

DAVID CRONENBERG ON RABID



David Cronenberg

Writer-director David Cronenberg is to Canada what Roger Corman had been, for years, to the United States: the reigning king of schlock horror. And it's a position that Cronenberg cherishes. No sooner was *SHIVERS* (reviewed as *THEY CAME FROM WITHIN*, 5:3:22) making critical history—and money—than production began on *RABID*, another horror film starring ex-porn queen Marilyn Chambers. And in keeping with the theme of *SHIVERS*, *RABID* is also about a new strain of disease which takes hold of its victims, turning them into raving crazies. Also, like *SHIVERS*, *RABID* reaped the second highest sales at the Cannes Film Festival this year. A British sale was made long before that on the basis of a few "rushes." The film is currently in release in the U.S. from New World Pictures, Roger Corman's outfit, naturally. And Cronenberg has already nearly finished production on his third horror film, *THE BROOD*. Says Cronenberg, "I like being Canada's king of horror. It's a role I don't mind playing at all."

Why did you cast Marilyn Chambers?

Actually, I had been thinking, ironically enough, of Sissy Spacek but that was long before *CARRIE*, before the *Newsweek* cover and before she became associated with Altman. I had seen her in *BADLANDS* and thought she was terrific. About the same time I was beginning my campaign to bring her to Canada, one of my producers from Cinepix was making overtures to Marilyn's agent. I had always been fascinated with the Marilyn Chambers myth, although I hadn't seen any of her movies. When it was suggested she audition, I was agreeable. I was curious. Also, she wanted to break into movies in a legitimate way and she hadn't made a porn movie for about four or five years.

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by Lee Rolfe

She was willing to do a low-budget horror film and the only question was: can she do it?

Although my producers told me using a name would make it easier for them, I was under no obligation to use her. But I thought she was good and she was great on the set. A complete professional. She kept all the hassles with the hairdresser right off the set. She was willing to do whatever was necessary to make the film work and didn't complain about the cold and the mud and that kind of thing. She was just a pleasure to work with. The more you make movies, the more you realize, and appreciate, the need for professionalism. For the beginner you keep hearing about unions, temperamental actors and other things but after working with a cast and crew of professionals, you can't go back to amateurs.

Why did you decide to house the bloodsucker in Chambers' armpit—that seemed a particularly bizarre touch?

Where else would you put it? Yes, it is a strange place, but you try thinking of another place that will work and get you passed the censors.

Touche. In both SHIVERS and RABID, a medical experiment runs haywire resulting in new strains of virus being created. Are you making any kind of comment on the limits to which medical science should progress; that is, are we dabbling in areas where we have no business?

No, not at all. Actually you'll notice that the whole aspect about "there are some things man must not know" is almost non-existent in either film. To me it's just a premise, it's an entertaining premise which takes the viewer from the real world as quickly as possible into a world of nightmare reality and dream logic which is where I like to function. The idea of science gone haywire is just a link between hard everyday mundane reality and a nightmare world.

The special effects in SHIVERS are blatantly graphic. We see the parasites for long intervals, yet the special effects in RABID are more subdued, and we only catch glimpses of the thing living in the armpit of Marilyn Chambers. This was obviously intentional, but why?

They're just two entirely different movies. *SHIVERS*, I think, if it were to succeed, had to do it on some crazy, insane energy that ran from almost the first second to the end. It had to work like an express train. You know an awful lot about what is going on in *SHIVERS* very quickly and there's not very much left, saved for the end.

RABID, on the other hand, was always intended to be a more suspenseful film. There's not really what you would call true suspense in *SHIVERS*, except for a couple of scenes whereas *RABID* does involve the viewer with a kind of discovery along with the major character who doesn't understand what is happening to herself. You discover things along with her about what is going on and at the same time it is more of an action film in the sense that you have a city under siege and in the midst of chaos. Those two elements combine to give *RABID* a quite different tone, even though there are similarities between the films. It's just a matter of conception.

Both films seem to adhere closely to

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD.

Actually, I think there is a greater similarity between *SHIVERS* and *THE INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS* and *RABID* leans more toward *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*. *SHIVERS* ends with the ghouls triumphant, if you want to put it that way. In fact, *SHIVERS* has an inversely happy ending, really, in a sense there is a feeling that there is a kind of exuberance and jubilation that certainly is not at the end of *RABID*. But the similarities between my films and others is not intentional.

