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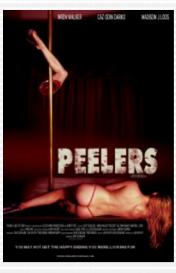
An Interview with Sevé Schelenz, Director of *Peelers*

by *Mike Haberfelner*
April 2016

Films directed by **Sevé Schelenz** on (re)Search my Trash

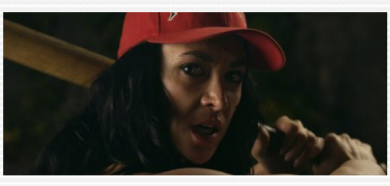


Your new movie *Peelers* - in a few words, what is it about?

Peelers is about the closing night of a small town strip club when some unwanted guests arrive and all hell breaks loose. We follow Blue Jean, the owner of the club, as she looks to get the final night off with a bang. Unfortunately, she gets more bang than she bargained for as patrons and friends around her begin to suffer from that nasty thing that seems to happen in all horror movies… death.

Basic question: Why a strip club? And what were your inspirations when dreaming up *Peelers*?

After **Skew** did its festival run and distribution, my sales agent asked me, "So, what's next?" I actually had a number of features that I was developing (both by myself and with others) but most were either comedies, thrillers, or sci-fi. He told me flat out that I should do another horror. I did have a horror film I was developing at the time but it wasn't a frontrunner project (and it wasn't **Peelers**). I asked my sales agent what he thought would sell and I'd see if it interested me. He said, "More blood and more boobs." Well, quite honestly that didn't interest me. I'm more into anticipation-building and psychological horror. But I went away and thought to myself, "I know I can get the blood in there, no problem, but what about the nudity?" I just wasn't interested in having gratuitous breast shots. There had to be a reason for it. So, I thought, "Where would we see nudity and accept it as being part of the story… a strip club." So I did some research and it turned out there were not a lot of stripper horror films and of the ones I found, they just weren't that great. So, I felt there was an untapped sub-genre of horror there. I went to Lisa DeVita and asked her if she would be interested in writing the script. I had three requests of her and they were: a strong female character(s) who kicked ass, a deft story and some good twists. Devits' eyes went wide and then she told me a story about an incident that happened to her while she was visiting a strip club in Las Vegas. From there, **Peelers** was born. Oh, and if you want to know that story, just ask Devits. She'll tell it the best.



What can you tell us about your screenwriter Lisa DeVita, and what was your collaboration with her like?

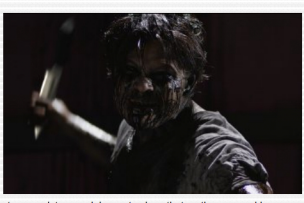
Lisa (Devits) and I met in the industry while we were working at one of the biggest production companies in North America. She was a post coordinator and I was a colorist. We worked in the same department (post production) but it wasn't until I was looking to recruit a decent female ball player to my baseball team that we actually met and got to know each other. I had never in my whole life met a girl like this. She burped, farted, scratched and sniffed her armpits, swore like a sailor, absolutely loathed shopping and shoes and absolutely loved comics and baseball. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Needless to say, we hit it off instantly. So after a few baseball games where Devits proved her skills and earned a spot on our team, we got to talking and I found out she was an avid writer who did a lot of journalist type stories for extra money while writing shorts and features, which is what she really wanted to pursue. The things that would come out of her mouth. I thought, if she talks like this, this unfiltered, frenetic diatribe, I've got to see what she puts down on paper. I was just finishing my first horror feature entitled **Skew** at the time, and we began chatting about films in general. When I approached Devits to write **Peelers** she was pretty excited about it. After seeing that glint in her eyes I left her alone for a bit to work out some of the ideas we discussed for the film. Shortly after, we worked on the story together but Devits wrote the guts of the script, which I feel is usually the best way to approach screenwriting, as the core of the script should come from one person. There were the usual tweaks here and there but it worked out really well in the end.

With *Peelers* being a movie of the horror variety, is that a genre at all dear to you, and why (not)?

