

Q&A: Eli Roth, producing "THE LAST EXORCISM PART II"

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
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This year, audiences awaiting the return of Eli Roth find an embarrassment of riches. On the directorial end, there's both werewolf-in-a-steel town Netflix original series HEMLOCK GROVE and his Amazonian cannibal odyssey, THE GREEN INFERNO. The sometimes actor scripted and stars in Nicolas Lopez's Chilean earthquake picture AFTERSHOCK and most relevantly, has lent a guiding hand to emerging talent, producing Ti West's upcoming THE SACRAMENT and the sequel to one of the more undervalued of recent American genre films, THE LAST EXORCISM PART II (out March 1st). It's this tale of Southern gothic that has Fango speaking to Roth about his own investment in continuing Nell Sweetzer's story, how audiences approach found footage, that which he's never seen before in a possession film and what his producing legacy aims to be.

FANGORIA: When did you feel continuing this story was right?

ELI ROTH: Obviously, when we came up with the title THE LAST EXORCISM, we weren't thinking about a sequel. The first one had a very dark ending and was somewhat open-ended, which is what we liked about it. One of the fun things about low budget filmmaking is that you can be much more unconventional with your ending, you don't have to satisfy the audience the way you do with a big, Hollywood movie. We liked the ending—it certainly split audiences—but it had everyone talking and thinking about it and discussing the movie and even rewatching it, trying to figure out exactly what happened. When the film opened at 20 million dollars, it was a wonderful surprise for us. It's very difficult to get any movie to do that, let alone an indie horror movie. When it opened at that, the first thing we immediately started thinking was, "How are we going to get to a sequel?" We said, "Alright, the biggest problem we're going to have is: What's the title of the next movie?" We certainly didn't break any new ground with THE LAST EXORCISM PART II.

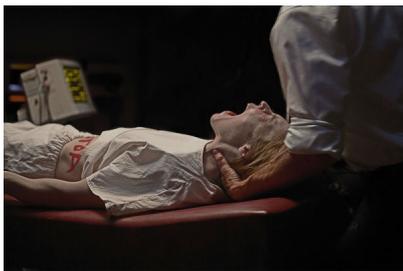
[Producer] Eric Newman and I were talking about story ideas and once we decided to not go into documentary, it really freed us up creatively. We wanted to be able to continue the story in a way that acknowledges the existence—we wanted to create a film world where the first movie exists. The first movie isn't found footage, it's a documentary that somebody has put together. It's not like someone found the videotape and popped it in. Somebody edited the movie and scored it. So, we still like the idea that it was edited, but was it edited together by Cotton? Was

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it the cult? Who put this thing together? And we like it existing as a video that's floating out there on the internet. It could be this viral video that someone created, so even when people meet Nell, they know her as the star of this video, but they still think it's some kind of hoax. They think it's a cool video, which is I think what would happen. When crazy videos get out online, people meet the people in real life and the first question is, "Was that real?"

We also loved the idea of a creature being in love with a girl. What would happen with something still inside of you, trying to possess you and didn't want to willfully take you, but wanted you to love it, wanted you to embrace it? What would happen if you slowly came to that place? We also wanted to write a showcase for Ashley Bell. Ashley is such a find and such a superb actress and such a wonderful person. We wanted to write a piece that was really tailored to her acting abilities. The first one was all about Patrick Fabian and the character of Cotton Marcus. We really wanted to make this one about Nell and explore the entire story from her point-of-view.



FANG: That idea of the first existing as a film is an interesting turn. Most audiences have come to accept scoring and "keep filming" simply because they know it's a movie.

ROTH: Exactly. That was a big decision we made, creatively, on the first one—to not try and pretend it was a real documentary. You have to treat the audience as intelligent and say, "Okay, we all know it's fake but to enjoy the story, we're going to accept this as a real documentary and that this really exists." People are fine to do that, they just want a good story. Every movie is that. *THE AVENGERS* is that. We all know it's fake, but let's enjoy the story. Once we just said, "Yes this is a movie, yes we directed it, yes this person is fake, but we've created a documentary and it's a terrific format for horror." We wanted to be able to acknowledge it and be able to embrace it, and incorporate into the movie in a real diegetic way that made sense. Once we cracked the idea that the movie, what everybody watched, that was released as *THE LAST EXORCISM* exists in the world of the sequel as a viral video that

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people have seen, you get a moment where the tourist stops her and recognizes her and are completely star struck and want to take photos with her. She doesn't really remember what happened to her, but to her the video's not a joke at all.

