

An Interview with Curtis Harrington  
by Rusty White

After viewing five Curtis Harrington movies in one weekend, I found myself drawn into his world of elegant madness. Today's horror and suspense directors would be well advised to watch Mr. Harrington's work before stepping behind the camera. Harrington knows the Danse Macabre.

Veteran horror and suspense genre director Curtis Harrington is unique in the film world in that he began making experimental and avant garde films with other cutting edge filmmakers as Kenneth Anger and Maya Deren during the post WW II era. Mr. Harrington went from experimental films to working for a major studio as an associate producer to Jerry Wald. Mr., Harrington then began his career as a feature film director in the world of independent films. Like Francis Ford Coppola and countless others, Mr. Harrington was a protege of Roger Corman's. With numerous theatrical and TV films, in addition to some episodic TV work to his credit, Mr. Harrington has recently returned to his roots with a contemporary short film "**Usher**" based on Poe's short story.

Harrington's films include "**Ruby**" (1977), "**What's the Matter With Helen?**" and "**Who Slew Auntie Roo?**" (both 1971), the cult classic "**Games**" (1967) and Dennis Hopper's first lead role "**Night Tide**" (1961). A friend of director James Whale (**Frankenstein, Bride of Frankenstein**), Mr. Harrington was called upon to coach Ian McKellen for the movie "**Gods and Monsters.**" Phil Hardy states in "**The Overlook Encyclopedia of Horror Films**" that Harrington is one of the most interesting American horror film practitioners and that he brings an elegance not often seen to his films. I have to agree with Mr. Hardy's assessment. In preparing for this interview, I rented as many of Mr. Harrington's films that I could find. I think it is a pity that he has not found financing for more recent projects. Mr. Harrington spent a couple of hours on the phone with me recently from his home in Los Angeles. I found him to be witty, gracious, a bit sardonic and cynical about the system run by moneymen with no artistic insight. What follows is most of our conversation:



Curtis Harrington in his latest film *Usher*

**EInsiders.com: You started out making experimental short films. IMDB lists "A Fragment of Seeking" as your first film. I wasn't able to find it anywhere.**

Curtis Harrington: No, the short films are not on video. They are only available from "The Filmmaker's Cooperative" in New York on 16 mm.

**What was "Fragment of Seeking" about?**

All of the short films were...it's so hard for me to describe them. The whole point of the films is they were entirely visual. They had no dialogue of any kind.

**I did get to see Kenneth Anger's "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" in which you acted.**

Yes, that's a film I acted in but that is not my film. I had nothing to do with the making of that film.



**Did you play the character that looked like Cesare from "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari?"**

Precisely. You got it. The resemblance was intention.

**As I watched it, I was thinking it was a cross between "Tales of Hoffman" and "The Trip" or it was visual MUZAK from Marilyn Manson's house.**

*(Laughs)* That was made many, many, many years before Marilyn Manson.

**What was Mr. Anger like to work with.**

He was very pleasant. He was very intense in what he was trying to do. Actually, we, well everyone who worked on it had a good time when we were making it. It was a lot of fun.

**You were also the cinematographer on his short film "Puce Moment."**

You can call it cinematography. I did very little. The cinematographer should do the lighting. I'm not sure that I even did the lighting. I think I mainly did the camera work. I was more like a camera operator than a cinematographer.

**Anias Nin also appeared in "Pleasure Dome." Do you have any recollections of working with her.**

I became a very, very good friend of hers. Not because of the film, but quite apart from the film. Like everyone else working on that film all the people were friends, friends of Kenneth and friends of each other. It was an amusing thing to do. Anias was very cooperative. She had appeared earlier in a Maya Deren film in New York called "**Ritual and Transfigured Time.**" You know Maya Deren was sort of the pioneer of the post W.W.II avant garde film making in America. So Anias had already appeared in her film in New York. Appearing in an avant garde film like that was just fun.

**It looked fun with the costumes. Technically it is an exciting movie. The colors are rich, there are a lot of process shots.**

Yes, he did a lot of optical work in laboratory after the final shooting.

**This weekend I watched 5 of your films to get ready for the interview. I'd like to get your comments on some of them. "[Night Tide.](#)"**



Yes, that was my first feature film. That had a relationship to "**Pleasure Dome**" only in the sense that the artist Cameron appeared in both.

**Was she the mysterious Greek woman in "Night Tide"?**

Yes. She was an artist, not an actress.

**It was a beautiful movie, especially considering the low budget you had to work with.**

Extremely small.

