

[ARTS & CULTURE]

If It Moves, Shoot It

FILM An insider account of the local-entry gore-fest that will spew onto the Flicker Fest screen this Sunday **MIKE CORRIGAN**

This is the story of how an independent film was made in Spokane last summer. It's certainly not the *whole* story. It's only a sketch, really – a snapshot in diary form. As such, it's compressed and incomplete. But hopefully, there's enough here to adequately convey both the agony and the ecstasy of ultra-low-budget filmmaking in the Inland Northwest.

The film was conceived by one man and fleshed out by an eager band of co-conspirators – including, it should be noted, your humble narrator. The film is called *Jack the Vomiter*. It was loosely conceived as a spoof, as a grotesque alternate imagining of the considerably more famous tale of Jack the Ripper, the infamous mass murder of women who terrorized London in the late 1880s.

Jack the Vomiter will have its world premiere screening this Sunday afternoon at the fourth annual Flicker Film Festival at CenterStage. Sixteen other independent short films from around the country will also be showcased. (For a list of films, visit www.flickerspokane.com.)

PRE-PRODUCTION

Jack began, as I mentioned, with an idea. On its way to becoming a film, this idea was first translated into hand-drawn storyboards – two-dimensional renderings of the story into frames simulating screen stills. Using the storyboard, we roughed out *Jack's* basic visual concepts. They also served as production templates, giving us a guide for following the narrative and visualizing individual scenes as they might be photographed with the motion picture camera.

This isn't video. *Jack* was captured on motion picture *film* – photochemical emulsion sandwiched around a strip of perforated plastic. Film has a depth, flexibility and luminosity that can never be realized with even the most expensive state-of-the-art video equipment. Much of *Jack*, in fact, was photographed using thrift-store movie cameras – cameras discarded decades ago as home-movie buffs abandoned film for the relative ease and inexpensiveness of videotape.

But back to *Jack*. From

the storyboard, the team set about securing a location, casting the actors and designing the “look” of the production. The location was secured with a simple phone call to a generous Spokane property manager. He gave us carte blanche to an abandoned building – a sprawling four-story expanse of concrete, red brick and pigeon guano right in the heart of the city.

As for actors, nearly all who signed on to the project were film virgins. Most were friends, and every one of them was willing to put up with a great deal of abuse in exchange for celluloid immortality and all the beer they could drink. Production design involved borrowing, fabricating or buying appropriate costumes; gathering props that would at least vaguely appear to be of late 19th-century vintage; and fabricating select body parts from plaster casts taken from the bodies of our actors.

Once the props had been assembled, the four of us entered the warehouse location and spent several days preparing the film's two primary sets – a lair for our killer and a brothel for our ladies of the evening – along with assorted dark staircases and gloomy passageways. We selected two rooms, one on the main floor and one in an exceptionally foul and claustrophobic corner of the foul and claustrophobic basement. We then cranked up the authenticity and atmosphere with the careful placement of props.

Satisfied with our set design, we hauled in the lights, cameras and actors, and worked during a succession of weekends, juggling schedules as we progressed. For *Jack*, no fewer than three cameras were rolling during each scene, a decision that would give us great flexibility later, during the editing phase.

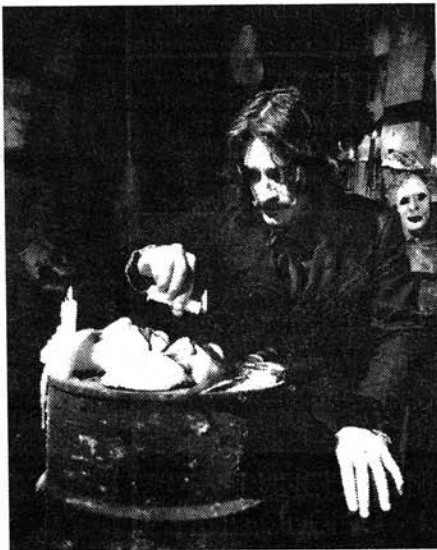
The following diary is based on my notes taken during film production.

DAY ONE

Travis Hiibner, Derrick King, Gary McLeod and I arrive early a.m. at the location to arrange props and set up lights for the first day of shooting on the whorehouse set. This takes awhile. Our “whores” eventually show up and start to slip into their costumes. Looks like they will be doing their own makeup, too. This is good. Many hours pass, yet everyone is stoked. Beers are cracked. Looks like we can begin. Ensemble shots first, then close-ups of each. Make sure they have cigarettes – and that the filters are cut off. Continuity! We shoot well into the evening.

DAY TWO

Arrive early. We put lingerie on a prop torso. It looks funny. Today we're up on the third floor filming a struggle between “Jack” (played by Jon Swantrom) and one of his hapless victims (played by his wife, Heather). It's pretty intense – and it occurs to me that only a husband and wife could pull off that kind of intensity for the cameras and not end up re-





Swanstrom swirls his 'stache for the crew.

senting each other later. Comic relief is provided when Jon (as Jack) straddles Travis who is filming a point-of-view shot of the attack. A very long and exhausting day for everyone.

DAY THREE

Arrive early. After a whole week off, everyone is eager to get their hands dirty again. Heh. With *blood*. We are upstairs, shooting streetwalking and gory murder bits. For this scene we have our lead whore (played by Laressa McMullin), a "customer" (played by Jerome Larsen), and dear old Jack. It's a very long day (more than 12 hours, solid) but it's fun, too, with lots of gore, action, special effects and bare skin.

DAY FOUR

The basement of this place resembles a medieval dungeon. And there is ample evidence that unspeakable acts were committed down here. It's perfect. Our Jack looks fantastic but must be wilting a little under the hot lights. The cameras roll. He's crouched in his lair, playing with wax, adding human hair and makeup to his precious masks, and admiring himself in the mirror. It's quite a disturbing sight. Even for us.

DAY FIVE

Today we're working again only with Jon (as Jack), filming him rising from his underground lair to the street above – along with close-ups of a nice throat slashing. For the gory bits, we have to actually duct-tape Jon to the prop torso. They look like Siamese twins. Taping it to an iron pipe works better and is less silly. We run

through it over and over (carefully keeping the Van Halen wall graffiti out of the frame) until we run out of "throats" to cut. With three cameras rolling at once, we must have captured something useful. Right?

DAY SIX

It's the last day of the shoot – the finale in more ways than one. We arrive very early to set up the body. In addition to our regular gear, we've brought in the following: an air compressor, condoms, canned chili, 30 gallons of water, and a garden hose. Spirits are high. As the day progresses a small crowd forms, as if something "big" were about to happen. Then it does. Then it does again. And again. We are laughing so hard we can hardly keep the cameras steady. Someone please get Jon a wet nap.

EPILOGUE

From our generous property manager, we learn that we don't have to finish cleaning up the hideous mess we made on the third floor because the entire building is scheduled for demolition (and, by the time you read this, has already been demolished). We feel this a fitting end indeed for a structure so defiled.

Processing, editing, and scoring may now commence. But that's another story. ■

***Jack the Vomiter* world premiere screening at the fourth annual Flicker Film Festival on Sunday, Oct. 15, at 2 pm and 6 pm at CenterStage, 1017 W. First Ave. Tickets: \$5. Visit www.flickerspokane.com or call 747-8243.**