

# Godfather of Gore Herschell Gordon Lewis: 'Blood Feast' to Zombificador'



Courtesy Herschell Gordon Lewis



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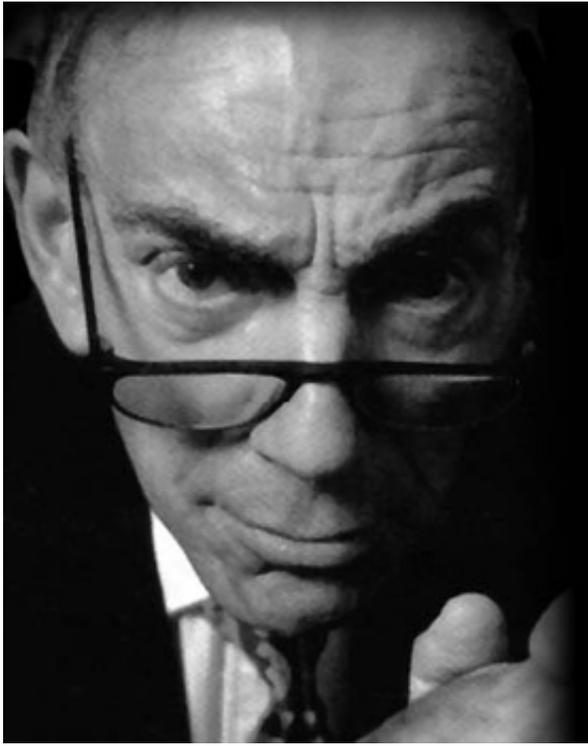
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“*Blood! Gore! The Manson Family!*”

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These all come up in a casual talk with writer/producer/director Herschell Gordon Lewis. Until they come up though, nothing about this genial, quiet-spoken intellectual would clue you into the fact that he's the inventor of the splatter film. Born in Pittsburgh in 1929, raised in Chicago, with a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern, Lewis is a quiet-spoken businessman, entrepreneur and teacher. Nonetheless, this is the director of "Blood Feast," first of the infamous "Gore Trilogy." How does the inventor of the splatter movie feel about his nickname, "The Godfather of Gore?"



*Courtesy Herschell Gordon Lewis*

"I don't want it on my tombstone," Lewis says. "But I revel in the recognition. Being the first in any situation that lasts has a cachet most people can't enjoy."

Lewis never saw himself making low-budget, independent movies when he was getting a master's degree at Northwestern University or later, teaching college: "If I had been given a list of one hundred futures, moviemaking wouldn't have been on it. I'm a perfect example of serendipity – finding what I wasn't looking for."

And yet make movies he did: exploitation pictures made on budgets Roger Corman would have found skimpy. So what prompted Lewis' initial leap from

advertising and directing commercials to features?

"I had been complaining, to someone I barely knew, about not being able to recoup my investment in 35mm film equipment. He asked, just as a conversational point, 'How do you make any money in the film business. Without even realizing what I was saying, I answered, 'The only way to really make money is to shoot features.' His riposte: 'Then why don't you shoot features?' The evil weed was planted."

Lewis and Dave Friedman started out making so-called "nudie-cuties," erotic comedies, that were light years from splatter movies. Why the change of direction from "Goldilocks and the Three Bares" to "Blood Feast?"

"Two motivators appeared. The first was that the field was becoming crowded. The other was that the nature of these films was taking a course in which I didn't want to participate. So the question arose: What other kind of movie might there be, that the major film companies couldn't or wouldn't make, but a brave theatre owner might show and a brave theatregoer might pay to see?"

## **"Outlaws in the Movie Business"**

By 1963, when Lewis made "Blood Feast," Hammer Films and Roger Corman's Poe Cycle were in full flower. He admits those movies, made on far larger budgets than his own, did influence him. But he also attracted the attention of the superstars of the genre, at least in Corman's case.

"In fact, at one time Corman and I discussed making a movie together," Lewis says. "But it turned that the way it was structured I would have paid for the entire thing in exchange for a minority position. What happened was this: these little movies, they're now regarded as harmless - they weren't at that time - we were something of outlaws in the movie business. My intention was simply to make the kind of motion picture that the major companies would not or could not make but somebody might show and somebody else might take a look at. Once we got into that groove, it seemed to be a bonanza, until, as always seems to happen, and not only in the motion picture industry, but throughout the world of commerce, someone has a profitable operation going, and everybody else says 'Oh well, I can do that better he can,' and it's probably true."

Certainly it occurred to Lewis that he could perhaps film violence more realistically, or at least with more impact, than the major studios, where violence was still generally handled with relative timidity. Lewis recalls:

"One night, and this again is deep into history, I was watching some movie on television. I think the actor involved here was Edward G. Robinson. The police pumped him full of bullet holes and he died quietly with a little splotch on his shirt and I said: 'Wait a minute! That isn't right.' That really might have been the actual genesis of 'Blood Feast,' because it became to clear to me that what they were doing was simply sugar coating an effect that I, as an independent, was in a position to make more dramatically without spending a lot of money because that was the other factor. Anybody can spend a lot more money to get an effect, but how do you get an effect without spending a lot of money? But there's got to be a factor that goes with it too, where people have to say 'Hey wow, did you see that?'"

