

Written by Michael Gingold  
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It's a busy month for producer Travis Stevens of Snowfort Pictures, who's got a pair of genre features—BIG ASS SPIDER! and CHEAP THRILLS—playing both South by Southwest and the Boston Underground Film Festival. The latter is a particular honor, as Stevens' films are opening and closing the event; he discussed them both with Fango, and provided an exclusive new still from THRILLS.

Director E.L. Katz's CHEAP THRILLS (produced with Gabriel Cowan and John Suits of New Artists Alliance; see story [here](#)), in which a down-on-his-luck new father (Pat Healy) encounters a couple who can solve his financial problems for a frightening price, plays SXSW tonight at 11:59 p.m., with Mike Mendez's arachnid-on-a-rampage epic BIG ASS SPIDER! (see previous story [here](#)) following on Monday, March 11 at 11:59 p.m. THRILLS then opens BUFF on Wednesday, March 27, and SPIDERS closes it on Sunday, March 31 (times to be announced).



**FANGORIA:** How did you hook up with Mike Mendez to do BIG ASS SPIDER!?

**TRAVIS STEVENS:** BIG ASS SPIDER! came to me through Epic Pictures Group producers Patrick Ewald and Shaked Berenson. They had a script [by Gregory Gieras] called DINO SPIDER and said, “We want to do one of these monster movies, but a cool version of it. How do we approach that?” So we analyzed what we liked about the classic monster-running-amok films, and what the modern versions lack. Once we identified what sort of humor and approach to the material we wanted, we said, “OK, let's start looking for directors,” and drew up a list of like 20 guys who had worked with horror and sci-fi and special effects before. I've been friends with Mike for years, and he was the one who really seemed to get the approach, and the way to make the experience fun and not just about the effects. After a few months of developing the script with him, we went into production in September 2011.

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**FANG:** Based on the trailer, BIG ASS SPIDER! looks pretty epic on what I imagine was a limited budget.

**STEVENS:** Yeah, I mean, you can tell any story on any budget if you narrow the perspective. We looked at [Gareth Edwards'] MONSTERS, and said, “OK, that was a monster movie done for almost no money. How did they approach it?” In that film, the creatures are kind of obscured, and it helped [keep to] the budget by limiting the audience’s perspective. So we tried to structure the script so that even when the spider’s not on screen, there’s something fun happening, so the audience isn’t like, “Jesus Christ, when’s the spider going to come back?”

It’s all a matter of designing your movie to not strain your finances. For this one, we were like, “All right, the monster’s going to destroy Los Angeles.” We looked into shooting in places that would have been a little cheaper, but they would have come with the drawback of not having such iconic landmarks. But even with LA, originally there were drafts where the spider made its way from the Santa Monica Pier past the Hollywood sign, all the way downtown. But as we were developing it, we thought, “Well, if we do that, we’re not going to be able to put as much movie on screen.” So we tightened the spider’s geographical path a bit, and that allowed us to focus on making what does appear on screen pop much more.

Another thing is that when you’re doing a low-budget movie, people are willing to put in all their effort—if not for the paycheck, then because they believe in the project. I believe that when we met with people on this one, they understood that we were in it to make a good film, and it was going to be something they could be proud of, and that made it easier to call in favors and get more out of the movie than what the budget would normally allow. That’s another great thing Mike did: When potential department heads would come in and hear his vision and his enthusiasm, they’d go, “Yeah, let’s make this happen.” So we were able to get a lot more for our buck than if we had been like, “Yeah, we’re going to crank this out, we’re going to make some money and then we’re done!”



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**FANG:** From what I've heard, CHEAP THRILLS (pictured above) takes kind of the opposite approach, and is a much more confined story.

**STEVENS:** Yeah, and again, on that one, it was a lot of work on the script so the audience has breaks from that space. A lot of the movie takes place in one setting, so we designed the script to give the characters little adventures—action sequences, stuff like that—outside of it so that the movie feels like it has scope, and gives the audience a breath of fresh air. It's just a matter of having a clear sense of what the film needs to be when you're at that early writing stage, because if you have the experience of knowing what's possible at that budget, you're can really work with the writer and design the script to get something that's cinematic but achievable.

**FANG:** Did you work with E.L. Katz on the script for CHEAP THRILLS, or was it locked by the time he came on board as a director?

**STEVENS:** Well, I've been roommates with Evan for years, and when he said he wanted to try his hand at directing, I said, “Sure, what do you want to do?” He had a script by Trent Haaga called MONEY FOR SOMETHING, and that was basically the blueprint for CHEAP THRILLS. The characters were there, the structure was there, the plot was there. What we needed was to ground it in reality a little, so Evan and I brought on another writer named David Chirchirillo, a young, really funny guy, and we ironed it out. It was really kind of a polish; we dialed in the voices of some of the bad guys a little more. That took about two years, and Evan was involved every step of the way so that by the time we were ready to shoot, it all happened very quickly, and what's on screen is what was in the script.

**FANG:** Did you cast Pat Healy and Sarah Paxton together again based on their work in THE INNKEEPERS?

**STEVENS:** Yeah, I think so. CHEAP THRILLS is sort of an ensemble piece; there are five main characters but four of them are on screen almost the entire time, about 80 percent of the movie. So it was important to put together a group of actors who had good chemistry and could feed off each other and keep things light and energetic. There was a lot of humor in the script, and we needed people who were comfortable with each other and with riffing on stuff, so we were like, “Sarah and Pat had great chemistry on THE INNKEEPERS, and it seems like a good cornerstone for this cast to have two people who already know each other.” When we brought

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on Ethan Embry, he and Pat spent some time together before shooting so they could get more familiar with each other, and Pat and David Koechner have already known each other for a few years, so there was sort of a sense of comfort between everybody by the time we started shooting. And thanks to Ti West for preparing Pat and Sarah in the first place!

**FANG:** It must be exciting to have these movies going into two festivals together, one right after the other.

**STEVENS:** It's cool, because they're unique films. CHEAP THRILLS has kind of a serious message underlying the story, which is a bleaker view of the world. So to have that opening Boston and then to have BIG ASS SPIDER!, which is really just concerned with being fun and giving the audience a great time, as a sort of bookend is great. I'm hoping people like them both.