

B-Fest '87

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR FRED OLEN RAY

On Sunday, October 25, the Second Annual B Festival hosted the gala premiere of Fred Olen Ray's new film, *The Phantom Empire*, a subtle send-up of 1940s lost-world flicks starring Sybil Danning, Jeffrey Combs, and Robert Quarry. Dawn Wildsmith, Ray's wife, also appears in a major role. The film is constructed on a host of B movie conceits: a lost world beneath the Earth's surface, an alien space princess, scantily-clad cave girls, even a robot named Robby. *Empire* was received very well by the Festival crowd, and following the screening, Excalibur's Norman Wilner accompanied Ray to Lee's Palace for a conversation that would span Ray's entire career and several of his films, including *Scalps*, *Cyclone*, and *Armed Response* (all available on videocassette somewhere in the city).

EXCALIBUR: Of everything you've done, what would you consider your most popular film? What had the most appeal?

RAY: Probably *Armed Response*, because that was just so mainstream, featuring two highly visible stars, David Carradine and Lee Van Cleef.

EXCALIBUR: How did you go about putting together your "break-through" film, *Scalps*?

RAY: We were going to make it for four grand, and it went up a little bit from there. It was supposed to be the world's cheapest movie, with six kids, a station wagon and a tent. That's all it really amount to—it just seemed like the cheapest idea we could do. It really wasn't my particular cup of tea, 'cause I don't really like maniac movies, and that's what it was.

EXCALIBUR: You have a penchant for using old film stars, character actors like Robert Quarry and Kirk Alyn (the original Superman, who appeared in *Scalps*). How did this start?

RAY: I'm just a B movie fan; if you were in my position you'd probably do the same thing. I like Russ Tamb-

lyn (who has a brief scene in *The Phantom Empire*), Robert Quarry and all those guys, and so if I have a chance to bring them in and interview them, I do that, and then if I have a chance to hire them, I do that. It's just sort of fun to bring them out, and work with them, and when you consider that all these people work for the same price as anybody off the street now, why would you hire somebody you didn't know when you can get somebody you're a fan of? It gives them a shot in the arm when (in the case of veteran performer Anthony Eisley) nobody's hired them for nine years or so. It gets them back in the industry again, and I think that's a good thing.

EXCALIBUR: How did you start out?

RAY: Just a monster movie fan, making regular 8 movies, and then when Super 8 came out I did that. I guess everyone wants to make a feature, and we figured out a way to do it for almost nothing, so we gave it a shot.

EXCALIBUR: In 16 millimetre?

RAY: Yes, we started in 16.

EXCALIBUR: And your first 35 mm feature was . . . ?

RAY: *Biohazard*.

EXCALIBUR: There was another film with that name around the same time, and you ended up keeping it while they changed theirs to *Warning Sign*.

RAY: That's right, I made them change their title. I made more money than they did, too. After all the PR we did, we made them change it, and I don't know what happened after that. It's on tape, I think.

EXCALIBUR: Will the *Phantom Empire* go into theatrical release, or just direct-to-videocassette, like *Cyclone*?

RAY: Theatrical. It has to, because of a special deal with SAG (the Screen Actors Guild), the union. If you go under \$500,000 then you get a special cut on the actors' pay, but you have to release it theatrically. I mean, that movie was made for less than half of David Carradine's salary on *Armed Response*, so you can imagine how low it must have been. (The cost of *Empire* came to about \$110,000.)

EXCALIBUR: Your newest film, just completed, is Hollywood *Chainsaw Hookers* ("They charge an arm and a leg!"). How did that one come about?

RAY: There was someone who wanted to buy a picture from us; we didn't want to sell them anything, so we offered to take the money that they would advance for the other picture and make a completely new film. We put some money with it, and we did it. I was on this Britt Eklund movie—to reshoot it, and make some changes—so our deal was that I would take the cameras

for a three-and-a-half day weekend at the head of the shoot, and then for two days on the end of the shoot, to have five days of free equipment . . . and I shot it. It worked out pretty well.

EXCALIBUR: What's in the future?

RAY: We're on the end of *DeepSpace*, with Bo Svenson, and we're shooting another called *Terminal Force*. We're editing *DeepSpace* right now, and that'll take us up to Christmas.

EXCALIBUR: What would your dream project be? What have you always wanted to do?

RAY: Well, I don't know. Different things; we wanted to do a remake of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* with Klaus Kinski as Caligari and David Bowie as the somnambulist, using Introvision (a camera-matte technique used to create fantastic backdrops in *Outland* and *Megaforce*) to create an entire city of twisted buildings. And then there's *Ancient Angels*, which is like *The Wild Bunch* only it's about Hell's Angels out of prison after 20 years, and it stars all those old motorcycle actors like Wil-

liam Smith, Sid Haig and Dennis Hopper, back on the road, finding out that the world has sort of passed them by.

EXCALIBUR: Sounds different. Any closing advice for aspiring filmmakers?

RAY: I think you can make a feature for whatever you can get your hands on, and you don't have to have \$250,000. People seem to promote the idea that if you don't have x amount of dollars, you can't do anything, which isn't true. There are people out there making features in 16 mm for \$15,000. I wouldn't advise anybody to use video, that's death. But 16 mm features for the home video market—that's a limited appeal but there is one there. There is some money in home video, but it's not a mint . . . people shouldn't spend \$200,000 just for the video market. Television and foreign market count, too. *Chainsaw Hookers* isn't going to make the foreign market because there's a lot of blood . . . it's not a graphically violent film, but there's a lot of Monty Python-esque arms and legs flying around the room. It's meant to be funny, but censorship's pretty hard in a lot of territories now.

EXCALIBUR: No kidding. How do you feel about your film product so far?

RAY: If I hadn't made them, I wouldn't go see most of the films that I make; if someone else had made 'em, I wouldn't go (laughs). They're not the kind of pictures I'd pay to go see, to be honest with you. It's better than washing dishes, or something, though . . . it has an advantage over regular work.

Fred Olen Ray films can be found in almost any video store, from the popular *Cyclons* (RCA/Columbia Home Video) featuring Heather Thomas, Jeffrey Combs, Martine Beswicke and a souped-up laser motorcycle, to *Commando Squad* (Media), with Amazon guerrilla Laurene Landon and popular bit actor Dick Miller. Other titles on various labels: *The Alien Dead*, *Scalps*, *Biohazard*, and the upcoming *Armed Response*. The *Phantom Empire* should open in December or January for a limited release.

Next week, a talk with British writer Clive Barker, the man behind *Hellraiser*, the novels *The Damnation Game* and *Weaveworld*, and the *Books of Blood*, a six-volume collection of short horror stories. Barker will discuss his future plans, and reveal his side of the *Underworld/Rawhead Rex* lawsuits.

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