**A couple of things stood out to me. The story is poetic, something you normally don't find with AIP and the dialogue is a level above what you hear in most movies. The dialogue is intelligent and elegant, but it doesn't sound pretentious, if that makes sense. My thought was, that I would like to know people who talk like that in their daily lives.**

*(Laughs)* Well thank you. I think in terms of the general public, there was a slightly higher rate of literacy in the 60s than there is now. When you look at our President who went to a major Eastern university and still hasn't mastered the English language that that is symptomatic of our times.

**I can identify with that. I'm more literate on paper than speaking. I apologize for stumbling along here. I just recently began conducting interviews. I just finished interviewing William Windom and Kim Hunter at the Memphis Film Festival.**

Did you talk to Kim Hunter about one of my favorite films "**The Seventh Victim**"?

**She was asked about that during a panel discussion. She spoke very highly of Val Lewton, said he was a pure gentleman, and the king of the horrors. I followed that up with a question about working with Dario Argento in "The Black Cat." You have two different takes on horror. One suggests rather than shows the horror while Argento just lays it out there, stylishly though.**

Yes. I like his films. He is a wild filmmaker. Although I just saw his latest and there wasn't much to it unfortunately. I like the Mother's trilogy, "**Inferno**" and "**Tenebre**" and I can't think of the third. I like Argento. I met him once. I had lunch with him when he was in Los Angeles.

**Do you speak Italian?**

No, no. But he speaks a little English. It's interesting what you said about Val Lewton, because I think "**The Seventh Victim**" is a particularly interesting film.

**He produced one movie that scared me to death as a child. I can't remember the name. There is a small boy locked out of his house screaming for his mother to let him in because a panther is coming....**

That was "**The Leopard Man.**" That was a wonderful one. He was an extremely talented filmmaker. It is so interesting to me that Val Lewton is one of the few producers whose mark is so strong on his films that it doesn't matter much who directs them. He must have conceived them very fully at the script level so it was more a matter of executing what was on the page rather than the director's talent, although I do think of the directors who worked for him that Jacques Tourner was the best.

**Oh yes. I thoroughly enjoyed "Night of the Demon." I understand that you were a bit disappointed that they showed the demon at the end.**

It was so phony. It was a big comedown. It should have been done in the Val Lewton manner, even if they suggested it with sound or something. The use of the talisman is wonderful in that film. Several years ago a producer came to me and said he wanted to remake it and wanted me to direct it. Unfortunately it never happened. I would liked to have done it.

**You mentioned last week that you got up in the mornings and did some writing. Are you working on a script?**

No, actually I'm working on my autobiography. My career in the film world. I think I have an interesting story to tell. Almost every does you know, its just a matter of being able to tell it. That's what I'm working on now.

**Well, you certainly have worked with or brushed elbows with some of the greatest artists of the last 60 years.**

I have. I've been fortunate that way.

**When you direct do you storyboard?**

No. I work from a shooting script. I've never storyboarded. My films do not involve special effects as you know. If I had something like that I would storyboard it or if I had an extremely complex action sequence. My films are very human oriented. Even though they are suspense films they are more about human relationships and human beings.

**"The Killing Kind" really struck a chord with me. I'm a criminal defense lawyer by profession and a long time true crime buff. I was overwhelmed by the similarities between the relationship between John Savage and Ann Southern and several real life serial killers.**

In preparing to do that film, I didn't write the script, but in order to be psychologically grounded to direct I read a book on serial murderers who



had made a great study of them at the time. The common denominator in the kind who murdered women over and over again was a relationship with the mother in which the mother punishes the child by withdrawing her love, or ostensibly with drawing it. In other words, "If you're not a good boy then mother won't love you any more." The psychologist pointed out that in the male child that creates a terrible rage and frustration. So in point in fact, what serial killers, the kind that murder women that is, are murdering their mother over and over again. Of course, they can't kill their mother because that is taboo, so they seize on other women to take their mother's place. That's a simplification, but you get the idea.

**The opening sequence, the gang rape under the pier is a great scene in that it takes you in one direction when the other guys grab John Savage, pull his pants down and pull him on top of the girl. You have that point of view shot looking up at John and he screams in rage. I took the scene to mean that here was a kid who knew what he was doing was wrong and doesn't want to be doing this, and that his friends have gotten him into this trouble. As the story unfolded, my thought became that the scream of rage was because he was thinking of mama, that he wasn't being faithful to her.**

Actually the scream had a lot to do with the fact that he was impotent. That had a lot to do with it.

**There was some subtleties later. When he was having a nightmare and he revisited the scene under the pier. You had a close up shot of the victims face, and she had a smile on her face that wasn't there before.**

Yes. A subtle smile. A lot of people admire the film, and think it is one of my best films. It is really sad that it never had a proper release, and that's a long story. Everything was bungled by the people who were in control of it. It is really sad to me that it never had a proper release. It was too raw for television at the time, and it never had much of a theatrical release.

