

REEL LIFE

TRUE TALES of ADVENTURES IN
MOVIEMAKING & DISTRIBUTION



Low Budget doesn't Impede Big Imagination in ***Underbelly***

By John Mense

While horror films have experienced an explosive resurgence in popularity within recent years, the genre has always maintained a core of lifelong fans. We grew up on a steady diet of Leatherface and Michael Myers, scouring the shelves of the local "Take One Video" for the latest horror releases at a time when they weren't so prevalent.

Matt Cade is one such admirer of all things horror, and his appreciation for the genre runs deeper than the simple desire to experience a few leap-from-your-seat scares. While Cade certainly has a place in his heart for *Friday the 13th*, *Part 6* and *Sleepaway Camp 2*, his love of horror and the art of filmmaking in general is rooted in the classics of the seventies such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Halloween*. Cade's first directing venture was an eighth grade *Halloween* homage, with yours truly playing one of Michael's victims.

Cade spent his early twenties devouring

books on filmmaking and shooting movies whenever he could, including the zombie-gangster horror flick *Smoke Some Kill* during his junior year in college. But his desire has always been to make a horror movie in the vein of his favorites.

With the return of scary movies to the top of the box office — many of them glossy remakes and/or vehicles for the latest teen idol — more than a few filmmakers have talked about recapturing the essence of those polyester era hallmarks of horror. But as Cade is quick to point out, you can't *force* authenticity; it usually happens as a direct result of the financial limitations placed upon the filmmakers and the unique creative environment in which they find themselves. The original and harrowing stories came straight from the imagination, imbued with a sense of what was going on in the real world at the time. It is impossible to pick up a newspaper — be it 1974 or 2008 — without reading accounts of people doing despicable things, and that can't help but weigh on the creative mind.

When Cade began developing his idea for a serious and atmospheric horror movie, he knew that crafting an interesting film on a low budget would require a vivid imagination. What he came up with was the screenplay for *Underbelly*.

The story begins with Henry Rose and his wife Jill as they drive through the Southwest on their way to Florida. While stopped along a pastoral roadside in Texas to admire the bluebonnets, Jill suddenly disappears. Henry is forced to drive into the nearest town to seek help and encounters far more than he bargained for. A family of depraved and violent fugitives has arrived in the backwater town with its own agenda. While Henry struggles to find help in the search for his wife, Toby Haynes and his crew commit violent atrocities as they hunt for Toby's sister, who has also disappeared under strange circumstances. The paths of Henry and the Haynes crew eventually become inextricably linked as they each attempt to make sense of what is going on.

With script completed, Cade turned his



John Mense as Terry



Lead Mark Reeb & crew



Soundman Dustin Youse, Cade, DP Skye Borgman



Matt Cade & actress Felicia Bianca Lopez



Skye Borgman at work, not rest

focus from the writing desk to the conference table, or more specifically, the table in coproducer Mark Reeb's dining room. Reeb, a University of Texas and New York University trained actor, also signed on to play the lead role of Henry Rose.

When it came to casting the other roles, the pieces fell into place rather easily. Cade confesses that he committed a low-budget no-no by writing some of the major roles for close friends (myself included), who collectively had zero hours of experience in front of the camera. However, there was a "certain something" about each of us that Cade found unique, and he felt compelled to see how the "something" would translate on screen.

We slid into the skin of Cade's characters and trusted him to guide us. The rest of the cast was comprised of professional actors who had either worked with Cade in the past or were new faces who had auditioned for Reeb in either Dallas or Austin. The majority of our small but extremely efficient crew was assembled out of Dallas.

Finding the right director of photography to capture the insanity of *Underbelly* — without the insanity of our twelve-day shooting schedule scaring them away — was difficult. Two DP's dropped out during preproduction. Fortunately, three weeks before shooting was to begin, Cade received an email message from Skye Borgman in Los Angeles. Skye wanted to come to Texas and be a part of this "absolutely bizarre" horror movie. She hit the road for the Lone Star state, stepped in as DP and proved herself to be completely fearless and immensely talented.

Central Texas provides its own natural scenery, with an abundance of 'down-home'

locales, wide-open spaces and, of course, deserted country roads. And the citizenry and local businesses across Texas are generally accommodating and film-friendly. The only con to shooting in that part of the world is the intense summer heat. Out-of-pocket expenses for water and sunscreen weren't factored into the budget, but we managed to secure plenty of both. Thankfully, nobody suffered from heatstroke. The sunscreen prevented Cade from having to match footage of a pasty skinned performer with his or her lobster-red doppelganger. And, as Reeb showed us, a blow dryer came in handy when our sweat-soaked shirts became a little too worse for wear.

Mornings often began with a caravan of vehicles heading out from Reeb's house in Austin and making the hour's drive north to Temple. We shot at several locations in and around Temple and the nearby town of Cyclone. One of the great things about Texas is that the reputation for Texan friendliness largely holds true. While every now and again someone might take a second glance at a group of strangers capturing images of an armadillo carcass on a deserted farm road, most of the time people were sympathetic to our aim and assisted us in any way they could. This provided for the relative ease of securing unique locations like Peter Pan Mini Golf and MRP Raceway. We also lensed a small scene at the very Take One Video where Cade and I had devoted so many hours poring over the horror section some twenty-odd years ago.

One of the locations integral to the shoot was a large piece of property north of Austin near Round Rock, which is owned by Cade's aunt and uncle. Although surrounded by suburban development, the

many acres of land are situated away from main roads and appear rural in nature. We shot several key scenes there, including the story's climactic denouement in a surreal forest clearing. After nine straight days, the bulk of the movie was 'in the can.' We broke for four days and then resumed shooting the following weekend.

Underbelly underwent the lengthy editing process throughout 2007. Dustin Youse, at that time a senior film student at the University of Texas, would take a greyhound bus every Friday night from Austin to Houston where he and Cade would edit the film non-stop until Dustin had to leave the following Monday.

Meanwhile, halfway across the country in Virginia, Fritz Beer, who had played Toby Haynes, worked tirelessly on the soundtrack. Cade and Fritz would spend hours on the phone making sounds and humming ideas back and forth. The result of Fritz's hard work is an original, haunting and continually surprising score that ended up being its own character in the final cut.

Despite our dark subject matter — or maybe *in spite of it* — our small cadre of cast and crew seemed to get along famously and truly enjoy the experience. That's probably the most important lesson from working on a real indie project. No matter the means at your disposal, if everyone develops a personal attachment and a sense of pride in their work, the end result can be whatever you originally dreamed it to be. www.underbellythefilm.com

Post production is complete and *Underbelly* is seeking distribution, represented by attorney Michael Saleman. Contact Matt Cade: cade@birdnose.com. —John Mense grew up in Temple, TX and currently resides in Lewisville, TX.