



Sunday, Oct. 22, 2006

## The Splat Pack

By Rebecca Winters Keegan

The shuddering naked woman strung up in the meat locker was not the problem. Neither was the guy ripping through chains embedded in his flesh to dismantle a ticking bomb in front of him. What worried the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) when the ratings body screened *Saw III*, the latest installment in the lucrative, torture-based horror franchise, was the disturbing "tonality," according to the film's director, Darren Lynn Bousman. "This movie is too dark?" asks Bousman, a 27-year-old Elvis Costello look-alike from Kansas. "That's what I set out to do! It's a horror movie." Before altering *Saw III* to garner a more box-office-friendly R-rating, Bousman called up another director who specializes in movies people watch through their fingers, Rob Zombie, the tattooed heavy-metal vocalist. "I told him to talk to the MPAA as a filmmaker," says Zombie, 41, whose depraved gorefest *The Devil's Rejects* contains what many consider cinema's most artful human-roadkill scene. "Explain why the extreme violence is necessary to tell the story in a way that's more socially responsible." When pressed, Zombie admits he doesn't actually care what's socially responsible. He just wanted to help out a kindred spirit, another guy who understands the unique beauty of a properly lighted viscera shot.

Bousman and Zombie are both members of an emerging and collegial band of horror auteurs--unofficially known as the Splat Pack--who are given almost free rein and usually less than \$10 million by studios or producers to make unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies. If they get it right, there's a fervid fan base, composed mostly of people far too young to take death seriously, who will send those movies into almost gruesome profitability (some of the films have made more than \$100 million). The group is loose knit, and other members include the director of the first *Saw* movie, James Wan, and his co-writer, Leigh Whannell; *Hostel* writer-director Eli Roth; *The Descent's* Neil Marshall; and Alexandre Aja, who remade Wes Craven's 1977 cannibalistic film, *The Hills Have Eyes*.

The gore-happy gang owes a lot of its recent good fortune to Whannell and Wan, who ushered in the latest iteration of big-screen bloodlust with the first *Saw* movie in 2004, just as eerie Japanese horror movies like *The Ring* were peaking. Whannell was a Melbourne, Australia, TV host who thought he had a brain tumor. His film-school buddy, Wan, was unemployed. "I would have done anything to be healthy again," says Whannell, now 29, who, it turned out, was actually just suffering from stress headaches. When he felt better, he wrote the script for *Saw*, in which a terminally ill cancer patient, Jigsaw ultimately played in all three movies by the creepy character actor Tobin Bell forces people to consider what they're prepared to do to stay alive.

Using \$7,000 of Whannell's savings, the pair shot a shocking 10-min. film in which Whannell played one of Jigsaw's victims who has to dig a key from the digestive tract of a paralyzed cellmate before Whannell's character's jaw is split open by a reverse bear trap. On the strength of that short, Los Angeles--based Evolution Entertainment ponied up \$1.2 million to make a feature. The sets were grungy--most of the film takes place in a dirty bathroom--and the actors, Danny Glover and Carey Elwes, weren't too expensive. Wan got to direct, and Whannell starred as another of Jigsaw's victims.

Bought and savvily marketed by Lionsgate, *Saw* was a huge hit, proving that mainstream audiences have an appetite for sadism--at least if it's cleverly conceived. Another *Saw* quickly followed. So far the franchise has earned more than \$250 million worldwide, and *Saw III* will open in roughly 3,000 U.S. theaters Oct. 27, the biggest release of the films to date. *Saw* films skew to the under-25 audience and are as popular with girls as with guys. "Good horror movies don't need stars, and they don't need special effects," says Tom Ortenberg, Lionsgate president of theatrical films. "They earn their scares through twists, through intelligent writing and great up-and-coming directors." Most of the *Splat Packers* are on only their second or third film in a genre that many critics willfully ignore. If there's a nascent Stanley Kubrick or Steven Spielberg in the mix, it's still too soon to tell. But there's certainly innovative filmmaking under way that rises above the mindless slasher sequels of the '80s or such predictable teen-star killfests of the '90s as *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.

The basic plotline of most of these films is that people are stuck somewhere and have to endure horrible things--or indeed, do horrible things to each other--to escape. The more deviant and repulsive the treatment, the better. Bousman, who directed the later *Saw* films, says he got inspiration for that meat-locker scene from shoveling the driveway during endless Kansas winters. "I always thought I was gonna die 'cause it was so cold outside," says Bousman. "What happened if you were stuck outside with no clothes on? The ideas start off in the real world, and then we take them beyond."

