

Gay of the Dead: A conversation with documentarian Jeffrey Schwarz, Part One

Written by Sean Abley

Wednesday, 28 December 2011 10:24



I met Jeffrey Schwarz, the man behind the awesome SPINE TINGLER! THE WILLIAM CASTLE STORY about ten years ago when he'd just started that project. In the time since, he's created tons of DVD behind-the-scenes featurettes for more genre films that you can shake an axe at, and now he's branched out into features.

FANGORIA: Let's start with SPINE TINGLER! THE WILLIAM CASTLE STORY, because that's when I very first met you, I think more than a decade ago. You actually had the book of transcripts of all the interviews with you. How long, from beginning to end, did it take to make the film?

JEFFREY SCHWARZ: When I first moved to Los Angeles in '95, one of my goals was to make SPINE TINGLER! I had no idea how to do that. So what I did was approach Sony, which owned most of the big Castle gimmick films. There was a great guy over there named Mike Stradford. I said, "Hey I want to make this documentary about William Castle. Why don't you guys bankroll it?" And it was a little bit naïve of me, because studios don't generally bankroll documentaries. (Laughs)



FANG: [Laughs] You pay them, actually, as you found out.

SCHWARZ: It was good because I got to meet Mike, and he was just starting up this division for DVDs, which was a new format at the time. He said, "We don't really make documentaries here..." but he liked me and threw me a couple small producing jobs to produce extras for THE TINGLER and Tom Savini's NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD. So those were, as a producer, my first two DVD extras. So William Castle actually did lead me to being a DVD producer. After I produced those two small jobs for them, they gave me HEAVY METAL to do. After that, it started to escalate, and I started getting calls from other studios. This was (what) we can now look back on as the "Golden Age of Added Value," because now we're not in that age any more

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(laughs). Sony ended up giving me five William Castle catalog titles to do the extras on, but I always wanted to do the film. The reason it took so many years is I was doing a lot of things other than working on [SPINE TINGLER!].

Ultimately, I had a bunch of interviews from the Sony jobs, and then I went out and started shooting interviews on my own to really tell the whole story of William Castle. I had maybe fifty or sixty interviews. Then, just one day I decided I wasn't going to wait for anyone else to give me permission to finish this movie, because it's very difficult to get any movie made. Most of the time people just want to see it when it's done. I ended up finishing it in time for the AFI Festival in 2007. We had an incredible premiere, Terry Castle was there. So many fans came out for that. I got to walk the red carpet with the Tingler (strapped to my back) and a cigar. After that it played at festivals all over the world, and it got picked up by Sony, so it came full circle. They put it in the William Castle boxed set. Just this year, I released it as a special edition DVD. I added many, many hours of really cool extras that I've been collecting, and tried to put a package together for the fans. I feel a sense of closure, because the movie is finally out there in a format I'm really proud of.

FANG: Wasn't there a time after the premiere when you had this daunting task of paying for all the clips, and so you had this great movie, but what were you going to do with it because it was too expensive to show on TV or anywhere?

SCHWARZ: Clearance is always such a tricky thing with documentaries. That's where Sony came in, when they picked it up for distribution in the boxed set, they gave me all the clips. It's all totally legal now (laughs), and I really couldn't have done it without their support.

FANG: I'm a DVD consumer—or was, now that DVDs are going away—and I'm of the mind that both FRIDAY THE 13TH and NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET series quadruple dipped on their reissues and special editions and super special editions. I've seen the docs you've done for both, and they're really good. How do you come up with a new angle on these films when they've been so strip-mined over the years by other documentarians?

SCHWARZ: Before the Paramount boxed set for FRIDAY THE 13TH came out, because Warner Bros. has the international rights to it, I did a piece called RETURN TO CRYSTAL LAKE. It was the first time Betsy Palmer ever talked about the movie. It was the first time Adrienne King talked about it on camera, the first time she talked about her stalker. I'm really proud of that thing, except that nobody got to see it here because it wasn't used on the

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Paramount set.

As far as NEVER SLEEP AGAIN: THE MAKING OF 'A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET' goes, that was done for New Line (when there was a New Line). I was asked because I'd done a lot of horror titles, and the guy running the show over there thought I would be the right guy to produce this. This was before the NEVER SLEEP AGAIN feature documentary came out. This was going to be the first full-length doc about A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET. This was going to be on the reissue of the first film. I looked at it as, "if I never get to do it again, if the studio never gets to do it again, this could be the definitive ELM STREET DVD." Because I was working for New Line, I was sort of on the inside doing it. I got to go back to the dailies, which had never been done before.



