

ADAM ROCKOFF

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Mr. John Dunning
JVJ Productions
376 Victoria Avenue, Ste. 300 Westmount
Montreal, Quebec, H3Z 1C3

Dear John:

Finally! Enclosed please find a copy of my book, *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986*.

Now that the book is finally published, I appreciate your interview even more. As you will see, it's talks with you – and other horror trailblazers – which really make the book come alive. I hope you enjoy it a fraction as much as I've enjoyed your films. At the very least, I think it will be a nice, albeit bloody, trip down memory lane.

On to a more contemporary matter. . . I recently spoke to my contact at Dragon Films. While they certainly expressed interest in investing in *My Bloody Valentine 2*, I don't really know if they're in a position to contribute a substantial amount. Do you already have a budget for the film which I could share with them or others? On that note, just off the top of my head I can think of some companies, both American and Canadian, which might be interested in the sequel. As I wrote to you in my previous email, I'd be more than happy to contact them if you like.

Also, I just want to reiterate, Dragon Films was interested in an uncut version of *Bloody Valentine* ONLY in Germany – where they don't believe Paramount owns the rights. They are well aware Paramount controls the rights for all other territories.

Again, thanks so much for sharing your experiences with me and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Warmest regards,



Adam

GOING to

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SLASHER FILM, 1978-1986

PIECES

Adam Rockoff



To John,

A true pioneer in

Going to Pieces

every sense of the word.

Warmest regards,



Going to Pieces

*The Rise and Fall of
the Slasher Film, 1978-1986*

ADAM ROCKOFF



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Frank Zito (Joe Spinell) is a deeply disturbed loner who can't break his compulsion for slaying and scalping young women in Bill Lustig's unfairly maligned *Maniac* (1981).

a film such as *Combat Shock* (1986), an exercise in *real* sleaze to which it has been compared. Rather, it is the film that *Taxi Driver* (1976) didn't have the guts to be—a dark examination of psychosis and death on the mean streets of New York City.

In the early '80s, producers John Dunning and Andre Link were running Cinepix, a Canadian production company. They knew that the only way they could compete with the majors was with low-budget exploitation films. They also realized that the horror climate was, as Dunning puts it, "once again ripe for the psychopath." The Motion Picture Association of America was beginning to realize that the slasher film was not a passing fad. It tried to discourage the studios from getting involved in such garbage by drastically cracking down on the amount of on-screen sex and violence. Therefore, the task of supplying such films fell to inde-

pendent producers like Dunning and Link. Both had experience with horror films; they had recently produced David Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1977) and had executive produced William Fruet's disturbing *The House by the Lake* (1976).⁵ Since everyone was choosing a holiday as the backdrop for their film, Dunning and Link settled on Valentine's Day.

John Beard was hired to write the script which eventually became *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) and George Mihalka, who had recently directed a low-budget action film, was slated to direct. Both were relative novices at the time. Dunning and Link then went to Paramount's Frank Mancuso, with whom they had worked the year before on the hysterical summer camp comedy *Meatballs* (1979). As furious as the MPAA was about *Friday the 13th*, Mancuso was not about to pass up another potential cash cow and promised to come

take a look at *My Bloody Valentine* once it was finished.

Paramount was trying to keep its hands clean for as long as possible, however, and with only the possibility of a distribution deal, Dunning and Link were forced to solicit outside financing for the film. *My Bloody Valentine* was budgeted between \$1.5–2.5 million and was shot between late September and early November of 1980, in and around Nova Scotia's Sydney Mines.

Dunning good-naturedly calls *My Bloody Valentine* a "horrendous shoot." The Sydney Mines were in use at the time and the crew only had a few abandoned mine shafts in which to film. Along with the inherent problems of shooting in a working

mine, the production was fraught with other difficulties. In addition to spending \$30,000 to repaint a part of the mine which an art director erroneously defaced in an attempt to create a dingy look for the set, the production was threatened with a lawsuit by an artist whose uncredited work is briefly shown in one scene. This minor fiasco cost them \$15,000 to settle out of court. One of the more comical on-set stories involves an actor whose driving skills left much to be desired. As Dunning tells it:

One of our lead actors said he could drive a car. Well, he couldn't drive a car. In Canada, you can drive a car without a license as long as you're on private property. Well, this guy went crazy. He hit another car because he had never driven and injured his foot. He also hit one of our electricians, who went to the hospital. So he [the driver] shows up the next day with a cane and was giving the crew a hard time. The prop man who was in charge of his cane was slowly cutting a half inch off everyday. So the cane was getting shorter. He didn't realize it though so he thought his limp was getting worse, because his back was hunching when he leaned on the cane. Those are the kind of things a crew will do if they want to put you off.

