

“BIRTH OF THE LIVING DEAD”

A Feature Length Documentary

Written, Produced, Directed & Edited by Rob Kuhns

Producer, Esther Cassidy

Executive Producer, Larry Fessenden

Press Notes

A Glass Eye Pix Presentation

A Predestinate Production

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INTERVIEWS

GEORGE A. ROMERO

Filmmaker

LARRY FESSENDEN

Filmmaker

MARK HARRIS

Author

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Producer

ELVIS MITCHELL

Film Critic

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Producer

JASON ZINOMAN

Film Critic

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“Birth of the Living Dead”

TRT 76 min.

In 1968 a young college drop-out named George A. Romero directed “Night of the Living Dead,” a low budget horror film that shocked the world, became an icon of the counterculture, and spawned a zombie industry worth billions of dollars that continues to this day.

“Birth of the Living Dead,” a new documentary, shows how Romero gathered an unlikely team of Pittsburghers -- policemen, iron workers, teachers, ad-men, housewives and a roller-rink owner -- to shoot, with a revolutionary guerrilla, run-and-gun style, his seminal film. During that process Romero and his team created an entirely new and horribly chilling monster – one that was undead and feasted upon human flesh.

This new documentary also immerses audiences into the singular time in which “Night” was shot. Archival footage of the horrors of Vietnam and racial violence at home combined with iconic music from the 60s invites viewers to experience how Romero’s tumultuous film reflected this period in American history. “Birth of the Living Dead” shows us how this young filmmaker created a world-renowned horror film that was also a profound insight into how our society really works.

About the Production

"Birth of the Living Dead" was shot in New York City, Toronto and Los Angeles between the end of 2006 and the Summer of 2011. It is directed by Rob Kuhns, who has been editing documentaries in New York since 1987. It is produced by Kuhns and his wife, Esther Cassidy, who also collaborated on the documentary, "Enemies of War," that told the story of El Salvador's bloody civil war as seen through the eyes of a U.S. Congressman, a U.S. Ambassador, an American priest, and an FMLN guerilla fighter and his family. "Enemies of War" was broadcast nationally on PBS in 2001, and was selected for the Los Angeles and Chicago Latino Film Festivals, the City of Angels Film Festival, and won awards at the Columbus Film Festival and Chicago International Film Competition.

Kuhns has been a fan of Romero's work since the early 1980s when he first saw "Night of the Living Dead" at a midnight show. "Night" had been playing regularly in theaters in New York since it first came out in 1968. Before considering making a documentary, Kuhns read about Romero and became fascinated with the story of the making of "Night." Here was this crew of mostly working class people, not very experienced in filmmaking and with very few resources, coming together to make a seminal and world-shaking film. It was a great story of a "little-movie-that-could."

After extensive interviews with George A. Romero in Toronto, Kuhns started editing the documentary. Kuhns' previous experience working as an Editor for "Bill Moyers Journal" and later on "Moyers and Company" gave him the opportunity to explore the powerful archival images of American history in the 1960's. Kuhns surveyed television news stories of the racial violence exploding across the country and horrific combat footage of the Vietnam War. He also saw the U.S. government responses to both. Kuhns realized that Romero and his collaborators created "Night of the Living Dead," a film about the world coming to an end, at a historic time of enormous U. S. upheaval. "Night" was revealing itself as a living document of the time in which it was made.

Romero, "*There was a good deal of sort of anger. Mostly that the 60s didn't work. You know, we thought we had changed with world or were part of some sort of a reform that was going to make things better. And all of a sudden it wasn't any better. It wasn't any different.*"

Once Kuhns illuminated the historical context, his new documentary evolved into something much richer than the "making of" film that he originally envisioned. Michael Winship, head writer for "Bill Moyers Journal," recommended Mark Harris' highly-praised book, "Pictures at a Revolution," which looked at the cultural and political context of the films that were nominated for the Academy Award in 1968, the same year "Night" was released. Harris spoke about how intricately and complexly "Night" is connected to that moment in history and about the many radical choices Romero made which redefined the horror film. Kuhns added Harris' remarkable take on "Night of the Living Dead" to the documentary.

Filmmaker Larry Fessenden, who has been compared with Romero for his thoughtful horror films, provided another key interview. He also speaks about some of the radical choices Romero made to create such a groundbreaking horror film:

"When you play with the expectations of the classic structure, and then you defy them and the wrong person gets killed. This is what's upsetting, that's what haunts, that's what creates a feeling of dread."

Critic Elvis Mitchell first saw the film when he was 10 at a Drive-In Theater in Detroit, soon after his city experienced racial violence.

"If there had been more resources devoted to the movie, and more consideration, and if it wasn't like run and gun filmmaking, It was like hearing Public Enemy for the first time, or for my parent's generation seeing Elvis Presley for the first time. It's just that kind of, oh my God, that electricity."