FANG: In the first, Nell seemed alone in that no one truly understood her affliction. It seems this time around, that's just amplified.

ROTH: That's exactly the entity's point, "I'm the only one who understands you, and everyone turns their back on you. Look at all these other people, you can't trust any of them." It pushes everyone to this point of turning on her one way or the other. We like that idea. I've never seen that angle before in a possession or an exorcism movie. In a possession movie, someone gets possessed and they try to get it out. We've had that experience, but what if you actually started to embrace the thing that lives inside you and realize that you could do terrible things with it. But, then you would do it to the people that were horrible to you. It seemed like a really fun area to explore and with an actress of Ashley's caliber, you could really go into that territory.

FANG: So the decision to be more of a classical narrative was already in place before director Ed Gass-Donnelly was brought on?

ROTH: Yeah, we had the script and then we brought on Ed and Ed did his draft with Damien Chazelle. Ed is just a fantastic director. We had the idea and the tone of the movie in mind. We were looking at directors and talking to different people and I think what made the first one work with Daniel—by the way, Daniel Stamm is an amazing director—was the fact that he approached it like a Lars Von Trier movie. You can certainly feel my influence in there, but as far as the creepy, uncomfortable moments and the docu-style, he really went for that. And he's European, so he really went for the feel of European art-house film, which I think people really didn't expect; the film had a real tasteful elegance to it.

So, we wanted to continue that with a different aesthetic and treat it as a traditional narrative. I was so impressed with Ed Gass-Donnelly's film *SMALL TOWN MURDER SONGS*. For us, the test is what can someone do on no money. We need people that are going to be very clever and that are going to make it look big and scary, that the movie will look beautiful and elegant and be well crafted, but they aren't going to need a lot of money to do it. Some of that really goes to performance. Ed comes from the theater world, his family's in theater. We wanted someone that was really going to go for performance, because if the acting didn't work, we knew the movie wasn't going to work. He did a magnificent job. He really tried to go for the

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Polanski end of the spectrum.



FANG: What's the line you draw for yourself when producing and understanding both being a guiding hand and someone with a creative interest and letting a director do their thing?

ROTH: You have to be a good, strong, supportive producer. I was prepping HEMLOCK GROVE. Ed's a director, he doesn't need me on set. And there's a certain intimacy. What's going to make the movie work is the intimacy between Ashley and the director. That first movie was them in the farmhouse. There were a lot of quiet, creepy, close scenes.

Sometimes, I feel like your presence can actually be a hindrance, because you don't want to put the actors or the director to feel like there's two directors on set. To support him as a producer, I'm really there with him in the prep, the script development and casting and other ideas, but I was watching all the dailies, talking to him as he was shooting. I thought everything looked amazing. I could be most helpful in the editing room and that's where, when I was shooting HEMLOCK GROVE, we were both in Toronto. So, I could really go into the editing room and help him when he needed to make it scarier and certain things to tighten up. I could be there as a sounding board. I want to be there to creatively support him and be his sounding board, but also stay away and when I feel I really need to step in, or there's a dispute amongst the producers, that's where I can. Ed and I really respect each other and we trust each other, so I'm never going to force an opinion on him, but if I strongly about something, he listens.

FANG: You seem focused, as a producer, on showcasing new talent to a larger level of audience. Is that part of the reason Daniel Stamm didn't return; an attempt to introduce someone new?

ROTH: Well Daniel, at the time, was on a movie that M. Night Shyamalan was producing. And

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then he was on another film for Dimension, so he was busy developing those two. I knew that Daniel loves THE LAST EXORCISM, but right after he got a much bigger movie, which was great. You want to be the one that helped bring him to the attention of larger audiences and watch other people catch on, but Daniel was already on to other projects and there's other people out there that either have done a film that was great and hasn't gotten mainstream attention that were really hungry for a job like this.

FANG: You're doing such with Ti West, who's certainly now well known independents-wise, but THE SACRAMENT seems primed for a bigger platform.

ROTH: Yeah, that's the idea. The distribution world is changing so fast, with all these movies. We're very lucky. With LAST EXORCISM and CBS Films has been fantastic giving it a huge release, which it deserves. But now, even the indie world, with that Richard Gere movie, people are doing VOD and limited releases. For me, I just want to work with filmmakers I like and make movies that I think are great. I want to make a movie that people watch five years from now.