The electrician who was hit eventually sued and the police desperately wanted to arrest the reckless driver, but perhaps the biggest threat to the production came from the locals themselves. Eventually, the actual mine workers got fed up. They worried that the powerful lights which were being used to illuminate



Peter Cowper is Harry Warden, a crazed miner who returns to the small town of Valentine's Bluff to mete out his own brand of justice in George Mihalka's *My Bloody Valentine* (1981).

the mine's dark shafts would somehow cause an explosion and gave the production 24 hours to vacate the premises. Since the film was not done, the production went into "triple golden time"—the film industry's version of overtime—a nightmare for cost-conscious producers and especially devastating to low-budget productions. Mihalka was racing to finish and had not slept in over a day, but as Dunning says, "The result it great ... he did a helluva job."

Mihalka did do a helluva job, as did the rest of the cast and crew, for *My Bloody Valentine* is easily one of the best and most polished slasher films. It is set in the appropriately named small mining town of Valentine's Bluff, where the annual Valentine's Day dance has been resurrected after a 20-year hiatus. While the town's young miners and their girlfriends prepare for the celebration, an insane miner armed with a pickax begins slaughtering the town's unlucky residents. He sends one victim's heart to the mayor and sheriff, accompanied by a prophetic warning instructing them to cancel the dance. The mayor takes the threat seriously, but despite his pleas, a group of young townies decide to hold their own party. His warning unheeded, the miner pays them a visit. In a deliciously sinister open ending, the killer escapes into the belly of the mine.

Paramount released a heavily edited version of *My Bloody Valentine* on February 11, 1981, a few days before Valentine's Day. As Dunning says, the film "was cut to ribbons." After initially screening *My Bloody Valentine* in Canada with some other Paramount executives, Mancuso had left numb, shocked by the graphic and realistic murders which even Dunning admits they may have been a bit "overenthusiastic" about. Jack Valenti was even more incensed and kept demanding that further cuts be made to the film. The version which the MPAA finally approved may be

devoid of some of the bloodier scenes but this in no way lessens the film's effectiveness. Mihalka did a masterful job utilizing the claustrophobic confines of the abandoned mine shafts and managed to draw out fairly realistic performances from his young cast. He clearly understands the conventions of the slasher film and shrewdly exploits the natural eeriness of the setting. The scene in which the miner methodically smashes each lamp, plunging the mine into darkness, is one of the most suspenseful in any slasher.

My Bloody Valentine made Paramount close to \$6 million, although Dunning insists that the producers "never saw a nickel for the film." He does, however, hold a trump card in the form of six minutes of lost footage which he recently unearthed during an inventory of his office. Paramount has expressed some interest in an unexpurgated director's cut and Dunning is anxious for audiences to see the film as it was meant to be seen—in all its bloody glory. Recently, there have been some rumors about a sequel, logical since *My Bloody Valentine*—with its ambiguous ending—is one of the few slasher films which inherently lends itself to one. Whether Paramount, who has first rights to a sequel, will want to revisit a slasher classic instead of developing new projects remains to be seen.

After *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Tobe Hooper was prematurely anointed the patron saint of gore—despite the fact that *Chainsaw*, while terrifying, was far from gory—an honorary position he had little desire to hold. His follow-up to *Chainsaw*, *Eaten Alive* (1976), a disappointing film about a motel owner who feeds his guests, employees and whomever else he can get his hands on, to his pet crocodile, was a huge flop at the time of its release but has recently begun to receive some undue praise. He then directed the miniseries *Salem's Lot* (1979), based on