**There was one scene which was cut by the producer of "The Killing Kind."**

There was one key sequence which was arbitrarily cut out by the producer. I gave an interview about it and the wife of the producer got angry with me. I didn't care because I was so deeply angered by this cut by a man who should have known better. Other than that one cut, the movie is how I wanted it. There was an absolute idiot involved in the distribution who wanted the scene cut and the producer gave into him. He should have had the strength to stand up to him.

**What was the sequence.**

It was a very important sequence psychologically. Do you remember the scene when the boy is returning to the house and the old lady is coming down stairs on the elevator? That scene was preceded by the cut scene. The boy was at the zoo looking at the apes behind

the bars so there would have been a visual analogy to where he would have been before the movie starts. The footage was wonderful. While he was there, he suddenly hears laughter that is somehow familiar to him. He glances over and in another cage nearby is the girl you saw in the rape sequence with her present boyfriend. The point is, that he doesn't come home and just arbitrarily just call her. She has been put back into his mind. It gives a different context during the phone call when he is masturbating.

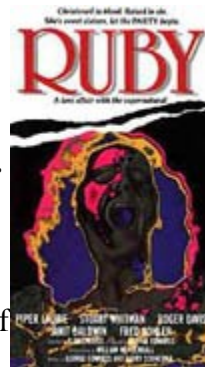
**The phone call was also a very intriguing scene in that your treatment of the rape victim. You didn't show her as some psychologically scarred, put upon person, but rather as a someone who has gone on with her life and has healed, and can enjoy her sexuality.**

Yes.

**When he asks her "Do you still do it under the pier?" and she didn't freeze up and become terrified, it casts some doubts about his guilt. There were a lot of ambiguous scenes in the movie which make it so rich.**

Well thank you. I happen to be a filmmaker who loves ambiguity and uses it very consciously. Of course, that is the opposite of what producers want. I remember what Orson Wells said: "The trouble with my career is that I don't want to make the films that producers want to make." The same is true of me; I don't want to make the films the producers want to make.

**I get upset with the moneymen too. With DVDs you see so many that are slapped together without a single thought about the fan, and then you have a DVD like "[Fight Club](#)" by Fox Home Entertainment in which the moneymen get it right. That's one of the things I liked about the "[Fight Club](#)" DVD. It seemed that VCI was taking another step up in the quality of their product.**



I was glad that Piper (Laurie) was available to do the commentary with me, and the interview with David Del Valle, who is a long time admirer of my work, but it is unfortunate about the ending of the film. It is so truncated, and even though I told them about the additional material, they were unable to find it.

**You have an idea of where it can be found?**

No, oh no. I don't know where they found anything. And I'm not on speaking terms with the film's producer.

**I don't blame you after what he did. My feeling was that I wish VCI had cut off that horrible ending that was tacked on and end with Piper Laurie and her lover standing by the lake and cut to Stuart Whitman being restrained by Roger Davis as Mr. Davis explained that this was the way she wanted things. It would have been a**

**little shorter but, I thought that would have been closer to the spirit of the original theatrical release.**

I don't know what happened to the footage.

**I imagine the producer destroyed it.**

I don't know, I wouldn't put anything past that terrible man.

**So, you were among the ranks of the many Alan Smithees out there! (Alan Smithee is a pseudonym used by studio's to replace the real director's name when he has the credit removed.)**

Yes, yes. The version that was available on video for so long with the name Alan Smithee on it was not even remotely close to the version they just released. It was filled with extraneous scenes which were shot by another director and written by the producer as far as I know, that were just ludicrous, ludicrous. Why that version was put out on video I'll never know, because that version was specifically made to pass "Standards and Practices" at CBS at the time. So they cut out every bit of violence, and then the film only ran about 70 minutes and he had to add footage. That's why he did it. Which for TV and the late show was one thing, but to subsequently put that version out on video was insane...and not go back to the original feature.

**I enjoyed sharing the movie with my kids. My 12 year old son hightailed out of the living room during the scene when Piper Laurie and Roger Davis entered Janet Baldwin's bedroom as she is levitating up side down.**

*(Laughs)* Oh yes. I had her do what Salvador Dali talked about in his book, and what Salvador Dali drew, and it was also used by Bunuel in one of his Mexican films, it is called "the hysterical arch." I imagine that it is written about in Freud. That back bend effect, that's what it is called, "the hysterical arch." Fortunately Janet Baldwin was very limber and she was able to do that.

**The scene struck me for another reason. I saw the recent re-release of "The Exorcist" with the famous 'crab-walk' scene.**

Oh yes? I haven't seen that yet.

