

Get the Gig First, *Then* Unleash Your Genius



It was the kind of phone call every film critic dreams about. A producer asked if I'd like to direct a movie. I had been cocky in my reviews of the producer's films in *LA Weekly*, making it seem as if I could do better. Now he was calling me on it. He had a low-budget film, financing in place, ready to go into preproduction. Though I had never directed, he thought I would be perfect. Would I read the script?

It was a horror film, a senseless slaughter piece of crap. Despite my reputation as a comic philosopher who thought such films were evil, I wanted this job. I had other scripts I really wanted to do; experience could only help.

The script wasn't entertaining or scary, just disgusting. I had been forced to review literally hundreds of these films, and I thought I knew more about them than anybody. The cheesy ones, like this one, worked only when the viewer understood that the filmmakers weren't taking this absurd genre seri-

ously. When all the lights go out and there's a killer on the loose and a teenager says, "Let's go look in the basement," are we supposed to laugh or be scared? There's often a fine line between horror and comedy. I decided to erase it.

The film was about a crazed killer knocking off college students. He was a Vietnam vet who worked as a short-order cook. I decided that he should have a steel plate in his head, so when he took orders, he could stick them to his forehead with a magnet. I rewrote like a demon, turning all the senseless slaughter into creative senseless slaughter. For a beheading scene, I added a Rube Goldberg sequence in which the head flies out the window, bounces off a trampoline and continues on a long, ridiculous voyage until it eventually lands between the shoulders of the body it was removed from. Then someone comes along and, thinking the victim is sleeping, accidentally shakes the head loose from the body and screams. Simultaneously funny and disgusting.

There also was a character who was forced by his friends to wear a negligee in public, humiliating him. I decided that this character would realize that he liked it, and would wear women's clothing for the rest of the picture.

A meeting was set with me, the producer and the executive producer, a famous TV executive who would make the final decision about my employment. I had these guys in stitches for the next hour. I was sure I had the job. Then the executive producer

said, "Those are all great ideas. You're obviously really talented." I waited for the guillotine. "But it's not a comedy."

And that was it. I tried to explain that my little winks at the audience let them know we're in on the joke. All great horror films have moments of humor to release the tension. Blah blah blah. It made no difference. I had shown them that I didn't take the assignment seriously. I was out of a job.

The next day, the producer called and apologized. He thought they should have used me but, *c'est la vie*. He also pointed out that the famous TV executive was a known cross-dresser who thought I was making fun of him with the guy in the negligee. I should have done more research.

The film eventually got made with another director, who shot it as written—humorless, bloodthirsty and awful. It bombed. I was right, he was wrong, but he's a director and I'm still not. Being right isn't all it's cracked up to be.