Ha! It's funny because although I like horror, it's not the genre that I would kill to do (see what I did there?). But seriously, for me, it just comes down to telling a good story with strong characters. As a matter of fact, there's no one set genre that is the be-all, end-all for me. I have a very open mind to all genres of film and love elements from all of them. I feel that that will probably help me make even better films as a director because I'm open to trying different things. I also enjoy twisting genres so it's not exactly what the viewer may expect. But, since we are talking horror here, I must say that I do love a good horror. My top three would probably be **John Carpenter's The Thing**, **The Ring** and the big daddy of them all… **Jaws**. To this day, I still don't like to go swimming.

***Peelers* does have its fair share of blood and guts - so for the sake of all the gorehounds among my readers, do talk about the gore scenes in your movie for a bit, and how were they achieved?**

Practical effects played a huge part in **Peelers**. We definitely wanted to go with real effects over visual effects as much as possible. Not that I have a problem with VFX. As a matter of fact, we have our share of visual effects as well and they are crucial to the film. Trust me, without VFX we wouldn't have had the chance to do many of the shots that just couldn't be done practically on the tight budget we had. I worked with our amazing special effects supervisor Keir Vichert on the practical effects. After he read the script, he was as giddy as a kid in a candy store. Early on in our meetings, he brought so many suggestions to the table on how to do the shots. We also enlisted our main SFX vendor, *MastersFX* to provide many of the rigs needed to pull off certain shots. *MastersFX* has done special effects for **Elysium**, **Robocop** and **Twilight: New Moon**. Keir worked closely with them to create many of the unique effects you see in the final film.

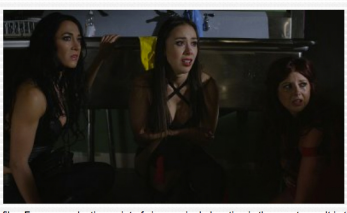


What can you tell us about your overall directorial approach to your story at hand?

As mentioned, our first feature film was **Skew**. That was a POV style movie and some would even go one step further and call it found footage. For **Peelers**, I wanted to get away from that and go with a more traditional style of filmmaking. I also knew **Peelers** was going to be a bigger film with the number of characters in it so that was going to be a fun challenge. I wanted to give life to these great characters and the environment they were in. I knew we had a strong script so my job was to show that on the screen. I have an editing background so I knew that I could make good transitions from scene to scene. What I wanted to focus on on-set was not only the blood and guts, but achieving a memorable visual stamp to each scene. I worked with our great DP, Lindsay George on that feel. I even went further to make sure I got my "money shots" in all the important areas needed. They worked out great and give a real vibrancy to the film.

Do talk about your cast, and why exactly these people?

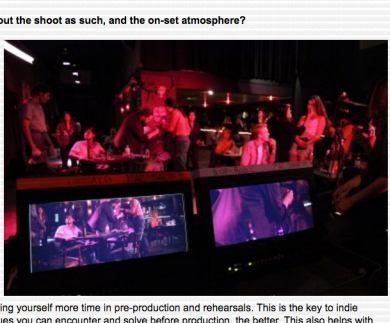
We threw out a wide net for the casting because we had so many characters for **Peelers**. When I made **Skew**, the pool of actors was quite small because it was a really busy time for production and therefore, casting was a struggle. For **Peelers**, it seemed the opposite. Surprisingly, we had a lot of talented girls show up to auditions. I say "surprisingly", because we were worried that actresses would hear "stripper horror" and think we wanted ditzy, damsel-in-distress types with fake boobs, when really we were going for something different, something against type for **Peelers**. We wanted characters with brains, women you could sympathize with who come in all shapes and sizes, confident in their own skin. So, we were worried there would be a lack of actresses wanting to audition because how could they know this coming in to cold auditions? Thankfully, we were pleasantly surprised, which made it tough to make our casting choices due to all the talented options. However, when it came to our lead character, Blue Jean, it was tough to cast her for different reasons. None of the girls really fit the role. As a matter of fact, we really only had two viable options in terms of who could play her. Funny enough, Wren Walker came in late to the audition process because her boyfriend saw our ad and encouraged her to read for Blue Jean. She almost didn't come in. Luckily she did, and she nailed it. Wren just owned the Blue Jean role right off the bat. When we made our final decisions and offered her the role, she was ecstatic.