**Linda Blair's double walks down the scene in that same position. When I saw "Ruby" afterwards it hit me that this scene was never shown before, until this year and 3 years after the original run of "The Exorcist" you include a scene which almost the same, and just as terrifying. The similarities were amazing. I guess great minds think alike.**

I guess so, because I had no idea that they used that in "The Exorcist." Did you watch my film "[Games?](#)"



**Yes I did. When the film ended I wondered if you had seen the movie "Wild Things" with Kevin Bacon, Matt Dillon and Denise Richards. It came out about 2 years ago.**

I don't think so.

**The ending of "Wild Things" popped into my mind as I watched "Games." I wondered if Kevin Bacon had seen your film before they made "Wild Things" because of the many similarities including the ending up to and including the poisoned liquor celebration.**

It sounds like someone saw "Games".

**What was Don Stroud like to work with? He was one of the lesser players, but he's been a favorite of mine since "The Buddy Holly Story."**

He's adorable. He's such a sweet guy. He was a young contract player at the time. I thought he was perfect for the part.

**All of the memorabilia that James Caan and Katherine Ross had in their apartment, was this just stuff that Universal had on hand in their prop department?**

Some of it was stuff that I owned and some of it came from friends. No, it didn't come from prop houses.

**The apartment was amazing. It helped so much in defining the characters.**

It was a combination of things. A very interesting aspect of things was that the studio...the studio they run things like clockwork, without any intelligence or design to what they are doing. They automatically assigned to this production a set decorator from their set decoration department, who was an old timer who had mainly done Westerns. He no more idea how to decorate these sets than fly to the moon. Finally we went to the head of the art department and said "We can't work with this man because he hasn't a clue." So how they worked it out was they gave him a paid vacation during the making of "Games" which was strictly against union rules and allowed our costume designer, who was our choice and who was a very creative person design the set. So the man who was on vacation gets the credit on the screen, but the costume design did the actual work.

**Can you imagine the controversy if there had been an Art Direction Oscar?**

*(Laughs)* Yes, that would have been terrible. Our set designer was fine. He understood what we were doing.

**Speaking of costumes in "Games" I was amazed how well the film holds up today. I see a lot of contemporary films from the 60s and 70s and shake my head to think that I used to dress that way. But the costumes as well as the sets in "Games" seem timeless. It helps the film maintain its impact today.**



That's because we had a marvelous designer working with us. The costume designer had been nominated for an Academy Award. He did the original "**Planet of the Apes**." His name is Morton Hack, and he had done some Broadway theater earlier in his career. So he was a marvelous designer. He also did, uncredited Sylvia Kristel's costumes for my film "**Mata Hari**." By then he was semiretired and living in Rome. I called him and he agreed to do them. He did them all at one of the big costume houses in Rome.

**"Mata Hari" has taken fairly bad raps from a lot of the critics. Is there anything you feel you could have done differently?**

Well, yes. I was under terrible pressure from the producers on that one. Not that they cut it so much. I was working with a line producer who made it into a very difficult shooting situation. I had a cameraman who was foisted on me. I didn't get along with him. I didn't like him. He did some beautiful work, but he took all of my time for lighting, my shooting time. The line producer had a deal with the Hungarians that they couldn't go into to one minute of overtime. You can't shoot a film that way. In other words, at 5 o'clock, the Hungarian people would show up on the set and start looking at their watches to make sure we quit on time. So there I was in Hungary with no recourse. No one to appeal to, nothing. I was just stuck there, and I had to make the best of it. Of course the emphasis was on Eroticism. The film did receive some very good reviews in French and England. The film does have its admirers. Another problem with "**Mata Hari**" was Sylvia Kristel. While she is lovely to look at, she can't act at all. She hasn't a clue. She appeared in so many films, and heretofore, before "**Mata Hari**" all of her films, the voice, you know which gets the inflection of acting into it, is all dubbed by another actress. I wanted her to use her own voice in this, whether rightly or wrongly. Since so much of the film had to be looped (adding the dialogue track later rather than using the soundtrack from the actual filming) they first looped the entire role with a credible actress. But then, they had forgotten that they signed a contract saying that Sylvia could speak on the film. There is nothing wrong with her voice, but....

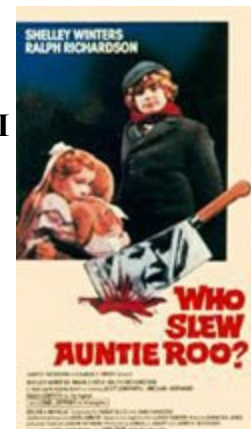
**Like any other tool, you have to know how to use it.**

Exactly, so, the reason it was as good as it was, was because we put the earphones on her with the other actress, and in all the looping she imitated the actress, the inflections and everything. So that helped a lot. And physically, I worked with her on the physical level in terms of acting. I would tell her 'Look up, look down, now look off to your right, then look back at him.' And it's kind of a simulated type of acting. But she wouldn't do any of that on her own.

