . . . That was the one I remembered, him driving the car. They were just some close-up pick-up shots. What happened was, and I remember this like it was yesterday, he was shooting *Nighthawks* in some bodega. He wraps and the Universal makeup team there put on a wig and mustache for him so we could go out shooting. It was great that the Universal guys helped us.

You and Joe Spinell co-wrote *Maniac* together. How did that project come about? What were its origins?

Well, Joe and I walked in and we were determined to make a horror film. At the time, I had just started in the adult film business and I had made an adult film that was fairly successful. Actually, it was more than that, it was just outright successful. But my goal was to make a horror film. I really loved horror films, and I really wanted to make one. So Joe and I started developing some scripts. We had developed one script and decided it was out of our ability to raise the money required to make it. Then we wrote *Maniac*, but it was more conventional at that point; it was a detective chasing a serial killer in New York. Again, it was out of our scope, out of the range of what we could afford and what we could raise. So finally, we decided to get rid of all the police stuff and make it focus on a serial killer in New York City. We wanted to make it lean and mean. Focus on the killer as though it was a shark on land. So that's what we did! We shot the film. We started with \$48,000, in the end, it was just over \$100,000. That's how we made the movie. We really made it on a wing and a prayer.

At one point you were planning on just making it for the \$48,000. How different do you think the film would have been if you had been forced to make it on that budget?

Well, technically we did shoot it for the \$48,000. The thing is, we knew we didn't have enough money to complete the movie. We went out and did the thing that most people say you should never do, which is starting the movie without the proper capital to finish it. But we felt as though, if that train got on the tracks, people would eventually jump on board. And we were right. People did. So it was really courageous, I guess, that we started shooting the film with just \$48,000, knowing we didn't have enough money to complete it. But we had enough money to put stuff in the can to show people so we could raise money. I don't recommend that method, but we proved that it can be done effectively. We got it finished.

You've said in the past that Dario Argento was involved with *Maniac* at one point. How did Argento get involved, and what ultimately happened to derail that?

Andy Garroni and I worked with Dario Argento on the New York scenes of *Inferno*. We got friendly with Dario. I particularly got close to him because we used to sit in Central Park while we were shooting, off to the side, and talk about horror films and about all his movies. I was really the only person on the set who was a fan of Dario Argento's work and had seen all his movies. This was before he became really well-known.

In talking to him, I told him about my desire to make a movie and he expressed interest in it. He had a partner, Claudio Simonetti. I met with the two of them and we were going to co-finance the project together. Dario's wife was going to be in it and *Goblin* was going to do the score. But then it just started to unravel. His wife got a job on an Italian mini-series and I kind of sensed that Dario was losing interest. It kind of unraveled. We were determined, Joe, myself, and Andy Garroni, and we said, "Fuck it. Let's just take the money we have." Joe had contributed the money he had made from *Cruising*, which was \$6,000. Andy had a savings of \$12,000. And I had \$30,000. So we took \$48,000 of our own money and started shooting the movie. You just get to a point where you can't wait around anymore. If you're going to make the movie, you just have to go do it.



Original art by Neil D Vokes.

One of the cool things about *Maniac* is that you managed to capture the seedier side of New York City in a way that few other films have.

It wasn't too hard to capture the seedy side at that time because it was the real deal. It's not like *The Deuce*, where there was CGI creating fleas. This was the real deal. Times Square was dangerous and it was riddled with prostitution and drugs and all the rest of it. But, I gotta tell you, I prefer that incarnation over what Times Square has now become. Today, it's Universal City. It's terrible. It's really awful what Times Square has become today. I avoid it like the plague. I hate tourists anyway. You know, they fuck up everything, and they managed to do it to Times Square.

One of the things that makes *Maniac* different is that it has an inherently gritty feel to it. This might be a stretch, but do you believe your background in adult films in any way contributed to that?

