

HORROR STORY!

THE PLAGUE ON BOTH THEIR HOUSES

Not every Hollywood story has a happy ending **BY HAL MASONBERG**

W

HEN I WAS FIRST ASKED to write about my experiences making *The Plague*, I was thrilled to get a chance to tell my story. At the same time, I was gripped with self-doubt: Who's gonna care about my story?

It's the same old cast of characters from so many other Hollywood tales. What makes this version worth telling? Perhaps it's the fact that, for me, the story's not yet over...

ACT 1: My writing partner, Teal Minton, and I decide we want to make a horror film. Having grown up with the genre, we realize we haven't seen a truly horrifying one in years or, for that matter, a contemporary one made for adults. In our opinion, most of the great horror films had been done years ago and almost all of them dealt with fears that existed in society: The Communist scare that feeds the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; a woman's sacrificial role in society in *Rosemary's Baby*; a parent's inability to help or understand what is happening to her adolescent child in *The Exorcist*. These films terrified us and left us thinking, asking questions and looking inward.

So we write *The Plague*—a story about kids and violence in society. We tell it through the guise of a horror film about how people react when faced with a world where all children become catatonic, then wake up and strike out.

We shop the script around for five years looking for people who don't want to turn it into a teenage slasher pic. Meanwhile, the script's themes become more and more relevant with the massacre at Columbine, 9/11, etc. For a while, this scares people away. "We love it, but we can't do it. It's too timely, too sensitive." Even our agents suggest we shelve it and move on to something more commercial.

We end up at Seraphim Films, Clive Barker's production company. They love the script and want to make it. There is only one stumbling block: *The Plague* is nothing

like a Clive Barker film, nor is it meant to be. The producers assure us that the reason they want to make it is precisely *because* it isn't. "Clive Barker makes Clive Barker films," we're told. They tell us they want to create an avenue for smart horror films of all shapes and sizes, and use *Gods and Monsters* as an example—more a character piece than a horror movie. This is exactly what we've been looking for: People who understand the film and want to make it. *The Plague* has found a home.

ACT 2: The next three years of development reflect all our desires. The script gets even better; we're all on the same page and excited about the film we're making. We join forces with Armada Pictures, a production company that puts together the money. It's agreed by all that, once completed, we will take the film out to festivals to find its audience and a domestic distributor. We know this film is more character-driven and psychological than today's mainstream horror films, so it's not geared toward your typical horror fan.

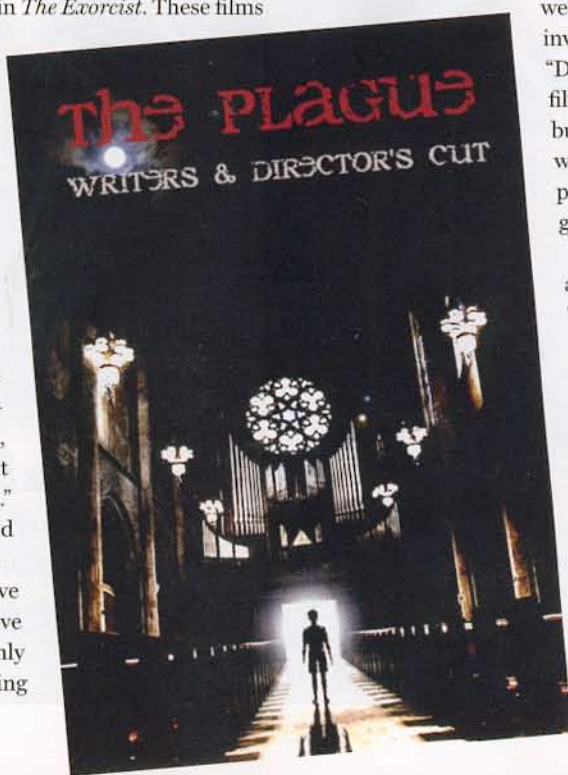
With our cast in place and the script in great shape, we head to Winnipeg, Canada to begin shooting. We're barely off the plane when we hear that Armada has sold the film to Screen Gems for domestic distribution. Normally this would be cause for celebration, but the sale is done in such a mysterious way, in defiance of everything

we've discussed and so completely without our involvement that we find ourselves asking: "Does Screen Gems want to make the same film we do?" We never get a straight answer, but there's no time to argue; we're a couple of weeks from shooting and knee-deep in pre-production. We tell ourselves it will turn out great... and move forward.

It's a grueling, wonderful, 20-day shoot and by the end, the producers are thrilled. "This is better than *anyone* expected!" I'm told repeatedly. We head back to Los Angeles for post-production.

Once in post, everything changes. I am in the editing room with six weeks to put the film together, when I notice some of the producers are acting cold and distant. Finally, one of them confides that "Someone at the top wants this to be a different film."

I rush to my agent's office with the news. "You shouldn't be worrying about this kind of stuff," he says. "You should





Hal Masonberg takes matters into his own hands with *The Plague: Writers and Director's Cut*.

be enjoying the editing of your film. It'll all work out."