**And you wouldn't need to do it with Debbie Reynolds or Shelly Winters.**

No, no, no. You don't direct them that way at all!

**You had some great character actors in "[Who Slew Auntie Roo.](#)" I love Ralph Richardson's work.**



He is wonderful. He was an absolute sweetheart on the film.

**As I watched "Roo" I couldn't figure out where I had seen Michael Gothard, who played Almy the butler. It hit me that he was a Bond Villain in "The Spy Who Loved Me."**

Oh he was. Well, he was not a good actor. I had a lot of trouble with him.

**It was also nice to see Hugh Griffith (Oscar winner for Ben Hur) as the Pig Man.**

He was also wonderful. Unfortunately he was a heavy alcoholic. His wife came with him to the set everyday to keep the liquor away from him. Other than that he was great to work with. And so unique and funny. That was great fun making that film. I enjoyed working with the children.

**Mark Lester and Chloe...**

Chloe Franks.

**They were excellent. It can make or break a movie going with the wrong child actor.**

Yes.

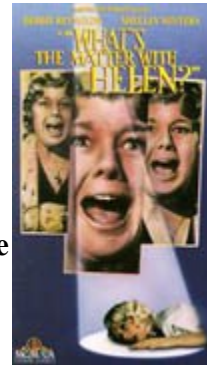
**I noticed Jimmy Sangster (long time Hammer film director) was listed as one of the screen writers. Did you get to know him?**

He wrote the original script, but we did a lot of changes. We had no contact with him at all. The final script, a lot of it uncredited, was written by Gavin Lambent.

**My favorite of all of the films of yours that I've seen has to be ["What's the matter With Helen?"](#)**

Well, that's my personal favorite, so I'm happy to hear that.

**I love when someone takes historical familiarities and fictionalizes them. Obviously Agnes Moorehead's part was based on Aimee Simple McPherson, and the little girl who did the Mae West routine was amazing.**



The little girl was an amazing actress.

**How did it do at the box office?**

I don't think it did very well. I haven't had very good luck in my career with releases. "What's the Matter With Helen?" was released by United Artists. The year that it was released, it was released in the summer. United Artists had just made "Fiddler on the

**Roof**" and they had invested a great deal of money in **"Fiddler."** They were saving all their guns, and all their publicity and all their money to launch **"Fiddler on the Roof"** in the fall. Because **"What's the Matter With Helen?"** was basically financed through a deal with NBC, which had to do with Debbie Reynolds and a deal she had with them to do a series. In effect, the film was handed to United Artists free. They didn't have production money in it to speak of, so any little amount of money they made was profit. So, they had no advertising, no publicity. I don't even think they had screenings for the critics in New York. It just came and went so quickly during the summer. It was during one of the waves for nostalgia for stuff from the 30s, and they didn't even offer a clue in the advertising that this took place in the 30s. They tried to make the advertising look contemporary. All of the qualities that would have appealed to the public...no one in the audience had a clue going in what the film was. It picked up admirers, but it never had a chance to let word of mouth build or anything. It was dumped, it was just dumped.

**That had to be heartbreaking.**

It was heartbreaking. It was absolutely heartbreaking.

**It is also asinine when you consider that fact the the story was by Henry Farrell who wrote "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane" and "Hush...Hush...Sweet Charlotte." If you look at the Oscar track record for both of those, not necessarily wins, but nominations. "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane" got, I believe, 10 nominations, which is amazing for this kind of film.**

Oddly enough, **"What's the Matter With Helen?"** got a nomination for best costume design. Again, it was Morton Hack from **"Games."**

**I though "What's the Matter With Helen?" would be a great double feature with "Day of the Locust" (1975).**

Well, yes, it would be a very interesting double feature to say the least. He (director John Schlesinger) borrowed the Aimee Simple McPherson character from my film, played by Gerry Page.

**I also liked all the stage mothers. They were individuals while all being highly neurotic.**

Yes. We had a great time. As I said, it is the personal favorite of all my films. It is the closest to my heart for the things it has to say.

**Speaking of other directors, you stated earlier that you enjoyed Dario Argento, what do you think of Wes Craven?**

Wes Craven's films don't mean very much to me. They don't speak to me.

**Who do you like in the genre?**

Well, of course, the number one director in the genre is, or the two of the greatest in America are long dead. James Whale, I love James Whale, and I love some of the films of Tod Browning. "**Freaks**" is just an amazing film. Tod Browning doesn't have much style. What is interesting about his films is the content, because, stylistically, they are very plebeian Sort of by the numbers, but so interesting on the level of concept. A film like "**The Unknown**" for instance, and so, I like Tod Browning and his collaborations with Lon Chaney Sr..