Chiz Schultz, producer of Harry Belafonte's TV specials in the late 60s, discusses how revolutionary it was for Romero to cast a black actor, Duane Jones, in the lead but to also never have his race referred to or mentioned in the film. Schultz, who also produced "Ganja and Hess," a dramatic film also starring Duane Jones, was a first-hand witness to the racism of the 60s. During the rehearsal of one of Belafonte's shows, singer Petula Clark touched Belafonte's arm, which caused a sponsor to demand there be no physical contact between them. Race and the casting of Jones is a major theme and is discussed by all of the interviewees.

Sam Pollard, a documentary director, producer of Spike Lee's documentaries, and a film professor at NYU, analyzes the film's plot and structure and also offers a historical perspective.

"There was a sense of chaos and sense of tension in the American fabric which means things are going to change. So I think that what Romero was doing with "Night of the Living Dead"—points to this unraveling."

Film Critic and Author of "Shock Value," Jason Zinoman, explores Romero's film's enormous influence and the seminal creation of the zombie, now one of the most popular monsters in horror films.

"All these zombies all go back to Romero. There's no movie director that's responsible for the vampire. There's no movie director that's responsible for Frankenstein. There's no movie director that's responsible for the Werewolf... ...What we know of as a zombie, the "it's alive" moment of it was, 1968, George Romero, 'Night of the Living Dead' in Pittsburgh."

Living legend Gale Anne Hurd, Executive Producer of "Walking Dead," as well as Producer of "The Terminator" and "Aliens" explains how the zombies in "Night", as well as its mythology, are the basis of her hit show. Hurd got her start with Roger Corman and also speaks about what it's like to make a film with little experience and no money.

Romero takes us through his efforts to get the film distributed – it did not ignite a bidding war – and the ferocious attacks on "Night" by U.S. critics when first released. Variety, for instance, called it, "*an unrelieved orgy of sadism*" which "*casts serious aspersions on the integrity and social responsibility of its Pittsburgh-based makers.*"

That all changed when the film went to Europe where it received huge box office and lavish praise from prestigious film journals like "Positif" and "Sight and Sound." "Night of the Living Dead" was eventually invited to become part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In spite of the enormous success of the film worldwide, Romero and his partners got only a small fraction of the profits. The distributor accidentally removed the copyright notice from the negative and "Night" fell into the public domain. The film went viral, with pirated copies playing worldwide. There's no way to know how much money it has made.

The documentary ends with a tribute to and interview with Bill Hinzman, who played the "graveyard zombie" – the first zombie in the film, and the first one built on Romero's mythology, which spawned so many imitators. Hinzman is shown at a zombie convention at the Monroeville Mall, PA, not far from where "Night of the Living Dead" was shot. He's surrounded by adoring fans, many of whom were born decades after the film was made.

When asked how he feels about all of the attention, Hinzman says, "*Sometimes, I really do blush I think under the make up because it's really kind of embarrassing. I'm sure you've heard the stories of actors are always afraid they'll get discovered that they don't have any talent or anything. And sometimes I feel that way. I'm a little embarrassed because every Sunday night I have to take the damn garbage out (laugh), and on the way out I'll go, "I'm a legend! What the hell am I taking the damn garbage out for?!" (Laugh) Why aren't I rich? But that's, that's life! But it's so much fun to do these things. My wife kicks me out every once in a while and says, "Go to one of those events. Get your ego built back up again." I say, 'Okay.'*"

About the Interviews

GEORGE A. ROMERO, Filmmaker

1968's *Night of the Living Dead* was just the beginning of George A. Romero's enduring contributions to American film. Over the next 40+ years, he has written and directed several dozen movies. Especially noteworthy among his films are: *The Crazies* (1973); *Martin* (1978); and *Creepshow* (1982), which are still exhibited in film festivals and prestigious venues throughout the country. The films for which Romero attained international and lasting acclaim include those that introduced an unprepared world to a zombie apocalypse -- *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985) *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2009) and *Survival of the Dead* (2010). Currently, Romero is Executive Producer of the 2012 documentary, *Into the Dark: Exploring Horror Films*. In 2009, Romero was honored with the Mastermind Award at Spike TV's Scream 2009. The tribute was presented by longtime Romero fan Quentin Tarantino, who stated in his speech that the "A" in George A. Romero stood for "A f***ing genius."

MARK HARRIS, Author

Mark Harris is the author of *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (2008), which was named a New York Times Notable Book of the year and Booklist magazine's best nonfiction book of 2008. For fifteen years, Harris worked as a writer and editor covering movies, television and books for *Entertainment Weekly*, where he now writes the back page column, "Final Cut." He has written about pop culture for several other magazines as well. A graduate of Yale University, he lives in New York City with his husband, playwright/screenwriter Tony Kushner.