But it doesn't. People I'd worked beside for years suddenly seem indignant. Others, who I had grown to consider friends, grow quiet and step into the shadows so as to not jeopardize their positions.

The day my contract ends, I walk into the editing room and one of the producers I've worked beside the whole time tells me, with frighteningly matter-of-fact casualness, "We're cutting down the characters and turning this into a killer kid film." Everything stops. "Why would we do that?" I ask. "We've worked so hard to *not* have it be that." He looks at me, condescendingly, "Because this is a *horror*

film called *The Plague*, not *The Tom Russell Story*." (Tom Russell is the main character.)

My stomach turns. The thing I'd most feared—the thing I'd fought eight years to prevent—was happening. I argue that this is not the time to abandon ship; that the characters are the film's emotional core; that if the audience doesn't care, they won't be scared. But it's too late. A decision had been made long ago and my time in the editing room had merely been contractual.

So I fight to save the film. I phone the producers, but my calls go unreturned. I offer to help the producers with *their* cut of the film in the hope that I might salvage something—one moment, one sequence, one tidbit of the film we'd made—but the producers are very clear: "This is our film now and we see no reason for the writers and director to be involved."

The door is shut. The betrayal I feel at the loss of the film is agonizing. I fall into a dark, devastating depression.

Now this is that place in the second act where the protagonist looks like he may not achieve his goal. But what is the goal at this point? That depends on my definition of "success." If my definition is to keep working and make money, then I should probably do what my agent and lawyer recommend: "Let it go. Move on." But if my definition of success is telling stories, growing as both an artist and a human being, reaching people on some deeper level... If the thing

WORKSHOPS & MASTER CLASSES

Documentary • HD • Directing • Post-Production • Cinematography

New Winter & Spring Workshops include:

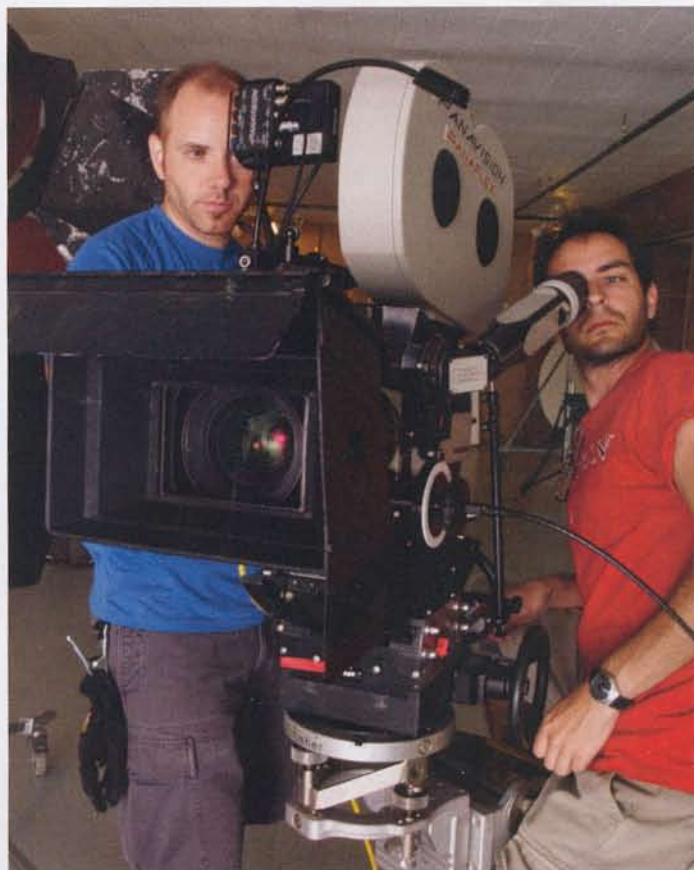
- Independent Filmmaking
- Writing Your Treatment Proposal
- Grant Writing for Your Film
- Producing Your First Feature Film
- Script Supervision & Continuity
- Writing For The Documentary
- Distributing and Marketing Your Documentary
- Shooting for Multimedia
- Final Cut Pro 101 & 102
- Compositing Visual FX for Film & TV

The International Film & Video
WORKSHOPS

Rockport, Maine

For more information visit www.FilmWorkshops.com
call toll-free 877.577.7700 internationally 207.236.8581

ARRI® Canon Panasonic STEADICAM



Maine Media Workshops admits students of any race, color, national and ethnic origin to all its rights, privileges, programs, and activities provided access to students at the school. It does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national and ethnic origin in administration of its educational policies, admission policies, scholarship and loan programs, and other school-administered programs.

that is most important to me about making this film is *this* film... Well, shit, how inconvenient would that be?

So, I decide: I'm going to finish my film.

My reps look back stone-faced, clearly not amused. When they realize I'm not joking, they spin into a tizzy, telling me it will be a career-killer. "I can't imagine *anyone* who would want to see your cut!" Maybe so, but my gut tells me otherwise; to fight this hard, to invest so much of myself psychologically, creatively and physically only to then have the film taken away and turned into the very thing I was making it in reaction to...