For a movie like *Peelers*, location is key - so you have to talk about yours, and what were the advantages and challenges filming there?

A single setting concept can be the kiss of death from an audience point of view. There is this natural perception to think that the more locations, the bigger the film, the more the audience will want to see it. My sales agent strongly recommended that we have multiple locations if only to have them in the trailer to show off the film. From a production point of view, a single location is the way to go. It is the best answer to the one main obstacle of indie filmmaking: budget. As mentioned, I come from an editing background so thinking about how scenes transition from one location to another is a part of that. It's something I can bring to the screenwriting process as well. So, I sort of treated each room in the strip club as a separate location. We were very conscious of giving each room its own look and feel. Not only through production design but through lighting and camera angles as well. Our DP, Lindsay George was amazing to work with. An indie filmmaker's dream because she was fast, had a great eye for composition and understood lighting. **Peelers** really doesn't feel like it's all in one location, when in fact it pretty much is. There are a few other cheats that can make your film feel bigger from a location point of view. But that's a whole other conversation.

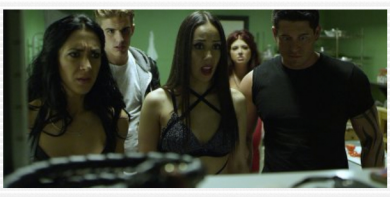
What can you tell us about the shoot as such, and the on-set atmosphere?



When you make a true independent feature film, you're always worried about days running over. It's a constant fear in the back of your head. Luckily I had the experience of our last film, **Skew** to draw from and we also had a great first and second A.D. on **Peelers**. So, for the most part, the shoot went according to plan. I mean, there are always hiccups... like trying to find a baby for production right up to the last minute before shoot day, but that's a story for another time. Another way of staying on schedule is giving yourself more time in pre-production and rehearsals. This is the key to indie filmmaking. The more issues you can encounter and solve before production, the better. This also helps with the mood on set. No one's as stressed out because the prep has been done. Of course, you also set the tone of production pretty early on. I got to know most of the cast and crew ahead of time and that made things more enjoyable. It's funny, you always hear cast members say, "I had a great time on set. It was so much fun." Well, that's great to hear but it's not really the case for the producers and the director. Yes, we are pretty pumped to be on set and making a movie but it really is up to us to get all the shots needed or there's no film. So, not really a party for us, but if I hear the rest of the cast/crew had a good time, that's awesome.

The $64-question of course, where can your movie be seen?

We've just started our festival run with **Peelers**. As a matter of fact, we just started submitting to festivals and in no time have already gotten into seven of them. We're pretty stoked. We had a good feeling about the film, but we didn't expect this type of attention so quickly. We're quite honored to have such positive vibes on the film so far. We just had our world premiere at *Palm Beach International Film Festival* and we were runners up for the Best Horror Feature Film. We are following this up with festivals in Iowa, Utah, Texas and Ontario, Canada to name a few. Hopefully by the time you print this, we'll be announcing another one! Check out our website or follow us on Facebook/Twitter to get all the details. Oh, and distribution will obviously follow the festival run so stay tuned for that over the next six to nine months. The more fests we get into, the longer that road will be traveled to get a buzz out on ***Peelers*** and the sooner it will be available to all the gorehounds who want to see it!



Anything you can tell us about audience and critical reception of *Peelers* yet?

It really is too early to tell what the overall reception to ***Peelers*** will be. In this very short amount of time it has proven to be quite amazing though. Audiences have loved it so far and there have been loads of interest from sales agents and distributors. We're quite excited to be a part of this journey with the film. I think some incredible things will be coming out of all these **Peelers** screenings. We have been quite pleased with everything so far in this early part of the process and this is only the tip of the iceberg!

Any future projects you'd like to share?

