

Conversation

with George Romero

Among the highlights of this year's Festival of Festivals was a special series entitled **The American Nightmare** which traced the history of horror filmmaking over the past 50 years. Among the films shown were five by director George Romero who has been labelled the "Modern Master of Horror". At the close of the festival last weekend, **Excalibur's** Elliott Lefko had the following conversation with Romero.

Do you ever worry that the horror in your films will trigger horrors outside the theater?

It has to cross your mind. But I don't worry about it too much. If you let yourself worry about that stuff you wind up having second thoughts and keeping yourself from doing things. The only time that I've ever really been able to identify having any qualms is when I'm actually on the set when there are friends around. That's the only time I feel any slight embarrassment. But once it's over I don't have any problems with it. I don't think my films have the effect of, say, a **Texas Chainsaw Massacre**. My films are pretty cathartic. A lot more plastic. They draw from a comic book style. They're not painful. They're so extreme that it's not realistic.

What is your background?

I grew up in New York City and went to Pittsburg to go to school. My dad was a commercial artist in New York. I grew up in a Catholic background. Parochial schools. My dad did advertising art for movies, so that was a help. My attitude towards people making films was some magic thing that went on in Never, Never Land. But at least knowing that my dad was a real person working in the field gave me a willingness to think seriously about doing it myself.

Did you skip school and watch movies when you were a kid?

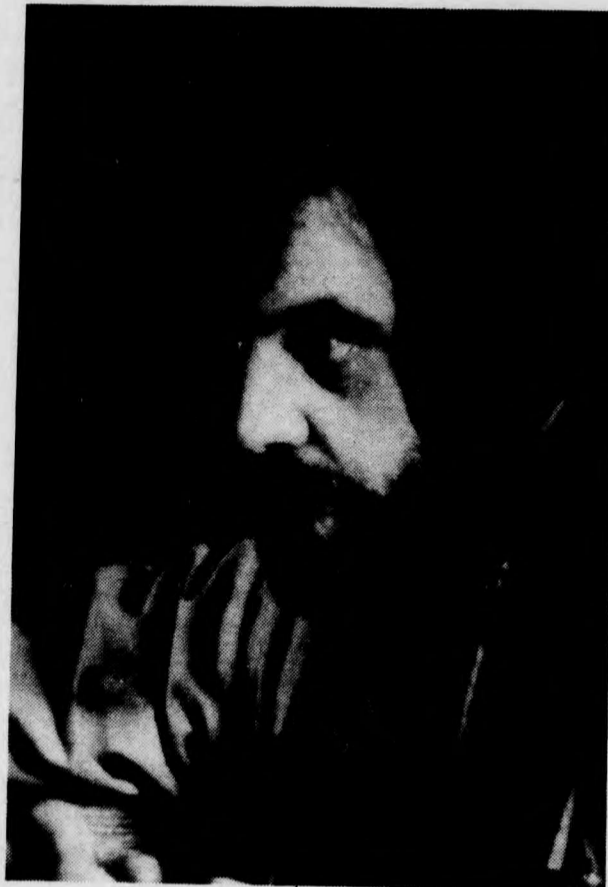
Oh yeah. I loved horror films. There weren't that many, but there were some good ones. **The Thing** I saw as a kid. It knocked my socks off. It had the sharpest effect. I grew up in the Bronx and never really got away from the repressions that came from growing up in that environment. Luckily I was able to leave and shape up.

Is Pittsburg all smokestacks?

Actually, it's okay. Physically it's pretty attractive and interesting geographically. Along the rivers, which is where the mills are, it's really rough. It's like the end of the world. It's really depressing. Depressing and depressed. The economy is fucked up. A lot of the mills are closed. So you have towns like Bladock, where the film **Martin** was shot. That's really the UNDEAD.

What is the American Nightmare?

I think that anyone who had their faith in government and/or Richard Nixon was in trouble to begin with. So that fact that people now say that government is fucked up—it's no big revelation. What's really happening is that the US has been so structured on things like consumerism that people forget what their own position is. The basic problem that people have is any kind of self-identification. And now they don't even have that. Even the working class in the US really doesn't weigh what they do with any kind of pride or with any kind of thought. They weigh it all on what they get for it and how that competes with what the guy next door is getting for it. So there is this synthetic society that's been building up for the last forty years. It ain't no kind of foundation to build such a large nation on. The run towards this conglomeration of industry means there is no real faith in the free enterprise system. The welfare system is going bankrupt, there is serious crime in the streets, and a tremendous amount of apathy in the young people. I think rather than seeing salvation in upcoming generations, people see further disintegration. And everybody is just kind of scrambling around wondering, "what's going to happen to ME, MAN," instead of figuring out what's happening to us all. Everybody is living in their own little world of isolation, which has nothing to do with anything but their own desires. There is no real communal spirit of any kind. It's a mess.



In Dawn of the Dead there are scenes in which people are blowing other people's heads off. In order to make the film seem authentically gruesome, did you do any research into the subject?