**Going back to James Whale, there you had both style and substance.**

Exactly, exactly. James Whale, I'm sure has had an influence on my work. He had a combination of humor and horror which I have in my films.

**You were given a THANKS credit in the movie "Gods and Monsters."**

Yes. Well, that's because when I was very young I got to know James Whale in his last years. And so, the director of "**Gods and Monsters**," Bill Condon who is a good friend of mine arraigned for me to spend some time with Ian McClellan, and I spent a whole afternoon with him talking about James Whale. And Bill arranged for us to go to the actual James Whale house, which I had, when I was younger, been to many times. Hoping that just being there would evoke certain memories and I could convey them all to Ian, which I did to the best of my ability. I think his portrayal of James Whale was very accurate. The story is completely made up. but the character is well portrayed.

**That's similar to "The Buddy Holly Story." While the story took liberty with the facts, Gary Busey nailed the character of Buddy Holly.**

The character, yes. The same thing here. All through the history of film, directors who are commercially viable, do a lot of stuff for commercial reasons. So for instance, one of my favorite films of the last 20 years or so is "**Blade Runner**." "**Blade Runner**" is just magnificent in its own way. But the director has directed a lot of guff too. So I can't say Ridley Scott is one of my favorite directors because he goes from directing a masterpiece like that to "**G. I. Jane**." So there's no consistency. I think there is consistency in my work, except for "**Mata Hari**" which goes into totally different area.

**Speaking of Ridley Scott, did you ever see "The Duelists"?**

Yes. I thought that was a very interesting film. I was alerted that I must watch the work of this director....And I love Val Lewton's films, but of course he didn't direct them. I later got to know Mark Robson, and of course we all know Robert Wise. Robert Wise went from directing "**The Haunting**" to "**The Sound of Music**" so you can't say that these people are genre directors. Even James Whale did a lot of films that are quite forgotten. The only films of James Whale that are remembered are his horror films like "**The Old Dark House**."

**Which we have you to thank for saving.**

I rescued it from sure destruction.

**Well thank God you did. Did you know Karloff?**

I only met him once. I didn't know him though. I can say that after I rescued "**The Old Dark House**" one day I was on the Universal lot. I found out that Karloff was playing a guest role on a TV series. So I just went on the set and introduced myself to him and told him that the film had been saved. I think he was pleased.

**I think Karloff was the epitome of someone being the opposite of their screen persona.**

Oh yes. He was an English gentleman, very very nice. Of course James Whale told me a lot of funny stories. One in particular that I love. Karloff, when they made "**Frankenstein**"...James Whale had a very jolly set. His sense of humor was paramount. They had fun making those movies. Lots of laughs on the set. He said Karloff was very amusing and amused. He didn't take himself too seriously. Then when he suddenly became a big star because of "**Frankenstein**" and became the king of horror films, he began to take himself very seriously. James said that one day he was sitting in his office and an emissary from the makeup department at Universal came to his office and said "Mr. Karloff would like to see you in the makeup department. He said he was ushered with great ceremony into the makeup department, into one of the rooms there, where Karloff was sitting in a chair covered by a sheet. They did a kind of unveiling for Jimmy. He said it was the makeup for "**The Mummy**." The way James Whale put it, he said it looked like he had every piece of makeup on his face. He said Karloff looked at him and said (seriously and somberly imitating Karloff) " I think this will be the most marvelous thing ever seen on the silver sheet!"

**Silver sheet?**

That was an old term, sometimes used in the 30s for the silver screen. James found that so funny.

**Well, James knew him when.**

Yes. James in essence discovered him. Karloff had been around for a while acting in a lot of films. He made a star out of him, because nobody paid much attention to him before that.

**In the 50s you worked as an assistant producer.**

Yes, I worked for Jerry Wald.

**I thought it was interesting that you have backgrounds in studio, independent and experimental avant garde films.**

It's true.

**When you worked on "The Harder They Fall" did you get to know Bogart?**

No, in point of fact I don't think I was ever on the set of that. That was the very first film when I got hired. It was already in production. I don't even remember seeing any dailies on that. It was virtually in the can when I began to work for Jerry Wald. The first film that I remember doing as his assistant was Tyrone Power and Kim Novak in "**The Eddie Duchin Story.**"

**I've heard lots of stories about Kim Novak as far as...**

I was on the set and I watched her work, but I have no specific memories of her.

