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Q&A WITH SEVÉ SCHELENZ, DIRECTOR OF PEELERS

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Cult Projections: You've worked as an editor for twenty odd years, how did your first feature, *Skew*, come about? Was it difficult to make?

Sevé: The idea for *Skew* came to me the day before a planned road trip with two other friends. I always loved to just grab my video camera and shoot anything I could and have fun with the footage. All of a sudden this crazy horrific scenario hit me, "What if I brought my camera along for this trip and I started seeing some weird things through its viewfinder?" - I took this idea and actually constructed a very rough first draft of the script during the four days of our road trip. It took another six months to finish the final draft. -Making *Skew* (as with any film) was an enormous process. Long pre-production, long production, long post-production. -You just can't avoid it on a true indie feature film. That's not to say I didn't have fun! Working with a small cast and crew was a real treat and kept the creative juices flowing for everyone. Being my first feature as a Producer/Director/Writer, *Skew* was an amazing experience. As a matter of fact, my history in post production was a huge asset to making the film. As an editor I was able to take the knowledge of what footage needed to actually be filmed in order to construct a story in post. So, it was an advantage for me to be on set as the director of my own projects because I knew what had to be put in the can before the editing began.

CP: Had you seen many found footage movies when you made *Skew*? Which movies of this horror sub-genre have impressed you the most?

S: I personally had not seen many found footage films before I made *Skew*. Actually, *The Blair Witch Project* was the only one I can think of at the time and it definitely was an inspiration to me. I remember going to the theatre and saying to myself, "Yes, I know this is fake but let's pretend it's real and go along for the ride." It turned out to be one of the best experiences for me at the theatre.

I had never seen a film like this and the realism of it was the most shocking and scary aspect. I realised then that I could get away with making an indie film and not worry about it looking like so low-budget. That was the real crux for me from the get-go when I wanted to make my first feature. I felt the technology wasn't quite there yet and most indie films with small budgets tried to look bigger and failed. I just didn't want to be another traditionally-shot, throw-away indie film that looks cheap. Found footage essentially saved the day for me. Now, having said that, there has been a large debate about whether *Skew* is a found footage film or not. If you're interested in that debate, there's enough literature about it online. At this point, I'll let the fans make up their own minds.



CP: What compels you as a filmmaker about the horror genre? What kind of horror movies tickle your fancy the most? What kind of horror movies disinterest you?

S: What compels me about the horror genre is trying to really scare the crap out of people. It's such a hard feat these days, but if you can do something that the audience is not expecting, it can be very rewarding. Although *Peelers* is more of an action-horror film and definitely has a number of its own unique scares, I do love horror movies that mess with your mind and also love the traditional slow-burn types that build the tension and sense of dread like *Halloween* or *Rosemary's Baby*. I'm not really into the torture porn horror flicks. I have no interest in films like *Hostel* or *The Human Centipede*. That type of horror just doesn't do it for me. I find it over-the-top gratuitous and not that enjoyable to watch.



CP: Tell me about the origin of *Peelers*? How did you team up and collaborate with Lisa DeVita?

S: I actually met Lisa at a post facility where I was working as a colourist and she was a post production coordinator. I originally recruited her for my baseball team when I learned she played and we were in need of a girl. I only found out later that she was an aspiring screenwriter. I heard she lived in Las Vegas for a while and so when I approached her about writing a stripper horror flick, she was giddy with excitement and came onboard immediately. We hit it off and worked together really well. We both have thick skin and neither one of us gets offended by anything so none of that political correctness bullshit ever comes into play. It's very liberating. As for the origin of *Peelers*, you'll have to ask Lisa the story behind the inspiration for the script as she tells it the best (hint: it involves a strip club she visited while in Vegas).

CP: You and Lisa have small roles in the movie, had you always planned to play the cops?

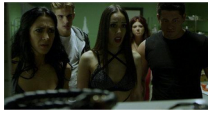
S: Hello?? Spoiler! Kidding. I definitely had the idea of giving us a cameo but I didn't share this with Lisa until she was finished with the script. I knew she would try to get out of it and it took a bit of convincing to get her on board. As a matter of fact, the other two producers of *Peelers* appear in the same scene and they were reluctant to do it as well. But I knew I would be able to change their minds and have them in the scene. Once they saw my acting they probably realised it was going to be a cakewalk.



CP: Actually, you and Lisa had a hand in many of the movie's key departments. Tell me about the pros and cons of being so involved. What was the hardest part? What was the most enjoyable?

S: You quickly learn in indie filmmaking that if you want something done, you have to do it yourself. So, for this reason as well as for budget, Lisa and I had our hands in every single department. I'd say the cons of being so involved in the whole production process is that there is so much to do that you really spread yourself thin and you don't eat or sleep much. It's very stressful and just when one thing goes right, ten others go wrong. And if you're not familiar with a department or a procedure, you have to learn it on the fly because no one is there to help you. The good thing about wearing twenty hats at once is that you get final say on everything and you call all the shots. You don't worry about getting burned by someone whom you thought you could trust, it's all on you. The hardest part was trying to play director and producer at the same time once production was under way. It just doesn't work. You have to be totally focused on your role as a director; you don't have time to be putting out fires as a producer when you're working with the actors and the crew. Thankfully, that's where Lisa came in. I deferred the producer problems to her and our second producer when they popped up during production and enjoyed watching her try and deal with those fires... She hates conflict and tries to avoid it at all costs. But as a producer, it's part of the job. The most enjoyable department for me was editing. I love being in a room finally all alone with all the footage and putting it all together to create a story.

