

# Gory ads paying off for bloody movie

E12-H  
The Los Angeles Times

HOLLYWOOD — Columbia Pictures had this little marketing problem: How to peddle its bloody, psycho-killer, made-in-Canada movie, Happy Birthday To Me in a marketplace already hip-deep in gore.

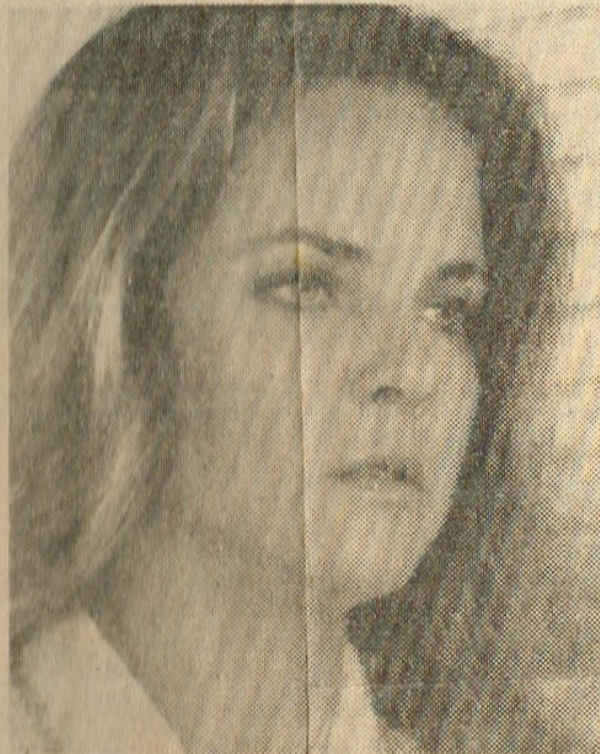
You may have noticed Columbia's solution, an advertising campaign that is so blatant in its try for shock that it borders on parody. The movie's poster, which is used in newspaper advertisements, features the horrified countenance of a young man confronted with the implement of his death — a fully loaded shish kebab.

"John Will Never Eat Shish Kebab Again," the ad's headline proclaims. "Steven will never ride a motorcycle again. Greg will never lift weights again. Who's killing Crawford High's snobbish top-ten?"

"You have to launch an exploitive campaign," said Ken Blancato, Columbia's vice-president of advertising, "because this is an exploitation film." Never mind that there is no one named John in the movie, or that it's Steven who gets skewered by the kebab, or that Etienne, not Steven, gets done in by his motorcycle.

"You're going to the movie to see somebody get it with a shish kebab," said Blancato. "The names are irrelevant."

Blancato's boss, Marvin Antonowsky, president of marketing and research for Columbia, considered Blancato's shish kebab layout a clever touch. After all,



**Melissa Sue Anderson:** Plays a prep school senior whose classmates disappear under mysterious circumstances.

there's Friday The 13th Part 2, Graduation Day, Kill And Kill Again, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Scanners (see Eye column above) and half a dozen other movies competing for the violence-exploitation market.

It's all a matter of pushing the right buttons among the right audience, Antonowsky said. "You don't want to get the wrong market in to see a film because

you'll wind up with lousy word-of-mouth, which will defeat your purpose at the box office. In this case, it's teenagers. This is clearly a teenage audience, that's the market for this picture," which co-stars Glenn Ford and was made by DAL Productions of Montreal, which also made Meatballs and My Bloody Valentine. It was universally panned by critics, including The Star's Ron Base.

The advertising campaign cost nearly as much (\$3.5 million so far, Antonowsky said) as the making of the picture (about \$4.75 million). Apparently, it's pushing the right buttons. In its first 18 days in release, Happy Birthday To Me grossed more than \$9.7 million at the box office.

Are Antonowsky and Blancato pushing a good chiller or exploitive junk? Two of the most conspicuous customers at an afternoon showing of Birthday here last week were Maria Tieche and Chris Baumgardner, both 16, who shrieked and gagged throughout the movie's torturous 108 minutes.

"It was supposed to be really, really scary," said Maria, "and I thought it was..."

"I thought it was one of the scariest movies I've ever seen," said Chris. "And I've seen a lot."

"It was scary," Maria continued. "Really gross."

Blancato would have been pleased. The girls had not come to witness dramatic art, or even well-done horror. They came, as Blancato knew they would, to see somebody get it with a shish kebab.