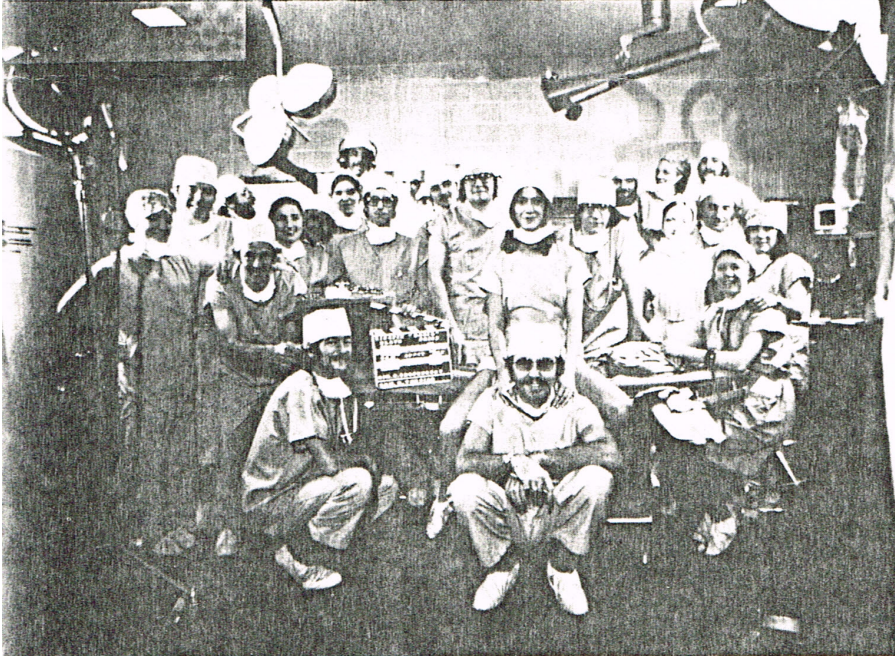
NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD also owes a lot to *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*. There's a body of that kind of literature which goes back to the beginning of recorded time. So I think what it is, is that we're tapping the same roots, the same source, the idea that you are the only sane person left in a world full of zombies and ghouls is a common feeling among writers who tend to be paranoid anyway. It's not a conscious attempt to copy or build on these other films. In fact, the biggest influence of *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* is that you are consciously trying to avoid comparisons.

What scenes in RABID don't work the way you had intended, now that you've seen the film with an audience?

Interestingly enough, if you had asked me that before I saw it, I probably could have given you a long list. Now I would say they all do what they're supposed to do. It's not a matter of arrogance; it's very straight forward and a practical observation. I watched the audience and they were laughing at things they were supposed to laugh at; they were tense when they were supposed to be tense; they were disgusted when they were supposed to be disgusted. I think, though, we cut a bit too much out of the explanation of why the disease develops the way it does. It was in the original script, we shot it but it was taken out because the scene where that information is given was poorly paced. It seemed that the film would not suffer if it was removed. I think it was a mistake. For the sake of ten seconds, and literally ten seconds, the audience would have a much better feeling for what is going on. I find that people generally just don't get it and it's too bad because it was a nice invention. It paralleled the premise of *SHIVERS* as being a kind of absurd, but vaguely possible, scientific achievement and to me that omission is the biggest flaw in the film.

You once said that a good horror film "partakes of art." What did you mean?

I made that statement in response to criticism, not only of *SHIVERS*, but the horror genre in general, criticism which seemed to suggest making horror films automatically excluded you from the field of art. Making horror films means to many that you are not making art. What art is, is a totally subjective thing. You tell me the difference between anyone's favorite art film and someone else's favorite horror film? There isn't any difference. Emotions are involved, your sense of imagery is involved, a sense of yourself as a human being is involved. The mere fact that you are working in the genre does not exclude you from making an artful film. ■



Welcome to the twenty-third issue of CINEFANTASTIQUE (sin-eh-fawn-toss-teek), the magazine with a sense of wonder, devoted to an examination of horror, fantasy and science fiction in the cinema and related media.

This issue heralds the fact that THE WICKER MAN is finally making its way into U.S. distribution, after four undeserved years of sitting on the shelf. David Bartholomew traces the story of the picture's production and subsequent distribution problems in interviews with those involved, including its producer, Peter Snell, its director, Robin Hardy, its writer, Anthony Shaffer, its star, Christopher Lee, its music composer, Paul Giovanni, its new distributor, Stirling Smith of Abraxas Films, and David Blake, the man who originally sold the film in the United States. The tangled story that emerges, of how a film gets buried by the deal-making and executive musical chairs of the film business, is probably not an unusual one, though it may seem quite bizarre to most readers. There are literally hundreds of films that are made, and then never seen. In most cases, their loss is probably a blessing in disguise. What makes the story of THE WICKER MAN so compelling is that it is a *great* film, and for that reason could not *stay* buried for long.

THE WICKER MAN is a horror film, but one of unquestionable beauty and intelligence, which does not fit snugly into this or any other genre. Its surface is a thoroughly engaging mystery, topped-off with a chilling, surprise ending, and on this level alone should satisfy audiences. But writer Anthony Shaffer's story of the clash of paganism and Christianity on a remote Scottish isle resonates on many deeper levels. It is basically a warning of the danger of unreasoning faith. Shaffer, who denies being an atheist, portrays the evils resulting from the blind faith commanded by any *theism*, in the folly of Sgt. Howie and his life-denying Christian superiority, and in the folly of the pagan islanders and their empty gesture of burning him alive. In equating the motivations of Howie and the islanders, Shaffer calls into question fundamental beliefs held by us all, and triggers, even if unconsciously, the troubled unease of recognition, as we watch the pagans gleefully burn a man.

The interviews with the filmmakers explore THE WICKER MAN and all its meanings. I think that you will agree that this is a film you will want to see, that *deserves* to be seen. It is the finest horror film to come out of England since the classic DEAD OF NIGHT (1945), and a film whose reputation can only grow over the years. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to be among the first to champion the film in the United States, for I think the test of time will show that THE WICKER MAN is the CITIZEN KANE of horror films. ■

Top: The vampire-like organism protruding from Marilyn Chambers' amput, in RABID. *Middle:* The cast and crew: Marilyn Chambers (seated, middle), director David Cronenberg (first at right, behind Chambers), and Byrd Holland, special effects and makeup man (second from left). *Bottom:* Joe Silver is attacked from behind by his infected wife.