**Was the first time you met Orson Welles on the set of "The Long Hot Summer"?**

No. I don't think I met him on that. I was in such awe of him. There was no one to introduce me, and I wouldn't just walk up to him. Who directed "**The Long Hot Summer**" I've forgotten?

**Martin Ritt.**

I should have gotten Martin to introduce me, but I didn't. No, I got to know Orson later. Gary Graver, who worked with Orson in his later years as his camera man was a very close personal friend of mine for some years before that. Gary finally arranged for me to meet Orson and to have dinner with him, and from then on I knew Orson Welles.

**I had an auto accident because of Mr. Welles. I lived in Las Vegas, and was having lunch in a small Mexican restaurant when Mr. Welles and David Copperfield came in. I only lived a block away, so I got in my car to go home and get a book for Mr. Welles to sign. I had a wreck speeding out of the parking lot. Never did get that autograph.**

*(Laughs)* What a shame.

**I think one of the most famous films never released is Mr. Welles' "The Other Side of the Wind."**

Yes well, I'm privy to what is going on. Gary Graver is trying to set a deal with Showtime to pay for the completion of the film. It's all shot, it just needs final editing, sound effects, the final music and the whole production will be finished. There is a big problem and I think this is still an ongoing problem. They haven't resolved it yet. One of Orson Welles' daughters is an incredible, its very unfortunate, an incredible obstructionist. She is in the grip of a shyster lawyer. Whenever anything is done, she brings a law suite trying to get money. She's just vicious about it. She's a terrible person. When they did the restoration of "**Touch of Evil**" she caused trouble at Universal. She's extremely litigious because of

this guy, this shyster lawyer that she is involved with. It's very unfortunate. She's preventing...they're afraid you see...she makes them afraid to make a deal to finish the film, because she's threatening and threatening and threatening. Even if she doesn't have a leg to stand on, they don't like the idea that there is going to be a lawsuit to fight through. Can't blame them. She is just awful.

**What was it like working on "The Other Side of the Wind"? There was an amazing number of directors acting in the film?**

Well I'm one of them!

**Oh yes.**

It was fun. Orson did it (the sequence with Mr. Harrington) the night before I began shooting "**What's the Matter With Helen?**", the very night before. I had to get up early to begin shooting, but I was so thrilled that I would do this little scene for Orson that I said "Come hell or high water, I'm going to finish my prep (on "**Helen**") and I'm going to be there and do this!"

**Have you been able to see portions of the film?**

A huge amount of it. Gary Graver, in trying to get the money to complete the film, arranged several screenings, not public screenings, but private screenings in a projection room in a laboratory or a studio.

**It sounds like the movie has an intriguing premise.**

Well, it's a very...it's an Orson Welles movie! It has two simultaneous storylines. It's about a film director played by John Huston, and then interspersed with the present day story about this film director are scenes from his latest film. So it's a film within the film. The film that he's shooting, which it has sequences from, is done in a very different style than the rest of the film. So it is very fascinating exercise.

**Well hopefully one of these days the lawyer will go away...**

I wish he would!

**...and the world will get to see this.**

It's really a shame that she is so terrible. She should be promoting the completion of the film, not obstructing it.

**You would think so. You would think that she would tend to profit from its release. What did you think of "Touch of Evil"?**

It's one of my favorites. There again, that's one of the great master works of the cinema, and it was totally ignored, totally ignored, even more ignored than my film "**What's the Matter With Helen?**" when it was originally released. It was released as a B-picture by Universal. They didn't like it. The executives didn't like it, nobody there liked it. They didn't understand it, they didn't want it, so it was just thrown out. It took France to recognize this. Then people began to notice it.

**I guess it is too much to ask a producer to think beyond the bottom line, but from a historical viewpoint, where would Martin Scorsese be without "Touch of Evil"? That movie had such an impact on him, you look at the opening shoot...and Brian De Palma or Francis Ford Coppola?**

Of course. Orson has had a profound influence on all of us. Absolutely. He was one of the great theatrical geniuses of the 20th century.

**Yes, and he still owes me \$99.00 for that fender on my Camero.**

*(Laughs).*

**But, hey, I'm not going to be like his daughter and sue.**

Good, good.

**I'll chalk it up to being star struck and lead footed. One of the things I find about seeing your movies today is that you can't see a lot of your TV movies. Any chance of...**

The only ones that I know are available are "**How Awful About Allan**" and "**The Dead Don't Die.**" "**How Awful About Allan**" with Tony Perkins is available.



**What was Joan Hackett (costar of "How Awful About Allan") like?**

I knew her very well. We were very good friends. She was a very interesting girl, very nice. Very special. Very sad early demise from cancer. It was so sad. And Julie Harris was also a joy to work with. One of our greatest actresses.