LARRY FESSENDEN, Filmmaker

Larry Fessenden, winner of the 1997 Someone to Watch Spirit Award, is the writer, director and editor of the award-winning art-horror movies *Habit* (Nominated for 2 Spirit Awards), *Wendigo* and *No Telling*. His most recent film, *The Last Winter* (Nominated for a 2007 Gotham Award for best ensemble cast), starring Ron Perlman, Connie Britton and James Le Gros, premiered at the 2006 Toronto Film Festival, was distributed by IFC FirstTake and is now available on DVD through Genius Products. Fessenden recently directed *Skin and Bones*, starring Doug Jones, for NBC TV's horror anthology show *FEAR ITSELF*.

GALE ANNE HURD, Film and Television Producer

Gale Anne Hurd joined New World Pictures as executive assistant to Roger Corman the company president. She worked her way up through various administrative positions and eventually became involved in production. She formed her own production company, Pacific Western Productions, in 1982 and went on to produce a number of box-office hits including *The Terminator* (1984), and *Aliens* (1986). In 1998, she was awarded the Women in Film Crystal Award for outstanding women who, through their endurance and the excellence of their work, have helped to expand the role of women within the entertainment industry. She is currently Executive Producing the AMC drama series *The Walking Dead*. In 2003, she was awarded the Telluride Tech Festival Award of Technology at Telluride, Colorado along with Sir Arthur C. Clarke.

ELVIS MITCHELL, Film Critic

Elvis Mitchell is a former critic for *The New York Times* (1998 – 2004). In the late 1980s, Mitchell was part of a short-lived PBS show called The Edge. Mitchell is currently the host of KCRW's pop culture and film interview program *The Treatment*. He is also an occasional film critic/commentator for Weekend Edition on NPR. In 2008, Elvis Mitchell: *Under the Influence* began airing on Turner Classic Movies. On the program Mitchell interviews actors and directors about their favorite classic films.

SAM POLLARD, Filmmaker/Film Professor, NYU

Sam Pollard's professional accomplishments as a feature film and television video editor, and documentary producer/director span almost thirty years. He recently served as Executive Producer on the documentary *Brother Outsider*, Official Selection 2003 Sundance Film Festival. His first assignment as a documentary producer came in 1989 for Henry Hampton's Blackside production *Eyes On The Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads*. For one of his episodes in this series he received an Emmy. Eight years later, he returned to Blackside as Co-Executive Producer/Producer of Hampton's last documentary series *I'll Make Me A World: Stories of African-American Artists and Community*. For the series, Mr. Pollard received The George Peabody Award. Between 1990 and 2000, Mr. Pollard edited a number of Spike Lee's films: *Mo' Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever*, *Girl 6*, *Clockers*, *Bamboozled*. As well, Mr. Pollard and Mr. Lee co-produced a couple of documentary productions for the small and big screen: *Spike Lee Presents Mike Tyson*, a biographical sketch for HBO for which Mr. Pollard received an Emmy, and *Four Little Girls*, a feature-length documentary about the 1965 Birmingham church bombings which was nominated for an Academy Award.

CHIZ SCHULTZ, Film and Television Producer

Chiz Schultz has more than thirty years' experience producing motion pictures and live, taped and filmed television programs. His productions have won the ACE Award, Peabody Award, International Documentary Association Award, New York Film & Television Award, San Francisco International Film Award and the Ohio State University Award. His productions have received Academy Awards, EMMY and ACE nominations. Among his many credits is the Academy Award winning film, *A Soldier's Story*.

JASON ZINOMAN, Critic

Jason Zinoman is a critic and reporter for *The New York Times*. He is currently the paper's first comedy critic, and has covered theater there for a decade. His book *Shock Value: How a Few Eccentric Outsiders Gave Us Nightmares, Conquered Hollywood and Invented Modern Horror* is now out in paperback. He has also regularly written about movies, television, books and sports for publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *The Guardian* and *Slate*. He was the chief theater critic for *Time Out New York* before leaving to write the On Stage and Off column in the Weekend section of the *New York Times*.

About the Filmmakers

ROB KUHNS, WRITER/PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/EDITOR

Birth of the Living Dead is Rob's first feature length documentary as a Director. He Co-Directed/Edited two broadcast documentaries, *Enemies of War* (PBS, 2001) and *This is a Game, Ladies* (PBS, 2003, Audience Award – AFI Silverdoc Festival). His many editing credits include *Moyers and Company* (2011 - Present), the dramatic television series *Sleeper Cell* (Showtime, Golden Globe nomination, 2005), and *Adam Clayton Powell* (Academy Award nomination, 1990). Rob Wrote and Directed the short comedy, *King's Day Out*, (1993 Sundance Film Festival). This year he received an individual artist grant from the New York State Council of the Arts. Rob lives in Brooklyn with his wife and producing partner, Esther Cassidy.