Roth's film *Hostel*, about young backpackers caught in a pay-for-torture club in Slovakia, was inspired, he says, by a website he saw advertising a club in Thailand that claimed to let you shoot someone for \$10,000. The torture scenes Roth devised came from researching European witch trials and Nazis and from some trips he made to the tool aisle at Home Depot (one shot guarantees you'll never look at bolt cutters the same way again). In the scene that won Roth the Most Memorable Mutilation prize at this month's *Scream Awards*, a kind of horror Golden Globes, a rich American pays to blowtorch a Japanese girl's eyeball. "I don't know if it's medically accurate that the white goo would come out of her eye," says Roth. "It just looked so disgusting we had to go with it." He later found out that torture by blowtorch has been used by Iraqis both during and after Saddam Hussein's rule. Roth, 34, has taken heat for the brutality in *Hostel*, the DVD of which knocked the family-friendly film *The Chronicles of Narnia* off the top-selling spot at Wal-Mart last spring. "People say, 'How can you put this stuff out there in the world?' Well, it's already out there," says Roth. He appeared on Fox News and proclaimed that it was because of George Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld that Americans are watching horror films: "You're so scared, you want to scream."

O.K., the Splat Packers are brash. But considering their work, they're actually a very normal bunch. In fact, the writers and directors of the new wave of horror movies seem to be mild young men from the suburbs who grew up watching *The Shining* at sleepovers while Mom and Dad slept in the next room. The Old Guard of horror directors, including Craven and Tobe Hooper (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*), has welcomed the newcomers, inviting them to its Masters of Horror dinner parties in Hollywood (also occasionally attended by Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, who are co-directing a slasher double-feature called *Grindhouse*, due next year). And for men (and it is all men) who spend their lives coming up with vile ways to kill people, the horror club is awfully warm and fuzzy. "I'm just so happy to be part of this wave," says Roth. "Everybody's so psyched for each other."

The only thing that could end this horrorteurs lovefest, it seems, is if the extreme gore craze starts to suffer from, well, overkill. After *Saw III* comes *Turistas*, which is sort of like *Hostel* with Brazilian bikini girls instead of Slovakian ones. In addition to Tarantino and Rodriguez's *Grindhouse*, 2007 will bring a full sicko slate, including *Hostel: Part II*, a retooling of *Halloween* by *Zombie* and *The Hills Have Eyes II*. "These movies aren't for everybody," admitted *Zombie*, the day after he turned in his *Halloween* script. But they don't have to be. "I see trailers for movies like [romantic weepie] *The Lake House*, and I think, I would have to rip my eyes out of my head to sit through that. But that's somebody's favorite movie." And somewhere, at some sleepover this weekend, someone is watching *Saw* or *The Devil's Rejects* while Mom and Dad sleep in the other room, and appreciating that, yes, it does feel good to scream when you're safe. [This article contains a table. Please see hardcopy of magazine.]

THE MOVIE SAW THE DEVIL'S REJECTS HOSTEL THE HILLS HAVE EYES THE DESCENT SAW III THE FILMMAKERS Leigh Whannell and James Wan Rob Zombie Eli Roth Alexandre Aja Neil Marshall Darren Lynn Bousman THE GORY DETAILS An ill villain pushes victims to value their lives by forcing them into grisly traps in the 2004 hit Cost: \$1.2 million Box office: \$103 million A clan of serial-killer hillbillies take off on a gory road trip as they run from police Cost: \$7 million Box office: \$20 million Young backpackers unwittingly stumble onto a pay-for-torture club in Slovakia Cost: \$4.8 million Box office: \$80 million Cannibals torment a family in a desert town once used for nuke tests in this Wes Craven remake Cost: \$15 million Box office: \$67 million Six girlfriends are harassed by creepy Gollum types on an extreme caving trip in Appalachia Cost: \$6 million Box office \$44 million From his deathbed, a man directs a doctor and an aggrieved dad in new games Cost: \$10 million Box office: Opens this week ICKIEST SCENE Two men wake up chained to pipes in a dirty bathroom and must saw off their feet to go free A woman's intestines gleam in the sun after she's smacked by a truck A Japanese tourist loses an eyeball to a blowtorch-wielding American businessman A man fights an ax-wielding mutant with a flagpole he pulls from a corpse's skull An unlucky spelunker ends up standing in a pool of blood that reaches to her chin A naked woman strung up in a meat locker is sprayed with cold water that hardens to ice