I, or I should say, "we" (Devits and I) have many projects in the works. I'm working on some of my own films and some with Devits. Presently we have a finished script for a family comedy and a draft of the first book in a sci-fi trilogy, which is meant to eventually go to screen. We also have a handful of other projects in different stages of development. From comedy to thriller to sci-fi to another horror, it's all there. We've become a tag-team that works really well together because we both agree that the most important thing above all is story. When story is your number one priority, you spend a lot of time in the early stages of creation to make sure you get it right. I think the reason it's such a great partnership is because we are, for lack of a better term, "un-offendable", which is very rare to find in a person, let alone two. We know each other's strengths and weaknesses and we call each other on everything without the drama and the hurt feelings. We are also dreamers at heart who share a dogged determination to never give up. Plus, we both share the same outlet when we need a break: beer and baseball.

What got you into filmmaking in the first place, and did you receive any formal training on the subject?

I think my fascination with movies went further than a lot of my friends' did when I was young. As a kid, I bugged my parents constantly for a camera to shoot all these skits and ideas I had. Eventually my folks broke down and bought me a state of the art video camera at the time: a VHS. I proceeded to shoot anything and everything I could, using my family and friends as actors. I'm sure my friends were very happy to see me move to Toronto, Canada where I studied Film and Video at university. After receiving a BFA degree at York University, I began working in both the production and post side of the film industry. I leaned more towards post and worked in editing and coloring while writing at home in my spare time. Eventually I completed the script for our first film, **Skew** and everything moved on from there.

How would you describe yourself as a director?

I would probably describe myself as a patient director and a bit of a perfectionist. Both those things are hard to be when you're working on an independent film. You don't really have the time or money to do all the things you want to so you have to cut corners. So I try to balance it out by having an open mind and by being a really good editor, haha. I will tell you though, that one of the most important things for me to do before going to production is to be prepared as much as possible, and that means a long pre-production. Everyone, and especially the actors on **Peelers**, were surprised at how much prep time we had before we went to camera. Initially they thought decisions based on auditions would go by quickly and we'd go right into production. But for me, getting to know the actors, letting them get to know each other and rehearsing lines and actions made for a better film and a much smoother filmmaking process.

Filmmakers who inspire you? And your favourite movies?

There really are so many amazing directors out there, both big and small. I have learned so much, not only from making films myself but by watching others as well. I would say Tarantino has a huge influence on me. From storytelling to composition to long shots to characters owning the screen. What he brings to the screen, every time, is a pure passion and love of filmmaking. Whether you like all his movies or not, you can't argue against the fact that he absolutely loves film. On the flipside, I think Robert Rodriguez has a great command of frenetic storytelling. He seems to approach it from an editing point of view, which is where it all began for me, in the edit room. It's funny because **Peelers** is being described as Tarantino meets Rodriguez, which is a huge compliment for me. As for specific films, I have been influenced by so many. I'm not a one-genre guy at all. I love to see all types of films. As a matter of fact, Oscar season is one of my favorite times for checking out movies. No matter how you cut it, this is the time of year when some of the best of everything comes out. Off the top of my head, my top three films would have to be **Pulp Fiction**, **Die Hard** and **Pee Wee's Big Adventure**. But, I also have to say, I'm a sucker for a good comic book movie. Go *Marvel*!

Your/your movie's website, Facebook, whatever else?

All things **Peelers** can be found at **www.peelersthefilm.com**. That's the place where everything gets updated for the film. If you want to be a part of the ride, like us on Facebook as we post something there daily on the film. That can be found at **https://www.facebook.com/peelersthefilm/**. And, of course, follow us on Twitter **https://twitter.com/peelersthefilm**. You can also go to our IMDb page **http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2769828**. I think that's enough gory fat for your fans to chew on.

Anything else you're dying to mention and I have merely forgotten to ask?

Yes, please support independent film! Not just **Peelers**, but all the great indie films out there. We were at *Palm Beach Int'l Film Fest* and there were loads of great films there that need your attention. Especially in the horror scene. I have seen some exceptional independent films that are better than some of the stuff Hollywood is putting out right now. Seek them out!

Thanks for the interview!

And thank *you* so much for the interview, Mike. I had a lot of fun answering all your cool questions. I hope all your fans and horror fans in general get a chance to check out **Peelers** when it's playing in their town. I guarantee that everyone will have a great time with it! Good luck with all your reviews and interviews for your site. And keep the pen sharp and flowing!

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