Jeffrey Combs first became a horror icon in 1985, exploring the outer limits of medicine to extremely gruesome ends as RE-ANIMATOR’s Herbert West. Twenty-five years later, Combs is back in DARK HOUSE, using a different kind of cutting-edge science to enhance a haunted attraction—with equally dire results.

DARK HOUSE, available everywhere next Tuesday, September 28 as part of the eight-title FANGORIA FrightFest line on DVD from Phase 4 Films and via video-on-demand (check local listings), casts Combs as Walston Rey, an impresario of the macabre. “I go into towns, find old Victorian houses and convert them into fright houses,” he says, “with holograms and lasers and sound effects to make them as immersive and realistic as I possibly can. The backstory is that the last few I’ve done have not quite measured up to expectations, so on this one I’m really going to step up my game so I can maintain my status as the P.T. Barnum of the horror-house circuit, if there is one. I’m pretty positively full of myself; I’m a real winning guy.”

Combs revels in the flamboyant opportunities afforded by the character from the moment he crashes an acting class, seeking new performers to replace a group who have quit. He recruits the aspiring young thespians for a preview night designed to show off his new “Dark House” attraction to a couple of influential reviewers. “What I don’t know, but the audience knows, is that one of the girls, when she was little, was traumatized in this house I’ve taken over,” the actor explains. “When she hears where this is gonna be held, she talks the rest of them into it because she feels she has to face her own personal demons—so she has a personal agenda besides the money. And what none of us know is that the house is still deeply possessed by a

hideous woman who used to run the place. She ran a foster home for kids and did awful, unspeakable things to them. So my gimmicks and holograms start acting up, and things start happening that I didn’t program. Then we realize we can’t get out, and it becomes not so fun for us!”

DARK HOUSE, which also stars Meghan Ory (as the troubled Claire), Matt Cohen, Shelly Cole, Danso Gordon, Ryan Melander, Bevin Prince and Diane Salinger as the villainous Ms. Darrode, was scripted and directed by Darin Scott, who has previously worked with Combs on 1998’s CAUGHT UP and (as a producer) 1994’s LOVE AND A .45. “I was his first choice,” Combs recalls, “and as always happens, the producers started overthinking things and wanted to test the waters to see what kind of ‘name’ they could get. But it ultimately came my way, and I’m really glad it did, because it’s a juicy part and a really good film. What Darin did was basically take the same old formula and make it fresh. How many horror movies have you seen where it’s a group of young people stuck in a house and, ‘My God, what are we gonna do?’ In this case, it’s about the execution, how Darin did it, that really puts this movie above a lot of others.”

And Scott did it on a limited schedule and budget, though Combs notes, “Not too little of a budget, because, dude, some independent films are shot in warehouses, and we were fortunate enough to be on a soundstage out in the Santa Clarita Valley, next to where CSI is shot. It was, if not the same stage, at least right next door to where I did HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL with Bill Malone. The shoot was a hell of a lot of fun; it went very smoothly and we had a great DP [Philip Lee], and it put me together a lot of really good, well-cast young actors.”

This is one of a number of recent genre films that have placed Combs amidst an ensemble of up-and-comers, an experience he greatly enjoys. “It has been sort of a weird journey, because in my mind, I’m still one of them,” admits the actor, whose young daughter Natalie has a small role in DARK HOUSE. “It’s strange to turn around one day and go, ‘Hmm, I’m a veteran.’ It’s kind of a mix of gratitude and fun, and surprise. It’s interesting—younger actors these days have been so much more exposed to so many more movies, because they have so many outlets. When I was growing up, it was Saturday matinees or what was on the 10 channels, or your own imagination or books. Now, kids are bombarded with it. Their skill sets and their library of references are much vaster than in my generation, certainly.”

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