

Long Live the New Flesh: "FATHER'S DAY" Doc Reveals Trouble in Tromaville

Written by Dave Pace

Thursday, 21 June 2012 10:38



The title of Astron-6's making-of FATHER'S DAY doc is inspired by a death-march like motto, NO SLEEP, NO SURRENDER, and the teaser shows us some of the hilarious and insane conditions the cast and crew had to endure while making a \$10, 000 feature look like a million dollars. This will prove to be something to watch for all indie filmmakers out there. You can expect to see the blood, sweat and tears that were poured into the movie, but perhaps the most interesting aspect of this documentary is that it is being released by the film collective independently, and will not be appearing on the FATHER'S DAY set from Troma.

{youtube}riqRwO23GfM{/youtube}

As of this writing the Blu-ray/DVD release has been pushed back to July/August. This alone reveals that there is a fracture in the relationship with Astron-6 and producer/distributor Troma Entertainment, but in the teaser we're given a slice of some of the experiences that soured the relationship that the full doc will likely expand on. Accusations of broken promises and bad faith contracts are at the heart of it, but the trailer shows us other pitfalls like the charge that Troma was selling bootlegs of the movie at screenings that ended up on The Pirate Bay within a day.

The tale of Astron-6 and Troma is at heart, a tale of duels; a tale of the smaller personal battles that a war ultimately breaks down into. I'm reminded of one of the great Spaghetti Westerns, LA RESA DEI CONTI, which translates roughly from the Italian to: "The Settling of Accounts". I'm not sure these books will ever balance but let's dig into this thing and try to break it down into chunks we won't all choke on.

I had hoped when I began this thing that I would be able to present both sides of the story and there would be some obvious conclusion the reader could reach. I'm sad to say this isn't really the case.

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Not long after I saw the NO SLEEP, NO SURRENDER trailer, I had asked Troma frontman Lloyd Kaufman for his comments on what it meant for the relationship between the two parties and his comment on the public accusations being made and printed uncritically by other genre press outlets. I was trying to find balance of some kind in all of this and it was my misfortune to find some. You see, it's much easier to pick a side and paint the other as the enemy and monolithically wrong. It's also a lot more popular. In trying to find the truth of most situations you'll often find an injection of truth makes the waters a little muddier because rarely is one side monolithically anything.

Kaufman didn't respond to my request for comment, which struck me as deeply odd and a sure sign this rift was the source of some real trouble within Troma. This was confirmed when instead of Kaufman responding to me I found myself on the phone with Troma partner Michael Herz. To have him come out and speak to the press when he has rarely ever done so in over 30 years told me straight away this was something they took very seriously.

Our conversation was very frank and open, he wanted to hear everything I had heard and answer to each point specifically and that is what we did for about the next half hour. His responses overall were reasonable and more importantly, they were plausible. He painted a picture of a series of misunderstandings, the kind that naturally arise between artist and business.

Essentially Troma is suggesting that Astron-6 is jumping at shadows because this healthy skepticism has turned into ugly irrational terror. Herz sounded very genuinely hurt by the breakdown in the relationship and he was quick to describe the A6 crew as an extremely talented group and wished them well, expressing he'd be happy to try and work this out with them and produce more of their work. He even asked me if I'd talk to Adam Brooks for him and try and get him to call so they could talk it out (for the record I did, and for the record it doesn't seem likely that will happen).

So we can see here that in my search for truth what we have found is just uncertainty. Both Herz and Astron-6 come off completely sincere and convinced of their positions and both are plausible.

So how is one to judge? I can't tell anyone who to believe. The truth in these situations tends to

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come down to lawyers and I'm not going to pretend to be one. I'm not privy to all the contracts and all the discussions. Here is what I do know – everybody took a hit on this one no matter how you slice it. Everyone was diminished by it. Where once it was a token of faith that Troma were the champions of the indie filmmaker, there is now some mud in the water. Astron-6 is burned and burning more all the time as they spin wheels hell bent on exacting some kind of street justice for their broken relationship. Lloyd Kaufman is no doubt wounded and sore over all the bad blood. Michael Herz sure is. Troma is actually double-burned because they are also going to miss out on a Troma that could have been with a talent like Astron-6 flying the Toxie flag. Finally though, the fans are burned as they feel like their trust in whomever they think is not playing a straight game here is shaken, and they have to wonder just what the hell happened and why they can't have their film heroes out there making movies instead of shuffling letters between lawyers (probably the only winners in all this).

Are Troma innocent darlings? Nobody seriously believes that. You only have to watch a few of the making-of docs for their other films to see they have their share of problems. You only have to talk to a few former Troma people to get the stories of cut corners and burned bridges but so what? Throw a stone in this business and there is somebody with a story of a really savage burn; a deal that left scars. The art/business mix is a knife fight in a tight alley under the best of circumstances, and Troma's circumstances certainly aren't the best. When the suits and the dreamers punch it up, somebody is leaving with a bloody nose and it's usually the dreamers. That's the world we live in.

To further confuse matters though, you need to understand that Troma are seen more as the dreamers than the suits by most of the community and I think that is why this kind of thing hurts them the most. It kills that mystique a little bit and reminds you they are producer/distributors and carry a piece of that DNA in there as a result.

After I talked with Herz, I went back to Astron-6's Adam Brooks and asked for his response. Things quickly turned into a back-and-forth of accusation and counter-accusation and frankly I'm just not going to get down in it here, but suffice to say he disagrees with Herz on most things and I leave it to the lawyers to settle out.

I asked Brooks if he wanted my advice at the time and he said he didn't, but I intend to get it down here.

I'm a big supporter of Astron-6. I love their movies, I like them as people. I want them to

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succeed. I want them to not get screwed around in this business. When I watch all this unfold though I can't help but think about how many other potential producers are watching them kick the people who financed their film in the balls repeatedly in public. They can't help but be wondering how long before they would be in the same position if they got into business with them. How long before the boots start flying? How many kicks could they take? Just how tough and grizzled are their balls, and would it be worth it?

You may be right, but sometimes being right doesn't count for much, and might even hurt you. It's grim, but that's been my experience. I get wanting to stick up for yourself and fighting for what is right but I also know there is a point where the fight can hurt you more than it hurts anyone else. Learning where that point is and jumping off before the flaming wreck is a tricky art.

Troma, there is a mythology around you that you are the champions of the indie filmmaker and the only true independent spirits out there. I count myself among your admirers who really love this myth and want so badly for it to be true. I know Astron-6 felt the exact same way at one point. Be exactly who you say you are. Live up to the myth. Be brave and resist the temptation to be anything less and I promise you that the people will always be behind you. They want to be behind you, don't make fools of them for trusting you.

As a rule, I root for the underdog. I think a lot of us do the same, so it's easy to side with Astron-6 here, but it's important to keep in mind that Troma is a bit of an underdog themselves. They're out there kind of flying by the seat of their pants sometimes; lovable, determined, here for a good time and managed to hang around for a surprisingly long time no matter what Trooper had to say about it. If you believe people are getting fat and rich at Troma, well maybe you haven't seen enough of their movies. There is a labour of love element present that is undeniable. Herz told me on the phone that when they started the company Lloyd said "Let's make movies." he didn't say "Let's make money." It was a point well taken. Of course, that was then and this is now.

I leave it to you, the reader, to judge. Until then, it looks like neither side in this will compromise. Or sleep. Or surrender.