CP: The movie has been doing very well on the international film festival circuit, is there a particular audience that *Peelers* appeals to? Did you expect this kind of response? What festivals have you enjoyed attending?



S: *Peelers* definitely appeals to the rowdy, fun, sneak-beer-into-the-theatre-type crowd. We've been to festivals where the audience seems civil enough and then once the film gets going, the crowd just goes nuts. It's like a light goes on and they say, "Oh, it's this kind of film! Wahooo! I can finally have some fun!" And they do. They're laughing out loud and whooping and cheering. They get into it. It's been a blast to experience. We honestly didn't know what to expect. We just hoped that people would enjoy the story. And so far, it's really been that way. It's weird to say this, but it's like a "feel good" stripper movie. And not because it's got a happy ending and everything works out (trust me, that's far from the case), but because it's just a fun ride with a story and a bunch of characters that everyone seems to genuinely like. As far as festivals, we absolutely loved attending Sitges, Leeds and Razor Reel (in Bruges). All three festivals had great turnouts and the audiences were enthusiastic and buzzing afterward. Shriekfest in L.A. was good too. The crowd left shaking their heads in disbelief and laughing the whole time.

CP: How important is humour and exploitation in a horror movie? How does it work best?

S: While I don't think either humour or exploitation are absolutely important or mandatory for a horror movie, both work well in *Peelers*. With our film I wanted to give the audience a break from the gore and violence by injecting some humour into the mix. I find it allows the audience to empathise much more with the characters. As for the exploitation, I think that term is used far too often to generalise a horror film. Exploitation has been used to describe so many low budget non-Hollywood horror flicks because of the raw and roughness of an indie film. I think it fully depends on what type of sub-genre of horror you're creating that exploitation comes into view. Funny enough, story and characters are my number one concern when making a film, even horror, and the rest becomes complementary to this.



CP: What's your opinion on the use of practical effects vs. CGI? What are some of your favourite examples of CGI?

S: I'm an old-fashioned filmmaker so I'm all for practical effects if possible. That being said, having worked on CGI firsthand with *Peelers*, I have a deep appreciation for the work that goes into visual effects. Both have their place in film. Some of my favourite practical effects are in *Jurassic Park* (I know, not a horror, but it's a favourite) and *The Exorcist*. As for VFX, the American version of *The Ring* comes to mind. Overall, as a filmmaker I always think of doing an effect practically first. Yet, in the end, it comes down to what it will take to realistically make the effect happen. Budget and time ultimately decide the route to follow on creating an effect.

CP: How tailored was *Peelers* in terms of classification? Considering it's set in a sleazy strip club, it's remarkably tasteful, all things considered. Even the gore factor is kept under reigns, relatively. Were you and Lisa tempted to make a more extreme movie?

S: With *Peelers*, we wanted to do something different. There have been a few stripper horror films already made and I feel that many of them don't really work. Probably one of the best stripper horror films would have to be *Prom Dusk Till Dawn*. Seeing as that was the pinnacle of this sub-genre and there weren't many others to follow, we felt we could bring a breath of fresh air into it. Enter *Peelers*. We wanted to give the strip club a slightly cleaner look. Having the colours pop and giving a stylised look to the club. Even our opening title sequence has a "James Bond" feel to it. Breaking the rules and giving something different to the audience, that's what our plan was. Oh, and of course we really bent the rules with our leading lady being so strong and kicking ass in a strip club rather than being a victim as most stripper horror flicks have done.



CP: What would be your horror movie desert island flicks? (Just five movies)

S: Desert Island... Ha! Can I put *Jaws* at the top of the list? In addition to that I'd pick *Alien*, *The Ring*, *Evil Dead 2* and *The Thing*. Is there a Blockbuster on the island so I can rent more? Wow, Blockbuster...wonder if your younger readers even know what that is?

CP: So, what do you have planned next?

S: Well, we have a bucket-load of films we're working on right now. They're all in different stages of development AND all different genres. You may be surprised to know the project most advanced at this stage is actually a family film. Wait for it... it's a talking dog flick. Our projects are very much like us: original, creative and possibly pushing the envelope. One way or another, you'll always have fun with what we have in store for you. Oh, did I mention we're also working on a comedy, a sci-fi, a thriller and a trilogy that began as a novel that Lisa is working on right now? And we may have another horror up our sleeve as well.



CP: Thanks Sevé!

S: Thanks Bryn! Was fun to get a chance to answer all your great questions. I hope your readers get the opportunity to catch *Peelers* at A Night of Horror Film Fest this year. If they do, I'll be there in person to screen the film and I hope they get a chance to say hello.