**I remember seeing "The Cat Creature" when it first came out. It was an ABC movie of the week if I remember correctly. That was one I was really hoping to find.**

That apparently hasn't been made available. I don't know why. I have no idea. "**The Cat Creature**" and the other TV movie that I'm proud of is "**Killer Bees.**"

**"Killer Bees" with Gloria Swanson.**



It's a pity that that is not available. That ought to be available. Both of those films have admirers so someone should put them out.

**The thing is, in the early 70s before cable, you had some top quality films being made by the networks. Some of them have turned out to be considered important, even landmark films, like "Duel" "That Certain Summer" "Born Innocent" or "Brian's Song." The networks were turning these out on a regular basis. I know ABC did two a week.**

I know, they did a lot of them. Also what was nice, for that brief period of time you could make a film like those I made which were entertainments. You know. Then TV, a bit later, became totally engulfed in the idea of doing sort of 'socially significant' TV movies. Where every movie had to be about a disease or a mother who was losing her children because she had cancer, and it crowded out pure entertainment like "**The Cat Creature**" in the tradition of Pulp Magazine stories. It's a great loss. I made one other TV movie that you may come across in lists that I would like to not to have my name on, as it was positively dreadful, I would like it never to be seen again, anywhere, any how for as long as I live. It is "**Devil Dog: The Hound of Hell.**" It's a piece of shit!



**(Laughs) I appreciate your honesty on that.**

I would just as soon no one sees it. It is just ludicrous. It's just terrible.

**Was it one of those films done to pay the bills?**

Kind of. But one of the reasons it is so terrible is it is one of those stories that builds up to a climax where you have to show the creature, like we were talking about earlier in "**Night of the Demon**" but in this case, you had to see the creature. It was just nothing at all. The actor's reaction of stark terror, which I had to shoot without him seeing anything at all doesn't match what you see at all. And the reason it is so terrible is the producer was so determined not to go beyond the licensing fee, that he wouldn't spring any money to do any thing properly, post-production special effects. So it is totally ludicrous. Perfectly terrible. It was a terrible premise to begin with. As I said, I did it because I needed money at the time and they offered me the job, but I would very much like that it be totally forgotten.

**You also did some episodic television. "Baretta."**

That was just a couple of episodes. I got to know Robert Blake very well when I was working with him. He was a very difficult person to get along with, but I was able to get along with him quite well. I like Bobby. I certainly don't believe that he had any thing to do with this murder. I don't blame him for announcing that he is going to move away from here now, and create a life for himself elsewhere. God knows, he's salted away the

money, so he is all right. ... I thought he was wonderfully chosen to play in "**Lost Highway**." Have you seen it?

**No I haven't.**

"**Lost Highway**" is David Lynch's film. The film he made before the one about the guy on the lawnmower. "**Lost Highway**" is every bit as good as "**Blue Velvet**" but it is more difficult than "**Blue Velvet**" so a lot of people don't like it. It is very, very interesting. I have seen it about 4 times. Bobby Blake is absolutely wonderful in it. If you haven't seen it, you should go rent it. It has a lot of horror film elements in it.

**Any other recommendations for our readers as to any films they should see?**

Well, I would certainly recommend "**Lost Highway**." A lot of people haven't seen it. It is an extraordinary film. I'm a great admirer of his films. In fact, he is my favorite contemporary filmmaker. Oh! I just saw a new Japanese film called "**Cure**" out here that has a wonderfully sinister quality to it. The filmmaker has the same name as a very famous Japanese filmmaker but they apparently are not related. His name is Kurosawa. It's called "**Cure**" and it is about a series of strange murders done by people who would seem not to be murderers. It is very nice.

**One of the unfortunate thing about living in middle America, in a place like Memphis is...**

You don't get films like that.

**We have one theater that brings in independent, foreign and art films, but all the others are the multiplexes with "Planet of the Apes" on 3 screens. We have to wait for the video or DVD. release.**

We are just lucky here that we have a theater like the "NuArt" that plays nothing but odd ball films.

**What are you working on now, besides you autobiography?**

I've just finished a remake new version of Poe's "**The Fall of the House of Usher**." My version is contemporary. I call it "**Usher**." It's a short film 36 minutes long. I star as Roderick Usher. It was filmed it in 35 mm. Gary graver is the cinematographer. I hope to enter it into film festivals around the country.

**It sounds perfect for "A&E" or "Bravo."**

Yes, yes. Whatever exposure I can get will be nice.

**Well, Mr. Harrington, I have taken about an hour and a half of your time and I'd like to thank you. I really appreciate the time you have given me. Bea Suarez from**

**VCI said you were a very nice gentleman, very interesting to talk with. She was absolutely, dead on right. Thanks for everything, especially your films.**

Well, you are very welcome.