Certainly. The amount of money we had to spend was a factor. We shot the movie on 16mm and blew it up to 35. So right off the bat, it's going to have an inherent gritty look. We didn't have any money to do any major lighting, so you're working on the edge of the film. Again, it's going to have an inherent gritty look to it. I think the advantage of having done the adult movies was having the technical ability to be able to make *Maniac*. I felt as though the adult films were my film school. When I did *Maniac*, I had the technical chops, I felt, to do a pretty decent job with the money we had. I was able to use the little bit of money we had more efficiently.

How seasoned was the crew you were working with?

The cameraman had shot my two adult films. It was pretty much the same crew I had on the adult films. We had a fairly small crew, by industry standards. There were no dressing rooms or anything. It was a really small crew, a small production.

Tom Savini did the special makeup effects on the film and also acted in it. How did Tom become involved with the project?

I had seen an early screening of *Dawn of the Dead* that I wasn't supposed to see. There was a screening in a private screening room in a facility I was doing some work at. I snuck in the projection booth and watched the movie. I was blown away, both by the movie and the groundbreaking effects done by Tom Savini. So when we set out to do *Maniac*, I located Tom Savini, who was shooting *Friday the 13th* in New Jersey. So Andy Garroni, myself, and Joe Spinell got in a car, and we made an appointment, and we met with him on the set of *Friday the 13th*.

Really what convinced him to do the movie was that he had just broken up with a girl in Pittsburgh and didn't want to go back home after the movie wrapped. So he asked if we'd put him up in an apartment in New York while we were in pre-production on *Maniac*. We said sure, we'd put him up in an apartment, and that was that. Tom came on board the movie.



Joe Spinell and Tom Savini get some TLC from "Mother."

How was it decided that Tom should also act in the movie?

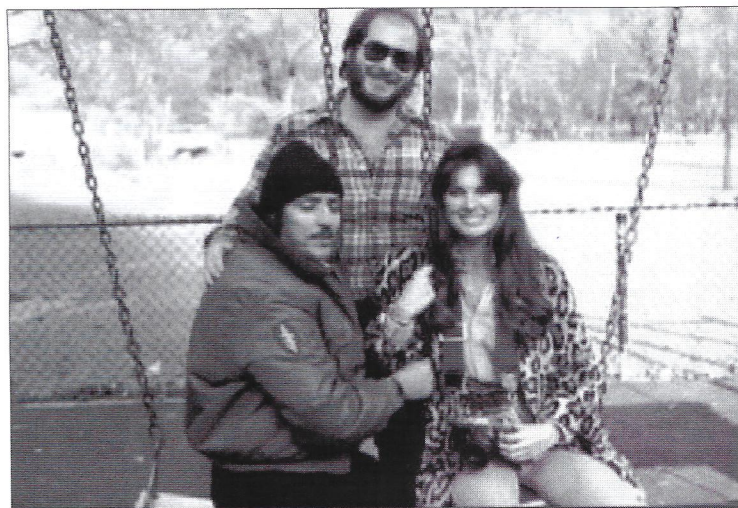
Well, as far as him playing the role . . . One of Tom's things at the time, he was planning to get a nose job. He had a dummy of his head with his current nose, which would be obsolete once he got the nose job. We decided he would get the role and then blow up his own head that he would have no more use for in a few weeks. He got the nose job after we wrapped the movie.

You famously shot a lot of this stuff guerilla-style in New York City without a permit. What do you remember about those experiences?

People say that, but that's not entirely true. We did have permits for a lot of what we shot. We were just working under the radar.

So you had a permit when you shot the famed exploding head scene?

Technically, yes, we had a permit, but there was no permit in existence that would allow you to fire a shotgun on city streets. Yes, we had a permit to be there, but back then, they would not scrutinize us since we were not shooting downtown. By the highway, where we were shooting, we didn't need the police to block off the streets. In fact, we very rarely, if ever, had police with us. But we did file for permits. What we did was, we created a fake alternate title for the movie called *On the Run*. We always intended to call the movie *Maniac*, but *Maniac* is a provocative title. When we filed permits, we filed permits as *On the Run*. You know, a very benign title. Generic. So regarding the shotgun, we had a permit to be there, just not a permit that would allow us to fire a double-barrel shotgun.