## **"Blood Feast"**

This type of filmmaking was shoestring budget and done with a guerrilla warfare sensibility. The clear delineations of job descriptions that's the norm on big budget studio productions had no applicability here. Witness Allison Louise Downe, who had appeared in "Boin-n-g," and is credited as the screenwriter of "Blood Feast." How did she end up writing the script for the first splatter film? That answer is simple:

"She didn't. We wrote that script pretty much as we went along...and gave her the screen credit for it."

In a day when fledgling screenwriters will resort to WGA arbitration, if not pistols at dawn, over on-screen credit for a script, this seems hard to imagine. How did Downe end up with credit for a script she didn't write?

"In the early days, when people would say who wrote the script for 'Blood Feast' my standard answer was, 'Who wrote the what?' We literally wrote that as we went along. We weren't sure we could get a location, we weren't certain an effect would come off, we were breaking new ground, and we were breaking new ground with no budget. Any script we might have written would certainly have been an experiment to start with. There's no question that she was valuable on the set. She handled most of the make-up in the early days. But I could never, in good conscience today, say that she actually wrote that script."

## **Lenses by Coca Cola Bottling Company**

The production credits on the early Lewis/Friedman movies were all largely fictitious, it turns out:

"I went all the way back to an old movie I'd made called 'The Adventures of Lucky Pierre,' where the entire production team was two people, Dave Friedman and I. We were made up the titles as we went along. If you look at 'Lucky Pierre' today, you'll see a title that says

'Lenses by Coca Cola Bottling Company.' The whole thing was a joke. We didn't take screen credits seriously at all. Now, here we come with 'Blood Feast' which is absolutely the watershed movie in the splatter film world and we suddenly are faced with the same problem. We weren't about to stick out names all over the place, which is an admission that we had no budget. That's what happens when you have to use your own name over and over and over again. That's another reason why in many of my movies you will see the name Sheldon Seymour – where did that come from? I came to the conclusion that everybody I knew who owned a theater or distribution company was named either Sheldon or Seymour. So I put the two names together figuring they could identify with it. So, you will see sometimes music by Sheldon Seymour, unit manager, whatever that is, Sheldon Seymour. Sometimes I reversed them to Seymour Sheldon. We thought nothing of it at all. We certainly didn't think that we would come to a point in the year 2013 in which someone would say, 'Did she actually write that script?' That's the miracle, really, of the film's longevity."

Upping the level of on-screen violence into hitherto unknown territory turned out to have technical challenges as well. After all, audiences weren't used to seeing any amount of blood in a shot.

### ***"Three Gallon Pictures"***

"I realized how purple the fake blood at that time was because it had been prepared for black and white movies," Lewis says. "Then we come with 'Blood Feast' and certainly I was not about to go to some hot shot film company and buy stage blood at retail. So what I did, there was a little cosmetics laboratory. We shot, as you know, in Miami, and in Coral Gables there was a lab called Barfred Laboratories, which I assume was some sort of a combination of the two people who owned that company and off we went to Barfred Laboratories to get stage blood made. They made it for us. To the point where in later movies we were buying it by the gallon. 'Oh, this is a two gallon picture, that one we better get three gallons for.' And, there again it was the casual approach to that kind of thing. So, to get the effect that we wanted we were not only paving a new era, new ground here, we were truly in an experimental mode. The one thing I knew, we'd shoot it in color because if we were going to startle people, we had to startle them in color."

## *The tongue's gone bad...*

Urban legends that certain props for “Blood Feast” were actually obtained from slaughter houses or butcher shops, it turns out, are not just urban legends.

“The most famous scene in the entire history of splatter movies is the tongue scene in ‘Blood Feast’” Lewis says. “In fact, people couldn’t believe we were actually going to shoot that. We bought a tongue. We couldn’t use the tongue from a butcher shop locally or a supermarket. We needed the part behind the tongue that’s already cut off those. We found a packing house, not in Miami, one in Tampa and we very carefully ordered this tongue and when it came, we stuck it in a refrigerator in the little place we were staying in, the Suez Motel on the north beach of Miami, and in fact, that place too became part of movie history. We had a little refrigerator in the room, and we hadn’t even thought about it but the power went out or something went out or it got unplugged, I don’t know, but it was a brutally hot day, and when we got back you could smell that for two blocks away. I said, now what, we don’t want to go through this again. At this time we had three or four people on the crew, and some of the braver members of the crew doused that tongue with Pine-Sol to get rid of the smell. It’s hardly what I would call a professional creation of props but it worked. What was funny was that we shot the scene in a motel room in the Suez. As we were shooting it the maid came in, she didn’t know what was happening and she was saying, ‘Uh-uh-uh-uh, do you folks need help?’ Here was this girl with a big tongue hanging out of her mouth and we’re photographing it and there’s blood all over the place, and I’m saying ‘No, no, no, there’s nothing, thank you, ma’am.’”

Nonetheless, Lewis does not see any connection between his work and the current “torture porn” subgenre.