I was a little disappointed that it didn't get more notice, because there's material in the documentary—there's footage of Jim Doyle wearing the glove going into the bathtub, going underwater right before they started shooting that scene with Nancy falling asleep in the bathtub. There's outtakes of Robert Englund with his original voice. There's all this really, really cool stuff, and that was the result of physically going through all the 35mm work print at New Line. Ronee Blakely, who'd never done an interview about it, we got her to be in it. I'm really proud of that thing. Now it's on Blu-ray, and when you buy A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, that's what you get. There's another piece called THE HOUSE THAT FREDDY BUILT, about New Line, and then there's another piece called NIGHT TERRORS about the real story behind A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET.

For me, it was kind of a dream come true project. I really tried to hard to get them to do Special Editions of NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 2 and 3 and all the other ones, but that didn't end up happening because New Line basically went away, and there's less of an interest in going back to the well on library titles from most of the studios.

FANG: Soon any sort of physical media is going away, and I wonder what your thoughts are on what's next for the added value stuff. You have your Netflix streaming, but you only get the

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movie. They don't give you the option for the Behind-the-Scenes material. Where are we going to find those docs?

SCHWARZ: I don't think that content is going to go away. Every new film has a behind-the-scenes crew. There's usually pieces created to promote new films, and sometimes they end up on the DVD. As far as library titles, yes, it's still happening for Blu-ray, but the Blu-ray sales haven't been as strong as the industry would have liked, and they're not putting the resources to Blu-ray added value as they used to for DVD added value. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, because I just did the 30th anniversary of RAGING BULL, which is another project that I'm really, really proud of I hope people get to see. And we just did the original FOOTLOOSE. So those library titles do come out, and the studios still put resources into some titles, but the days of a commentary and three featurettes on a movie that's lesser known aren't over. It's just not happening the way it used to. Honestly, I think we're in a transitional period. I don't think the studios are going to put the resources into developing content for streaming like they did for DVDs. The economics just aren't there yet for them.

FANG: There was a certain point when you started making stuff specifically for TV, right? Like, for IFC and for Starz?

SCHWARZ: Yeah. I got into doing DVD extras because I wanted to make documentaries, and I loved the behind-the-scenes genre. Because I made all these things, I started getting opportunities to create pop culture-oriented shows for TV. I did a couple shows for IFC, I did a couple shows for Starz. I'm going to continue doing those, and I've also been focusing on documentary features. My main focus is really doing features. At a certain point, I decided the DVD extras was my job and not my art, and it's a great thing to have as a job. And the documentaries are more my passion, and I hope there will come a day when my passion can be my job, but until then I'll keep making these things and putting them out into the world.

FANG: I have to say, I think some of your DVD docs are art. I'm thinking specifically of the FINAL DESTINATION 2 featurettes. I remember watching them and thinking, wow, this is the first time I've seen something as a DVD extra that goes so in depth into the effects. It was really interesting, and thorough, and well made. So don't say those aren't art! [*Laughs*]

SCHWARZ: [*Laughs*] Of course they're art. I've gotten to do so many cool things, and I hope they continue to be in circulation. FINAL DESTINATION 2 just came out on Blu-ray this week. If you look at FD2, we got to do three documentaries and a commentary, and compare that to

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what's on FINAL DESTINATION 4 or 5, there's not much going on there. You can definitely see a shift in the interest of the studios to really pack these things with a lot of stuff. New Line was always the best studio to work for because they really put a lot of faith and trust in the DVD producer, and we got to produce really out of the box things for them. On FINAL DESTINATION 2, we did this thing called the "Terror Gauge", where we actually measured people's levels of fear as they watch FD2, as sort of biofeedback. That was a lot of fun, we actually did that. So I definitely think there was a Golden Age of DVD extras, and I think that Golden Age is over. But that material is still out there, and a lot of times it does get ported over to the Blu-rays. What the next phase is, I don't know.

For more of Jeffrey Schwarz's work, check out the [Automat Pictures website](#) and the *SPINE TINGLER: THE WILLIAM CASTLE STORY* [page](#).

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