Joe Spinell, William Lustig and Caroline Munro take a break while shooting *Maniac* (1980).

Were you at all nervous or hesitant when you shot that scene?

No, not at all. I was 24 years old when I made the movie. When you're young, you don't worry so much about stuff like that. I was fearless back then. I think young people are inherently fearless. Some of them do excessive drinking and drugs, or drive cars fast. Me? I was making movies without a net. I didn't care. I just said, "I gotta get it done." It was actually Tom who fired the shotgun that blew up his own head. When he did that, the force of the shotgun caused him to fall off the front of the car onto the concrete. We never expected he would fall off the car. He fell off onto the concrete pavement and I didn't care. I just grabbed the shotgun out of his hands, threw it in a waiting car with a production assistant, and said, "Drive it to Staten Island," which was across the bridge that you see in the background. I just wanted to make sure if anybody saw the shotgun blast and the cops came that there wouldn't be a shotgun on the set. Especially one that had just been fired! (laughs)

While you were shooting the film, did you have any run-ins with cops?

No, not at all. We had with us, at some of the locations, not all, we had Randy Jurgensen. Randy Jurgensen, at the time, was a gold shield detective. He was not retired, but he was a gold shield detective. He was the cop famous for *The French Connection*. He was also the cop who was the subject of *Cruising*. He was the cop who had actually infiltrated the gay community looking for this killer, which was the basis of that movie. So Randy was a famous gold shield detective, and when you're a gold shield detective, uniformed cops don't question you. So anytime we had to be someplace where we felt we needed some cover, we had Randy with us.

When we shot the subway scene, we had absolutely no permission, nor could we ever have gotten permission unless we paid an extraordinary amount of money for insurance, to shoot on a subway platform and put cameras on a subway train itself. We were only allowed to shoot on the levels above the subway. Where the girl enters, through the turnstile, all of that we were permitted to do. And when she emerges from the subway and is running along to the bathroom. All of that we were permitted to do. What we weren't permitted to do was the subway platform and putting the camera there and all of that. How we achieved it, when we filed permits with the city and the subway authority, they assigned us a guy to watch us while we were shooting. When we were getting ready to shoot on the subway platform, we asked Randy, who was standing by, to take this guy to dinner. So he took this guy to dinner and that gave us at least an hour to shoot her coming down the stairs, her coming up to the train, to put the camera on the train so we could get shots like that. We had maybe about an hour, hour and a half, to shoot all the stuff on the platform and around the train. Then we set up, up above, and the guy came back. That's how we got away with it. **Joe Spinell famously said he didn't consider *Maniac* a horror film. What are your thoughts on that?**

(laughs) Look, Joe knew and saw it as a horror film. Sometimes Joe liked to be a contrarian. He just wanted to be provocative. In France, when we first went to Cannes with *Maniac*, one of the French press people asked Joe what his relationship was with the director. And Joe goes, "Well, we used to be lovers!" Something to that effect, which came back to me the year after. The press asked me, "Are you and Joe still together?" (laughs again) That's how Joe was. You ask him a question and he would say, "Oh, I don't believe *Maniac* is a horror film. It's just what's going on today." That was just Joe. He was a contrarian. He tried to be funny and provocative. You couldn't take anything he said seriously.

At the time the film came out, there was a lot of controversy surrounding it. What was your reaction to it, and now, looking back on it, have your thoughts about it changed?



Different strokes for different folks.



Frank Zito: ladies man.



Rita Montone and Joe Spinell show off Tom Savini's work.



Nobody here gets out alive.

I was disappointed about that, but I can't really complain about the controversy because it got us a lot of attention. What I learned from it was there was a lot of hypocrisy in it. For example, there was a woman who was the head of the National Organization for Women who stood out in front of the Hollywood Boulevard Theater. She hadn't even seen the movie, but was holding up an ad. She called a press conference to condemn *Maniac*. A year later, I'm watching the news, and she was being arrested for having been an accomplice to a murder a couple of years before she was out protesting my movie. Now, you know, I'm throwing ketchup around in our movie and she's out committing murder.