“Absolutely not. I do not. I could see the same thing that was happening with these little cutie movies. It goes one step beyond. Somebody asked me if I would be interested in participating in a snuff movie. I said, not even as a blank consideration. No, that’s completely beyond the pale. The idea of motion pictures, entertainment, you may entertain on a different level because you aren’t appealing to somebody’s idea of a thriller. But as I think you also might be aware, my most recent movie, what I’m planning now, will be based on that marvelous little

marriage between gore and wild humor. Where the audience knows, implicitly that the whole thing is a gag. I think we need that now. I have felt for a few years now, that the movie business in that area, that element, is heading in a very dangerous direction.”

## ***Filming around the Manson Family***

There’s another urban legend that Lewis directed the lesbian western (yes, you read that right) “Linda and Abilene” on the Spahn Ranch in California, which was soon to be notorious for housing the Manson Family. Legend has it the Manson Family moved in after Lewis’ company left. The truth is actually stranger. They were there at the time.

“‘Linda and Abilene’ was shot at the Spahn Ranch which became notorious because that’s where that Manson gang were carving up people. They were there while we were shooting. I didn’t know we were in such dangerous company. They had a big dog and they had put some sort of a bell around the dog’s neck, typical of these people. It drove that dog absolutely crazy. Every time the dog moved, the bell rang and the dog was trying to dislodge the bell, and it couldn’t do it, and somebody who was working with us removed the thing from the dog’s neck, and somebody from that gang said, ‘You want to die?’ We didn’t take it that seriously, but they were serious about it because it wasn’t said with any kind of good nature. But at least for the time being we got the thing off the dog.”

So you have to ask. Did Lewis actually meet Charles Manson? The answer is a little chilling.

“I don’t know...They really weren’t in our way very much, but they were there. We would see them, we would cross paths with them, they weren’t that unpleasant. We would say, would you mind letting us have this area? But they were certainly on the scene.”

## ***The campaign***

Lewis is characteristically frank as to the impact his background in journalism and marketing had on his work as a filmmaker:

“I would call it communications. It occurred to me that the campaign had an impact well beyond

the caliber of the acting or the professionalism of the camerawork. And I became the master of campaigns, to the point where other people came to me with their movies and asking me to do their campaigns for them. That does add a certain quality of cynicism to ones approach to working in moviemaking. But it's a big item and to this day, I look at campaigns for major movie companies and I say, 'What pit did these people fail to crawl out of?' Time and again I see movies whose budgets are bigger for one movie than I spent on the whole bunch of movies I ever put together, and the campaign is amateurish as you can imagine. What makes sense is not what I want to make but what I can convince someone to want to look at."

Did you have any sense at the time you were making these movies that you were in effect actually creating a subgenre of horror film?

"Yes and no. I certainly knew that we were entering a plotline Purgatory. And quickly I saw that people would pay to see these oddball creations. That's why I decided to grind them out as fast as I possibly could."

## **'Zombificador'**

What can you us about your latest project, "Zombificador?"

"'Zombificador' isn't my movie. It's owned by a bright fellow in Spain named Marc Fernandez. I've agreed to tweak the script and direct the picture if he gets his funding together. We've never met face-to-face, he's in Barcelona, I think, and somehow or other he had heard of me. And, I get these communications from him, totally by email, in which he says, if I'm going to make this movie, you must direct it because it's going to be the ultimate gore movie. Well, I certainly care about 'the ultimate gore movie.' He sent me the script and I sent him an answer back, having read the script. I said, first of all, it's incomplete. But I also felt that it laid out some elements of coherence that I wanted to see. He was very, very agreeable, to me rewriting it and I will rewrite this script once we have an agreement that makes it sensible for me to take the time and care to rewrite the script. So then he came up with this fundraising notion and I said 'That's entirely in your hands.' He then said to me, would you at least appear in a video endorsing the project. I said certainly I will do that because that gave me some control, but you have you realize that I'm hedging to some extent because it's not within my control...If 'Zombificador' becomes, in fact, a project, it will be because he has raised enough money to

make it a project. If he doesn't raise enough money to make it a project, I still have something else to fall back on and that's 'Mr. Bruce and the Gore Machine,' which has been sitting there ready to go for quite a while...I love the business. I will leap to the notion of making movies. Somebody says let's do a movie and I'm ready to go. Well, I can't start this at least for another 20 minutes."

The title "Zombificador" would reasonably lead us to believe that Lewis is entering the zombie genre. This summer is going to see the release of "World War Z," with a superstar leading man and a budget big enough to make a James Bond movie. Does "Zombificador" have to compete with that? Or are they perhaps missing the point, spending over a hundred million dollars on a genre that up until recently has virtually specialized in being low-rent.

"Competition neither bothers nor terrifies me. An airplane has seats in coach as well as first class. And no matter what happens, if 'Zombificador' loses money it won't compete with the hundreds of millions Disney lost on 'John Carter.' Add to that my personal conviction that many, many major companies don't have the foggiest notion how to campaign a picture other than dumping money into bottomless holes."

Is the idea of retirement is simply not appealing to Lewis?

His answer is quick and optimistic: "Ask me again in ten to fifteen years."