I've never actually seen it happen. I did go down to the coroner's office, in Pittsburg several times and looked at shots. Looked at a corpse that had been shot at several times. Our weapons master on **Dawn** was an old army disaster guy in Vietnam. He had some first hand experience.

What are your feelings about making a film outside the horror genre?

It's something that I'd really like to do. We have the rights to one of David Rabe's plays called **The Boom Boom Room**. I'd really like to do that, but I have no idea what it would be like. The only things I've done outside the genre is a film called **There's Always Vanilla**, which is the least exhibited of all my films.

Would you ever want to make a total fantasy, Tolkien kind of film?

I'd like to. But there's a problem. It's the kind of thing that I've been saying about the big projects we're pitching at the large studios. I'd rather not do them. If I could get someone to go in and buy **Lord of the Rings** for me I know what would happen. You'd have to fight it out with the bastards. They tell you, "You've got to use this, you've got to do that. We got Johnny Williams to do the score for you." It would be such a packaged situation. That's how those people work. It's virtually impossible unless you get to the point of a Coppola or a Kubrick, where people will take a twenty million crap shoot on your instincts. So many people get wrapped up in it, thinking, well I can beat it. Or, well I can make this compromise, or that compromise, not realizing that it's insidious. So the answer is yes, I'd love to try to do it but I'd give the project up rather than see that happen to it. For a long time I tried like hell to get **Tarzan**. That was one of my pet things. They're working on it now, but they're into the same old shit that you always hear about. Like **Jaws**. They're building mechanical apes and spending all their time and energy just completely in the wrong areas.

Do you try to see as many films as you can?

I try to. If I'm working on a script, or a film, I don't like to see other films. But when I'm finished I love to see movies. I love to see junk, exploitation stuff. It gets harder and harder for me to get into heavy, serious cinema. I almost don't understand why they keep trying to do that.

Who are the other filmmakers that you watch?

The people I most admire to the point of watching and re-watching are Welles, Kubrick, Kazan. Woody Allen, I like now, although his films are not really cinematic. They're just really clever. In fact, when tries to get too cinematic, it's always a little disappointing. To me, **Manhattan** is a little disappointing. I preferred **Annie Hall**. Altman's stuff is really interesting. I still like to watch Brian de Palma's films because on a craft level the cat is always amazing. His stuff is always really energetic and interesting. You don't see that very much. I thought Scorsese was going to be the next man, but I haven't seen anything great since **Mean Streets**.

Would you like to do television?

It's hard for me to answer that. We own a property that is suitable, and could be made for television. It's something that I'd really like to do. It's called **Out of this Furnace**. It's about the early days of the Carnegies and the unions starting out in Pittsburg. I just have an affinity for it because I really like Pittsburg and I have lived there for so long. It's a perfect television thing. And television might be the way that that property will be made. But I don't need television. I really dislike television. In fact, you can hardly watch it anymore ... I keep saying I have hope for the video disc. There's never been a market for film or tape, for A V that puts the filmmakers directly in touch with the audience. You have to go through a distributor and so on. So I think the hardware will sell like wildfire. It's putting the power and discretion back in the hands of the audience.

Robin Wood has stated some theories about your films, which you've heard. Are there others you've met with their own theories?

Yeah. It's very easy, even for me, to go back after two years and begin pulling apart the films. So often it's just something instinctive that you did. Fifty per cent of the time it's just pure accident. Who knows what half of the stuff is about. It doesn't make a lot of this analysis that people make completely invalid. I just never think about it in analytical terms. A lot of it is just pulling it out of your hat.

Your next film is a biker film entitled Nights. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

I had this idea for a long time. I've had it for about three years, but I'm really comfortable with it now. It's a very different thing. It's about a bunch of people that live like a travelling road circus. They have a communal lifestyle. Most of them are bikers. They are celebrants of a mediaeval lifestyle. And they have this whole hierarchy: The Kingdom. Their own feudal system. The Nights are the heavies, they run the show. They joust on motorcycles. They have regular tournaments that do mean something to them. In other words the championship means something internal to their social order. But they mostly do it as exhibitions for the public. That's how they make their money. And artisans travel with them. People that make pots and sandals and stuff like that. They have this whole order. They have their own perfect democracy working. Actually it's just kind of a re-telling of the Camelot thing. Only using those elements of contemporary society. Kind of an anti-McDonald's movie.

What about a third Zombie film?

I spent five years resisting making a sequel to **Night of the Living Dead**, then five years trying to make it. Right now it is too close to **Dawn of the Dead** to begin making the third film. It would be too much like **Dawn**. We have a contract waiting but one of the big stumbling blocks is that the studio wants us to use some major names. We're fighting that.

Do you ever wake up in the morning and say "What am I doing in this business?"

Oh man, fuck yeah. Not that I'd like to do any other business. I really love to make films. That's one of the things I like about discs. If I can find some mechanism to just keep doing the stuff, I'd be happy. That's really all I'm interested in doing. It's either that or hitting the beach and making sandals.