I guess the moral here is that it's okay to actually murder people, but it's not okay to depict it in a movie. (laughs)

I don't know what the moral is, except look, I understood that there was a backlash. I understood what people were concerned about. There were a lot of those movies at the time, and people had legitimate concerns. I must say that I did get some threats that were unnerving though. You know, in the end, the movie has actually kind of grown over the years. It's gotten some really, really good press over the years.

At the time it came out, would you have ever imagined it would have the legs it's had? Here we are 38 years later, and it's as big as it's ever been.

It's definitely something I never expected. I actually thought we'd be lucky to play 42nd Street and Texas drive-ins. It was really Joe who thought this movie had the longevity and who thought we were making a classic. That was funny about Joe. He really, really thought we were making a classic. And it turned out he was right! It did become a classic. It even spawned a fairly big-budget remake.

There was a period in the mid to late 80s where Joe Spinell was wanting to make a sequel to *Maniac*. What do you remember about that?

Yeah, he wanted to make a sequel. What I remember about it was that he died about three to four weeks before shooting was to begin.

Were you going to be at all involved with that?

No, not at all. I didn't want to make any kind of sequel to *Maniac*. I just didn't think it lent itself to it. I felt it was a one-off and it really didn't make any sense to do a sequel. But Joe wanted to do it and I didn't want to stand in the way of him.

You mention the remake. The remake is kind of a different animal. What are your thoughts on the remake?

First, I never thought the film was remake-able. But I thought that Alex [Aja] did a very good job. He did a really, really good job. I just didn't really think that the idea of doing it in the POV made much sense. I think that when Elijah Wood signed on that they should've abandoned the POV idea. I think that Elijah Wood was terrific. It was an interesting movie, but I think shooting it in LA, shooting with those locations, made it look too nice.

There was a time you didn't seem too enthused about returning to *Maniac* and doing a restored version of it. What changed?

Big change! The film was shot, as I said, in 16mm. All of the prints and video transfers, up until now, had all been sourced from the original 35mm blown-up negative. As a result, the look of the film was always disappointing to me. Because the negative was deteriorating. I really thought that my movie was soon to be lost forever. Until I got a call this past April from my producer partner, Andy Garroni. Andy and I, over the years, had always assumed we had disposed of the original 16mm negative. We couldn't remember doing it, but we always assumed because we could never find it. We didn't know where it was. And this brings us back to the fake title that we gave the film during shooting. Andy Garroni finds a box, in a storage room he was cleaning out, labeled *On the Run*. Not *Maniac*, but *On the Run*. He opens it and there it is—the original 16mm negative. We immediately took that negative to the lab, and we proceeded to do a state-of-the-art 4K, 16-bit scan of the original 16mm negative.

So that's what excited me about doing this new release of *Maniac*. It's like we took and lifted a cheesecloth off of the film. It looks so much clearer and sharper, you see things that you couldn't see before in the movie. I am so happy about it. It's really amazing. It's going to be something nobody has ever seen before, not in theaters, not on home video. It's going to be the first time they're seeing what the film looked like when we shot it.

What kind of extra features can we look forward to with this edition?

I did a feature which is called *Return to the Scene of the Crime*, where I go to the location where we did the shotgun scene. I also go to Times Square where we shot the opening hotel scene. And we go to various locations. We also have a lot of outtake footage and deleted stuff from the movie that we've cobbled together, so you'll be able to see bits and pieces of stuff that was cut from the movie. I do a commentary over that, as well. That's the extra material. Plus, of course, you have a 4K transfer from the original camera negative. It's exciting. It's definitely an event.

In your mind, what do you see as being the legacy of *Maniac*?

I think the legacy of *Maniac* is Joe Spinell's performance. Joe was a brilliant character actor, which could be seen in the numerous films he was in, but this is really his only starring role in a movie that had some visibility. I really feel Joe was proud of the movie, and I'm very proud of the work that Joe did. I think that's the legacy of the movie.