I fight the overwhelming desire to pack my bags and leave L.A., and instead take the digital dailies I have on DVD (the film was originally shot in Super 35 by the extraordinary Bill Butler, who shot *The Conversation* for Francis Ford Coppola and *Jaws* for Steven Spielberg) and transfer them into Final Cut Pro and start editing the film from scratch.

I spend the next six months in self-imposed exile. I teach myself effects and sound design; I create a temp score. This time, unlike the six weeks I'd spent in the editing room previously, I *really* get to study the dailies. I know every frame, every actor's nuance, every angle, every breath. I start to see not only the film we'd written but, more importantly, the film we'd *shot*. I discover that this part of the moviemaking process is one of my favorites and a part I never want to live without again. This is why I wanted to make films in the first place.

I finish the film and show it to the people closest to me. The response is overwhelming. People who never watch horror films are asking to see it again. Lovers of classic horror films are asking if they can have copies to show their friends. My friend Carrie jokes, "The reason they took your film away is because you made a horror film for 35-year-old

women with master's degrees and the producers didn't know what the hell to do with it!"

I show the film to some of the cast and crew and they are ecstatic. They agree that this is the film we set out to make. *This* is the film they want seen! I send a copy of my cut to Screen Gems. I have no idea if they ever look at it.

The producers' cut is released straight to DVD in September 2006 under the title *Clive Barker's The Plague*. The film has been completely restructured, stock footage added, new dialogue recorded, different takes used. Even Butler hasn't been invited to color-time his own work. My name is still attached as director, Teal and I as the writers. It feels like a wound reopened; the film in no way reflects our vision, work or intent.

ACT 3: Legally, I cannot show my cut of *The Plague* at the local multiplex or release it on video, so I make a documentary called *Spreading the Plague* in which cast, crew and film experts speak out about what I now call *The Plague: Writers and Director's Cut*. I create a Website, SpreadingThePlague.com, and post the doc for all to see. I include articles, trailers and interviews. Thousands of people log on. Other sites start writing about what has happened. I start a petition and link it to the site in the hope that Screen Gems will agree there is an audience for this cut and release it as it was meant to be seen. People immediately start to sign (and people are still signing).

The Plague: Writers and Director's Cut is about fear and how we react to it. That seems to be its story both on- and off-screen. It was fear that caused many of the producers to panic just as we were about to cross the finish line.

The story behind *The Plague* isn't finished yet. But I am certain that whatever happens next, it will have the perfect Hollywood ending. **MM**

Ai Miami International University of Art & DesignSM

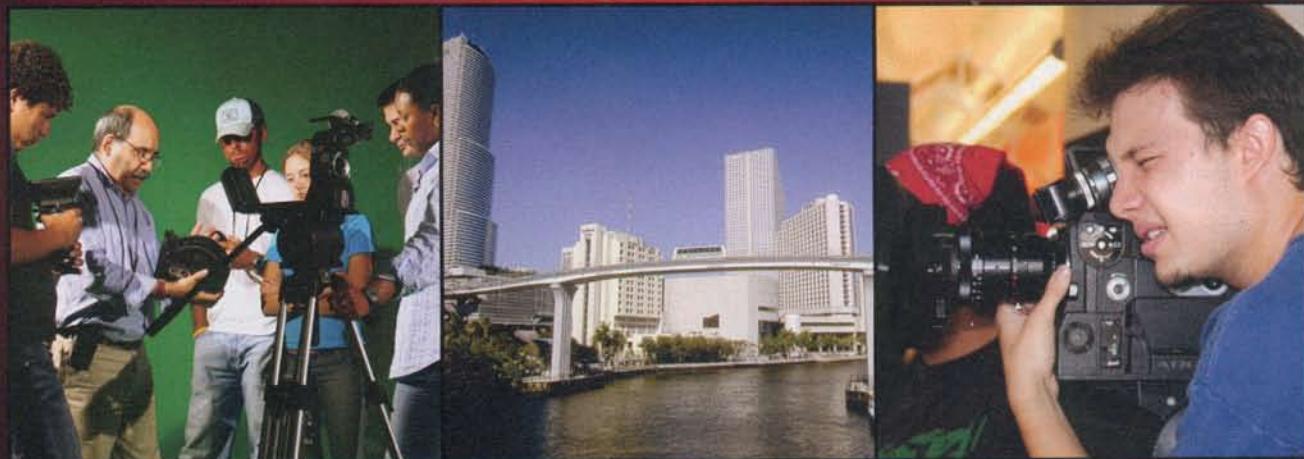
Film and Digital Production Department (BFA and MFA degrees)

Study filmmaking with working professionals in a diverse community of artists.

Collaborate with visual effects artists and animators.

Intern with local production companies and post-houses.

Learn visual storytelling in one of the most colorful, diverse, invigorating cities in the world.



For more information, please contact the Office of Admissions at: 305.428.5700 - 800.225.9023
or visit us online at: www.aii.edu/miami | 1501 Biscayne Boulevard | Miami, Florida 33132