ESTHER CASSIDY, PRODUCER

Esther produced and directed the documentaries: *Enemies of War* broadcast nationally on PBS, and in Spain, Portugal, and Denmark, and *The Wrong Man: The Case of Edward Lee Elmore* for Court Television. She was Coordinating Producer of *American Dream*, Barbara Kopple's Academy Award-winning documentary feature, and also produced with Ms. Kopple: *With Liberty And Justice For All*; *Justice For All*; and *Civil Rights: The Struggle Continues*. She was Consulting Producer on the Peabody award-winning broadcast documentary *A Healthy Baby Girl* (2006); and the 2007 theatrical documentary *Sacco and Vanzetti*, which has been shown in theaters and film festivals in the U.S., Holland, and Italy.

LARRY FESSENDEN, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

SEE BIO IN "ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS," ABOVE.

SUPROTIM BOSE, CINEMATOGRAPHER

Suprotim Bose has over twenty years of experience in international film and television production. He has shot and produced live, studio and remote shoots all over the US and the world, including England, France, Spain, Germany, Japan, Canada and India. Credits include, *Mahakumbh*, a 23-minute, 16-mm documentary about a religious event attracting 15 million people - the largest such event in the world - who gather every 14 years for two weeks of prayer and festivities on the banks of the river Ganges in India. He has also shot documentaries and PSAs for UNICEF about children who work as paramedics in the slums of Bombay and preventative health solutions in the developing world.

MICHAEL GRIPPO, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Michael Grippo is a Gemini Award-winning, and Emmy nominated cinematographer, who has worked on Canadian and international productions in over 30 countries. He has done it all – from covering war zones to shooting beautifully recreated dramas. He works for American news networks and for independent documentary producers. Grippo has DOP credits on numerous award winning films, including *Faith Without Fear* (NFB/PBS, Emmy nomination) *Sex Slaves*, a multi-award winning documentary feature (NFB /CBC/PBS), *House Calls* (NFB), *Shinny* (NFB), *Unwanted Soldiers* (NFB), *Bosnian War Criminals in Canada* (CBC), and *Living with Disabled Adults*.

GARY POZNER, COMPOSER

Gary Pozner has had a long and fascinating career in music. As a teenager he played piano in the Catskill Mountain resorts for such luminaries as Joel Grey, Mel Brooks, Henny Youngman and Chubby Checker. He moved on to Rock n Roll opening for The Grateful Dead and sharing a bill with Keith Richards and U2 as a member of the Tom Tom Club. He continues to tour all around the world with his African-Celtic-Gospel rock band, EO. In the early nineties, Gary began composing for television. He has since created over two hundred sound scores for HBO, Cinemax, Lifetime, PBS, FOX, Court TV and many others. While his image spot for ThrillerMax (1997) and his 25th Anniversary (1999) Logo for PBS, garnered Silver Promax Award, his music for ESPN's International Sports Center won a BDA Award. Additionally, Gary was the first American composer commissioned to write music for Singapore National Television. Gary has worked on a number of films with Rob Kuhns, including *Enemies of War* and *Russia: Land of the Tsars* for which he was nominated for an Emmy in 2004.

DALE ROBBINS, ART DIRECTOR

Dale is currently Creative Director for the weekly PBS series *Moyers and Company*, for which she oversees all things visual, providing art direction for on-air, online and print. She first started working with the Moyers on *Earth on Edge* in 1999 and continued on other productions including *America's First River*, *NOW with Bill Moyers*, *Becoming American* and *Bill Moyers Journal*. Dale's company, Pie Design, has been challenged by a range of projects from a series of trading cards for the National Basketball Association to a museum installation for the Newseum in Washington DC.

GARY PULLIN, ILLUSTRATION AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

"Ghoulish" Gary Pullin is an award-winning freelance artist residing in Toronto Canada and has steadily carved out his own unique niche within the genre he loves – horror. In 2009 he was voted artist of the year at the Rondo Hatton Classic Horror Awards. For over ten years he made his mark as Art Director at Rue Morgue Magazine, the world's leading genre

publication. He has worked with many notable contemporaries such as musician/filmmaker Rob Zombiek, artist Mike Mignola (*Hellboy*), and horror icons Clive Barker and Basil Gogos. Gary's work has hung in galleries across the globe and has been published in publications such as *Royal Flush* and the heavy metal magazine *Revolver*. Gary is Rue Morgue's resident art columnist for The Fright Gallery and has been interviewed for several genre-related documentaries, the latest being *Fanboy Confessional*.